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Does divorce help adults become happier?

Divorce is too complex a process to produce just winners and losers. People adjust in many different ways, and these patterns of adjusting change over time.

—E. Mavis Hetherington, noted divorce researcher¹¹⁸

That was the easy part—getting the divorce. It's the aftermath that's the hard part. When you're living it, it's so magnified. It literally takes the air out of you.

—“Laura”

Overview: A large majority of individuals in unhappy marriages who hang in there and avoid divorce end up reporting their marriages are very happy a few years later. For the most part, those who divorced and even those who divorced and remarried were not happier than those who stuck with their marriages. About half of all divorces come from marriages that are not experiencing high levels of conflict; individuals from these marriages generally experience a decrease in happiness over time. When individuals end high-conflict marriages, however, they increase their happiness, on average. About two in ten individuals appear to enhance their lives through their divorce, but about three in ten seem to do worse; about four in ten individuals build future romantic relationships but they have mostly the same kinds of problems as they did in their previous marriage. Divorce can eliminate some of the problems with your spouse, but it can also cause others; for many couples conflict actually increases after a divorce. Many people report having mixed feelings and even regrets about their divorce. Studies suggest some divorced individuals wished they and/or their ex-spouse had tried harder to work through their differences. About three of four divorced people will eventually remarry. However, second marriages have even higher rates of divorce, although if couples can hang on through the challenging first five years

of remarriage, their chances for success are high. More than 90% of young people believe they will meet and marry their “soul mate.” But with this attitude comes the risk that when couples run into serious problems in their marriage they may think that they made the wrong choice rather than think that they need to work out their problems.

A. Are people happier as a result of divorce?

Many people assume that the answer to this question is “yes.” People thinking about a divorce may think that it will solve a difficult problem and eventually make them happier. And sometimes it does. But studies have found that most adults are not happier when they divorce. However, there are many different factors that influence how divorce affects individuals. This chapter will review what research tells us about this complex issue.

A recent summary of research in this area found that, compared to married individuals, divorced individuals had lower levels of happiness, more psychological distress, poorer self-concepts, and felt more alone.¹¹⁹ Of course, some of the poorer outcomes for divorced individuals can be explained by the unhappiness in the former marriage and the ongoing stress of divorce. Perhaps even more informative is a national study that followed happily and unhappily married individuals for a five-year period.¹²⁰ Many of these unhappy individuals remained married but some divorced. Those who divorced were no happier when interviewed again than those that stayed married. The study also found no differences in rates of depression, sense of mastery, or self-esteem between those who stayed married and those who divorced. This was true even if divorced individuals had remarried. For women who had experienced violence in their marriage, however, divorce did help them get away from that violence, which is important.

Another recent national study found that about half of all divorces come from marriages that were not experiencing high levels of conflict but one spouse (or both) was still unhappy.¹²¹ When individuals ended high-conflict marriages, they increased their happiness and sense of well-being, on average. However, when individuals in a low-conflict marriage ended their marriage, they experienced a decrease in happiness, on average. This study suggests that ending a marriage that may be unhappy at the time but does not produce a high level of conflict is not a reliable path to improved happiness. One couple we know ended their low-conflict marriage because of differences in finances. Both remarried to other people. As they reflected back on their first marriage both spouses admitted that they should have worked harder to make their first marriage work. They realized after remarriage how much hard work goes into making a good marriage. They both agreed that if they would have put the same effort into their first marriage that they are putting into their second marriages, the first marriage could have worked.

One of the best long-term studies of divorce found that divorce generally does not lead to a better life.¹²² These researchers found that about two in ten individuals appeared

to enhance their lives, including building more satisfying romantic relationships, through divorce, but about three in ten seemed to do worse after their divorce. About four in ten individuals were able to build future romantic relationships but they had mostly the same kinds of problems as they did in their previous marriages and didn't seem to improve their situations much. (The remaining 10% were functioning fine, but did not rebuild romantic relationships.)

It is hard to work through a difficult marriage, but it is also hard to work through a divorce. Some people are happier as a result of divorce.¹²³ On the other hand, many marriages that experience very serious problems, such as alcoholism, infidelity, and emotional neglect, are now happy after working through their problems.¹²⁴ As we mentioned in Chapter 2, it may surprise you to learn that about three in ten currently married Utahns have at one time or another thought their marriages might be in serious trouble and have thought about divorce.¹²⁵ But more than 90% of these individuals said that they were glad that they were still together.

“Fern” and “Deron” were one such couple we interviewed. They struggled early in their second marriage and considered divorce. But they hung on and years later were grateful that they did.

We knew that we trusted each other and we knew how hard it is for children in the streets and in the world today. “Deron” wanted his children to be protected and cared for, and I wanted mine to be protected . . . It was so important for us not to be selfish. We knew we loved each other. The challenges were the life we had to deal with, and we weighed and measured and we both came up with the same decision. It’s better for all concerned if two like-thinking people and people that love each other, even though we have had our rough spots, you know, he could not imagine himself with someone else, and I could not imagine myself, so we knew we would just condemn ourselves to being lonely, ol’ angry people, and we also knew that the children needed both of us.

The decision to divorce may be the most difficult decision you ever face. One myth about divorce is that children will be better off because a divorce will make for happier parents. Research does not confirm that parents, on average, become happier as a result of divorce. Moreover, children are not nearly as tuned in to the quality of their parents’ marriage as their parents are. If there isn’t a lot of conflict in the marriage, research suggests that the children probably will be better off if their parents stay married.¹²⁶ (We will review the research about the effects of divorce on children later in Chapter 5.) Fortunately, most unhappy couples who avoid divorce will eventually be happy in their marriages again. Especially if you are currently unhappy in your marriage but not experiencing high levels of conflict with your spouse, think hard about the possibility of continuing to work to improve your relationship and being patient for things to get better. If you can do this, you and your family will probably be better off down the road. You may benefit from doing exercise 4.1, “Imagining a Happy Ending,” at the end of this chapter.

B. Does conflict between spouses decrease as a result of divorce?

Some people see divorce as the cure-all; they hope that ending the marriage will be the beginning of the end of all their unhappiness. But while divorce can eliminate some problems with your spouse, it can also cause others that are very difficult to manage. Research suggests that, for many couples, conflict actually increases after a divorce and post-divorce conflict between ex-spouses makes it more difficult for children to adjust to the divorce.¹²⁷ Remember that most couples that divorce did not experience high levels of conflict, so the marital difficulties and unhappiness may have been hidden from the children. Divorce adds the potential for a whole new set of problems with your ex-spouse. When you are unhappy in your marriage, it's easy to underestimate how difficult the problems of un-marrying can be. Relationships don't end cleanly with divorce, only the legal status of marriage ends. Minimizing conflict with your ex-spouse after divorce is a good thing to do. But for many it is as difficult—sometimes even more difficult—than dealing with conflict while they are married. And it likely is more visible to the children.

In one such “nightmare” divorce we know about, one spouse would literally count the minutes of the Christmas holiday and divide it in half, subtracting out the Christmas-time visits. The inflexible spouse insisted on an exchange right to the minute. If the other spouse was even a minute late there was a big scene at the parenting exchange. This is just one example of all the demands that came from the ex-spouse. There was no flexibility from anything in the divorce settlement. The spouse was always looking for a reason to take the ex-spouse back to court. The children felt much resentment about the divorce situation and knew that any mention of the other parent would be a source of conflict.

Many studies have shown that conflict with an ex-spouse continues after divorce and adds a great deal of stress to life.

Another divorcing spouse we know expressed frustration that comes when their children are looking forward to a visit from the other (non-custodial) parent and the parent never shows up or calls. The hopes of the children have been dashed time and time again, yet the parent legally was entitled to every other weekend with the children. This caused a lot of conflict for the divorcing couple and they had to return to court to try and resolve issues.

Many studies have shown that conflict with an ex-spouse continues after divorce and adds a great deal of stress to life.¹²⁸ Some of the new stresses include:

- ❖ Your and your ex-spouse's emotional response to the divorce (e.g., anger, retaliation, resignation, acceptance, relief).
- ❖ Reactions of the children to the divorce.

- ❖ Moving households.
- ❖ Custody and visitation struggles.
- ❖ Child support payments.
- ❖ Financial struggles.
- ❖ Health problems, including greater risk for abusing drugs and alcohol.
- ❖ New romantic relationships or marriages that can bring both joys and headaches, happiness and sadness.
- ❖ Family conflicts with ex-in-laws and other family members.¹²⁹

In all the emotional turmoil associated with an unhappy marriage, it may be hard to sort out whether conflict would decrease or increase if you divorced. A trusted religious leader and/or professional counselor may be able to help you sort your thoughts out. Also, you may benefit from doing exercise 4.2, “Thinking About Conflict After Divorce,” at the end of this chapter. If you attend the divorcing parents education class required by Utah law, this class also will help you find ways to minimize conflict between you and your spouse if you divorce.

C. Do some who divorce later wish they had worked harder to try to save their marriage?

This is a sensitive subject, but some recent research suggests that some people do harbor some regrets about their divorces. One national expert who counsels many divorced individuals reports that ambivalent or mixed feelings about the divorce are very common.¹³⁰ In an important study that followed divorced couples over a long period of time, researchers found evidence of feelings of regret. When they interviewed individuals one year after the divorce they found that, in three out of four divorced couples, at least one partner was having second thoughts about the decision to divorce.¹³¹ As we mentioned in Chapter 3, a handful of other surveys in various states have found that perhaps half of individuals wished they and/or their ex-spouses had tried harder to work through their differences.¹³² A statewide survey of Utahns on this question was interesting. The Utah survey found that three in ten divorced men wished they had tried harder to save their marriages, while just one in eight divorced women said that they wished they had worked harder.¹³³ Interestingly, however, when asked if they wished their spouse had worked harder to save their marriage, three-quarters of divorced men and two-thirds of divorced wives said that they wished that their spouse had worked harder to save their marriage. It seems clear that most people wish their spouse had been willing to work harder to save their marriage, but research suggests that some divorced individuals also think that they should have worked harder.

As we interviewed people about their experiences at the crossroads of divorce, we were struck by these sentiments of regret or uncertainty, even from divorced individuals

who described very serious problems in their marriage. “Brittany” was one such individual.

Now that I’m older and more mature, I look back and I think, “Oh my goodness, the issues were really not as big as we made them out to be.” And truly, I wish I would have done things differently to maybe work on that relationship further. Because he is a wonderful, amazing person.

“Laura’s” thoughts on this were similar:

The grass is not greener. . . . I would have done it a different way. . . . I would not have made the same decision. I would have worked really hard. . . . I would say [to others facing a decision to divorce], do not evaluate with anger because your anger is an emotion and it will guide you towards a decision that you might not be happy with down the line. I always tell people—and I have plenty of friends who . . . [are] having problems with their sex lives or this, that, and the other, and I say, “I don’t care what it is. Figure it out. . . . And be extremely prayerful about it. Make sure 100% that this is not an emotion-based decision. Because when you base it off of an emotion, you’re going to be sorry about the consequences later on.” . . . Don’t make these decisions based on emotion. Try to see past it. Or give yourself some time to step away. . . . I always steer people not to get a divorce, even though I have had one. And they always say, “Well you did it.” Yeah, well, if I had a chance to go back, I probably wouldn’t have done it. I tell people, “Look, if he’s beating the crap out of you, we’ve got an issue. . . . But if it’s about anything else, you can work through it.” . . . People are imperfect. I know he loves me, and I was too stupid and too prideful, even though he did me wrong.

“Janet,” who endured nearly a decade of intense problems and marital unhappiness, almost from the first week of her marriage, surprised us with her ambivalence, even 15 years after the divorce:

I don’t think that I had a choice [about divorce]; I know that I didn’t have a choice. I have mixed feelings about that, interestingly enough. . . . I think right now we are better off. But the intervening 15 years were so difficult and so draining. . . . I think that the cost to all of us was so great, that I’m not sure we would have gotten there, you know. I think you mature and you work through things. And had we been together, I think a lot of those things would have worked themselves out. And I think it is possible we would have been better off together.

Of course, we can’t say what your experience will be. And you may not have a choice in the matter. If you do have a choice, right now a divorce may look like the only solution. But these individuals’ experiences suggest that you think hard about trying to repair the relationship.

D. What are my chances for remarrying and having a happy marriage?

People who divorce usually are not giving up on the idea of marriage. Most of the time they want to remarry again sooner or later, hoping that it will be better the next time around. Some have referred to remarriage as the triumph of hope over experience. The chances that you will marry again are good; about three of four divorced people will eventually remarry within 10 years.¹³⁴ About half who will eventually remarry have done so within five years.¹³⁵ There are some factors that may affect your chances of getting remarried. For example, if you have children you are less likely to remarry, probably because divorced parents struggle to find time for dating.¹³⁶ And some people aren't enthused about marrying someone and perhaps taking responsibilities for their children. (Research has found that women who bring children from a previous union into a second marriage face a higher risk of eventual divorce, although for some reason, this is not true for men who bring children from a previous union into a second marriage.¹³⁷) Also, chances for remarrying decline the older you are when you divorce, probably because there are fewer single partners available at older ages.¹³⁸ However, there are still many divorced people that remarry at an older age and with children.

Unfortunately, research shows that second marriages, in general, are not happier or more stable. A generation ago, scholars thought that easier divorce would help strengthen marriage. They reasoned that if people were freer to leave an unhappy marriage they could find a better match and a happier marriage. But this line of thinking appears to have been short-sighted. The divorce rate for second marriages is even higher than it is for first marriages, and they break up even faster.¹³⁹ There often is more conflict in second marriages compared to first marriages. Much of this conflict comes from complications in blending families together.¹⁴⁰ These stresses usually subside after about five years, however. Because of this, if couples can endure these early years of remarriage, they usually find greater happiness.¹⁴¹ These long-lasting remarriage relationships usually show characteristics such as friendship, support, and respect¹⁴²—a recipe for happiness in any marriage.

Of course, bringing children into a remarriage can be very difficult for the children involved. Children in stepfamilies often experience an increase in stress, even though it probably means more financial security. The increase in stress can put children at more risk for problems. (We give more details about the challenges faced by children of divorce in Chapter 5.)

Although most people who experience a divorce will marry again, there is no guarantee that the second time around will be better. This is another reason why individuals and couples at the crossroads of divorce should think carefully and consider whether it would be better to try to repair their current relationship rather than look for another one.

E. Is the idea of finding and marrying your “soul mate” a myth?

More than 90% of young people believe that they will meet and marry their “soul mate.”¹⁴³ It’s not surprising then that many young (and older) people believe that the secret to a healthy, successful marriage is searching until they find their soul mate. Once you have found her or him, then a successful marriage is virtually guaranteed, or so the reasoning goes. But one of the problems with this attitude is that it is easy to believe that a marriage to your soul mate should be effortless. When problems arise in marriage, it’s easy to think that your spouse is not your true soul mate, and that there is someone else out there for you. In reality, marriage takes a lot of effort, even for soul mates. While it is good to search for someone who shares similar values and dreams and with whom you have a deep connection, the reality is that many individuals who could build a healthy, happy marriage with you, so the idea of finding and marrying a one-and-only soul mate is a myth.

Exercises for Chapter 4

4.1: Imagining A Happy Ending.

A. As we discussed in this chapter, most people who are unhappy in their marriage, if they hang on for a few years, report that they are happy again. Try imagining that in three years both you and your spouse will be happy again in your marriage. What could happen that would explain this change for the better? Imagine a series of events, changes in circumstances, shifted attitudes, new behaviors or actions, etc., that could result in a happy marriage down the road in a few years. Write down your thoughts here. If you can’t imagine this scenario at all, then write down why this is the case.

B. Now think what steps you and your spouse could take and changes in circumstances that could potentially turn your imaginings into reality. Write down your thoughts about this:

4.2: Thinking About Conflict After Divorce.

Divorce may end some conflicts you have had with your spouse, but it can also be the beginning of other conflicts. This exercise is designed to help you think about what conflicts you have had and what will happen if you divorce. Also, this exercise helps you think about what other conflicts may arise if you divorce, and how challenging those conflicts may be.

A. Current Conflicts. What are the current conflicts you have with your spouse that cause the most difficulty and emotional pain? List those below and say how difficult the conflict is for you. Then think about whether this conflict is likely to get better (go away) or worse if you divorce, and why.

What are your most difficult conflicts in your marriage?	If you divorce, do you think the conflict will get better, worse, or stay the same? (Put an x in the box.)			Why? Briefly explain.
	Better	Same	Worse	
1.				
2.				
3.				

4.				
5.				

B. Conflicts After Divorce. Now, try to think about what conflicts you might have if you divorce that would be the most difficult and cause you the most emotional pain. These may be some of the same conflicts you currently have. But they may be new ones due to changes from divorce. You may want to review some of the stresses that commonly come as a result of divorce in section B of Chapter 4. List possible conflicts below. Then say how difficult you think each conflict will be. Finally, think about ways you could reduce this potential conflict.

What do you think your most difficult conflicts with your ex-spouse might be after a divorce?	How difficult do you think this conflict will be? (Put an x in the box.)			How could you reduce this possible conflict?
	Slightly Difficult	Somewhat Difficult	Very Difficult	
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

C. Overall. Overall, how do you think a divorce would affect conflict with your ex-spouse? Write down your thoughts here:
