

6.

What are the possible consequences of divorce for adults?

[I]ndividuals who make the decision to divorce need to be well-informed about its potential costs to themselves, their partners, and their children. When spouses are preoccupied with own immediate frustrations and disappointment, family experts have a responsibility to remind them of the long-term investment they have in each other and in their children.

—Drs. Linda J. Waite & Maggie Gallagher, noted marriage researchers²⁰⁵

Overview: Compared to adults in a stable marriage, divorced adults, on average, have poorer physical and mental health. They experience more social isolation. After a few years, most divorced fathers do not have regular contact with their children. For some divorced adults, new romantic relationships help rebuild self-esteem and happiness, but for others, new romantic relationships end up producing greater feelings of loneliness, unhappiness, and lower self-esteem. Many individuals struggle to manage their emotional ties to their ex-spouse. They continue to be dependent on them for emotional support and practical matters. They remain deeply attached even though the legal ties have been broken. Continuing strong attachment to the ex-spouse makes it harder for adults to adjust to divorce. There are a number of factors that help individuals adjust better to divorce, such as the ability to embrace change.

Parents at the crossroads of divorce have many questions about the possible effects of family break-up on their children. But parents also have questions about how a divorce might affect them. This chapter examines the research evidence on the effects of divorce on adults. We save a discussion of the financial effects of divorce for the next chapter.

A. Why do some adults thrive and others struggle after divorce?

Nearly all people enter marriage with the hope and expectation that their marriage will be a lifelong, mutually rewarding relationship. So it's not surprising that divorce is a painful experience for almost everyone.²⁰⁶ Some newly divorced individuals experience temporary setbacks while others find themselves on a downward slope that almost never seems to end.²⁰⁷ Some people are better able to handle the stresses and challenges and new opportunities of divorce than others. Researchers have found a number of factors that help us understand why some people seem to do better than others after divorce.

Breaking away from high-conflict marriages. Individuals who are ending a marriage with chronic, high conflict or violence, on average, are happier over time.²⁰⁸ Escaping the stress of a high-conflict relationship and the personal threat to safety, not surprisingly, can lead to a better situation, even with the other challenges that often accompany divorce. (Exercise 2.5, “How Healthy Is My Marriage?” at the end of Chapter 2 may help you assess the level of conflict in your relationship [especially items 22–30 in the relationship quiz], along with other aspects of your relationship. Exercise 3.4, “Is There Abuse in My Marriage?” at the end of Chapter 3 may help you assess whether there is violence in your relationship.)

Embracing Change. As hard as it can be sometimes, embracing the opportunity for change helps many people deal better with divorce. The most successful divorced individuals are men and women who embrace the opportunity to make changes in their lives. They work on maintaining friendships or establishing new ones. They embrace employment opportunities and often return to school, and they explore and test the options and avenues available to them.²⁰⁹ Perhaps this helps explain why people with more education adjust easier after divorce; they are better able to solve their problems and they feel more in control of their lives during this difficult transition time.²¹⁰ Some women report that the early years of divorce are a time of significant personal growth; they thrive on the increased independence and personal choices.²¹¹ Those who can feel good about the possibilities for change after a divorce don't just talk about making a better life; they work and sacrifice to make life better. This attitude and effort then begins to open up new opportunities and relationships.²¹² Each time a divorced person makes a choice—about how to earn a living, about where to live, about what kind of daycare center or school to send their children to, or about when to start dating—he or she is making a choice about whether or not to embrace the chance for positive change following a divorce. Each choice leads to another choice and these choices begin to fold into one another until they form a pattern and the individual is on the road to making

life better.²¹³ Research has found that individuals tend to adjust better to divorce if they have more personal resources, such as higher income or education level.²¹⁴ It is possible that having resources such as these give individuals more positive opportunities, making it easier to embrace the change associated with divorce.

On the other hand, many struggle to take those first steps toward positive change in the early years following divorce. It's easy for newly divorced individuals, particularly those with fewer resources, to be preoccupied with the immediate stresses of life following divorce. When just getting through today's problems seems so overwhelming, it's hard to do big-picture thinking and embrace long-term change. Worn down by day-to-day efforts just to get by, some divorced people become brittle and easy to break. They sink into a sense of failure, purposelessness, or depression, and sometimes make things even worse by abusing alcohol or drugs. For some, divorce seems to set in motion a process in which they end up losing everything—jobs, homes, children, and self-esteem. Fortunately, studies have found that most of these problems—unhappiness, depression, alcohol abuse, etc.—have largely subsided 2–3 years after the divorce.²¹⁵ This does not necessarily mean that divorced adults have rebuilt happy lives after a few years, however. Even when they eventually manage to rebuild a functional new life, some find little joy and satisfaction in that new life.²¹⁶

Attitude toward the divorce. Of course, it's easier to embrace change when you wanted the marriage to end and have an accepting attitude toward divorce.²¹⁷ In most cases, however, one of the spouses does not want the divorce.²¹⁸ When someone is still committed to the marriage and views the divorce as a personal tragedy, then he or she tends to have a more difficult time after divorce.²¹⁹ So, unfortunately, often the person who didn't want the divorce usually has a harder time adjusting to divorce than the person who initiated the divorce. Those who still have positive feelings toward their ex-spouses tend to feel more distress as the result of divorce.²²⁰ Individuals in this situation may benefit from staying involved with others socially and developing a new romantic relationship.²²¹ However, holding negative feelings toward an ex-spouse can make it harder to adjust to a divorce. Individuals may have an easier time adjusting to a divorce if they avoid conflict during divorce so that they experience less negative emotion toward their ex-spouses.²²²

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Insecurity and attachment to the ex-spouse. As we mentioned in Chapter 3, insecure individuals—those who are emotionally dependent on their spouses and/or have a fear of abandonment—may also find it harder to adjust to divorce. Research has found that insecure individuals are typically willing to stay in a marriage even if they are not satisfied with the marriage.²²³ Understandably, these insecure individuals tend to have a harder time adjusting to life after divorce. On the other hand, secure individuals

tend to adjust to divorce better. First, they report only mild, rather than high distress, as a result of their divorce, and they see it as less threatening.²²⁴ These individuals also view themselves as being more capable of coping with divorce, and in fact, research does show that they use more effective problem-solving strategies, such as better negotiating and reasoning skills.²²⁵ As a result, these individuals experience fewer physical and psychological health problems after divorce.²²⁶ They also report feeling more comfortable with themselves and others and experiencing fewer problems with their former spouse.²²⁷ In addition, these individuals also generally use more positive parenting skills after divorce,²²⁸ which may help children better adjust to life after divorce.

It's hard to know how divorce will affect you personally. It's hard to know if you are one of those who can embrace change with divorce or if you will be worn down by it. You may benefit from doing the exercise 6.1, "How Will Divorce Affect Me Personally?" at the end of this chapter. It will help you think about these issues and your personal circumstances.

B. What are the possible emotional and physical health consequences of divorce?

For some, leaving a very difficult marriage is a path—albeit a difficult one—to building a better, happier life. However, as we discussed earlier in Chapter 4, for many others, divorce trades one set of challenges for another. Overall, researchers have found that, compared to adults in a stable marriage, divorced adults have poorer physical and mental health, other things being equal.²²⁹ In our interview with "Janet," who had been divorced for more than 15 years, she described herself as an emotional and physical wreck as a result of her divorce: "I weighed like 50 pounds less than I do now; . . . stress makes me lose weight. Everyone would always ask me if I had an eating disorder, I was so thin."

Of course, researchers have also found some positive benefits to divorce for some individuals, and we will review those findings too. But the overall picture documents how hard the process of family breakdown can be on adults, not just children. Below is a partial list of some of the physical and emotional problems that are more common among divorced individuals compared to married individuals.

- ❖ **Happiness.** Divorced adults are generally less happy.²³⁰
- ❖ **Depression.** Divorced individuals, particularly women, are more vulnerable to depression. They have higher levels of psychological stress, lower levels of general psychological well-being, and poorer self-esteem.²³¹
- ❖ **Health.** Divorced individuals see a doctor more often and are more likely to suffer from serious illnesses.²³² Some of these health problems diminish over time. But individuals who experience a divorce are more likely to die at earlier ages.²³³
- ❖ **Alcohol/Drugs.** Divorced adults drink more alcohol than married adults and account for the highest proportion of heavy drinkers. This is especially

true for men.²³⁴ This isn't too surprising given that research shows that men and women—but especially men—generally reduce their use of drugs and alcohol when they marry.²³⁵

Although divorced individuals do go through a period of stress, many bounce back after a few years. (See the Resource List at the end of Chapter 8 for helpful resources within your community.) Some individuals will bounce back quicker given certain circumstances, such as divorcing at younger ages, higher income and education, and higher levels of social support from family and friends.²³⁶

C. What are the possible consequences of divorce for social support?

The decision to divorce can bring about major changes in the social lives of individuals. Compared with married individuals, divorced individuals are less involved in social activities²³⁷ and report more social isolation.²³⁸ Being involved socially is often difficult because accomplishing the day-to-day activities of home, work, and childcare is often more difficult to do alone.²³⁹ Divorced adults often face greater loneliness than married individuals. In addition to losing a spouse, they also lose many of their social contacts such as in-laws, married friends, and neighbors.²⁴⁰ The loss of these social contacts often results in the loss of emotional support.

Divorced individuals often find that friends disappear following the divorce. Often friends, even close friends, distance themselves from the divorced individual because

Divorced men and women approach the transition into single life differently.

they do not know what to say or do to make the person feel better. Although the newly divorced individual desires to maintain friendships and be involved socially, many complain they feel socially awkward because they struggle with whether or not they still fit into social activities as a single person.

Also, divorced individuals find they have less in common with their married friends. Many times friends sort themselves into “his” friends and “her” friends. And married friends may see the newly divorced person as a possible threat to the stability of their own marriages.²⁴¹ Married friends often find it difficult to sustain independent friendships with both sides of a divided couple because the newly divorced person is often wrapped up with the struggles and challenges of single life.²⁴²

The amount of social activity that men and women experience varies, because divorced men and women approach the transition into single life differently. Divorced men report a more lasting attachment to their ex-spouses than divorced women.²⁴³ Often, to compensate for losing their spouse, male social activities tend to rise rapidly and dramatically following divorce.²⁴⁴ Many divorced women seek out a support group to help in their single-life adjustment.²⁴⁵ Friends help the newly divorced woman get a new perspective on the divorce.²⁴⁶ Women like to talk about their problems while men are

more likely to “tough it out” than “talk it out.”²⁴⁷ Men often have fewer close friends to rely on for support after divorce. In addition to men losing their spouses, they usually lose custody of their children as well.

One such man we know, devastated by divorce, began to drink heavily and use other addictive drugs. This problem, when discovered, resulted in legal changes to his co-parenting arrangement. He ended up having to pay for supervised visitation with his children until he became more stable. This was financially costly for both spouses because they had to use the court to deal with the substance abuse and control the conflict in their divorce.

Following a divorce, children usually reside with only one parent, most often the mother.²⁴⁸ This increases the amount of loneliness men feel after divorce. Most fathers make real efforts to stay involved with their children even if they do not have custody

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and live together. But research indicates that after a few years, most divorced fathers do not have regular contact with their children.²⁴⁹ The ex-wife and children of one father we know moved across the country after the divorce. His visitation is limited by the expense of the airline tickets to transport his children back and forth for visitation. Therefore, he can only afford about two visits a year, which makes it difficult to have a solid relationship with his

growing and developing children. When a friend of his was considering a divorce, this divorced father encouraged him to think seriously and try as hard as possible to make the marriage work.

And it's not just the quantity of father-child contact that suffers; it is common for the quality of these relationships to deteriorate, as well.²⁵⁰ The proportion of single fathers raising their children has tripled in the past generation.²⁵¹ However, having custody of the children often creates more social isolation because fathers deal with the challenges of being a single parent.²⁵² Men as well as women find it difficult to be successful at work and home and still find time for a social life.

Even though parents love their children and want to be with them, the children often add an emotional strain on both mothers and fathers. Single parents struggle with trying to balance being a parent and being involved socially. The balancing act between being a parent and having a social life can have a negative effect on the parents' happiness.²⁵³ Both men and women who have custody of their children face more isolation because they are less active in social activities and have fewer friends than married individuals.²⁵⁴ Many divorced mothers report that meeting the needs of their children limits them from being socially active.²⁵⁵

One single mother we know admitted how difficult it is to parent full time with little or no breaks. When visitation comes for the children's father, she is happy to be able to spend a little time on herself. Still, her work schedule and the back and forth on the

weekends associated with her children's visitation with their father limits her ability to socialize.

Although work can be a source of stress for mothers during a divorce transition, it can also be a source of social support. Newly divorced working women generally feel less depressed and less isolated than divorced stay-at-home mothers.²⁵⁶ Working mothers have adult company that helps them to feel better about themselves as they work to rebuild their lives.

D. What are the possible consequences of divorce for religious involvement?

For many people who have strong ties to a personal faith and a religious group, marriage often has a sacred component. For them, marriage is not just a vow with your spouse, but also a covenant with God. Because couples can feel like God is a part of their union, approving it and sanctifying it, when these marriages dissolve, feelings of spiritual failure, guilt, and a broken relationship with God sometimes arise.²⁵⁷ This is even stronger when individuals feel responsible for the breakup of a marital union.²⁵⁸ Divorcing individuals may therefore feel cut off from a dimension of their life that gave them access to sacred, spiritual feelings. Some will even go so far as to feel that they deserve to be cut off from God or their religious friends, feeling that they were not as good or loving or forgiving or patient as they should have been.²⁵⁹ This kind of sacred loss is linked to higher rates of depression.²⁶⁰

When one spouse feels that the other has purposely violated sacred covenants, their marriage, which was once regarded as sacred, may now seem desecrated—something which was precious to them is now “dirty” and defiled—and this leads to even greater anger compared to other kinds of loss.²⁶¹ Sometimes, those with religious backgrounds may feel that their spouse could have violated such a sacred thing only if he or she were under the influence of evil forces. This outlook can cause a parent to guard the children from the ex-spouse, and has potential for long-lasting conflict after the divorce is over.

Spouses with strong religious convictions also may be vulnerable to “using” God in a manipulative way in their conflicts. They may try to convince the other spouse that God is on their side. Sometimes spouses may seek for help from God in prayer but avoid directly communicating with each other.²⁶² Also, sometimes each spouse tries to spiritually one-up the other, which sets the stage for difficulty in trying to cooperate as co-parents and can impede personal recovery from divorce.²⁶³

In many cases, adults (and children) end up leaving or switching their religious group as a consequence of divorce.²⁶⁴ Some may feel embarrassment or resentment; others may feel that they are spiritual failures or outcasts. They may feel that they either deserve to be cut off or are not worthy to participate in worship services. Many families move to different neighborhoods or cities with a divorce, which may necessitate switching familiar congregations. But for many, religious beliefs and activities can be a powerful support to help families deal with the challenges they are facing. Counseling with trusted religious

leaders and accepting their support during these difficult times can be very helpful for many, as well.

E. What are the possible consequences of divorce for romantic relationships?

Most who divorce hope to find a more satisfying relationship in the future. Exploring new romantic relationships after divorce can be both exciting and stressful. One important study that followed divorcing individuals for many years after their divorces found that a new romantic relationship after divorce often produced an increase in self-esteem, a decline in feelings of depression, and even decreased health complaints and visits to the doctor.²⁶⁵ These positive outcomes were found when the new relationships provided a sense of security and support and when there was real concern for each other. However, this study also found that some divorced women and men (especially) used casual sex to find the closeness and intimacy that they were missing. These psychological researchers observed that casual sex frequently ended up producing greater feelings of loneliness, unhappiness, and lower self-esteem. Moreover, these feelings sometimes led to substance abuse, which made problems worse. So new romantic relationships after divorce are a two-edged sword: healthy, caring relationships can be helpful but relationships based on casual sex can make things worse. When dating again, it makes sense to be cautious and go slowly.

In addition, we heard from several of the people we interviewed that moving on to another romantic relationship wasn't easy. "Laura" divorced her unfaithful husband but struggled to move on:

So yeah, do you move on? You try. Does it get any easier? No. And it doesn't matter who comes in your life. I have a great boyfriend right now, and I feel bad because he always wants to be better than [my ex-husband]. But [my marriage] was 12 long years. It's going to take a long time to get [past] that.

For "Janet," trying to find a new love had left her exhausted:

I have really not dated [in a long-term relationship] since then [the divorce]. Because . . . when I finally extracted myself from that, I realized that, even though the circumstances were so different than my marriage, there were a lot of similarities. And as they say, the common denominator in all your failed relationships is you. . . . I was exhausted from trying to make things work with people that it ultimately wasn't going to work with. . . . And I sort of liken it to a love slot machine; you keep putting in hoping that it will pay out and you spend all of your time sitting in front of the slot machine and feeding it.

F. What are the possible consequences of divorce for your relationship with your ex-spouse?

It's often easier to end a relationship legally than it is to end it emotionally. A court will divide up property and specify other responsibilities, such as child support. But a court cannot decree a clean emotional break. Despite divorce, many have a continuing emotional attachment to their ex-spouses.²⁶⁶ This was clear in our interviews with those who had experienced a divorce. Researchers have found two kinds of continuing attachment. One is a continuing preoccupation with and/or dependence on the ex-spouse. A second kind of emotional attachment is ongoing hostility towards the ex-spouse. Researchers have found that continuing emotional attachment to an ex-spouse is associated with a variety of psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, loneliness, anger, and feelings of powerlessness.²⁶⁷

Not surprisingly, hostile emotional attachments have the most negative effects. Researchers have found that the more hostile the divorce process and the higher the level

Some couples seem unable to let go of their hostile feelings even as much as a decade later.

of conflict after the divorce, the harder it is for individuals to adjust in healthy ways and move on with their lives. This also makes it harder on the children.²⁶⁸ Researchers have found that some couples seem unable to let go of their hostility and conflict even a decade later.²⁶⁹ It's helpful for both adults and children when ex-spouses try hard to hold down natural feelings of anger during the divorce and let those feelings go after the

divorce. Of course, this is easier said than done.

One such couple we know were married while they were teens. But they soon divorced. Their struggles to co-parent their children after divorce escalated as each thought the other was being unreasonable. The mother resented any visitation with the father and the father fought in court often to enforce his visitation. They rarely spoke to one another and used their attorney and the court to communicate and make decisions for their family.

What may be surprising to some is that many individuals struggle to cut their more positive emotional ties to their ex-spouse. They continue to be dependent on them for emotional support and practical matters. They remain deeply attached even though the legal ties have been broken. Researchers have found continuing strong attachment to the ex-spouse makes it harder for adults to adjust to divorce and can contribute to psychological problems.²⁷⁰ "Laura," as you just read was struggling to move on because of how emotionally attached she was to her ex-spouse:

It's been two years since my divorce and you can see that we still have a major connection, and it's terrible. It's terrible to feel that way. Because even now we talk, "What the heck have we done?" . . . It's still really, really hard. I really, really did and still do, deeply, deeply love him. . . . Even now, it's just been a nightmare because we're still so connected. . . . You've told this person everything in life. He knows everything about you. . . . He's called me about a billion times to tell me how unhappy he is. In the three years since the separation and the two years since the divorce, the longest that we have gone without speaking to each other has been one week. . . . I don't think there's another man on the earth that I care for as much as I do for him. But people don't understand that, they don't understand those feelings. . . . And this is coming from a girl that was cheated on, he got another woman pregnant, and he really, really betrayed me.

To show how complex divorce can be, one study found that sometimes maintaining a good relationship with the ex-spouse and working together to be good parents to the children went hand-in-hand with continuing emotional attachment to the ex-spouse, which makes personal adjustment to divorce harder.²⁷¹ There is a fine line between maintaining a positive, working relationship with your ex-spouse and remaining emotionally dependent on him or her. Healthy post-divorce relationships have clearly established boundaries that define the former spouse as a co-parent you work with for the good of your children but not as a person you continue to rely on for emotional support.²⁷²

Exercises for Chapter 6

6.1: How Will Divorce Affect Me Personally?

It may be impossible to know for sure how you will be affected by divorce. But there are many things to think about that will give you a better sense of what may happen. Below are a series of questions about different aspects of your life after a divorce.

A. Your social life. In this chapter, you learned that many people report having a difficult time maintaining friendships and feeling lonely after divorce. This exercise is designed to help you think how a divorce may affect your social life. (A later part of this exercise will focus specifically on romantic relationships after divorce. For now, think about friendships and family relationships.)

Friends. Who are your strongest friends and how might those friendships be affected by a divorce? (Next you will focus on relationships with family members.) Write down your thoughts about this:

Name of Friend	How might your relationship be affected by a divorce? Why?
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Family. Of course, family relationships are often the most important part of our social lives. Now consider how divorce may affect your social relationships with various family members. Include relationships with, for instance, parents, siblings, extended family, and in-laws. Of course, especially consider how divorce may affect your relationship with your children. (Next you will focus on your relationship with your ex-spouse.) Write down your thoughts about this:

Name of Family Member	How might your relationship be affected by a divorce? Why?
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•	
•	
•	
•	

Name of Family Member	How might your relationship be affected by a divorce? Why?
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Ex-Spouse. Now think about how your divorce will affect your relationship with your ex-spouse. For some, conflict decreases after divorce but for others it increases. Some can cut the emotional and practical ties fairly easily but for others they remain quite attached and dependent on their ex-spouse. Think about how this is likely to be for you. Write your thoughts here:

Future romance. Of course, most people who divorce hope to find a new and better love. What are your hopes and dreams? What barriers will you face to realizing these hopes? Be as realistic, honest, and specific as possible in assessing this. How can you meet and overcome these barriers? Write your thoughts here:

B. Your religious life. In this chapter, you also learned about the effects that divorce may have on your religious life. You may not have thought much about this aspect of your life after divorce. This exercise is designed to help you do so.

Beliefs. What are your religious beliefs about divorce? How will they affect how you adjust to divorce? Will they be a source of strength to you or might they make adjustment harder? Why? Write down your thoughts here:

Support. Do you think you will have support and help from religious leaders and friends? Or do you think you might feel alienated from religious support as a result of your divorce? Why? Write down your thoughts here:

Activity. Will you want to maintain your involvement with your religious group? Increase it? Decrease it? Why? What challenges will you face with respect to religious involvement after your divorce? Write down your thoughts here:

C. Change. In this chapter you learned that those who can embrace the big changes that come with divorce and optimistically work to make their lives better, not surprisingly, are able to adjust better to divorce. Try to assess your personality and attitudes about change. First, rate yourself with the following questions.²⁷³ Circle the answers that best describe you.

How much or how often do these words or phrases describe you?					
	Never (0)	Rarely (1)	Sometimes (2)	Often (3)	Very Often (4)
A. Open-minded	0	1	2	3	4
B. Flexible	0	1	2	3	4
C. Easygoing	0	1	2	3	4
D. Adaptable	0	1	2	3	4

Now add up your score (it should be between 0–16): _____

- Higher scores indicate that you are more adaptable and flexible person.
- If your score is less than 10, then adaptability and flexibility are probably not strengths of yours. You may struggle more than others to adjust to the significant changes brought on by divorce.
- If your score is 10 or higher, then adaptability and flexibility are probably strengths of yours. Although this doesn't mean that you will have an easy time adjusting to a divorce, your ability to adapt to change may help you adjust better to the significant changes brought on by divorce.

Having completed this brief scale, now think about the following questions, answering them as honestly as possible:

Flexibility. Are you a person who can adjust fairly easily to changes or is that hard for you? Are you pretty flexible or pretty set in your ways? Write down your thoughts here:

Attitude. What is your attitude about the changes that would need to come for you to adjust to divorce? Do you think you will embrace them or get worn down by them? Do you think you have the energy to pursue needed changes or will you struggle just to get by day-to-day? Would you welcome a divorce or would you dread it? Write down your thoughts here:

D. Putting it all together. So, having thought about how divorce might affect your social and religious life, and whether you would embrace change or struggle with it, what does it all mean for you? How well do you think you would adjust to divorce? Or do you think it would be better for you to keep trying to repair your marriage and avoid divorce, if you could? Write down your final thoughts here:
