

TWU Counseling Center

The Death of a Marriage

When there is a death of a partner in a marriage, it is considered tragic by friends and family, and they gather round in support and reassurance and understanding, responding to the mourning and grief of the survivor. This seems a natural and humane part of our culture.

Strangely divorce (which could be likened to the death of a marriage) does not receive the same response from friends and family. Family members are often disapproving, shamed, embarrassed, or perhaps take an "I told you so" stance. Friends are often made uneasy or uncomfortable by your action. Your divorce in some strange way may threaten their marriages. So that they may feel very awkward around you, having difficulty finding "safe" topics of conversation. Your church may be condemning and punitive, rather than supportive and understanding. On the other hand others may see you as light-hearted and happy, fortunate to have rid yourself of a burden. None of these reactions to your state gives you a chance to grieve. There is grief and sadness on the part of both the "leaver" and the "left", even though each may see the other as having the best part of things.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in her book On Death and Dying, lists five stages which a dying person goes through in his recognition of his / her mortality - as well as his /her family going through the same steps in dealing with this loss.

These steps seem particularly fitting in thinking of the death of a marriage. These steps need to be recognized, and worked through in order to be able to readjust and move toward a new and different life.

1. The denial and isolation: involves the refusal to recognize the situation and the difficulty of not being able to talk about the situation to anyone. There is a feeling of being alone in your struggle.
2. Anger: involves the need to punish, to get even, to make him /her hurt as much as you do, all of the punitive kinds of reactions are present.
3. Bargaining: involves all the ways in which we try to keep things as they were. Common thoughts include "I'll do anything to please if only you will try again, "please don't leave", and "I can't live without you" (which holds its own threat).
4. Depression: is the stage where things feel as if "all is lost", when the feelings of loss and gain are confused. The past looks good and the future cannot be tolerated. The hurt is intolerable so that the world looks lonely and desolate. There seems to be nothing to look forward to and common thoughts include "I will never have anything" and "I will always be alone". This is a bleak stage indeed, but it is a stage.
5. Acceptance: involves facing the reality of the situation, being willing to deal with this reality, moving on to the future, and making new relationships.

One of the feelings not mentioned here is guilt, which so often interferes with the readjustment and forward- looking movement which follows a "healthy" mourning. Perhaps one reason for this is the difficulty in looking at oneself and the reluctance to accept one's own responsibility in the relationship. One vital reason for looking at oneself and being able to accept the role I played in the disintegration of the marriage is to not ruin future relationships. To say "I am doomed to failure" (as is often heard in the depressive stage) is to say I have no responsibility. It should be mentioned that there is a great difference in accepting one's own responsibility in the relationship and compulsively blaming yourself for it all. This can be as non-productive or and as destructive as putting all the blame on your partner. You must be willing to want to change before any change takes place. It is important to be willing to look at oneself, say "this is what I did wrong in this relationship", and accept one's own weaknesses and strengths, so that the future will indeed be different from the past.

The failure to go through the stages and the failure to somehow make peace with yourself and move on from there may indeed cause a repetition of past errors.

Sometimes it is most difficult to find a place to mourn, or to find someone who will listen, much less understand the things you may be going through. Regardless of the worries you may have of wondering what others will think, it is important to find a place or persons who can give you support.

Note: This document is based on an audio tape script developed by the University of Texas, Austin. With their permission, it was revised and edited into its current format by the staff of the University of Florida Counseling Center. www.counsel.ufl.edu/selfHelp/deathOfMarriage.asp

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