

Divorce – Consequences and Alternatives

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If you are married, hopefully you are happy and fulfilled in your relationship. If so, you probably went through the storming phase of your relationship and got through it without creating issues you couldn't forgive. You both shared your wants and needs, discussed your differences, reached compromises where needed, aligned on important matters, and now enjoy life with your loving companion. You value and respect each other. You accept each other including each other's shortcomings.

This is not to suggest that you don't have disagreements from time to time. One of you occasionally says or does something that hurts or frustrates the other. There are times when conflict replaces harmony. However, if you have a genuine appreciation and respect for each other, these occasions are few. When they occur, you work through them with a rewarding reconciliation at the end.

There are also conflicts that don't get resolved easily or quickly. Couples encounter circumstances and issues that are difficult to overcome. They reenter a storming phase in their relationship. They deal with deeper and longer periods of discord. Perhaps one person learns and grows while the other doesn't. Or one gives up trying to honor and please the other. Or one does something that really hurts the other. Uncertainty about the viability of the relationship enters the situation.

When substantial discord is left unresolved, one or both parties have to make a really big decision. Are they willing to change? Are they willing to forgive? Are they willing to give rather than get? They have to decide – are they willing to change in some way, go to counseling, or do whatever is needed to preserve the relationship?

If the answer is no and they are not willing to work on the relationship or change in some way, they have two options. Live with their circumstances or not. They either accept that an issue isn't worth separating over or it is. Statistics find that many couples decide that separating is worth it. Approximately 50 percent of first marriages end in divorce. Second marriage success rates are even less. A lot of people decide they can't accept their circumstances when desired change doesn't happen.

With divorce so popular, it must be a good solution. Or is it? While the benefits of divorce can outweigh the disadvantages, many people regret their decision. They discover after all the frustration and emotion have subsided that their decision to divorce had far more negative implications than they imagined. Some wish they would have just separated for a brief period of time. Or spent a few days with a respected and trustworthy friend and then worked on reconciling their differences. Or wish they would have calmed down, been more grateful for what they had, and created a plan with their spouse to start over.

If you or someone you know is contemplating divorce, listed below are consequences of divorce that many people don't discover until it is too late. Before you give up on a relationship, understand the cost of giving up. Make your decision with your eyes open. Realize that leaving your spouse has downsides too. At least think through your decision in a balanced way. There may be justification for and benefits to getting a divorce. But there are liabilities too.

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Realities of divorce:

- Remember when you enjoyed spending time with your mate. Realize you will lose his/her companionship.
- You will be alone.
- Remember all that your mate did for you including the sacrifices, support, help, and fun. Realize you are leaving that behind.
- Remember when you felt secure physically and financially. You will lose whatever physical and financial assistance your mate provided.
- You will lose half, or more, of the financial and other resources you owned and had access to.
- The mediators and attorneys will go after you and create more animosity toward you and your mate.
- Many of your memories will no longer be cherished.
- Your pictures of past vacations and events may no longer be displayable or enjoyable.
- You will carry the label of “divorced”.
- You will not be with your children during holidays as you were before.

If you pursue another relationship or marriage:

- You will meet someone else someday who will have a different set of problems. You may trade one set of problems for another.
- If you begin a new relationship, you will go through another period of storming, debating, compromising, and settling with someone else.
- If you begin a new relationship, you will encounter a new way of living that is very different and uncomfortable compared to the way of living that you took for granted before.
- If you remarry and your new spouse has children, you will become a step-parent and have parenting responsibilities for children not born to you. You will have issues with them. They may choose not to like you or want you around.
- If you remarry, you will inherit your new spouse’s history. You will assume the consequences for all their past decisions, actions, and circumstances.
- If you remarry, you’ll get to watch home videos and look at pictures of the history of someone else’s family.
- If you remarry and stay together, you will be taking care of someone else in their old age.
- If you remarry, you will create a new estate plan in which you will share what you have with someone else. Your ex-spouse will share their estate with whomever they remarry and so your children will lose out and there will be conflict between you and your children.
- If you remarry, you will share your resources with someone else.
- If you remarry, you will have your attorney and your spouse will have her/his attorney. One or both attorneys will likely pit you against each other as they strive to protect and benefit each of you, even at the other’s expense.
- Your next marriage will be #2 and if that doesn’t work out, you’ll be divorced twice and potentially looking for marriage #3. Or if by chance your next marriage is #3 and doesn’t work out, you’ll be looking for marriage #4.

If you have kids:

- Your kids will be burdened with sharing their time with separate sets of parents and step-parents.
- Someone else will be influencing and possibly raising your kids.
- If your kids are young, they will have to constantly go between houses and parents.
- Your kids will likely hold a grudge against you.
- You will no longer enjoy holidays and special occasions with your kids as you did before.
- Your grandkids will have to share their time with extra sets of grandparents and step-grandparents.
- If you remarry, you will need to prioritize your spouse above your children and grandchildren.

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The alternative to divorce is working through your issues, making compromises or changes, and staying together. This requires both people to agree to do what is within their control to honor the commitment they made to each other.

People can change in many ways. For example, people can change their lifestyle and improve their physical fitness. They can change how they communicate. They can reframe how they think about things including adopting new core values. They can become more loving, giving, and compassionate. They can stop ignoring, drinking, working, playing, complaining, blaming, lying, and spending.

There are attributes people can't change too. People might be able to improve their physical fitness, but they can't change their innate physical shape. People can change how they communicate, but not the sound of their voice. People can change their values, but still hold on to deeply held beliefs. People can become less selfish and more compassionate, but may always struggle to show genuine empathy. People can become more emotionally and mentally engaging, but may always be introverted and socially awkward. People can read books, go to school, and increase their knowledge, but that won't increase their innate intelligence. People can change careers, work harder, and make more money, but may still not be able to provide a certain lifestyle. People can change most of their behaviors, but still can't undo their past.

Consider that most of what you wish for in your spouse and your relationship is possible with a few exceptions such as those listed above. If there is even a kernel of hope, apply the approaches listed below to overcoming issues in marriage and avoiding divorce:

1. **Manage emotions.** Control your anger. Avoid making accusations and threats that merely increase the conflict. Avoid exaggerations such as saying “you always ...” or “you never ...” that cause the other person to become defensive. Calm down, prepare for your conversations, and be in control of yourself. Avoid threatening divorce.
2. **Show empathy.** Understand each other's thoughts, feelings, and circumstances. Before offering your different opinion or expecting to be understood, relate to the other's situation. Before expecting the other person to understand you, put yourself in their circumstances. How would you feel? What would you think?
3. **Discuss the issues.** Talk about each other's unmet needs, concerns, and frustrations. Talk respectfully and constructively. Show grace to each other. Be gentle. Seek to understand each other without judgement. Ask questions. Explore the motives underlying each other's needs. Don't judge without knowing why the other is thinking or doing what they are thinking or doing. Ensure the issues are clearly stated, discussed, and understood. Check for understanding by asking the other to repeat what they understand the issues to be.
4. **Deal with history.** When past events and behaviors prevent looking forward, discuss what happened and the motives behind them. Discuss the hurts the behaviors caused. Say what needs to be said so troubling thoughts and feelings don't linger. Understand what preceded any bad decisions and how they can be avoided going forward. Put conditions in place that allow trust to be restored.
5. **Take responsibility.** Stop any blaming and start taking responsibility. Assess yourself and the portion of responsibility you have. You may only be one percent responsible for your relationship issues, but assess your one percent. What might you need to change? What might you be doing to create the issues you see in your mate? Do you have a way of thinking or behaving that is contributing to the issue? As minor as your contribution to a conflict might be, it could be significantly triggering to the other. Own, apologize for, and address the part which you contribute.
6. **Put issues in perspective.** Compare the issues to what others might objectively say are issues truly worth getting upset over. Consider whether or not your expectations are realistic and reasonable. Are the issues truly significant when compared to what most people deal with? Are they really worth fighting over to the extent you are fighting? Are you being overly sensitive or emotional? Be careful not to major on the minors.
7. **See the good.** Compare what you have that is working to what you don't have that isn't working. Are you giving attention to the areas that are working? Are they worth preserving? Think about the positives in your relationship and give them equal attention. Be grateful and appreciate what you have that is working that you would want to continue. Recall any love, help, and fun you've enjoyed.

Divorce – Consequences and Alternatives

8. **Check your ego.** Consider that your opinions might be too strong. Or that you are too self-centered or controlling. Or that your pride is driving you. Could you be a bit more flexible or openminded? Could you give up being right or a particular need? Or could you give up a part of your identity in the spirit of maintaining harmony in your relationship? Can you admit your part in contributing to the issue? Can you let the other have the last word?
9. **Look forward.** Give more attention to what could be in the future than to what wasn't in the past. Recall what you were each grateful for in the past that could be restored. Discuss and agree on what you both will do going forward to satisfy each other's needs. Discuss and agree on what you will change. Give attention first to changes in thinking before discussing changes in behaving. Changes in the heart and mind precede changes in behaving. Make change mutual rather than one-sided. Both sides have to change. Even if one is already making most of the changes, he/she may have to continue.
10. **Give first.** Give before expecting to receive. Be the first to contribute to restoring the relationship instead of expecting your spouse to compromise first. Lean in rather than disengage or back off. Fill the other person's void with something positive rather than leave their need unmet. Put your needs on hold, at least temporarily, until the other feels their needs have been addressed. Put your spouse's needs ahead of yours long enough for your spouse to experience your willingness to give. If whatever you give works, consider making it permanent.
11. **Get help.** Meet with a marriage counselor and/or friends whom you both respect and know you both well. Share your issues with them and ask for their feedback. See if they have suggestions on how you might reframe your issues in way that makes them easier to address. Get others' ideas on how both of you might react, think, and behave in new ways. Seek their wisdom, and if possible, accountability, to make any needed changes.
12. **Invest in your relationship.** If you are constantly under stress, such as when taking care of children or parents, find opportunities to get away. Schedule date nights where the two of you can be away from the stress in your lives. Create opportunities to catch up and talk. Attend marriage enrichment seminars. Read books that enhance yourselves as well as your relationship. Sign up for daily and weekly online messages from organizations designed to improve marriages.
13. **Affirm your mate.** Affirm each other's desirable behaviors. Give compliments when deserved. Give each other unexpected gifts such as a massage or time off from household duties. Write thoughtful and uplifting letters. Look for opportunities to build-up your mate. Regularly point out their strengths and positive attributes. Be an encourager rather than a critic. If you have to criticize, make it minimal in comparison to all the praise you give.
14. **Set the example.** Adopt the philosophy that you want to be the example your children and others should follow. Don't say or do anything that you wouldn't be proud of or that you wouldn't want others to know about. Show affection and respect for each other in front of others. Compliment each other. Make each other feel supported and valued. Don't humiliate each other such as interrupting or correcting the other in public.
15. **Have some fun.** Do things together that you both enjoy. Create positive memories together. Find hobbies, sports, or activities you can do together. Go out with friends you both enjoy. Attend events, neighborhood gatherings, church, concerts, and seminars together. Travel and create new experiences together. Find opportunities to learn and grow together. Create shared experiences that draw you closer.
16. **If all this fails.** Separate for a period of time if needed to calm down and/or escape undesirable circumstances. Spend a few nights, a week, or however long is needed to cool down, reflect, and receive wise counsel. Remain faithful during your separation. Talk nightly or do whatever you can reasonably do to keep each other secure and know that you are remaining faithful. Don't create new issues on top of the ones you are already dealing with.

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