

The Psychological Stages of Divorce

by Diane Neumann

Introduction:

Rarely is anyone prepared for the end of their marriage. This is almost as true for the spouse who initiates the divorce, as it is for the spouse who is being left.

Marriages are very difficult to end and everyone goes through a period of emotional transition, which can be described as a series of stages. Over the years, my work with separating and divorcing couples has shown five distinct emotional stages that comprise the divorce transition. These combined stages generally take an average of three years, though for some people the period is shorter, while for others, it is longer. The stages may occur in a specific order, though they may also blend and overlap. Occasionally, someone skips a stage.

The person who wants the divorce is called the initiator spouse, while the person who is not requesting the divorce (and usually does not want the divorce) is called the non-initiator spouse. The initiator experiences the first stage of divorce while still living with his or her spouse. Typically, this is not true for the non-initiator spouse. This individual begins the first stage after hearing of the divorce or after the couple has physically separated. This difference in the beginning of the transition causes a difference in the length of time it takes each person to complete the five stages, and this difference is a major reason why spouses are at different stages as they progress through the divorce process.

STAGE ONE: Blaming the Spouse

The focus during this stage is on the spouse. The individual blames his or her spouse for all of the past, present and future problems in their life. Both men and women are obsessively preoccupied with their past marital relationship, and often relive scenes from earlier years.

During Stage One, the individual may develop a negative self-image and be easily hurt. S/he appears depressed and sad much of the time and experiences a low energy level. Friends and relatives describe the individual as very upset. •

The characteristics of a person in Stage One will differ depending on whether s/he is the initiator or the non-initiator. The initiator is seeking relief from a stressful situation. Hand in hand with the feeling of relief, however, the individual experiences guilt over the decision to divorce. Additional feelings of blame, fear, anger and depression exist but are often masked as s/he tries to act as if nothing were wrong. The non-initiator often describes the initiator as stubborn or “going through a stage”. •

Sometimes the initiator is not the one who really wants the divorce. For example, Tom knew that if he continued his affair with Susan, his wife Barbara would end their marriage. He continued to see Susan, and his wife finally demanded a divorce. Though

she is described as the initiator, she is not the one who wanted the divorce.

Stage One is often the first time the non-initiator hears that the relationship is over. A period of disbelief follows, accompanied with a denial of the reality of separation or divorce. Indeed, that person may become divorce opposed spending all of his or her energy resisting the divorce. The non-initiator feels as though s/he has no control concerning the decision to divorce, and as a result, experiences helplessness and a lack of control. The individual often reacts in one of two extreme ways - either by letting the initiator make all of the decisions in the separation and divorce, or by taking control and attempting to make all of the decisions.

This stage is the most difficult of the emotional stages of divorce because of the profound changes, the loss, and the fear of the unknown. A former client described this as my "shell shock months". • This is also a time of diminished parenting. Men and women are too deeply immersed in their own feelings to attend well to the needs of their children.

Mediation Benefits During Stage One

Mediation allows each individual to take some degree of control over their lives. In addition, the process helps clients to start making short-term decisions concerning the physical separation.

Mediation helps each client with the following:

1. Fosters a sense of control,
2. Defuses a fear of the separation/divorce process,
3. Structures information gathering,
4. Organization of basic living expenses,
5. Better parenting skills, and
6. Working out physical separation details.

Mediation encourages tasks that are geared for this period and helps to make sense of the ambivalent and upsetting feelings that are prevalent.

STAGE TWO: Mourning the Loss

This stage can be compared to the general theme of Kubler-Ross™'s stages of death and dying. The primary focus is acknowledging the end of the relationship. Anyone who has witnessed someone in this stage is struck by the profound grieving. When a person explains, I just sat and cried for weeks, this is not an exaggeration. The grief feels overwhelming. There is an exaggerated attitude. The future looms ahead, hopeless and meaningless.

Each of us builds our identity through the roles in our life. We each have several roles in our life, which bear varying degrees of importance to us. The various roles of a divorcing

woman, for example, may be those of computer programmer, mother, and wife. The importance of a role depends on how much the role was part of your identity. A client of mine described how she felt as she looked at her mail, addressed to Mrs. Frank Rossi - as not me anymore. •

While in Stage Two, the individual tends to be overly sensitive to any comments and interprets ambiguous comments as criticism. A second characteristic is an intense preoccupation with his or her own feelings. The individual needs emotional support yet is ambivalent about the kind of support they want.

During this time, individuals have difficulty concentrating on tasks, as s/he is lost in a world of feelings. Parenting is still diminished, as the parent needs all of their energy for themselves. However, a parent may hold onto a child in an attempt to recapture the separated spouse, or else behave in a rejecting manner to their child because of perceived similarities between the child and the spouse.

It will be somewhat easier for clients to be in mediation during Stage Two, as both spouses are letting go of the relationship, but it is still difficult to make long-term decisions.

Mediation Benefits During Stage Two

1. Continuation of short-term tasks,
2. Re-focus from “poor me” attitude,
3. Help in letting go process,
4. Acknowledge the grief, so that the client is not pushed into anger stage too quickly,
5. Reality of the divorce, and
6. Structure for further information gathering.

During Stage Two, the positive feelings toward the spouse surface and serve to establish a necessary foundation for people to work out what is best for each of them. The mediation process allows feelings to be constructively channeled into a framework that is working toward a fair settlement.

STAGE THREE: Anger

The rage comes from a feeling of being betrayed - by your spouse - by life itself. •

Though anger is seen at just about every stage of the divorce transition, it is now the dominant trait. The rage is upsetting, especially to friends and relatives. The anger is

most often directed toward the spouse, but it may also be aimed at all women or all men. • There is a sense of righteousness to the anger - that the spouse is wrong and deserves to suffer. A common fantasy during this stage is that the judge will proclaim

the spouse the bad individual and declare the other as the wronged spouse. The parents may upset their children by reacting with sudden unexpected rage at the mention of their spouse. Behind the anger, however, are many fears, such as “How will I live alone?” “Will I have enough money to support myself?” “Will I find someone else?” • On the positive side, parenting skills are slowly returning and the individuals are better able to attend to the needs of their children.

The individuals energy level is higher than at the earlier stages and there is, correspondingly, higher self-esteem. Anger and energy are part of the same cycle, and anger means movement. This is a good point to be in mediation, because the individual has the energy to be actively engaged. It is a trying time for some mediators, however, who are not used to dealing with the displays of anger by their clients. It is very dangerous for the client to be taking part in the adversarial system because the legal divorce system will further incite most clients.

Mediation Benefits During Stage Three

1. Defuses anger,
2. Directs energy into specific tasks,
3. Enhances decision-making abilities,
4. Provides management of a variety of tasks,
5. Focus on long-term goals, and
6. Reality testing.

If you hear of a bitter, hotly contested divorce trial, you can be certain that at least one of the spouses is in the Anger Stage. • Mediation plays a significant role during this stage by defusing the anger. Rather than fuel the fires, it redirects energy by focusing on concrete and specific aspects of the agreements.

STAGE FOUR: Being Single

This is the stage that the media glamorizes as second adolescence, since individuals are frequently trying out new experiences. Contrary to popular belief, these experiences are not exclusively sexual. Often the spouse will be upset to learn that the new activity is something the individual wanted their spouse to share in. For many people, this is the first time in their adult lives that they have been single. Being single, however, has more to do with making your own decisions than with marital status.

One of the most significant changes is the growing sense of being a whole person - of not needing the spouse to make him or her complete. Men and women start to trust in themselves to make their own decisions, and their self-image is much improved over the earlier stages.

Parenting tends to re-establish itself during this stage. However, there is one troublesome aspect for many, and that is if they are the parents of adolescents, they may have a difficult time, as this age group tends to be harshly judgmental of any behavior they see as immoral in a parent.

Individuals in this stage are able to make decisions more easily than in the previous stages. The energy level is high in comparison to the earlier stages. This is the ideal time to use mediation, for clients are in a good place to actively take part in negotiations.

Mediation Benefits During Stage Four

1. Heightened communication between the spouses,
2. Facilitates co-parenting cooperation,
3. Opportunity for improved relationship interaction, and
4. Helps in long-term planning.

Stage Four is an ideal time for mediation; primarily due to the positive attitude one has toward change and oneself. Since the individual is in a relatively good emotional phase, mediation is more efficient and less painful.

STAGE FIVE: Re-Entry

Re-entry is the fifth and last stage of the divorce process. This stage of the divorce process is a time of settling down. If there is a predominant theme during Stage Five, it is the feeling of being in control of your life again. Men and women, alike, believe that they have some control over their future. Individuals in Stage Five are able to make long-term plans and commitments. If both spouses are in this stage, they will rarely be engaged in a courtroom trial. Invariably, however, spouses have completed most, if not all, of their divorce settlement.

Mediation will be relatively smooth at this point, as the individual is involved in a new life. Though that spouse has strong feelings towards his or her spouse and these feelings affect their life, the individual accepts the end of the marriage and continues on with his/her new and changed life.

Mediation Benefits During Stage Five

1. More efficient,
2. Provides closure,
3. Emphasis on the future, and
4. Is relatively painless.

Mediation is used at any time during a divorce. The mediator understands that the behavior of the clients is typical during these stages. It is not a sign of mental illness (though the spouse may question that). The stages are typical behavior for divorcing individuals. A mediator can help provide a framework for discussion and information gathering that respects the client and one, which assists to create a fair agreement.