



THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

BY MARYELLEN DABAL, MA, LMFTA

Chances are that you or someone you know has gone through or is currently experiencing a divorce. This complex situation can be worked through in a healthy way with the proper mindset and tools. There are many aspects of life to consider, including the physical changes of where to call home, the emotional changes of the entire situation and the mental health changes of life as it is currently known.

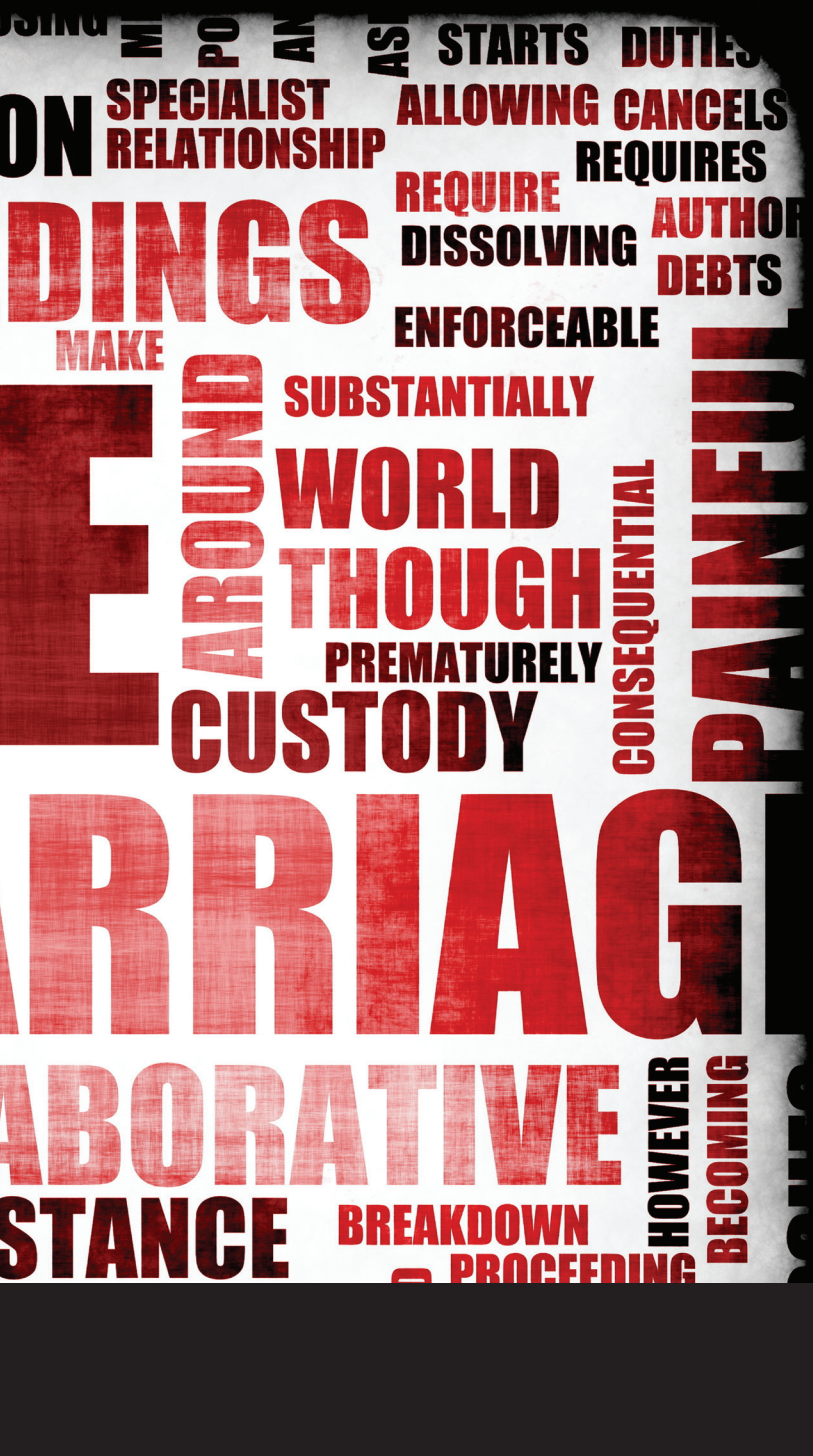
There are two main struggles within the process of divorce; the struggle of what to do and what to think about now and the struggle of what to do and how to plan for the future. Both are equally important and deserve attention. Whether you are the one experiencing the process or you are supporting someone else as they go through divorce, here are some things to keep in mind.

IN THE HERE AND NOW

Know that both individuals involved will most likely experience

a grief process in different ways and likely with different durations. This is perfectly normal. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a Swiss-born psychiatrist, coined the Five Stages of Grief. Many individuals will travel through these stages which include denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, and there is no correct order to be followed. The key to keep in mind is that this moving from stage to stage is what aids in the healing process to finally reach the stage of acceptance. You or your friend may go through many weeks or months at denial and anger while traveling through bargaining occasionally and visiting depression several times before finally getting to acceptance.

As the experience of these stages of grief progress, keep in mind that individual needs will have to be addressed and met. As a friend of the one going through the divorce, be sure to remind them that it will be harder to take care of their children if they are not maintaining their own health as well. It is important to get



plenty of rest, eat a nutritionally balanced diet and have a safe and healthy outlet for the frustrations that will come. A hobby or interest that will immerse them in something positive may help to regain strength during the process. Exercise is an excellent way to relieve the frustration in a positive way and it can be even more fun if you exercise with a friend.

Another key to working through this process is being sure the participants have a support network around them. Some of us in this transient area are lucky enough to have family close by. Some of us in the Metroplex are not as lucky. Close friends can be indispensable in this time of need. Divorce support groups in the area can be of assistance as well. I encourage checking with your local church, synagogue or place of worship to seek out those resources and understand that there are individuals and organizations that want to help.

People often tell me that they don't like to ask for help or

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THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF
PROGRESS, KEEP IN MIND
THAT **INDIVIDUAL** NEEDS
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AND MET.

bother anyone and they want to do this on their own. It is possible, to a point, but knowing that you can lean on others through the challenges truly can make it better. Know that you are worth the effort.

Change places for a moment with a friend. If they were hurting, would you want them to tell you that they can handle it alone, or would you want them to know they can lean on you for support? Think about it. Relationships whether friendships, coworkers or family members are built on that human connection and being able to rely on each other in time of need. Many times divorce is the result of partners no longer feeling they have the ability to lean on each other for support so they drift apart. Counseling is a resource that can help individuals as they begin that process of divorce or as they realize that this drifting apart is occurring to help restore the marriage.

One factor often overlooked in the process is what did go well in the relationship? What good was created out of the marriage? What assets did I contribute? Look in the mirror; tell yourself you are a good person. Ask yourself what is good about me? Many individuals suffer from self-esteem issues as they go through divorce, whether they were the one to ask for divorce or the one on the receiving end. Keeping this in check is crucial every single day. Find something good to say about YOU every day.....and believe it. Staying positively focused on yourself, your family and your contributions to life can do wonders for self-esteem. If doing it for yourself is a challenge, do it for your children or others that rely on you regularly. Helping a friend process this information from a different perspective can truly be welcomed in this time of need.

The flip side of keeping self-esteem in check is being able to admit that you are not perfect. You will make mistakes along the way. The key to not having this keep you down for long is to learn a lesson from that mistake. How did it happen? What can I do to prevent it from happening again? It is important for children to know that we are not perfect. That takes the pressure off of them

to think they have to be perfect as well. They need to know that leaning on someone for support can be healthy and normal.

AN EYE TO THE FUTURE

So now what does the future look like? What do you want it to look like? To keep mentally healthy through the process, I highly encourage my clients to be able to envision a future. It may not be the future you asked for, especially if you are not the one who filed for divorce, but you can absolutely choose how you see that future. What do I need to be successful in life? How do I define success? Is it a warm place to call home and to be able to provide the necessities or is it being able to finally finish college at age 45 and pursue a long-lost career? Create a visual reminder with a friend of all the good things ahead of you. Look at that visual reminder every day to remind you that there is so much left in life to do...so much to experience. Divorce doesn't have to be the end of all things good...it is the beginning of the future you have yet to live. Allowing children to take part in this process can be very rewarding, too. They can envision their new future. Suggestions can even be exchanged as you create this future together.

In addressing children and their future, keep a few things in mind for their mental health. Assuring offspring that just because the love between parents has changed, love for them has not. Their basic needs of safety and security have most likely been shattered or at least shaken. Being aware of their behaviors as the process continues can help to see how they are handling it. Encourage them to talk to someone about what they are feeling. Encourage them to ask questions and do not put down the other parent in the process and make them choose. They can love both parents.

The custodial parent may feel a need to lean on a child, especially an older child. Asking a child to help is fine, but please be sure to guard against giving that child too many responsibilities of the parent who is no longer present in the home. The child needs to remain in the role of a child, not become a substitute par-

ent. Friends, children's teachers and neighbors can all be great observers and supporters in this area.

As partners prepare for living separate lives, they need to be mindful to discuss routines and boundaries regarding what is acceptable in each household. Keeping these rules as similar as possible will again add to the safety and security of children, be they toddlers or high schoolers. For older children who are either living away at college or married and have children of their own this is not as crucial a topic but they also need to be aware of what will happen during the year in other areas such as on holidays. How will this be handled?

As this road to recovery is traveled, a person could begin to develop different parts of their personality or uncover many new aspects of themselves that were never noticed before. Keep in mind for yourself or a friend that the greatest part of this healing process is learning who you are now and what gifts you have to give. You can choose to stay in the past and not allow yourself to move on with life in a healthy manner or you can choose to face life head on and with the determination to make life the best it can possibly be. The choice is yours. Choose well. §



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