

Divorce as a process is often viewed solely as a legal custom, an unpleasant by-product of a conventionally engineered milestone which dissolves families and destroys connections. In this way, the concept of divorce, the D word, a dirty word still, continues to be misunderstood, but new evidence is now shedding light on the significant relationships that interplay in a split and why, in the end we cannot divorce love, law and logistics from the fraction in question if we wish to work out what truly makes or breaks a family.

Whilst much research has been done on families' adjustment periods post divorce, very little is known about the extent and effect of divorce on the mind and body during the legal process itself and before. The philosophy behind studying families considering separation is part of this new awareness; divorce is an emotional reaction that occurs long before the decision to say "I don't" and it is this new understanding of divorce that is pioneering the latest research on mental and physical illnesses related to spousal separation. It is a missing piece of a very big and complex puzzle and the findings are startling.

Those who have been through a difficult divorce will remember instinctively the run up to that period; the feeling that you are not communicating with your spouse, that what you are trying to explain is not being understood or worse, just ignored. This is often followed by a blind attempt at either problem solving on your own or carrying on with the status quo. Either way, both routes lead to anxiety and fear, as you grapple with the realisation that you are all alone in the marital conundrum, slowly being alienated from your own marriage and with an ever growing feeling of distance between you. This cerebral ostracising process can cause a great deal of stress, as a spouse tries to grapple on their own with the obstacles before them. Slowly but surely, that discomfort becomes a part of everyday life and as a spouse learns to live with it, they may also start to believe that this dangerous juxtaposition is a 'safe' place. It is in fact, the most unstable place for any union to sit and is its weakest point.

Professor Hetherington¹, who claims her research is the most comprehensive study on divorce ever written, has herself noted that as an experience, divorce begins long before it is legally initiated. Having studied over 1,400 families, she draws several insightful conclusions on this long lasting phenomenon. The first is that divorce is a cerebral concept, which may affect individuals long after the legal process is finished, although she notes that most families adjust well by the sixth year (or by year six of the culmination of the divorce). The second conclusion which is not only beautifully simplistic but also in and of itself an astute observation is that divorce is likely to affect people differently depending largely on their own biological thresholds. That is to say, it is all in the mind.

Not surprisingly, there is also growing evidence to suggest that the severity of stress during divorce is directly related to age, income, gender and educational background². Women seem to cope better than men in general³, as their levels of self esteem tend to rise post divorce but there are

¹ "For better or for worse: Divorce Reconsidered" Hetherington and Kelly (2002)

² "Marital Disruption and Physical illness: The impact of divorce and spouse death on illness" Sherwood Williams and Siegel (1989)

³ "Psychological and emotional aspects of divorce" Kathleen O'Connell Corcoran (1997)

several gaps in the research and one study concluded that there was not enough evidence to suggest that dissolution resulted in more or less permanent elevation of psychological stress. One of the great difficulties presented by the current research on offer is that much of it is conflicting. In another study carried out by professors at Iowa State University⁴, the finding that divorce as an act did not create an immediate effect on physical health but did have such an effect on mental health led the professors to discover that divorce could be linked to later psychological distress. A decade later, those women who were evaluated showed a 37% increase in physical illness as a follow on effect, compared to their married counterparts. What is so fascinating however about this new strand of research is that it is beginning to track the link between future illnesses both mental and physical to the quality of the marriage pre divorce. These professors believe they have found a link and they are not the only ones.

David Sbarra, at the University of Arizona believes that love does indeed hurt and his ongoing research has begun to establish a link between psychological and physical stress⁵. Sbarra discovered that spouses who think about their exes more than 60% of the time displayed an increase in respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA), whilst those who were better adjusted, found that their heart rates went up when asked about their exes. Sbarra believes that this is a good indication of the difference between those who cope better, as they tend to let the emotion pass. In short, those who have health problems, are those who have a hard time letting go. More fascinating still, is the ever increasing merge between our understanding of love from its philosophical perspective and its biological roots.

Other similarities across the board relate to the underlying factors in divorce, such as age, gender, income and education and that change in the quality of a marriage links to change in physical illness for both men and women. New research is also beginning to suggest that the negative effects of divorce on children have been greatly exaggerated and that researchers now view conflict rather than divorce as the single most critical undermining factor regarding a child's inability to adjust⁶. This is something most people who have experienced divorce would instinctively know and yet there are other factors which seek to undermine stability in the family unit during divorce and which can play an active role in increasing levels of conflict. At this time, when spouses feel vulnerable and physically and emotionally drained the following observations may not be so instinctive, lost as one can be, in a world of hurt and hopelessness.

Buffers then, as described by Sheldon Cohen in his presentation on psychological stress⁷ may be both part of the question and the answer. As all human beings' thresholds are different, catering for

⁴ "The Short Term and Decade Long Effects of Divorce on Women's Midlife Health" Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger and Elder (2006)

⁵ (Divorce Lawyer Source) How Divorce Can Affect Your Health (2007)

⁶ "Psychological and emotional aspects of divorce" Kathleen O'Connell Corcoran (1997)

⁷ "Psychological Stress and Health" Sheldon Cohen (Exact date unknown, but circa late 1990's)

that diversity in a divorce scenario is imperative and looking at each person as a unique set of reactions more helpful than trying to apply a one size fits all approach beyond the basics. Yet the basics matter too; buffers, or support systems as they might be called, help separating spouses greatly and to varying degrees but research does indicate clearly that those spouses who have family and friends and do not feel alone outside of their family unit are more likely to cope with divorce, or more accurately, conflict. With increasing evidence that acute stress triggers clinical events, buffers become an important part of the arsenal with which to bolster families in conflict. Buffers have been proven to help reduce stress: social support, physical fitness, tangible resources (money), psychological resources (feelings of control, self esteem, feelings of mastery, self efficacy) and institutional, cultural and political (agencies, social groups) buffers all offer aids to reducing conflict and keeping us calm. Whilst the research does not know exactly how many types of buffer there are or which buffers work best, as a human being, I would hazard a guess and say that as long as the buffer does not hurt us physically or mentally or others in the process of our using it, then anything goes.

When it is all in the mind and anything goes, when we come to accept that diversity is an ally in the battle against hostility and that divorce does not signal the end but merely a metamorphosis of the family unit, anything is possible. The clear cut divides that society makes to wear away at the layers of our existence no longer work to ease our minds. As twenty first century Homo sapiens, we are beginning to come back around to the idea that life in its many forms is just a take on a theme and that ultimately, divorce is not the enemy. We are. Perhaps the most poignant parts of this new research lie in these last two sentiments: the first being that divorce has its advantages; divorced parents tend to focus on contact and make that contact count, holidays are diverse, birthdays are plentiful (!) and holiday traditions get celebrated twice, sometimes three times. By nature, we are more sensitive towards children of divorce and their world is one of change but where coupled with affection, one of great emotional reward. The final point, which is also the final conclusion of Professor Hetherington's work, is that the emotional challenges faced by children of divorce parents are ultimately not much different to those of married parents⁸. Conflict lives in many guises; but our ability to shed a world of hurt and to protect our sanity as well as the ones we love, is limitless.

⁸ "For better or for worse: Divorce Reconsidered" Hetherington and Kelly (2002)