

# Should I Try to Work It Out?

Second Edition



A Guidebook for Individuals and Couples  
Who Have Been Thinking about Divorce

Alan J. Hawkins, PhD  
Steven M. Harris, PhD, LMFT  
Tamara A. Fackrell, PhD, JD

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# Contents

Chapter 1-----	1
Introduction and Overview -----	1
A. <i>What is the purpose of this guidebook?</i> -----	2
B. <i>Who are we?</i> -----	6
C. <i>How can I best use this guidebook?</i> -----	7
Exercise for Chapter 1-----	8
Endnotes to Chapter 1-----	11
Chapter 2-----	13
Why Are Good Marriages Hard to Sustain? And Do a Lot of Married People Have Thoughts About Divorce? -----	13
A. <i>Why is modern marriage so challenging?</i> -----	14
B. <i>Why is commitment so important to a successful marriage?</i> ---	16
C. <i>Is thinking about divorce common?</i> -----	18
D. <i>How do individuals decide to divorce or remain married?</i> ----	22
E. <i>Should we stay together for the sake of the children?</i> -----	23
F. <i>What percentage of marriages end in divorce?</i> -----	24
G. <i>Why should we be concerned about the divorce rate? Isn't it         just a personal and private matter?</i> -----	25
H. <i>What factors are associated with a higher risk for divorce?</i> ----	26
I. <i>What are the most common reasons people give for their         divorce?</i> -----	30
J. <i>Are people happier as a result of divorce? Do some who divorce         later wish they had worked harder to try to save their marriage?</i> -----	33
K. <i>What about abuse, infidelity, or addictions? Aren't these strong         reasons for divorce?</i> -----	35
L. <i>What is a healthy marriage?</i> -----	44
Exercises for Chapter 2-----	46
Endnotes to Chapter 2-----	66
Chapter 3-----	79
Can Unhealthy Marriages Become Healthy Again? How Can I Work on Improving My Marriage?-----	79

Contents

A. *Can unhealthy marriages become healthy again?* ----- 81

B. *Can couples improve their own marriages without outside help? How?*----- 82

C. *Are there classes that can help couples have a healthy, happy marriage?* -----84

D. *Can marriage counseling help? How can I choose a good counselor and make counseling work for me?*----- 88

E. *Is separation an option?*----- 95

F. *Do divorcing couples sometimes reconcile and get back together after separation? When is reconciliation likely to be successful?*----- 97

G. *What if I'm willing to try to save my marriage but my spouse doesn't seem willing?* ----- 100

*Exercises for Chapter 3* ----- 101

*Endnotes to Chapter 3*----- 112

Chapter 4----- 119

**How Does Divorce Affect Children?** ----- 119

A. *Why are some children more affected by divorce than others?* ----- 121

B. *How might divorce affect children's social, emotional, and physical health?* ----- 127

C. *How might divorce affect children's educational success?* --- 130

D. *How might divorce affect children's religious and spiritual development?* ----- 132

E. *How might divorce affect children's sexual behavior?* ----- 133

F. *How might divorce affect children's future adult romantic relationships? Do children of divorce have higher odds for their own divorce?*----- 134

*Exercise for Chapter 4*----- 135

*Endnotes to Chapter 4*----- 140

Chapter 5----- 147

**How Does Divorce Affect Adults?** ----- 147

A. *Why do some adults thrive and others struggle after divorce?* ----- 148

B. How might divorce affect adults' emotional and physical health?	151
C. How might divorce affect adults' social support?	152
D. How might divorce affect adults' religious involvement?	155
E. How might divorce affect my relationship with my children?	156
F. How might divorce affect my relationship with my ex-spouse?	157
G. How might divorce affect future romantic relationships?	160
H. What are my chances for remarrying and having a happy marriage?	161
Exercises for Chapter 5	162
Endnotes to Chapter 5	169
Chapter 6	175
<b>How Does Divorce Affect Finances?</b>	<b>175</b>
A. How might divorce affect women and children financially?	176
B. How might divorce affect men financially?	178
C. What might be the broader financial impacts of divorce on communities and taxpayers?	179
Exercise for Chapter 6	180
Endnotes to Chapter 6	188
Chapter 7	191
<b>What Are the Legal Options for Divorce? What Should I Expect During the Divorce Process?</b>	<b>191</b>
A. What should I expect going through the divorce process?	192
B. Does getting a divorce require a lawyer or can I get a divorce without the help of a lawyer?	193
C. What does it cost to get a divorce?	194
D. What is divorce mediation? And what are the financial consequences of choosing mediation services for a divorce?	196
E. What is collaborative law? How does it work in a divorce?	198
F. What if I don't want the divorce? Can I challenge a divorce in court?	199
G. Can I seek modifications to a divorce settlement?	200
Exercises for Chapter 7	200

Contents

Endnotes to Chapter 7 ----- 203

Chapter 8----- 207

**If We Get a Divorce, What Do Custody and Co-Parenting Look Like? ----- 207**

*A. If we get a divorce, what does sharing the children’s time with the other parent look like?----- 207*

*B. What are the most common joint custody schedules?----- 209*

*C. What are the considerations in legal custody or decision making for the children? ----- 212*

*D. What are best recommendations for co-parents? ----- 214*

*E. What are other considerations to stay cooperative as a co-parent? ----- 215*

Exercise for Chapter 8----- 216

Endnotes to Chapter 8 ----- 219

# Introduction and Overview

Divorce is such a gut-wrenching experience, and there isn't anyone I know that hasn't come through it without their whole world just turned upside down.

Janet,\* divorced single mom

The day my parents got divorced was the happiest day of my life. They got out of a bad marriage and began focusing on being better parents.

Amanda, 20-year-old college student

*Overview: In this chapter you will learn about the general purpose of this guidebook. It is designed to be a resource to individuals who have been thinking about divorce (or whose spouse has been thinking about divorce). Divorce is a very personal matter affecting people in many different ways. Of course, it also affects many other people's lives, especially children. So, you and your children—if you have them—deserve nothing less than careful consideration of whether divorce is the best solution to the challenges you've been facing in your marriage. This guidebook is designed to give you research-based information to help you make your decision.*

- ❖ James and Shelly were considering divorce. They have three children. Shelly wanted to divorce, but James wanted to save the marriage. Shelly had a long list of issues that the couple needed to work on. She had rarely been open about her disappointment in their marriage, but there had been a few frank conversations over the years. At one point, the tension escalated and they had a big fight. Shelly took the children an hour away from their home to her mother's house. She wanted to think carefully about her options as she decided how to proceed.
- ❖ Hilary and Sam had come to a crossroads in their marriage. Hilary was an alcoholic and the couple had many marital problems that arose out of her addiction. Sam thought he was ready to move on and

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\* All names have been changed to protect privacy.

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

divorce. Hilary wanted to work through the marital issues. She promised that this time, she would get her addiction in check. This was a second marriage for both of them and they each had children from their previous marriages, as well as children together from the current marriage.

- ❖ For about two years now, Felicia had intermittent thoughts about getting a divorce but hadn't acted on those thoughts and hadn't spoken to her husband, Rolando, about them. Recently, Felicia had yelled at Rolando about an issue regarding their children. But when Rolando wouldn't really engage, Felicia was heartbroken and refused to talk more about the problem. Now for the first time, Felicia thought that divorce was necessary.

This guidebook is a way to help couples like Sam and Hilary, James and Shelly, and Felicia and Rolando make important choices that come up when a couple is deciding between whether to try to work through marital problems or to end the marriage. Our hope is that this book will help you answer the question; Should I try to work it out?

### A. What is the purpose of this guidebook?

This guidebook is designed to be a resource to individuals who have had some thoughts about getting a divorce (or whose spouse is thinking about divorce). These thoughts can be “soft” (infrequent and not motivating any action), “hard” (frequent and taking some kind of action), or anywhere in between. Some may be at the “crossroads of divorce,” facing a challenging decision that has powerful consequences for the future of their own lives, the lives of family members, and their communities. Others may not be considering any action right now; they just have thoughts about divorce and may be discouraged about the health of their marriage. Regardless, this guidebook contains *research-based* information about important questions that individuals thinking about divorce often have, such as:

- ❖ Is thinking about divorce common? Does it mean a divorce is imminent?
- ❖ Can my marriage be repaired and can we restore our marriage to a healthy place? What resources are available to help repair a marriage?

- ❖ Is divorce a reliable path to happiness?
- ❖ What are the effects of divorce on children and adults, short- and long-term?
- ❖ How would a divorce affect my financial security and future?
- ❖ What can I expect will happen during the legal process of getting a divorce? What are the legal options for ending a marriage?

We try to answer these kinds of questions and many more in this guidebook, drawing on good research and our professional experience working with individuals and couples who have been thinking about divorce. This is the second edition of our guidebook. We have tried to update the research to be as current as possible with what researchers know about these questions. And we have added some new material to the guidebook that addresses new questions and issues that have surfaced over the past decade.

We know that these are sensitive and difficult questions to try to answer. Circumstances are different for everyone. Divorce is an option that many people consider to restore health and happiness to their lives; it is *one* method of dealing with marital struggles and trials. We believe strongly in the value of marriage in our society and the importance of strong personal commitments to marital vows. But we also believe there are clear and valid reasons to divorce. We are grateful that current laws allow people to leave abusive and unhealthy marriages without big legal barriers. But we believe people too often choose divorce before considering other options. Finally, we know that there are many individuals going through divorce who want to keep working to save their marriage, but their partner does not. We try in this guidebook to be sensitive to different situations. It is not our intention to make judgments about what individuals should or should not do in difficult, personal circumstances.

At the same time, our goal is to present the research on marriage and divorce accurately and fairly. And the research is clear that, generally, the process of family breakup we call divorce is associated with potential problems for both children and adults, even though it may also bring wanted relief from other problems. In some instances, divorce actually improves the lives of those involved. But for the most part, researchers have found that family breakup can put children at two to three times the risk for a wide range of negative effects. And it can be hard on adults, as well.

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

From our own research and work with individuals thinking about divorce, we know that they are constantly comparing their current marital situation—their problems, strengths, commitments, and happiness—to an unknown future after divorce. This thinking—or what we call *divorce ideation*—can seem never-ending. Gaining clarity and confidence in a final decision can seem so elusive.<sup>1</sup> One woman we interviewed compared this situation to being a lone person in a snow globe. Whenever she began to see things with more clarity, someone or something would pick up her world and shake it into a blizzard again. A main goal of this book is to provide you with information that can help you get greater clarity in your decision-making about the future.

Research suggests that some individuals who are actively thinking about divorce may be able to repair their marriages and avoid the problems that might come with divorce. But many don't know where to look for help. There are good resources available to help those who want to keep trying to improve their relationship. We put a lot of energy in this guidebook into helping individuals who want to walk this path of repairing their marriage. Of course, we know that for many that path may not be a reasonable option.

This guidebook can give you solid information that will help you make the best decisions in your individual circumstances. *It's not designed to be a "how-to" book to fix problems in your marriage*, although we suggest some resources that you could access to get some of that help. The book is about providing you with as much good information as possible about the realities of marriage and divorce so you can make the best decision possible for your situation.

Brittany, a divorced single mother whom we once interviewed, shared with us her strong personal feelings about the need for better education to help people make decisions about divorce:

What would I share with those who are approaching the decision of divorce? Explore every single avenue possible. . . . I think that it should be required that they go to a full-day, 8-hour course on "this is what happens [with divorce], this is how many days you get [with your kids], these are the holidays you get, this is how many days a year you get to see them. This is how this works." . . . I truly think that people start the process [of divorce] but they don't know what the ramifications are, but once they find out what the ramifications are, they are in it so far that they don't want to go backwards. So, if they knew up front how it was going

to work and what would happen to the kids, and the cost, I think people would be more apt to try harder. I think it should be required that they go to a course before they even file [for divorce].

Most states these days require that divorcing parents (with dependent children) take a brief class to help them be good co-parents to their children after the divorce and help their children adjust to the divorce.<sup>2</sup> Research suggests that these classes, on average, help improve outcomes somewhat for children and adults.<sup>3</sup> A few states now require that issues around marital reconciliation be a significant part of these classes.<sup>4</sup> If you live in a state with this kind of requirement, this guidebook would be an excellent supplement to the class.

We hope this guidebook can be useful to people in other circumstances, as well. For instance, individuals who may not be thinking seriously about divorce but are experiencing the struggles and disappointments that almost all married couples face could be motivated to work to improve their relationship to avoid the challenges associated with divorce. Some may be thinking more seriously about divorce but haven't taken any formal steps in that direction. This guidebook can be a valuable source of information for those individuals, too. Sometimes family members and friends who are watching loved ones struggle with their marriages want valid information, like the information in this guidebook, to share with loved ones. Marriage counselors, religious leaders, lawyers, and mediators who are working with couples facing a possible divorce may want to recommend use of this guidebook.

By the way, many couples these days are not married but have been living together for some time and have children together. We think many of the issues that these couples face when deciding to break up or stay together are similar to those that married couples face. So, we think this book can be valuable for them, as well. Also, we know that there have been significant changes to marriage laws in the United States since 2015 when same-sex marriage was legalized nationally. Unfortunately, the research on marriage and divorce for same-sex couples in the United States is still in its infancy. Same-sex couples face many of the same challenges that heterosexual couples face. So, much of the information we provide here will also apply to same-sex couples. But we don't yet have a lot of good research to help us understand the unique challenges these couples may face.

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

We have decided to self-publish this guidebook so that we can control its availability to the public. A printed version of the book is available for a small cost that provides us virtually no royalty. It can be ordered from sites like Amazon.com. However, we have worked to make electronic copies of the guidebook available for free so that cost won't be a barrier to accessing the book. A downloadable copy of the book is available on many different websites, including StrongerMarriages.org *And feel free to share your downloaded electronic copy with anyone else you think would benefit from the guidebook.*

### B. Who are we?

Good question. Since we are going to be sharing so much information about such important and personal topics, it's fair to ask who we are and what expertise we bring to this subject matter. As researchers, we think we have conducted the best and most recent research on the issue of thinking about divorce. And as professional practitioners—therapists, educators, and divorce mediators—we have a lot of real-life experience that informs what we write on this topic. That said, however, we cover an incredible breadth of topics in this guidebook and we confess that we are not experts in all these areas. So, we have tried hard to draw from good, recent research to inform what we have written.

**Alan J. Hawkins, PhD**, has been a member of the faculty in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University since 1990. He is the former chair of the Utah Marriage Commission. He also serves on the Research Advisory Group for the Oklahoma Marriage Initiative. For five years he helped teach the required divorce orientation education class for divorcing parents in Utah. He has published dozens of scholarly articles and several books on marriage, divorce, and fathering.

**Steven M. Harris, PhD, LMFT**, is a professor and former director of the Couple and Family Therapy Program at the University of Minnesota. He also serves as the associate director of the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project. He has served as a member and the chair of the Texas Healthy Marriage Initiative's Research Advisory Group. He currently serves as the editor of the prestigious academic journal, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. He is a co-developer of the discernment counseling model for couples on the brink of divorce. In his private couple therapy practice he

regularly works with couples trying to decide whether to divorce or stay married.

**Tamara A. Fackrell, JD, PhD**, is an attorney mediator in Utah. She has had a private mediation practice focusing on divorce and domestic mediation since 1997 and a private law practice since 1998 focusing on family law. She earned her PhD in Marriage, Family, and Human Development from Brigham Young University. Previously, she graduated cum laude from the BYU Law School. Dr. Fackrell is a Master Mediator and Primary Trainer for the State of Utah and performs certifications in mediation and divorce mediation for professionals. And she is an in-demand presenter and lecturer on strengthening family relationships.

As authors, we express our gratitude to the many individuals who allowed us to interview them about their personal experiences of thinking about divorce. We changed their names and sometimes a few details of their stories to respect their privacy. In addition, we are grateful for the many research assistants for their work on developing this guidebook. (Their names are listed in this endnote.<sup>5</sup>)

### C. How can I best use this guidebook?

There is a lot of information in this guidebook. You may be more interested in some parts and less interested in others. We don't assume you will read the entire book cover to cover, so there may be some repetition of information in the various chapters. Select the parts that are most meaningful to you. You may want to look over the table of contents to see which parts might be most helpful. We provide brief overviews at the beginning of each chapter.

In addition to all the research-based information that is presented, sprinkled throughout the guidebook are stories and quotations from real people we have interviewed over the years who have been thinking about divorce or who are divorced, telling how they handled their challenges, what they decided to do, and how things have worked out for them. Stories like these put a more human face on the difficult topic of repairing a marriage or getting a divorce than you are likely to get from all the research findings we share.

Also, at the end of each chapter, there are some writing exercises or self-guided activities so that you can evaluate your own situation and think

about your best course of action. *We think these exercises are one of the most valuable elements of the guidebook.* If you take the time to do these exercises, they may help you think more clearly about your decision.

We encourage you to do Exercise 1.1, “Plan Your Use of This Guidebook,” at the end of this chapter. It will help you get an overview of the guidebook and encourage you to plan your use of it.

We wish you and your family the best as you weigh your options and seek clarity and confidence in your decision-making about your marriage. Like James and Shelly, in the example at the beginning of the chapter, you may decide that counseling will help you make a sound decision. James attended counseling on his own to help him work through some personal issues that had contributed to his marital problems. James and Shelly ultimately decided to stay together and over time rebuilt a healthier marriage. Or, like Hilary and Sam, you may decide to divorce and carefully consider your options of how best to proceed. Hilary and Sam used the divorce mediation process to amicably resolve some of the main issues they experienced in their marriage, but ultimately decided to divorce. They continued to work at being effective co-parents for the sake of their children. For Felicia and Rolando, the outcome was more complex. Their emotions drove them almost unthinkingly toward divorce, blocking any communication with each other and preventing any attempt to salvage civility in the relationship. They continued to be involved as co-parents to their children, even as both remarried. But their inability to divorce amicably contributed to ongoing family conflict and expensive court battles. We hope your use of this guidebook can help prevent this kind of outcome for you and your family.

## Exercise for Chapter 1

### 1.1: Plan Your Use of this Guidebook

Often it is a good idea to start an activity with a goal and a plan. We invite you to do that for this guidebook. First, we suggest you look over the table of contents to get a better idea of the specific topics included in the guidebook. The various chapters and sections of each chapter are titled with a question that people who have been thinking about divorce often have. Then think about how valuable the information in the chapter will be to you.

## Chapter 1: Introduction and Overview

If you believe it will be valuable, make a plan to go over the material and complete some of the activities.

Using the guidelines below, for each chapter indicate how important you think the information will be to you (circle the number for your answer). Then, indicate when you would like to have read the material and completed some or all the activities.

After doing this, pause for a moment and think about your overall goal for this guidebook. Perhaps you seriously want to think about working more on your relationship and avoiding divorce, so your goal may be to find ways to do this. Perhaps you don't have much choice—the divorce is being forced on you—so maybe your goal is to make this transition as easy as possible for your children. Perhaps you are leaning heavily in the direction of divorce and need information to help validate your thoughts. Whatever your goal might be, write it down.

Chapter 2: Why are good marriages hard to sustain? And do a lot of married people have thoughts about divorce?				
How important do you think this chapter will be to you?	1 Not Important	2 Somewhat Important	3 Pretty Important	4 Very Important
When will you read it and work on the activities?			Finish date goal:	

Chapter 3: Can unhealthy marriages become healthy again? How can I work on improving my marriage?				
How important do you think this chapter will be to you?	1 Not Important	2 Somewhat Important	3 Pretty Important	4 Very Important
When will you read it and work on the activities?			Finish date goal:	

Chapter 4: How does divorce affect children?				
How important do you think this chapter will be to you?	1 Not Important	2 Somewhat Important	3 Pretty Important	4 Very Important
When will you read it and work on the activities?			Finish date goal:	

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

Chapter 5: How does divorce affect adults?				
How important do you think this chapter will be to you?	1 Not Important	2 Somewhat Important	3 Pretty Important	4 Very Important
When will you read it and work on the activities?			Finish date goal:	

Chapter 6: How does divorce affect finances?				
How important do you think this chapter will be to you?	1 Not Important	2 Somewhat Important	3 Pretty Important	4 Very Important
When will you read it and work on the activities?			Finish date goal:	

Chapter 7: What are the legal options for divorce? What should I expect during the divorce process?				
How important do you think this chapter will be to you?	1 Not Important	2 Somewhat Important	3 Pretty Important	4 Very Important
When will you read it and work on the activities?			Finish date goal:	

Chapter 8: If we get a divorce, what do custody and co-parenting look like?				
How important do you think this chapter will be to you?	1 Not Important	2 Somewhat Important	3 Pretty Important	4 Very Important
When will you read it and work on the activities?			Finish date goal:	

Now write down your overall goal for your use of this guidebook:

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## Endnotes to Chapter 1

- <sup>1</sup> Harris, S. M., Crabtree, S. A., Bell, N., Allen, S. M., & Roberts, K. M. (2017). Seeking clarity and confidence in the divorce decision-making process. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 58, 83–95.
- <sup>2</sup> Pollet, S. L., & Lombreglia, M. (2008). A nationwide survey of mandatory parent education. *Family Court Review*, 46, 375–394; Schramm, D. G., & Becher, E. H. (2020). Common practices for divorce. *Family Relations*, 69, 543–558.
- <sup>3</sup> See: Becher, E. H., Cronin, S. McCann, E., Olson, K. A., Powell, S., & Marczak, M. S. (2015). Parents Forever: Evaluation of an online divorce education program. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 56, 261–276; Fackrell, T. A., Hawkins, A. J., & Kay, N. M. (2011). How effective are court-affiliated divorcing parents education programs? A meta-analytic study. *Family Court Review*, 49, 107–119; Jewell, J., Schmittl, M., McCorbin, A., Hupp, S., & Pomerantz, A. (2017). The Children First program: The effectiveness of a parent education program for divorcing parents. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 58, 16–28; keLuse, S. R., & Braver, S. (2015). A rigorous quasi-experimental design to evaluate the causal effect of a mandatory divorce education program. *Family Court Review*, 53, 66–78; LaGraff, M. R., Stoltz, H. E., & Brandon, D. J. (2015). Longitudinal program evaluation of “Parenting Apart: Effective Co-Parenting.” *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 56, 117–136. Note, however, that the quality of the research on these programs needs to improve.
- <sup>4</sup> Since 2007, Utah has required a 1-hour divorce orientation class in conjunction with the mandated divorcing parents class. The purpose of the class is to help individuals considering a divorce think carefully about their options, including repairing problems in the marriage and keeping a family together, and to inform individuals of the potential consequences of divorce. The class also informs people of their legal options for divorce. Since 2014, Oklahoma has required parents with minor children who file for divorce on grounds of incompatibility to take a 4-hour class that includes information about the effects of divorce on children, possible options for reconciliation, and effective communication strategies for managing conflict.
- <sup>5</sup> Our research assistants included: Brittanie Beeson, Fawn Bennion, Victoria Blanchard, Elise Burnett, Shayne Dickson, Marissa Dittmore, Kimberlee Earl, Elizabeth Fawcett, Kristin Fixmer, Karalynn Forrest, Walter Hartje, Scott Huff, Alan Larson, Chelsey Long, Emily Luschin, Monica Mays, Carma Martino Needham, Sarah Pierce, Alexis Rasmussen, Heidi Reid, Valene Rose, Rebecca Score, Rachael Shaw, Cristina Smith, Elizabeth Van Patten, and Courtney Welling.



## Why Are Good Marriages Hard to Sustain? And Do a Lot of Married People Have Thoughts About Divorce?

Marriage is a counter-cultural act in a throwaway society.<sup>1</sup>

—Dr. William H. Doherty,  
noted marriage scholar and therapist

*Overview: In the United States, researchers estimate that half of all first marriages and more than 60% of second marriages will end in divorce. So, why is it hard to sustain a good marriage? One reason may be that we have come to expect so much from our marriages that it's hard to sustain them and easy to become disappointed. So, it's not surprising that thoughts about divorce creep into our heads. Commitment is having a long-term view of the marriage that helps us not get overwhelmed by the problems and challenges we experience day to day. When there is high commitment in a relationship, we feel safer and are willing to give more for the relationship to succeed. Barriers to leaving a marriage, such as financial worries and the impact of divorce on children, can help keep marriages together in the short run. However, unless there is improvement in the relationship, eventually these barriers are usually not enough to keep a marriage together long term. Even among committed couples, thinking about divorce is common. More than half of married individuals have thought about divorce sometime during their marriage and one in four have had recent thoughts. There are some well-known factors that put people at higher risk for divorce: marrying at a very early age, less education and income, living together before a commitment to marriage, a premarital pregnancy, low religious engagement, coming from a divorced family, and untreated mental illness and addictions. But the most common reasons people give for their divorce are lack of commitment, too much arguing, and infidelity. Some of these problems can be fixed and divorce prevented. Divorce does not seem to be a reliable path to greater happiness. Some people express regret about their decision to divorce. Yet divorce is necessary at times; it may even help to preserve the moral boundaries of marriage. Abuse, addiction, and infidelity are serious problems that often lead to divorce.*

## A. Why is modern marriage so challenging?

Even though we see a lot of divorce around us, research still tells us that a large majority of adults and youth (more than 70%) still believe that a good marriage and family are essential or important to a good life (with virtually no difference between women and men).<sup>2</sup> But it seems like it is getting harder and harder to sustain a loving, healthy marriage. Modern marriage seems hard. Why?

Dr. Eli Finkel, a noted marriage researcher, has an intriguing explanation for why modern marriages are a lot of work. He begins his book, *The All-or-Nothing Marriage*,<sup>3</sup> by noting that the relationship between marital quality and overall life happiness has been getting stronger over time. There has always been a correlation, but a strong marriage now is even more essential to overall happiness in life. He argues that in our modern society we are coming to expect more and more from our marriages.<sup>4</sup> We want our spouse to be our best friend, lover, soul mate, equal partner in domestic and financial matters, and more. He notes that every marriage is composed of unique individuals trying to mutually maximize their individual well-being. And because every marriage is different, spouses have to negotiate all the different roles and boundaries; there are few strong rules anymore. A marriage is now a kind of super-relationship with very high expectations and high demands and it looks different from home to home. Finkel argues that these new kinds of marriages take a lot more attention and nurturing. It was easier for our great-grandparents; expectations weren't so high and marital roles were more fixed. Marriage has been "de-institutionalized"; that is, it has fewer social norms and rules to guide it.<sup>5</sup>

In regular life, with all the demands on our time and attention, it's easy to put our marriages on the shelf and focus on more immediate demands. But when that happens, our marriages become starved for the oxygen they need to thrive at such high-expectation altitudes, Finkel argues. That's why our marriages can feel disappointing and unsatisfying—even when we are not actively doing things to harm them. They just aren't measuring up to our high expectations.

Mattie was one of the people we interviewed years ago when we set out to know more about divorce-decision making. He summed up the experience of his 22-year marriage being "put on the shelf" this way:

## Chapter 2: Why Are Good Marriages Hard to Sustain?

I think ultimately, we grew apart, we didn't realize we had to [put] this much work into our relationship over the last 20 years as we did when we were dating. ... So ... we got to this point where we hardly knew who the other person is because we have both changed so much. ... I think it's just because people tend to grow apart unless you put the work into staying together, which I didn't realize until we had grown apart.

The good news, Finkel argues, is that high expectations coupled with the ongoing hard work needed to nurture these super-relationships produces the most soul-satisfying marriages that humankind probably has ever known. So, while we see an overall decrease in marital satisfaction and happiness in society, we are also seeing some of the healthiest, happiest marriages ever.

Here is another way to think about working on our relationships. When we talk to people about the challenge of keeping a marriage healthy and strong, we often talk to them about the “Second Law of Marital Thermodynamics.” Maybe you remember from your high school or college physics class what the Second Law of Thermodynamics is. Basically, it says that chaos—not order—is the natural tendency of the physical universe, and unless energy is intentionally injected into these systems, they fall apart over time—they become disorganized. Anyone who cleans kitchens and bathrooms understands this basic principle!

We think there is a direct parallel of this principle for social systems generally and marital systems specifically. Marriages—including basically good marriages—naturally tend toward chaos. Unless we regularly put energy into our marital systems, they will gradually become more disorganized—less healthy and less satisfying. Good and healthy marriages are the result of regular work—attending to our relationships, communicating, spending fun and fulfilling time together, serving each other, etc. Without the work, marriages naturally fall apart. Working on our relationships seems to be a pretty modern idea, probably only a century old.<sup>6</sup> It doesn't sound very romantic to talk about having to *work* on our relationships. But almost all good things are achieved with energy and effort.

Of course, there are other reasons why keeping marriages vital and healthy may be harder now than in the past. Noted marriage researcher and family therapist William J. Doherty argues that we live in a hyper-consumer society and that the consumer mindset seeps into our relationships<sup>7</sup>: *Is this*

*“product” making me happy? Is there a new and better one that I should try? If it has outlived its usefulness, shouldn’t I try something else?* A consumer mindset may work fine with the latest smart phone, but it can be toxic to our relationships. Working to keep our marriage vital can feel like we are swimming upstream because we live in a culture in which the currents are always pulling us in the direction of “new and improved” and stressing temporary rather than permanent. However, human beings don’t stay “new” very long; they accumulate warts, scars, and emotional baggage. Commitment to a marriage can feel counter-cultural in our consumer-oriented world.

## B. Why is commitment so important to a successful marriage?

As we explain later in this chapter, the number one reason people give for why their marriage didn’t succeed is a lack of commitment on one or both spouses’ parts. Researchers have found that about half of all divorces come from relatively low-conflict relationships.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, when viewed at one point in time, these low-conflict marriages that end in divorce look pretty similar to happy marriages that didn’t end in divorce. In fact, researchers have a hard time distinguishing between these two groups of married couples except for one important factor: level of commitment. Low-conflict individuals who are not very happy in their marriage but have higher levels of commitment to the marriage are more likely to stay together and try to make things better rather than divorce to see if they could be happier in another relationship.<sup>9</sup>

One prominent marriage researcher, educator, and therapist, Dr. Scott Stanley at the University of Denver, defines commitment as having a long-term view of the marriage that helps us not get overwhelmed by the problems and challenges we experience day to day. We keep our eyes focused on the valued long-term prize—a healthy, stable marriage and family—and work to get there.<sup>10</sup>

Researchers have identified two elements of commitment.<sup>11</sup> The first is constraint commitment. These are things that keep us in the marriage even if things aren’t going so well, for example, social pressure from family or friends, financial worries, children, religious or moral beliefs about divorce, and fear about the future. We often think about constraints as negative things in a society that values choice and freedom so much. But constraints

also can serve the purpose of keeping us from jumping ship when leaks appear in our marriage, as they almost always do. This is the kind of commitment Keisha was referring to in our interview as she discussed how she and her husband, Doug, were able to halt their momentum toward divorce:

In a way, I don't think I've ever wanted to divorce. I'd say one of the biggest goals of my life, watching my parents' [failed marriage], was to build a good marriage, so a lot of that had to do with me saying that [our marriage] is really important.

When we interviewed Trisha, it was clear that constraint commitment, and in particular, concerns for how divorce would affect her children and how she would support her family, were keeping her from a divorce:

There are periods of time where I feel like I can't do it anymore, but literally, I have stayed with him because of my kids. ... I just really feel like it would just mess up their world too much. ... If I could leave, I would leave. In fact, I think if things were a perfect situation for me now, I would still leave. So, I guess, yes, on the one hand, I stay together because of the kids, but also because, what am I going to do with five kids? And where am I going to go and how am I going to support them? ... I feel like I'm trapped a lot. But I just put on a happy face and keep going. But not because I want to but because I feel like I'm forced, I feel like I have to, that I have no other options, at least no options that appeal to me in any way. ... Are you going to trade a marriage that you're not happy in for a really hard life of being a single mom? ... Can I just accept the way things are? It's not like I get beat up. It's not like I'm being abused in any way, other than I just feel like I have a loveless marriage, that we are just business partners. He does his thing; I do my thing to help things move along for the family. Can I accept that? I still don't know if I can accept it.

However, if this is the only kind of commitment in a marriage, then the marriage is not likely to survive long term. You might sense that from Trisha's comments. She is constantly struggling with the option of divorce. Her situation actually is odd because she has struggled with these feelings for nearly 20 years; it's highly unusual for constraints like this to hold a marriage together that long without developing a second, stronger form of commitment: personal dedication. This involves a real desire to be together

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

with one's spouse in the future, a sense of “we-ness,” or an identity as a couple, not just two individuals. It also involves making the relationship and the spouse a priority, and a willingness to sacrifice for the spouse. It also means making the choice to give up other choices, so we stay focused on our spouse and on our marriage rather than wondering about how green the grass is on the other side of the fence. When there is high dedication commitment in a relationship, we feel safer and are willing to give more—and even sacrifice—for the relationship. Personal dedication is the kind of commitment that was saving Keisha and Doug's marriage:

*Keisha:* I changed my focus from, “Should we get a divorce?” to “Okay, we've been through all these hard things and we've made it through. I sure hope it doesn't keep going like this, but we're going to keep trying and this is a challenge that is worth taking up.

*Doug:* What we decided was that from here on out this is our marriage now, and we're going to be committed to each other. And we had to lay that foundation again, because it felt like something was broken.

When commitment seems to be fading, it can be helpful to remember the good times in the relationship and to talk about your dreams for the future together. You may benefit from doing Exercise 2.1, “Thinking About Commitment in My Marriage,” at the end of this chapter.

### C. Is thinking about divorce common?

As we noted earlier, we have high expectations for our marriages and keeping relationships strong takes work. Plus, strong commitment seems to go against the grain of a culture of unlimited freedom and choices. Given these realities, it's easy to understand why we can become disappointed at times in our marriage. And in a society in which there is a lot of divorce and a lot of openness to divorce,<sup>12</sup> it's almost impossible not to think about divorce when we feel disappointment in our marriage. So, it shouldn't surprise you that thinking about divorce is pretty common.

We've done some research on this topic—what we call divorce ideation. In a recent study with a large, nationally representative sample, we found that more than half (53%) of married couples (ages 25–50) reported serious thoughts about divorce sometime in their marriage.<sup>13</sup> And one in

four report that they have had thoughts about divorce during the last 6 months. However, among those who had recent thoughts about divorce, most—70%—said these thoughts were infrequent.

Thoughts about divorce are even common among newlywed couples. In a recent study of Millennial newlyweds, nearly one in three said they had discussed divorce or breaking up at some point.<sup>14</sup>

In our study, women were a little more likely than men to report having had recent thoughts about divorce (27% vs. 22%). Rates of divorce ideation were pretty steady through the first 15 years of marriage and then began to decrease after that. (Although other research finds that divorce rates for older couples have increased substantially,<sup>15</sup> at least for those who have been married more than once.)

Interestingly, our research found that 40% of those who had recent thoughts about divorce had not talked to their spouse about their thoughts, maybe because those thoughts were not very serious. On the other hand, in our experience in working with couples on the brink of divorce, many of these people are not talking to their spouse because they want to avoid conflict. Another 20% said, “maybe we sorta talked about it,” suggesting that some conversations about divorce are indirect and veiled. Our research shows that talking to your spouse—or with anyone—about your thoughts of divorce is usually helpful.

Among those who had recent thoughts about divorce, only 5% reported, “I’m done with this marriage.” Most indicated openness to repairing the marriage. More than 40% (43%) said, “I don’t really want a divorce; I’m willing to work hard to keep us together.” About a quarter (23%) said, “I have mixed feelings about divorce.” The same percentage said, “I would consider working on my marriage and not divorcing if my spouse got serious about making major changes.” One year later, however, only about 6% of those who had been thinking about divorce had divorced or separated. This contradicts the notion that people make quick decisions about divorce.

About 40% of those who had recent thoughts about divorce reported one or more intense problems, such as abuse, addiction, or adultery. Sixty percent reported “connection” problems (e.g., feeling close, growing apart) or “instrumental” problems (e.g., handling money, dividing domestic labor).

Also, we found there was quite a bit of change over one year. Among those with recent thoughts about divorce, 30% reported no recent thoughts one year later. And among those who reported no recent thoughts about

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

divorce, a year later about a third (36%) of them reported some thoughts about divorce. So, thoughts about divorce can change over time; they come and go, wax and wane.

In our research, we found that about half (48%) of those who had recent thoughts about divorce were “soft thinkers”—that is, thoughts were infrequent and problems were mostly repairable. Another 45% of those with recent thoughts about divorce were “long-term serious thinkers”—that is, they had these thoughts usually for several years, and were losing hope, but most were not experiencing the most intensive problems. A small third group (6%) were “conflicted thinkers”—as a group they had the most serious problems but were still hopeful about saving the marriage.

We did some in-depth interviews with people in our study who reported recent thoughts about divorce to get a more fine-grained perspective of divorce ideation. We learned some interesting things. For instance, feelings of love and happiness were crucial considerations when making decisions to stay or leave—which is not surprising—but it’s more complicated than that. There was wide understanding that feelings of love can wax and wane over time and can change in substance—take on different meanings—over the course of the marriage.<sup>16</sup> So, dips in feelings of love were not sufficient to decide to leave a marriage. Similarly, feelings of happiness also can rise and fall. And one’s own happiness was not the only consideration; other people’s happiness—especially children’s—was important too. This undermines a common story that adults are self-centered when making decisions about divorce.

In addition, we learned in our research that people thinking about divorce desire clarity and confidence in their decision-making process, but it’s elusive.<sup>17</sup> It takes time to get there and can’t be rushed. There can be a lot of confusion and ambivalence; there’s nothing straightforward or linear about the process. And thoughts about leaning out of the marriage, leaning in, and holding on can fluctuate day to day.<sup>18</sup> Those day-to-day ups and downs over a long period of time can lead to a kind of psychological fatigue that makes divorce more likely.<sup>19</sup> In this situation, commitment can be more about staying with a process of trying to work on a relationship without knowing the outcome than it is a promise to a person or particular outcome.<sup>20</sup>

The commitment uncertainty that comes with “leaning in”—or trying to work through marital problems—can be more stressful than the uncertainty of “leaning out” because of the chronic nature of psychological stress and

not really knowing what the outcome will be. And there is no real legal or cultural marker of the end of the leaning-in process as there is for the leaning-out process, which ends in divorce. The stress of uncertainty, though tolerable for a short time, may be hard to sustain long term (although we interviewed a few people who had been thinking about divorce for years).<sup>21</sup>

We also heard a lot about religion and religious beliefs in our interviews with those thinking about divorce, even though we didn't directly ask them about how religion affects their decision-making. Spiritual values and beliefs played a significant role in the thinking process,<sup>22</sup> although religious people were just as likely to have thoughts about divorce as non-religious people. There was little question that those religious beliefs about a divine essence of marriage shaped the thinking process and constrained or slowed down decisions about divorce for many people.

Thoughts about divorce are common, but thoughts are not the same as deciding to divorce. Research shows that thoughts about divorce can intrude even when people are not seriously thinking about calling a lawyer. In fact, "soft thinking" about divorce is the most common kind. Most people hold both thoughts about divorce and hopes to improve or repair the marriage; there is no straight line from thoughts about divorce to actions that end a marriage. And thoughts about divorce fluctuate, even from day to day. Although those thoughts can be scary and the pain of a difficult marriage can be real, most people seem to understand that they need to move slowly and carefully through these thoughts and not rush to a conclusion.

One woman we interviewed shared with us an image of what it's like to be deciding between staying in in her marriage or leaving it:

It's like I'm holding an old-timey scale, the kind you'd find in a farmer's market. At times the scale is tipped in the direction of leaving the marriage and other times it tips in the direction of staying. Recently the scale in my mind was tipped in the direction of leaving, and I was feeling good about that. Then I came home from work to find that my husband had all the kids bathed and fed and was reading them stories before putting them to bed. I thought to myself, "How can I go through with a divorce and get rid of amazing times like these?" So, my scale begins to tip in the direction of staying in the marriage ... and it stays like that ... and things are good. Then, weeks later, as I'm looking over our finances, I notice that he's bounced three checks. ... "ugh! Why,

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

why, why?” This is one of our chronic problems: he just doesn’t pay attention, and I just can’t count on him. Once again, my scale begins to tip in the direction of leaving and I’m more likely to notice other things he’s been doing that get on my nerves. I’m in this constant state of fluctuation with my inner scale. It’s driving me crazy that I can’t seem to get the scale to ever settle on one path.

In the next chapter, we talk about ways that people can work on improving their marriage. But if you are having thoughts about divorce now—soft or serious ones, fleeting or chronic—you may benefit from Exercise 2.2: “Thinking About Thinking About Divorce.”

### D. How do individuals decide to divorce or remain married?

Researchers have found that individuals considering divorce make their decision to stay or leave based on the rewards they gain from the marriage, the barriers against leaving the marriage, their perceptions about finding a better relationship, and the amount of investment they have made in their marriage.<sup>23</sup> Some individuals decide to stay together, even if the rewards from marriage are currently low, when there are important barriers to divorce, such as concerns about money, the effects of family breakup on their children, religious beliefs about the importance of marriage, disapproval from family and friends, or fears of being single again.<sup>24</sup> Also, if individuals have invested many years in a marriage and have children together and a home, then they are more hesitant to leave.<sup>25</sup>

All of this sounds very rational and reflects research from decades ago. But newer research is beginning to show that people making the decision to divorce are usually unsure, confused, and feel lost and disoriented.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it can take a long time to make a final decision. Most seem to understand that these feelings of confusion are inevitable.<sup>27</sup> One person who considered divorce but decided to stay married compared her recurring thoughts of divorcing to a person who, during times of depression, becomes suicidal. Once a drastic option like this is realized as a way to end personal suffering, it never really ever goes away completely as a possible option. Moving away from the decision to divorce is likely a long and gradual process with stops and starts along the way.<sup>28</sup>

## E. Should we stay together for the sake of the children?

This is a common question for people who are thinking about divorce. We think a good answer to this hinges on what is meant by “staying together.” If staying together means you are unsafe or the children continue to be exposed to high levels of conflict or abuse, then staying together is probably not in anyone’s best interest. If you are safe, however, there may be some practical reasons to stay together for a time—maybe until the children are grown up—even when you have given up on the marriage. It might benefit your children to have just one home instead of two to grow up in or it might contribute to a more solid financial situation. These seem like logical and practical reasons to stay. Some parents we’ve worked with have elected to take this path until the children are grown. They typically take this path with their eyes wide open, however, knowing that they are sacrificing some personal happiness for the sake of their children. Some research suggests that where children are concerned, a mediocre marriage, or one that is “good enough” is actually quite good for children when compared to divorce and all that might come with it.

If staying together for the sake of the kids means your children will see an empty, loveless, conflicted marriage and an unhappy parent, that’s not a good situation. Children typically see or sense your unhappiness, especially as they grow older. And rather than appreciating your sacrifice to keep the family intact, your children may feel guilty because they think they are the reason you are unhappy. Also, they may come to internalize a negative view of marriage that will make a healthy and happy marriage in the future harder for them to achieve, even harder than if they experienced their parents’ divorce. If you choose the path of staying together until the children are grown, you need to get to a healthy personal place, even with your unsatisfactory marriage. If your mental health deteriorates over time because of an empty marriage, then you may not be as good a parent to your children as you could be otherwise.

On the other hand, if staying together for a time for the sake of the children means deciding to work on the relationship to overcome problems and giving your relationship more time to heal or get stronger, this can lead to positive outcomes for everyone. It also shows your children a positive example of two adults trying to resolve problems. In chapter 3, we explore the possibilities for improving your relationship.

## F. What percentage of marriages end in divorce?

You would think this would be an easy question to answer but, unfortunately, it's not.<sup>29</sup> There is a lot of research that tries to estimate a "divorce rate." But that rate is calculated by comparing the number of divorces and the number of marriages in a given year. That's different from knowing how many marriages actually end in divorce at some time. And it's even hard to get data on divorce rates from some states; they have stopped collecting and sharing data on divorces altogether. Still, even with these challenges, researchers are pretty sure that the divorce rate has been going down since the 1980s and is now at its lowest point in 50 years.<sup>30</sup>

A big reason for this is that marriage has become more selective. That is, compared to 50 years ago, those who are marrying now are more likely to be well off, higher educated, come from stable families, etc., each of which is associated with a lower chance of divorce. (More on these factors later in this chapter.) On the flip side, the marriage rate (the number of people getting married) has also declined substantially,<sup>31</sup> and those who are less likely to marry have higher risk profiles for divorce.

Divorce has always been present in American society.<sup>32</sup> The highest divorce rates ever recorded were in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Since then, the divorce rate actually has decreased, but it still remains at a pretty high rate.<sup>33</sup> Divorce rates have been declining for most age groups in middle-class America but actually going up somewhat for older (45+) Americans.<sup>34</sup> Also, in immigrant and refugee communities in the United States, divorce seems to be on the rise, especially among the younger generations.

In the United States, researchers have estimated that 40%–50% of all first marriages will end in divorce or permanent separation.<sup>35</sup> The risk of divorce is even higher for second marriages, about 60%–65%.<sup>36</sup> But these figures are a little dated now. We asked a demographer colleague of ours, Dr. Spencer L. James, to look at these percentages with the best and most recent dataset that can answer this question directly. He found evidence that, even for more recent birth cohorts, at least 50% of first marriages are ending in divorce within about 16 years. Later birth cohorts reach this 50% mark a little later—after a few more years of marriage—but they still appear to be rising above 50%. It does seem that more than half of first marriages these days are eventually ending in divorce. And the percentage of second marriages ending in divorce has always been higher.

Now, it's likely that at about 20 years of marriage, the risk of divorce diminishes and flattens out. But there are still a lot of divorces among older couples, what some have called "gray divorce" because they occur to people over 50 years old. Gray divorce has doubled over the past few decades. But most of that increase comes from ending second and third marriages, not first marriages.<sup>37</sup>

### *Same-sex Divorce*

Since 2015 in the United States, same-sex marriages have been legal in all states. Because this change occurred so recently, we don't have good data yet on divorce risks for U.S. same-sex couples. Some have speculated that many same-sex marriages since 2015 merely legalized long-term unions, so divorce rates for same-sex marriages would be lower than for heterosexual marriages. Others have speculated that because same-sex unions are less likely to have children, they will have higher divorce rates. But we just don't know yet. Some European countries, however, have legally recognized same-sex marriages for a longer time. Research in Sweden and Norway suggests that divorce rates are somewhat higher for same-sex couples, especially for female same-sex couples (although if they have children together it reduces that risk).<sup>38</sup> This could be because we know that in heterosexual couples, women are more sensitive to the quality of the relationship and twice as likely to initiate a divorce as men. So, with two women in a same-sex marriage, they may be especially sensitive to the quality of the relationship. Interestingly, there is some research that documents how many same-sex divorcees feel extra guilt because they saw themselves as role models for early same-sex marriage, and they feel they have let down the LGBTQ community and contributed to a stereotype that same-sex marriages won't last.<sup>39</sup>

G. Why should we be concerned about the divorce rate? Isn't it just a personal and private matter?

Many people think that high divorce rates are a serious problem in our society.<sup>40</sup> And while attitudes towards many family issues have been getting more liberal, attitudes about divorce—that it is the best solution when couples can't seem to work out their problems—have been getting more conservative.<sup>41</sup> Many states these days require parents to attend a divorcing parents class. A few states require that the class provide information about

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

working through problems and avoiding divorce, if possible. Why should legislators care about this? Aren't these just personal matters? The answer to this question is that the decision to divorce is, at a core level, a highly personal matter, but that it also carries with it some important public consequences.

Divorce introduces transitions into families' lives. And many children's lives are negatively affected by these transitions. Policy makers want to minimize harm to children. Each year about 1 million children experience the divorce of their parents.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, divorce has a financial impact not only on the families that go through it but also on all taxpaying citizens. Divorce is one of the leading reasons that children (and adults, especially women) fall into poverty. When this happens, the state has various programs that provide temporary assistance. These programs are expensive. One national study conservatively estimated the cost nationwide of family fragmentation—divorce and having children without marrying—to be \$112 billion a year.<sup>43</sup> Another study estimated the cost of divorce to taxpayers in Texas to be more than \$3 billion a year, which represents one out of every eight dollars of the Texas state budget.<sup>44</sup>

After careful consideration, if some marriages can be repaired and families remain intact, then everyone probably is better off: the children, the parents, and their taxpaying neighbors. The federal government each year invests \$75 million in relationship education programs to try to increase family stability for children.<sup>45</sup>

### H. What factors are associated with a higher risk for divorce?

To say that half of all marriages end in divorce sounds a lot like saying marriage is just a game of chance, a coin toss, for example. But a lot of research has identified various factors that are associated with a higher risk for divorce. So, some couples actually may have a low risk of divorce while others have a high risk. Understanding these factors may not directly help you improve your marriage or make a decision about divorce, but it may help you understand why you may be facing some challenges. Of course, these factors do not guarantee that someone will divorce; they are simply indicators that may increase the risk of divorce.

Here are some factors that appear to increase the risk of divorce. But this isn't a complete list of risk factors.

- ❖ *Young age.* Marriage at a very young age—before 20—increases the likelihood of divorce, especially in the early years of marriage. By about age 21, however, that risk diminishes a great deal.<sup>46</sup> Those who delay a first marriage until their 20s are probably more mature, able to make marriage decisions and handle the challenges of married life better than those who marry in their teens. Recent evidence suggests that there aren't a lot of differences in marital quality and stability between those who first marry in their early 20s and those who marry between 25–30.<sup>47</sup> These days, there's not much pressure to marry early—and sometimes even a stigma against it—so those who marry in their early 20s do so probably because they really want to, not because they feel pressure to do so. Waiting until your 30s, however, does not seem to improve chances for a happier marriage; in fact, the risk of divorce seems to increase a little for those who marry in their 30s.<sup>48</sup>
- ❖ *Less education.* Researchers have estimated that individuals who have graduated from college (vs. high school degree or not finishing high school) have a lower chance of divorce.<sup>49</sup> Apparently, investing in education is a good way to build a foundation for a better marriage, not just a better job. At the least, completing your education signals that you can persevere through challenges, ups and downs, and do hard things. And you mature as you learn more and more things about the world around you.
- ❖ *Less income.* Closely related to education is income. About 20 years ago, researchers estimated that individuals with annual incomes of more than \$50,000 have a lower chance of divorce (compared to individuals with annual incomes less than \$25,000).<sup>50</sup> Those figures have gone up now, we suspect. The point is: life is expensive and dealing with finances in a marriage can be stressful and having less money is even more stressful. Apparently, having at least a modest income can help couples avoid some of the stresses that can make relationships rougher and lead to divorce. Married couples whose income falls below the poverty line live under tremendous and unrelenting stress.
- ❖ *Premarital cohabitation.* Couples who live together before marriage appear to have a higher chance of divorce if they marry.<sup>51</sup> However, this risk is mostly for those who live together with more than one partner prior to marriage (sometimes called serial cohabitation). Those who live together with just one partner (whom they plan to later marry) don't seem to be at a much greater risk for divorce.<sup>52</sup>

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

And some of the risk is just that those who live together before marriage are more likely to have higher levels of characteristics and situations that lend themselves to divorce. In addition, research now suggests that those who get engaged before moving in together do not have a higher risk for divorce.<sup>53</sup> One recent, important study clarified that couples who live together before marriage actually have lower divorce rates in the first year or two of marriage, but after that they have higher rates of divorce.<sup>54</sup> The idea that living together before marriage increases your risk for divorce goes against a lot of common beliefs that it is a good way to get to know each other better and prepare for marriage.<sup>55</sup> Living together may be a way to get to know each other better, but other things about living together apparently do not help—and even hurt—your chances for a successful marriage, especially for those who have a series of cohabiting relationships. Researchers have found that those who live together already have or develop more lenient attitudes about divorce. They also entangle their lives in ways that are harder to break and often end up sliding into marriage with less commitment than those who do not live together before making a strong commitment to the future.<sup>56</sup>

- ❖ *Premarital childbearing and pregnancy.* Pregnancy and childbearing prior to marriage significantly increase the likelihood of future divorce.<sup>57</sup> In America, about 40% of children are born to parents who are not married,<sup>58</sup> but these parents usually don't marry.<sup>59</sup> Most of those parents will separate before the child begins school; some will never really get together in a way that ensures stability for the child.
- ❖ *Lower religious activity.* Researchers have found that religiously devout individuals have higher marital quality and a lower chance of divorce than those who are not devout.<sup>60</sup> If couples share the same religious affiliation and are active in their faith together, their chances of divorce are lower.<sup>61</sup> Being somewhat religious but not especially devout doesn't seem to help lower the risk of divorce; in fact, it seems to even raise your chances.
- ❖ *Parents' divorce.* Of course, there are some risk factors for divorce that you can't control. If you experienced the divorce of your parents, unfortunately that increases your risk for divorce. And if your spouse also experienced their parents' divorce, then your risk for divorce is even higher.<sup>62</sup> The good news, however, is that over the past few decades, the added risk due to parental divorce has decreased quite a bit. One recent study found that adults whose

parents divorced experienced a 45% chance of divorce if they married versus 40% for adults whose parents did not divorce.<sup>63</sup> So, yes, if your parents divorced, you have a higher risk of a divorce. But it doesn't doom your marriage to failure. It does suggest that individuals who experienced the divorce of their parents may want to work even harder to make good marriage choices, intentionally prepare for marriage, and work to keep their marriage strong and healthy.

- ❖ *Untreated mental illness and addictions.* There is good evidence that untreated mental health problems and addictive behaviors contribute to some divorces.<sup>64</sup> One large study that looked at the divorce and mental health records of 19 different countries concluded that mental illness and addictive disorders increase the likelihood of divorce regardless of different economic or cultural situations.<sup>65</sup> Serious mental illness, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, can severely complicate the ability to form and maintain interpersonal relationships and can lead to divorce.<sup>66</sup> Another study ranked drinking and other drug use as the number three reason people get a divorce, just behind infidelity and incompatibility.<sup>67</sup> In a different study, substance abuse was, once again, given as the third most listed “last straw” reason for why participants’ marriages failed.<sup>68</sup> The good news is that treatment is available for mental illness and addiction. People can go to therapy, get medication, or go to support groups to find the external help they need to redefine their relationship with substances or their mental and emotional issues. Sometimes, it can be a lengthy process to find exactly what approach will help someone distance themselves from their mental challenges or addiction problems. But people who are open to changing and honest in their recovery have the best chances of turning things around and keeping the support of their spouse and other loved ones.
- ❖ *Minority stress.* African Americans have a higher divorce rate than the general population. There are probably a variety of reasons for this. Chief among these is the idea that living in an environment where racism exists can be extremely stressful. Experiencing racism is related to a host of negative outcomes on mental health including psychological distress/anxiety, poor life quality, reduced life satisfaction, and depression.<sup>69</sup> And for this population the racism has been experienced across multiple generations. That means that the stress associated with racism is compounded each generation and can cut across all facets of life regardless of education, income, or social status. Black marriages may also carry the burdens associated with

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

historical trauma, which can include negative outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.<sup>70</sup> So, what does this look like for the average Black person in America? Consider the possibility that generally every move a Black person makes is scrutinized, second guessed, or judged to be suspect by people in the majority culture. Or it may be that when Black people interact with people from the majority group, they approach those interactions with an overarching sense of mistrust because of their experiences of racism. Also, because of racism, Black people have been less likely to reach out for services that might help them if their marriage is struggling. When interviewing African Americans about their attitudes toward seeking marriage counseling, Aimee Hubbard, then a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, was specifically told that due to the way Blacks were treated during the Tuskegee syphilis scandal (Blacks were not offered treatment, even though it was available) that they have a general mistrust of the medical establishment.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, these same interviewees indicated that they see marital counseling as something White people do, not Black people. In this same study, participants reported being more likely to go to their pastor for marital advice than a licensed family therapist. Professionals and educators who reach out to Black couples would be wise to consider the unique stressors these couples face and help provide them with skills and insights that will help shore up these more vulnerable relationships.

One more thing: most married couples today are dual-earner couples, but there is no straightforward evidence that marriages with two wage earners contributes to a higher risk for divorce. In certain situations, it may, but overall, it does not appear to be a factor in divorce.<sup>72</sup>

This list of factors that increase the risk of divorce is a short (but important) list. There are more factors, such as frequent conflict, infidelity, abuse, weak commitment, unhealthy communication patterns, insecurity, lack of social support, and others that are important factors in undermining the quality of a marriage.<sup>73</sup>

### I. What are the most common reasons people give for their divorce?

The previous section explained what factors increase the chances of divorce. Of course, when you ask people why they got divorced, they are never going to say things like, “I didn’t have enough education,” or “My

parents were divorced.” When asked this question, divorced individuals usually respond with more personal and practical reasons.

Researchers have identified the most common reasons people give for their divorces. A national survey<sup>74</sup> (in 2005) found that the most common reason given for divorce was lack of commitment (73% said this was a major reason). Other significant reasons included too much arguing (56%), infidelity (55%), marrying too young (46%), unrealistic expectations (45%), lack of equality in the relationship (44%), lack of preparation for marriage (41%), and abuse (29%). (People often give more than one reason, so the percentages add up to more than 100%.) Surveys of adults in specific states found results similar to this national survey.<sup>75</sup> A study of people who participated in premarital education but later divorced also found that lack of commitment is the #1 reason given for divorce (75%), followed by infidelity (60%), too much arguing (58%), financial problems (37%), substance abuse (35%), and domestic violence (24%).<sup>76</sup>

A study of people going through a required divorcing parents class in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area found that the two most reported reasons for divorce were growing apart and “not able to talk together” (53%).<sup>77</sup> A significant proportion of these divorcing parents also reported financial disagreements, infidelity, and “not getting enough attention” as reasons for divorce. Parents attending a mandated divorcing parents class in Utah recently reported that communication problems were by far the #1 contributing factor to their divorce. Growing apart came in at #2 (66%). Emotional mistreatment was #3 (63%) and arguing too much came in at #4 (55%).<sup>78</sup> Finally, one study followed 400 newlywed couples for 5 years and asked those who divorced what problems most often contributed to the divorce. Communication problems and unwillingness to work on the relationship were the #1 responses for women (70%) followed by “trust” (61%), infidelity (56%), and “moods and tempers” (56%). Divorced men rated “moods and tempers” (65%) the highest contributor to divorce, followed by communication problems (59%) and “trust” (53%). Both divorced women and men reported many problems that contributed to their divorce, not just one or two (on average, eight problems, for both women and men).<sup>79</sup> These researchers also found that these problems tended to develop over time rather than being present from the start of the relationship.

Looking at these lists, it seems possible to repair some of these problems and prevent some divorces. Couples can learn how to

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

communicate more effectively and avoid destructive arguments to resolve their differences better; they can create more realistic expectations for their marriage; and they can create more equal partnerships. Even damaging problems such as infidelity can be overcome if both spouses are committed to doing so, especially with appropriate help and support.

Marriage counselors sometimes talk about the differences between the “hard” and “soft” reasons for divorce. The “hard” reasons describe situations where abuse, addiction, or affairs (the 3 As) are actively happening and the person involved shows no remorse or willingness to change. For example, if your partner’s alcohol addiction is negatively impacting the family environment and your marriage, it needs to change for the relationship to be healthy. If the person using alcohol is not interested in or open to changing that behavior—or just helpless to change—that might be a condition where divorce could help solve a serious problem. This same rationale could be applied to abuse or affairs. The fourth A is abandonment. A long time ago, when divorce laws were very strict, this is how some people dealt with bad marriages—they just left and moved away. Nowadays, this is less likely, but certainly there can be psychological abandonment—disengaging from the relationship and not giving it any attention, even if they are living in the same space. This kind of abandonment can be cruel too, wearing down a spouse’s sense of worth and dignity and demeaning the meaning of marriage.

However, if there are “hard” reasons for divorce, it makes sense that there are also “soft” reasons for divorce. These include falling out of love, questioning that you married the right person, just being bored with the marriage, outgrowing the relationship, or just being different people.

In Western cultures, we tend to marry for love. If the love is gone, or someone is not feeling it currently, then it’s tempting to move out of the relationship and find new love. However, research suggests that the nature of love changes over time. The energy, excitement, and charge we feel from love at the beginning of a relationship are very different than the feelings of love and companionship that a couple might experience after years of sacrifice and dedication to one another. If you think the love is gone from your relationship, getting professional help to rediscover the love or redefine the love you have might be an important step in reclaiming your relationship.

J. Are people happier as a result of divorce? Do some who divorce later wish they had worked harder to try to save their marriage?

People thinking about a divorce may assume that it will solve a difficult problem and eventually make them happier. Sometimes it does, but it may not be a reliable path to greater happiness. One study followed happily and unhappily married individuals for a 5-year period.<sup>80</sup> Many of these unhappy individuals at the beginning of the study remained married, but some divorced. Those who divorced were no happier when interviewed again at the end of the study than those that stayed married. The study also found no differences in rates of depression, sense of mastery, or self-esteem between those who stayed married and those who divorced. This was true even if divorced individuals had remarried. For women who had experienced violence in their marriage, however, divorce did help them get away from that violence, which is important.

One of the best long-term studies of divorce found that divorce, in and of itself, generally does not lead to a better life.<sup>81</sup> These researchers found that about two in ten individuals appeared to enhance their lives through divorce, including building more satisfying romantic relationships, but about three in ten seemed to do worse after their divorce. About four out of ten individuals were able to build future romantic relationships, but they had mostly the same kinds of problems as they did in their previous marriages and didn't seem to improve their situations much. (The remaining 10% were functioning fine, but did not rebuild romantic relationships.)

Research suggests that, for many couples, conflict actually increases after a divorce and post-divorce conflict between ex-spouses makes it more difficult for children to adjust to life after the divorce.<sup>82</sup> Divorce adds the potential for a whole new set of problems with your ex-spouse. Relationships don't end cleanly with divorce, only the legal status of marriage ends. Minimizing conflict with your ex-spouse after divorce is a good thing to do. But for many it is as difficult—sometimes even more difficult—than dealing with conflict while they are married. And post-divorce conflict probably is more visible to children. Many studies have shown that conflict with an ex-spouse continues after divorce and adds a great deal of stress to life.<sup>83</sup>

It is hard to work through a difficult marriage, but it is also hard to work through a difficult divorce. Some people are happier as a result of divorce.<sup>84</sup>

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

On the other hand, many marriages that experience problems are now happy after working through their problems.<sup>85</sup> One study found that about three in ten currently married individuals in a western state have at one time or another thought their marriage might be in serious trouble and have thought about divorce.<sup>86</sup> But more than 90% of these individuals said that they were glad that they were still together.

Do some who divorce later experience regrets about their decision? This is a sensitive subject, but research suggests that some people do harbor regrets. One national expert who counsels many divorced individuals reports that ambivalent or mixed feelings about the divorce are very common.<sup>87</sup> A significant number of divorced individuals—maybe a third to half—report to researchers that they regret their divorce.<sup>88</sup> In an important study that followed divorced couples over a long period of time, researchers found evidence of feelings of regret. When they interviewed individuals one year after the divorce they found that, in three out of four divorced couples, at least one partner was having second thoughts about the decision to divorce and many openly confessed that they wish they had worked harder on their marriage.<sup>89</sup>

A handful of surveys in various states have found that perhaps half of individuals wished they and/or their ex-spouse had tried harder to work through their differences.<sup>90</sup> A survey of divorced individuals in a midwestern state found that 25% reported they had some regrets about getting a divorce. About 12%, or one in eight, said that looking back, they no longer were confident that they made the right decision to divorce. About one in six said that if they knew how hard things would be after the divorce, they might have worked harder to try and fix the marriage.<sup>91</sup>

However, it's important to understand that feelings of regret and ambivalence usually decrease over time for most, as people adjust and move on.<sup>92</sup> And it's only fair to mention that some who stay married can also experience feelings of regret. This doesn't seem to be common, however. Our research found that among those who had some thoughts about divorce in the past, nearly nine out of ten (88%) reported that they were glad they were still together.<sup>93</sup>

## K. What about abuse, infidelity, or addictions? Aren't these strong reasons for divorce?

Research can provide important facts, but research alone can't answer questions of moral judgment. Most Americans (73%) believe that divorce, in general, is a morally acceptable choice.<sup>94</sup> And many feel that divorce is a personal, private matter; it is their choice alone whether or not to divorce. Legally, this is correct. You may benefit from doing Exercise 2.4, "Personal Philosophy About Divorce," at the end of the chapter, which can help you think through these issues at a deeper level.

### *Abuse*

Abuse in marriages and families deserves special consideration. There are behaviors that are clearly outside the moral boundaries of marriage. And everyone has the right to be safe—physically, emotionally, and sexually—in their marriage. An ugly fact is that about one in four women (and one in ten men) report being abused by an intimate partner (not necessarily a spouse) during their lifetime.<sup>95</sup> The negative physical and psychological effects of abuse on victims are well known.<sup>96</sup> In our interview with Vera, we learned of her decision to end a marriage when she found out that two of her children were being abused by their father:

Two of my children came to me and told me their father had sexually abused them. At that moment I was done. That night I made sure my children were not at home—I worked nights—and the next day I confronted him and told him he no longer lived with us. . . . He was very angry. "You can't do this to me. What do you think you're doing? You can't do this on your own. I didn't do anything. I don't know what you're thinking." He made several comments like that over time, and I finally just lost it and got right in his face. He'd never seen me lose my temper like that. "Who do you think you are? You are done." And I told him explicitly what I knew (about the abuse). . . . It was absolutely the right decision (to divorce). There was no other option.

Vera reported in our interview that her children, though still dealing with the long-term problems of being sexually abused, were in better shape because she terminated the marriage. When there is abuse in a marriage or in a family, not surprisingly there is evidence that ending the marriage may be best for all involved. Women who have experienced intimate partner

violence who divorce usually are better off than those who remain in this unsafe relationship.<sup>97</sup> Also, children whose parents are in a high-conflict or abusive marriage generally are better off if their parents divorce than if they stay married.<sup>98</sup> And boys who view violence in their families growing up are much more likely to become abusive in their personal relationships as adults.<sup>99</sup> One of the unfortunate facts of family life is that severe abuse seldom corrects itself without intervention. So, leaving an abusive situation, although difficult and sometimes even dangerous, is probably the right thing to do for the family.

One thing to note, however, is that researchers are learning that there are at least two different kinds of relationship violence: “situational couple violence” and “coercive-controlling violence.”<sup>100</sup> Usually when we talk about abuse we mean the latter. Coercive-controlling violence is about domination and control of one spouse by the other. It is almost always men who are guilty of this kind of abuse. These men often have a need for power and control. Some also struggle with controlling their impulses and often have hostile feelings towards women in general. Coercive-controlling violence can manifest in either physical or psychological control, or both. It can be sexual force. (Many states have laws against marital rape.) It can involve severe economic control, such as not allowing a wife to have access to any money. Sometimes it involves almost completely isolating a wife from her family and friends. And sadly, this kind of abuse usually gets worse over time. If you are experiencing this kind of abuse, seek help. You probably will need to end the marriage.

On the other hand, there is a different kind of abuse in intimate relationships called “situational couple violence” or “common couple violence.” Any kind of aggression or violence in a relationship is unhealthy and can harm adults and children. But situational couple violence is not as severe and dangerous as coercive-controlling violence. It involves things like pushing, shoving, kicking, slapping, shouting, and name-calling, and some research suggests that it usually does not escalate to more severe aggression, although there is an ongoing debate about this.<sup>101</sup> Situational couple violence often comes when someone is experiencing a lot of stress. Men and women appear to do it in equal amounts, although men do more damage and their aggression tends to create fear in the relationship.<sup>102</sup> This abuse seems to be more about ineffective problem-solving skills rather than power or control. And as people get older this kind of abuse usually decreases, suggesting that immaturity or impulse control is a factor.<sup>103</sup> Thus,

as people become more mature and as they learn better problem-solving skills, this kind of aggression appears to decrease. If this kind of aggression exists in your marriage, you and your spouse can learn to solve your problems more effectively. As you do so, and as violence is eliminated, you may begin to experience a healthier marriage.

You may want to look at Box 2K “Signs of Abuse.” Also, you may benefit from doing Exercise 2.5, “Is There Abuse in My Marriage?” at the end of this chapter. There are resources and services for victims of domestic abuse in many states. And in some states, you can simply call 211 for a list of community services in your area.

One final thought to consider: some people think that because there is a risk of abuse in marriage, they won’t marry but just live together. But research shows that married individuals are much less likely to experience abuse than unmarried individuals living together or dating, even when taking account of other differences between these two groups of people, such as education and income.<sup>104</sup> So when people are in romantic relationships, marriage may be the safest form of relationship.

#### Box 2K: Signs of Abuse

(from the National Domestic Violence Hotline [http://www.ndvh.org/educate/what\\_is\\_dv.html](http://www.ndvh.org/educate/what_is_dv.html))

##### **You may be in an emotionally abusive relationship if your partner:**

- ❖ Calls you names, insults you, or continually criticizes you.
- ❖ Does not trust you and acts jealous or possessive.
- ❖ Tries to isolate you from family or friends.
- ❖ Monitors where you go, who you call, and who you spend time with.
- ❖ Does not want you to work outside the home.
- ❖ Controls finances or refuses to share money.
- ❖ Punishes you by withholding affection.
- ❖ Expects you to ask permission.
- ❖ Threatens to hurt you, the children, your family, or your pets.
- ❖ Humiliates you in any way.

##### **You may be in a physically abusive relationship if your partner has ever:**

- ❖ Damaged property when angry (thrown objects, punched walls, kicked doors, etc.).
- ❖ Pushed, slapped, bitten, kicked, or choked you.
- ❖ Abandoned you in a dangerous or unfamiliar place.
- ❖ Scared you by driving recklessly.
- ❖ Used a weapon to threaten or hurt you.

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

- ❖ Forced you to leave your home.
- ❖ Trapped you in your home or kept you from leaving.
- ❖ Prevented you from calling police or seeking medical attention.
- ❖ Hurt your children.
- ❖ Used physical force in sexual situations.

### **You may be in a sexually abusive relationship if your partner:**

- ❖ Views women as objects and believes in rigid gender roles.
- ❖ Accuses you of cheating or is often jealous of your outside relationships.
- ❖ Wants you to dress in a sexual way.
- ❖ Insults you in sexual ways or calls you sexual names.
- ❖ Has ever forced or manipulated you into having sex or performing sexual acts.
- ❖ Held you down during sex.
- ❖ Demanded sex when you were sick, tired, or after beating you.
- ❖ Hurt you with weapons or objects during sex.
- ❖ Involved other people in sexual activities with you.

### *Infidelity*

Unfortunately, too many couples face the challenge of infidelity; that is, one or both spouses have been sexually unfaithful. Infidelity is one of the leading causes of divorce; it nearly doubles the chance that a couple will get divorced.<sup>105</sup> More than 90% of Americans say infidelity is morally wrong.<sup>106</sup> Although it is hard to do research on how common infidelity is, it looks like about one in seven (15%) of married individuals reports that they cheated on their spouse while they were married.<sup>107</sup> About 20% of men say this, compared to 10% of women. (There is some evidence that this gender difference may be fading among the youngest cohorts.<sup>108</sup>) Of course, it's possible the actual numbers are somewhat higher than this because not everyone is honest in reporting about this behavior, even in anonymous polls.

The discovery of infidelity is usually traumatic and recovering from infidelity is difficult.<sup>109</sup> Therapists who help couples deal with infidelity describe three stages in the process of recovering from infidelity:<sup>110</sup> (1) absorbing and dealing with the traumatic impact of infidelity; (2) creating meaning for why the affair occurred; and (3) moving forward with one's life—either together or apart—with this new understanding.

In the first stage, individuals find that their whole world seems to be upside down. They may struggle to function with day-to-day life. They struggle to go on with life when something so fundamental in their life is

broken. They have to find ways to absorb this change and still function. Next, they have to find understanding and meaning about the infidelity. They need to know why it happened. And then they need to explore ways to recover and rebuild trust and intimacy. To do this, they need to find some level of safety and security again in the relationship. Then they need to develop a realistic and balanced view of their relationship, including the positives and the negatives. They need to find a way to let go of the negative emotions connected with the infidelity. The injured spouse needs to voluntarily let go of their desire to punish the participating partner. Often the offending spouse has to find a way to let go of their guilt. And finally, they need to evaluate carefully their relationship and reach healthy decisions about whether to stay together and keep working to improve the relationship or to separate.

Opinion polls show that nearly two out of three (63%) of married Americans say they would not forgive their spouse (and would get a divorce) if they found out their spouse had a sexual affair.<sup>111</sup> This was the case for Fran. She found out about her husband's infidelity when she discovered she had contracted a sexually transmitted infection:

I decided when I found out on the hospital table that I had gonorrhea that we were divorced already. ... He tried to talk me out of it, and so did his mother and his father, and my mother, and various aunts and uncles and brothers and sisters, but I was very willful and stubborn, and I would not be appeased. I was furious [about his infidelity]. The marriage was over.

Many couples who have dealt with infidelity in their marriages, however, find the will and the strength to stay together. Researchers have found that while most people say they would get a divorce if they discovered their spouse was unfaithful, in actuality, 40%–60% of married couples who experience infidelity stay together (cheated-on wives are more likely to stay together than cheated-on husbands).<sup>112</sup> Brittany described the difficult choice she faced at one point. She decided to work hard and try to repair the damage to her marriage:

I had to make a decision: Am I willing to work through this situation [infidelity] with him, which is going to be a long-term thing? And how will that impact me for the rest of my life? How am I going to feel about us? How am I going to trust again? Can I

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

love him with all of my heart again? I'm telling you, that's a hard, hard, hard, hard thing. Harder than I ever thought.

A few years later, she told us that she is happy in her marriage and is sure she made the right decision to stay and work things out. Research shows that many couples—but not all—who survive infidelity are able to rebuild trust and a strong relationship.<sup>113</sup> Couples who seek counseling to deal with infidelity are even more likely to survive and thrive.<sup>114</sup> An excellent resource to learn more about recovering from marital infidelity is the book, *Getting Past the Affair: A Program to Help You Cope, Heal, and Move On—Together or Apart*.<sup>115</sup> Also, you should seriously consider getting help from a well-trained marriage counselor and/or a dedicated religious leader who will help you with the hard work of healing, deciding what to do, and repairing the marriage, if you decide to stay together.

### *Polyamory*

Another emerging issue that has some connection to infidelity is polyamory. There is a small trend of more married individuals asking their spouse to “open up” their marriage to other sexual and romantic partners. Sometimes the various partners form a pod or a group with the other partners. (A few cities even legally recognize these multi-partner relationships.<sup>116</sup>) But sometimes spouses just have relationships with other people other than their married partner.

This phenomenon has been labeled *polyamory* or *consensual non-monogamy*. Only about 1% of married couples report that they are in a consensual non-monogamous relationship,<sup>117</sup> meaning that both partners have agreed that they can have sexual and romantic relationships with other people. (About 4% report that they have at some time been in consensual non-monogamous relationship while married.) Although only a small percentage of married people are involved in polyamory, a recent poll finds that a quarter say they would be interested in it (about 30% of husbands and 20% of wives).<sup>118</sup> And 40% of Millennials expressed interest. So, this is an issue that is affecting more married couples today.

Is consensual non-monogamy different than infidelity? Certainly, it is different in that both spouses agree to the arrangement and do so with honest and open communication. At least that is the theory. In reality, “cheating” still goes on sometimes because a spouse may not always openly communicate about every extramarital liaison. Also, the idea of “mutual

consent” can be contested and stretched.<sup>119</sup> For instance, there are plenty of news stories these days about how contested consent can be. In stories about an accusation of rape, one person says that sex was consensual, and another says it was not. Some may apply a strict, legal notion of consent (“she didn’t really say no”) while others apply a broader, personal notion (“I didn’t really want it and he knew that but didn’t stop”).<sup>120</sup> If a spouse requests that the marriage be opened—“*or else I’m gone*”—and holds a lot of power in the marriage, how mutual is consent? And if one spouse is more adventurous, more social, and more attractive than the other, is it really mutual consent? So, yes, polyamory is different from cheating. But there can still be challenging issues that are difficult to negotiate and navigate, even if some level of permission has been given to have other sexual and romantic partners.

The important thing here is that if your spouse asks you to open up your marriage to other relationships, you have the right to say no. (Two out of three women say they would leave their romantic partner if their partner asked them to open up their relationship sexually.<sup>121</sup>) If your spouse opens up your marriage despite your objections, that can be considered infidelity. More marriage counselors are learning to work with couples in these situations.<sup>122</sup> It may be wise to get some counseling if you are in this situation.

### Addictions

Another difficult problem that can cause people to seriously consider divorce is addiction. One woman we know was stunned when she discovered her husband was addicted to drugs. The drugs led to crime and she was devastated as the story unfolded. But she was determined to fight for her family, especially her two children. The couple separated for a time and after some rehabilitation for the husband and support groups for the wife, the family was able to come back together. The addicted spouse had an amazing turnaround in his life and the family has been flourishing for several years now. Unfortunately, this family’s experience may not be the norm.

Addictions come in many forms. Addictions to substances such as alcohol or drugs are quite common and mental health professionals routinely screen for them because therapy is less effective if an addiction is present and goes untreated. Addiction is often associated with dependence, or a reliance on a particular drug—meaning the body needs a certain

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

amount of the drug to operate. When someone is getting treated for their addiction they often go through a period of withdrawal where the body craves the feelings associated with having the drug (or alcohol) in its system.

Addiction brings with it a host of negative physical consequences, including dependence, malnutrition, weight loss/gain, and sleep deprivation. It's also associated with negative social and emotional consequences (e.g., marital/relationship instability, negative social, occupational, or legal consequences, depression and anxiety). Professionals in the addictions treatment world differentiate between addictions to substances and process addictions. Process addictions can include things like problematic gambling, Internet use, shopping, eating disorders, and sexual addiction. Process addictions may look different on the outside but inside the brain, process addictions carry with them the same neurological reinforcements that make change very difficult.

Addictions can take over a person's life and introduce a host of negative consequences into family life. Addicts often talk about "hitting bottom" before they make a decision to turn their life around. One man we know who hit bottom eventually got into rehab and summed up his drug addiction and the impact it had on his thinking this way:

The only thing that mattered to me was getting high. I only cared about my next fix. I quit paying attention to my kids, my job, my marriage. I was only focused on feeding my addiction. It didn't matter how much it cost me in money or relationships ... as long as I was high, I didn't care.

But change can happen and there are a variety of approaches that can help people re-evaluate their relationships with drugs, alcohol, gambling, food, sex, etc. Not everyone with a drug addiction will get into treatment. And sometimes, treatment can be as intensive as a month-long stay in a treatment center with regular (weekly) follow-up afterward, or less intensive, like outpatient psychotherapy. If you think that addiction has been playing a part in your marital problems, we encourage you to talk to a counselor about what you've been experiencing.

Addiction can also affect an entire family system, with some members of the family developing what has been referred to as "co-dependency." This term refers to actions and behaviors on the part of non-addicts within a family that are related to the behaviors of the addict. People with co-

dependency often try to minimize the impact of the addict's behaviors on the family or the world around them. This might look like covering for an addict when they are drunk and miss a shift at work or fail to pick up the kids from school on time. Telling your spouse's boss that your partner is sick, instead of telling the truth—that he's nursing a hangover—is an example of a co-dependent act. Covering for the addict results in the co-dependent person taking on too much responsibility for their partner's addiction. If you're someone who is often tracking your partner's addictive behavior, counting drinks, worrying about your partner's use, or covering for them to minimize the consequences of their addiction, you may be developing a co-dependency that will begin to wear you down. Similar to the options for treatment of an addiction, there are effective treatment approaches to dealing with the symptoms and relationship patterns associated with co-dependency. Developing good boundaries around your partner's addiction and engaging in thoughtful self-care practices can help someone let go of a problem that needs to be changed at the hands of the addict, and not by those around them.

In recent years, compulsive pornography use has become a challenge to many marriages. Almost 90% of young adults have been exposed to pornography, so it is obviously hard to escape it.<sup>123</sup> Twenty percent of married men report that they feel unable to stop using pornography.<sup>124</sup> And about 20% of couples report that pornography use has been a source of conflict in their relationship (and there is a lot of undisclosed use).<sup>125</sup> Many women view pornography as a form of infidelity.<sup>126</sup> Early research suggests that cybersex addictions are a major factor contributing to separation and divorce for many couples but more recent research questions its impact on marital stability.<sup>127</sup> This more recent research does seem to confirm that pornography use reduces the quality and satisfaction of romantic relationships. Couples where neither partner uses pornography have the highest levels of relationship quality.<sup>128</sup> And there is a consistent decline in relationship quality with greater frequency of pornography use.

One woman we know decided to divorce after she realized the seriousness of the pornography issues her husband faced. Yet another woman decided to support and help her husband through his compulsion. It was a long and arduous path that included having a candid talk about the pornography use, using support groups, regularly initiating conversation about pornography issues, monitoring screen time, and having tight filters and passwords. This woman feels it was worth the effort. Each person has

unique circumstances and must decide what is right for them. Marriage counselors regularly see these kinds of problems when couples come for help and are learning how to help couples address these problems with pornography.

## L. What is a healthy marriage?

In all this discussion about ways to repair marriages and keep families together, some may not have a clear idea of what a healthy marriage even looks like. Perhaps some grew up in a home and neighborhood without seeing good examples of a healthy marriage. So we want to clarify what it means to have a healthy marriage. While there are many opinions about this, we think one of the best definitions comes from a research organization called Child Trends that examined hundreds of studies to come up with 10 characteristics that define a healthy marriage.<sup>129</sup>

- ❖ *Satisfaction.* Overall, individuals are happy and satisfied with their relationship. This does not mean that marriage is without problems and challenges, or that married couples don't go through periods when they are not happy in their marriages. But overall, healthy marriages are happy and satisfying relationships. But that's not all –
- ❖ *Commitment.* Spouses have a long-term perspective toward their relationship; they intend to persevere when troubles come up; they are willing to sacrifice their personal needs for each other.
- ❖ *Communication.* Couples interact with each other to exchange information and solve problems in respectful, positive ways. The way that couples communicate with each other—in positive and negative ways—is one of the strongest indicators of how healthy a relationship is and whether the marriage will last.<sup>130</sup>
- ❖ *Effective Conflict Resolution.* Virtually all couples have differences and disagreements; some can be very serious. How they handle these disagreements makes the difference between a healthy and unhealthy relationship. An important indicator of a healthy marriage is a couple's ability to deal with stress and conflict without criticism, contempt, or defensiveness.<sup>131</sup>
- ❖ *Lack of Violence and Abuse.* While differences and disagreements are a normal part of marriage, aggression and violence indicate an unhealthy relationship. This includes verbal, physical, emotional, and

sexual aggression and abuse. Abuse of any children in the relationship is unacceptable and also indicates an unhealthy relationship.

- ❖ *Fidelity or Faithfulness.* Spouses are sexually faithful to each other; they keep intimate physical relationships within the bonds of marriage. Almost all married individuals endorse this value,<sup>132</sup> although as outlined above, a few couples mutually agree to open up their marriage. Infidelity is one of the most common reasons people give for divorce; about half of divorced individuals say it was a contributing factor in their divorce.<sup>133</sup> And individuals can be emotionally unfaithful to their spouse without actual sexual involvement.<sup>134</sup> Most married individuals remain sexually faithful to their spouses; research suggests that about 10% of women and 20% of men report they were unfaithful to their spouse while they were married.<sup>135</sup>
- ❖ *Intimacy and Emotional Support.* Couples in a healthy marriage are physically and emotionally intimate with each other. They trust, care for, and love each other. (About 5%–7% of married couples ages 18–59 are not sexually active. Older couples are more likely to be sexually inactive, usually because of health issues or lack of energy.<sup>136</sup>)
- ❖ *Friendship and Spending Time Together.* While couples are different in the amount of time they spend interacting and doing things together, in a healthy marriage couples enjoy being together. They are friends; they respect each other and enjoy each other's company. Friendship and time together may be more important to some cultural groups than to others,<sup>137</sup> but especially in America, they are highly valued in a marriage.
- ❖ *Commitment to Children.* Not all married couples have children or have children living with them. But in a healthy marriage with children, the couple is mutually committed to the development and well-being of all their children.
- ❖ *Duration and Legal Status.* The optimal environment for raising children is a family with two biological (or adoptive) parents in a stable, healthy marriage. Believing in the permanence of the relationship actually helps to sustain a healthy marriage; those who don't believe that marriage should be permanent have a harder time sustaining a healthy marriage.<sup>138</sup> Marriage represents an important legal status. Marriage is not only a commitment to another person

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

but also a public commitment to society to behave in certain constructive ways. In turn, society supports the relationship and the children in that union.<sup>139</sup>

It's important to remember that couples have healthy marriages to varying degrees; it's not an either/or situation. And all marriages have ups and downs. But these characteristics are a good definition of a healthy marriage. You may want to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your marriage with Exercise 2.6, "Elements of a Healthy Marriage: How Important Are They?" at the end of the chapter.

## Exercises for Chapter 2

### 2.1. Thinking About Commitment in My Marriage

As we discussed in this chapter, there are two elements of commitment: constraint and personal dedication. Constraint commitment includes those things that keep you in a marriage, even if things aren't going well, like financial worries or concerns about how a divorce might affect your children. In the long run, however, constraint commitment is usually not enough to hold a marriage together; dedication commitment is needed. Dedication commitment is a real desire to be with your spouse, to build a life and a future together, and a willingness to sacrifice for each other. Consider your situation and both elements of commitment and write down your thoughts.

A. *Constraints Against Divorce.* Think about each of the following and whether it would be a big constraint, a little constraint, or not a constraint against divorce (circle your answer). Then briefly write why it might hold you back from a divorce.

Possible Divorce Constraint	3 = Big 2 = Little 1 = Not a Concern (circle one)	Why?
1. Fear it would hurt my children.	3 2 1	
2. Fear my spouse wouldn't stay involved with the children.	3 2 1	

Chapter 2: Why Are Good Marriages Hard to Sustain?

Possible Divorce Constraint	3 = Big 2 = Little 1 = Not a Concern (circle one)	Why?
3. Fear my children would lose contact with extended family members (e.g., spouse's parents).	3 2 1	
4. Financial worries (money would be tight).	3 2 1	
5. Might lose our home and have to move.	3 2 1	
6. Not sure if I could get a good job to support the family.	3 2 1	
7. I might lose health insurance or other benefits from my spouse's job.	3 2 1	
8. My spouse might not pay regular child support.	3 2 1	
9. Fear of what family or friends might think if I get a divorce.	3 2 1	
10. It will feel like a personal failure.	3 2 1	
11. Religious concerns (disapproval of divorce).	3 2 1	
12. Uncertainty about what the future holds for me.	3 2 1	
13. Fear of ever finding another love.	3 2 1	
14. Don't want to have to date again.	3 2 1	
15. Fear that arguments with my spouse will get worse if we divorce.	3 2 1	
16. Fear of getting abused if I try to get a divorce.	3 2 1	
17. Other:	3 2 1	
18. Other:	3 2 1	
19. Other:	3 2 1	

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

Now, stop and think about your responses. What have you learned about the constraints that may or may not hold you back from getting a divorce? Write down a few thoughts.

*B. Dedication Commitment.* Next, think about your situation and dedication commitment. Even though you may be having some serious problems, how dedicated are you to your spouse? Answer these questions as honestly as possible by circling the number that best describes you. (These questions were developed by prominent researchers who study commitment in relationships.<sup>140</sup>)

Dedication Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I don't make important commitments unless I will keep them.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. My relationship with my spouse is more important to me than anything else.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I like to think of my spouse and me more in terms of "us" and "we" than "me" and "him/her."	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. My marriage to my spouse is clearly part of my future plans.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. It makes me feel good to sacrifice for my partner.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I want to have a strong identity as a couple with my spouse.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I want to be with my spouse a few years from now.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Chapter 2: Why Are Good Marriages Hard to Sustain?

9. I am not seriously attracted to anyone else right now.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. I do not think about what it would be like to be with someone else (romantically).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Now score your dedication commitment by adding up the numbers you circled. Your score: \_\_\_\_\_

- ❖ If your score is **higher than 50**, you are probably dedicated and committed to your spouse, even if you are having serious problems at this time.
- ❖ If your score is **50 or less but more than 30**, then you are probably struggling somewhat with dedication commitment in your marriage at this time.
- ❖ If your score is **30 or less**, then you are probably not dedicated and committed to your spouse at this time.

*C. Increasing Your Commitment.* How can you increase your commitment? One way to increase your dedication commitment is to remember the good times and all the good things you have gone through together. When you are going through hard times, it is easy to forget these good things. Write your answer to each of these questions.

1. What attracted you to your spouse at first and then later on?

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2. What are two or three of the happiest times in your marriage? Why?

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3. What are two or three of the most difficult times in your marriage that you have been able to overcome?

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SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

4. What two or three important values do you feel you still have in common with your spouse?

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5. What two or three important goals do you feel you still share with your spouse?

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6. What would be the biggest loss if you got divorced?

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7. What would be the biggest gain if you can stay together?

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8. What three things could you do to increase your dedication commitment and show more loyalty to your spouse? Write them down here.

- A. \_\_\_\_\_
- B. \_\_\_\_\_
- C. \_\_\_\_\_

D. *Remembering the Good Times.* When you think back on your relationship, both before you got married and after, can you think of good, positive times? When couples are going through hard times, it is common to focus on the bad and not remember the good times and good features of the relationship. But if you can recall those good times and good aspects of the relationship, then you have a better chance of being able to work through your challenges and keep your marriage together. A marriage that was built on friendship and fondness sometimes can be revived, despite the challenges you are facing now. This exercise is designed to help you try to remember the good times and good parts of your relationship.

- ❖ What do you remember about dating your spouse? What attracted her or him to you? What did you enjoy doing together? Write down some of your thoughts here:

- ❖ Why did you choose to marry your spouse? What influenced you to make the big decision to decide to spend your life together with this person? Write down your thoughts here:
- 
- 

- ❖ Despite your current problems, what positive things do you still see in your marriage? What good characteristics do you still see in your spouse? Write down your thoughts here:
- 
- 

- ❖ Have you gone through some tough times together before? What kept you going through those times? Write down your thoughts here:
- 
- 

- ❖ If you have been able to remember some of the good features of your marriage and your spouse, it helps you to see the possibility of a better future. What have you learned by trying to remember the good times? Write down your thoughts here:

E. *Your Spouse's Commitment.* You have been thinking about your commitment to your marriage and your spouse. Obviously, your spouse's commitment to you is equally important. Low commitment from either spouse can make it hard to stay together. But if both are committed, your chances of solving your problems and keeping your marriage together are much better. Take a few minutes now and think about how your spouse might answer the questions in this exercise, "Thinking About Commitment in My Marriage." Of course, this can be hard to do. It's hard to know exactly what your spouse is feeling and thinking. But it may be helpful to try to honestly assess your spouse's commitment. What constraints would be on his/her list? How would he/she score on dedication commitment? How would he/she answer the questions above in part C? What have you learned by thinking about commitment from your spouse's perspective? Write down your thoughts here:

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

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*F. Putting It All Together.* Considering all the information in this exercise, what do you think about continuing to try and work out the challenges in your relationship? Write down your thoughts here:

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### 2.2. Thinking About Thinking About Divorce

Here are some questions to ask yourself if you have been thinking about divorce. These can help you bring these to the surface your thoughts and make more sense of them. There aren't right or wrong answers to the questions. And we haven't created an artificial total score that indicates a direction you should go. These are just questions to help clarify your thinking.

1. Taking all things together, on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is completely unhappy and 10 is completely happy, how happy would you say your relationship with your spouse is?

<input type="checkbox"/>										
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all									Completely	
happy									Happy	

Now, these next five questions give you a sense of how much hope you have for your marriage. Thinking about your relationship with your spouse, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

Thinking about your relationship with your spouse, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
2. I believe we can handle whatever conflicts will arise in the future.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I am very confident when I think of our future together.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I'm hopeful that we can make our	1	2	3	4	5

Chapter 2: Why Are Good Marriages Hard to Sustain?

Thinking about your relationship with your spouse, do you agree or disagree with the following statements?	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
relationship work.					
5. I'm hopeful that we have the tools we need to fix problems in our relationship now and in the future.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I feel like our relationship can survive what life throws at us.	1	2	3	4	5

2. Sometimes couples experience serious problems in their marriage and have thoughts of ending their marriage. Even people who get along quite well with their spouse sometimes wonder whether their marriage is working out. Have you ever thought your marriage was in serious trouble?

- Yes       No

*If you answered "No," then this exercise probably won't hold much value for you.*

3. Have you and your spouse ever talk about the possibility of divorce?

- Yes    No                       Maybe, we sort of talked about it.

4. Are you glad or not glad you are still married?

- I'm glad we are still married.  
 I have mixed feelings about still being married; sometimes I'm glad and sometimes I'm not.  
 I'm not glad we are still married.  
 I'm just not sure how I feel about my marriage.

5. In the past 6 months, have you had serious concerns about your marriage that included thinking about a possible divorce?

- No, Not at All                       Yes, a Few Times                       Yes, Several Times                       Yes, a Lot of Times

*If you answered "No, Not at All," then skip to the end of this exercise.*

SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

6. Have you talked to your spouse in the last 6 months about your thoughts about divorce?

- Yes    No    Maybe, we sort of talked about it.

7. In the past 6 months, has your spouse mentioned to you that he or she has been thinking about the possibility of divorce?

- |                          |                          |                          |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| No, Not at All           | Yes, a Few Times         | Yes, Several Times       | Yes, a Lot of Times      |

8. How long have you had these thoughts about divorce?

- |                          |                          |                          |                          |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 0-3 Months               | 4-6 Months               | 7-12 Months              | 12-24 Months             | More than 24 Months      |

9. People have different attitudes about getting a divorce. Please check the one statement below that most closely fits your own attitude right now.

- I'm done with this marriage; it's too late now even if my spouse were to make major changes.
- I have mixed feelings about a divorce; sometimes I think it's a good idea and sometimes I'm not sure.
- I would consider working on my marriage and not divorcing if my spouse got serious about making some major changes.
- I don't really want a divorce; I'm willing to work hard to keep us together.
- None of these statements really fits my own attitude right now. Please write your attitude here:

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10. Married couples sometimes have different views about getting a divorce. Which of the following statements most closely fits your own attitude right now.

- I really don't want a divorce; I'll do almost anything I need to do to save my marriage.
- I really don't want a divorce, but I'll go along if my spouse insists.
- I have mixed feelings about a divorce; sometimes I think it's a good idea and sometimes I'm not sure.

*Chapter 2: Why Are Good Marriages Hard to Sustain?*

- I'm leaning towards getting a divorce.
- I'm certain I want a divorce.
- None of these statements fits my own attitude right now.

Please write your view here:

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11. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "I've struggled to come to clarity about my decision to divorce or stay together."

- |                          |                          |                                  |                          |                          |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/>         | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Strongly<br>Disagree     | Disagree                 | Neither<br>Agree nor<br>Disagree | Agree                    | Strongly<br>Agree        | Not Sure                 |

12. If you have made a decision to divorce or stay together, how confident are you that this is the right decision for you (or have you not made a decision yet)?

- |                                      |                          |                          |                          |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/>             | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| I Have Not<br>Made a<br>Decision Yet | Not at All<br>Confident  | Somewhat<br>Confident    | Very<br>Confident        |

13. Now, put it all together. What have you learned from answering these questions? Write your thoughts down here:

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What are some possible implications from what you have learned answering these questions? Write your thoughts down here:

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### 2.3. Thinking About Your Reasons for a Possible Divorce

A. Below are some of the more common reasons people give for divorce. Consider what role each of these reasons plays in your situation. Circle whether each reason is a major problem, a minor problem (and may have you thinking about a divorce) or not a problem in your marriage. (If something is a problem for your spouse but not for you, go ahead and circle

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

what you think your spouse would say.) Then for each reason you checked, take a minute to think about how willing you and your spouse would be to work to make improvements in this area. (Chapter 3 will discuss different ways to work to make improvements in your relationship.)

Reason for Divorce/ Problem in Marriage	Is this a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason for thinking about a divorce? (circle one)	How willing would you be to work on making improvements in this area? How willing do you think your spouse would be? 1 = Not at all willing 2 = A little willing 3 = Somewhat willing 4 = Very willing n/a = Not applicable in your situation (circle one)
Lack of commitment	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Too much arguing	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Infidelity (unfaithful)	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Unrealistic expectations	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Lack of equality	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Pushing, slapping, yelling, etc.	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Severe abuse	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Didn't prepare well for marriage	major / minor / not	(Not applicable)
Married too young	major / minor / not	(Not applicable)
Other: _____	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a

What have you learned from answering these questions? Write your thoughts down here:

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What are some possible implications from what you have learned answering these questions? Write your thoughts down here:

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## 2.4. Personal Philosophy About Divorce

When two people get married, they usually aren't thinking that the marriage will end in divorce. But then hard times arise and sometimes they find themselves thinking either casually or seriously about divorce. But most people haven't really thought carefully about their philosophy of divorce. When, if ever, is it justified? How hard and how long should people try to work things out? Does it make a difference if they have children? Does it matter how old the children are? There are many things to consider, but many people haven't clarified the answers to these questions. This exercise invites you to do this. Thinking about marriage and divorce in general (not your marriage specifically), answer these questions as honestly as you can.

A. What circumstances do you think could justify divorce?

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B. What circumstances do you think do *not* justify divorce?

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C. If a married couple has children, does that affect your answers in A and B above? Do the ages of the children matter?

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D. How long do you think a married couple should try to work things out? Does your answer to this question depend on some of the circumstances you wrote about above?

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## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

E. What steps do you think people should take before deciding to get divorced? (For instance, get counseling.)

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F. Why do think you have these beliefs? What has shaped your beliefs? (For instance, religious principles, family experiences growing up, friends you have observed going through a divorce, your ideological or political views.)

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G. Now apply this personal philosophy to your circumstances. How does your personal philosophy guide your thinking about the challenges you are facing in your marriage? What does this mean in terms of thinking about divorce? Write your thoughts here:

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Of course, as we have acknowledged many times, your spouse may have a different philosophy and it only takes one person to end a marriage. If it helps, you may want to try and think how your spouse would answer these questions.

## 2.5. Is There Abuse in My Marriage?

As we discussed in this chapter, there are at least two kinds of violence: “situational couple violence” and “coercive-controlling violence.” Situational couple violence involves things like pushing, shoving, kicking, yelling, etc., and is done by men and women equally, although men generally do more damage than women. When there is situational couple violence in a relationship, the couple needs to improve their communication and problem-solving skills. (Part B of this exercise will help you see if there is this kind of abuse in your marriage.) A second kind of abuse, coercive-controlling violence, is more serious. It involves more severe forms of physical, emotional, and sexual violence, and is done to control the other person. This kind of violence is almost always done by men against women.

*A. Assessing Coercive-controlling Violence.*<sup>141</sup> This questionnaire can help you judge whether there is severe abuse or coercive-controlling violence in

Chapter 2: Why Are Good Marriages Hard to Sustain?

your marriage, a very serious and dangerous form of violence in a relationship. For each question, circle the number that best represents your relationship. Then add up your scores.

My Spouse...	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Almost Always
Makes me feel like I'm walking on eggshells to keep the peace	0	1	2	3	4
Keeps me away from family and friends	0	1	2	3	4
Yells at me often, and calls me names	0	1	2	3	4
Doesn't care about my needs and expectations	0	1	2	3	4
Is unpredictable or has sudden mood swings	0	1	2	3	4
Puts me down to look better	0	1	2	3	4
Retaliates when I disagree	0	1	2	3	4
Breaks or hits things in my presence	0	1	2	3	4
Is forceful with things like affection and/or sex	0	1	2	3	4
Controls all the money and gives me little or none	0	1	2	3	4
Is possessive of me, or jealous of me	0	1	2	3	4
Sometimes physically hurts me	0	1	2	3	4
Add up your TOTAL SCORE:					

Compare your score to these categories:

- ❖ 0–19 = little risk of abuse
- ❖ 20–30 = likelihood of minor abuse

31 and higher = likelihood of serious abuse If your score is higher than 31:

- ❖ It is a good idea to get help (see <http://www.ncadv.org/> or a local agency).
- ❖ Also, individual counseling, rather than couples' counseling, is probably best.

B. *Assessing Situational Couple Violence.*<sup>142</sup> This questionnaire can help you judge whether there is situational couple violence in your marriage,

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

such as slapping and pushing. Although this kind of physical aggression in marriage is not as serious as coercive-controlling violence, it is still an indication of some unhealthy parts in a marriage.

No matter how well a couple gets along, there are times when they disagree on decisions, get annoyed about something the other person does, or have arguments or fights because they are in a bad mood or for some other reason. A couple may also use many different ways to settle their differences. Below are some things that you or your partner may have done when you had a disagreement or fight. For each question, circle the answer that best represents what *your spouse* has done. Next, answer the same questions about what *you* have done.

Thinking about your <b>spouse</b> , during the past 12 months . . .							
1. How many times, if any, has your spouse hit you?	0	1	2	3-5	6-10	11-20	20+
2. How many times has your spouse twisted your arm or hair?	0	1	2	3-5	6-10	11-20	20+
3. How many times has your spouse pushed, shoved, or kicked you?	0	1	2	3-5	6-10	11-20	20+
4. How many times has your spouse grabbed you forcefully?	0	1	2	3-5	6-10	11-20	20+
5. How many times has your spouse slapped you?	0	1	2	3-5	6-10	11-20	20+
Now, thinking about <b>yourself</b> , during the past 12 months . . .							
6. How many times, if any, have you hit your spouse?	0	1	2	3-5	6-10	11-20	20+
7. How many times have you twisted your spouse's arm or hair?	0	1	2	3-5	6-10	11-20	20+
8. How many times have you pushed, shoved, or kicked your spouse?	0	1	2	3-5	6-10	11-20	20+
9. How many times have you grabbed your spouse forcefully?	0	1	2	3-5	6-10	11-20	20+
10. How many times have you slapped your spouse?	0	1	2	3-5	6-10	11-20	20+

Chapter 2: Why Are Good Marriages Hard to Sustain?

There is no scale that says how much of this behavior in a relationship is acceptable or how much is too much. Any behavior like this in a marriage is unhealthy and indicates a need to improve your communication and problem-solving skills.

Looking over your answers, what have you learned about situational couple violence in your marriage? Have you and your spouse been able to avoid these kinds of behaviors? If so, this is a strength in your relationship. Or do you and your spouse sometimes use these ineffective and unhealthy ways to deal with disagreement and problems? If so, do both of you behave this way sometimes, which is more common, or is it just one of you? Write down your thoughts here:

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If you and/or your spouse sometimes use these ineffective and unhealthy ways to deal with disagreements and problems, how can you improve your ability to discuss things and solve disagreements in a healthier way? You may want to consider some of the resources suggested in Chapter 3 to improve your communication and problem-solving skills. Write down your thoughts and plans here:

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## 2.6: Elements of a Healthy Marriage: How Important Are They? And How Healthy Is Your Marriage?

A. *Elements of a Healthy Marriage.* Researchers have identified 10 essential elements of a healthy marriage. How important are these 10 elements to you? For each of the 10 elements, make a quick judgment about how important it is to you.

Essential Element Definition	How important is this to you?		
	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
1. <i>Commitment.</i> Each spouse has a long-term	0	1	3

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

perspective of the marriage and an intention to persevere through hard times; each spouse is committed to the well-being of the other.			
2. <i>Satisfaction</i> . The marriage is a source of happiness for each spouse.	0	1	3
3. <i>Communication</i> . The couple is able to talk and communicate with each other in positive and respectful ways.	0	1	3
4. <i>Conflict Resolution</i> . The couple is able to handle differences and conflicts and solve problems in a positive way.	0	1	3
5. <i>Lack of Violence</i> . Neither spouse is abusive of other or their children, physically, psychologically, or sexually.	0	1	3
6. <i>Fidelity</i> . Spouses are sexually faithful to one another; sex is reserved for one's spouse and no one else.	0	1	3
7. <i>Friendship/Time Together</i> . Spouses are friends; they like and respect each other; they know each other well; they enjoy spending time together.	0	1	3
8. <i>Intimacy/Emotional Support</i> . Spouses trust, care, and love each other; they are affectionate.	0	1	3
9. <i>Commitment to Children</i> . Each spouse is committed to the well-being of all of their children.	0	1	3
10. <i>Duration/Legal Status</i> . A couple makes a formal legal commitment (marriage) and plans for the marriage to endure.	0	1	3

This was a very quick assessment of how important each of these elements of a healthy marriage is to you. People will differ in how important certain elements are. What have you learned by considering how important these elements are to you?

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Next is a little more detailed questionnaire to help you evaluate the different strengths and weaknesses in your relationship.

**B. Evaluating the Strengths and Weaknesses of Your Relationship.** If you are like most couples, your relationship has both weaknesses and strengths. How do you rate your relationship? What can you do to keep the strong areas strong? What can you do to improve the problem areas? This quiz can help you think about these questions.

## Chapter 2: Why Are Good Marriages Hard to Sustain?

The questions come from a research study that looked at the quality of relationships.<sup>143</sup> The study included 1,550 couples that are typical of all couples in the United States. The researchers who did this study found that a person's answers to the quiz can tell a lot about the quality of a relationship, but it's not perfect.

Here's how the quiz works: Answer these 30 questions and then add up the score. Then you can go through an exercise to find the strengths in your relationship and areas where you need to make improvements.

You can do the quiz on your own. If you feel comfortable, both you and your spouse could take the quiz separately, then share your results. Use the tips at the end to help you appreciate your strengths and talk about ways to work on your weaknesses.

For each question, circle the number below the answer that best matches your feelings. Remember, the usefulness of this quiz depends on how much you know about yourself and your partner and how honest you are in your responses.

In your relationship, how satisfied are YOU with:					
	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
1. Your overall relationship with your spouse?	1	2	3	4	5
2. The quality of your communication?	1	2	3	4	5
3. The love you experience?	1	2	3	4	5
How is your SPOUSE in your relationship?					
	Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Very Often
4. My spouse understands my feelings.	1	2	3	4	5
5. My spouse listens to me in an understanding way.	1	2	3	4	5
6. My spouse uses a tactless choice of words when she or he complains.	5	4	3	2	1
7. My spouse doesn't censor his/her complaints at all. She/he really lets me have it full force.	5	4	3	2	1
How often do these words or phrases describe YOU?					
	Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Very Often
8. Worrier	5	4	3	2	1

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

9. Nervous	5	4	3	2	1
10. Depressed	5	4	3	2	1
11. Feel hopeless	5	4	3	2	1
12. Fight with others/lose temper	5	4	3	2	1
13. Easily irritated or mad	5	4	3	2	1
How often do these words/expressions describe YOUR SPOUSE?					
14. Worrier	5	4	3	2	1
15. Nervous	5	4	3	2	1
16. Depressed	5	4	3	2	1
17. Feel hopeless	5	4	3	2	1
18. Fight with others/lose temper	5	4	3	2	1
19. Easily irritated or mad	5	4	3	2	1
How much do you agree with the following statements about the family you grew up with?					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	It Depends	Agree	Strongly Agree
20. I'm still having trouble dealing with some issues from my family while growing up.	5	4	3	2	1
21. Some issues from my family while growing up make it hard for me to form close relationships.	5	4	3	2	1
How often have the following areas been a problem in your relationship?					
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
22. Financial matters	5	4	3	2	1
23. Communication	5	4	3	2	1
24. Intimacy/sexuality	5	4	3	2	1
25. Parents/In-laws	5	4	3	2	1
26. Roles (who does what)	5	4	3	2	1
27. Time spent together	5	4	3	2	1
28. How often have you thought your relationship might be in trouble?	5	4	3	2	1
29. How often is your SPOUSE violent toward you?	5	4	3	2	1
30. How often are YOU violent toward your spouse?	5	4	3	2	1

Score your quiz now. To score your quiz, just add up the numbers you circled. Your score should be between 30 and 150.

Chapter 2: Why Are Good Marriages Hard to Sustain?

Your Score: \_\_\_\_\_

*What Your Score Means:* A higher number indicates more areas of strength and fewer areas of weakness. A lower number indicates more areas of weakness that you may need to work on to improve the quality of your relationship.

*C. Learn from the Quiz: What Are Your Strengths and Weaknesses?* All couples have strengths and challenges in their relationships. List and talk about your strengths and areas for improvement.

*Strengths.* For questions 1–5 in the *Strengths and Weaknesses of Your Relationship* quiz, a response of 4 or 5 says that these are strengths in your relationship. For questions 6–30 in the quiz, a response of 1 or 2 says that these are strengths in your relationship. So, from your answers to the quiz, list the greatest strengths in your relationship.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

Think and talk about these strengths. Don't take them for granted. How can you maintain and nurture these strengths?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

*Weaknesses.* For questions 1–5 in the *Strengths and Weaknesses of Your Relationship* quiz, a response of 1 or 2 says that these are challenges in your relationship. For questions 6–30 in the quiz, a response of 4 or 5 says that these are challenges in your relationship. From your answers to the quiz, list some challenges in your relationship that you could work on.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Think and talk together about these challenges. What can you do to improve in these areas?

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

There are easy ways to get a more detailed, in-depth look at all the different aspects of your relationship. Here are three relationship inventories, or questionnaires, that you can access (for a minor cost) that allow you to answer many detailed questions about your relationship with your spouse (privately). Then you get detailed feedback on the strengths and weaknesses in your relationship. These have been developed by good researchers and used by couples and professionals for decades.

- RELATE: <https://relatefoundation.com/couples/>
- Couple Checkup:  
[https://www.couplecheckup.com/webapp/checkup/home/template/DisplaySecureContent.vm;jsessionid=314C21A239652D0BB4C0CEC369F6115D?id=checkup\\_main\\_site\\_content\\*home\\*CoupleCheckup.html](https://www.couplecheckup.com/webapp/checkup/home/template/DisplaySecureContent.vm;jsessionid=314C21A239652D0BB4C0CEC369F6115D?id=checkup_main_site_content*home*CoupleCheckup.html)
- *The Marriage Checkup* (book), by James Cordova:  
<https://www.amazon.com/Marriage-Checkup-Scientific-Sustaining-Strengthening/dp/0765706393>

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## Chapter 2: Why Are Good Marriages Hard to Sustain?

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## Can Unhealthy Marriages Become Healthy Again? How Can I Work on Improving My Marriage?

One advantage of marriage, it seems to me, is that when you fall out of love with each other, it keeps you together until maybe you fall in again.

Judith Viorst, American author and journalist<sup>1</sup>

I think a man and a woman should choose each other for life, for the simple reason that a long life with all its accidents is barely enough for a man and a woman to understand each other; and in this case to understand is to love.

William Butler Yeats<sup>2</sup>

*Overview: Most unhappy marriages become happy and healthy again if couples stick it out through the hard times. Some divorces are necessary, but some marriages can be repaired. This chapter reviews ways that couples can work to improve their marriage. Some individuals and couples read books or use other resources on their own to help improve their marriages. Others participate in marriage strengthening classes to improve their relationship skills (some resources for finding good marriage education classes are reviewed below). Still others seek counseling from professional counselors or therapists or seek help from a trusted religious guide. This chapter contains some useful guidelines for choosing a good counselor or therapist to help you repair your marriage. Through dedicated efforts, some couples are able to reconcile and rebuild a happy marriage. Some couples separate for a time to get more clarity about which direction to go, but this often is not a helpful strategy unless there is a lot of discussion before separation about the purpose of separation and other matters. Even if your spouse doesn't seem to be interested in working out problems in the marriage, there are things you can do individually that may help repair your relationship.*

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

Some may be surprised to learn that many unhappy and unhealthy marriages recover. As one respected marriage therapist and researcher, Dr. William J. Doherty at the University of Minnesota, noted, marriages are *not* like fruit. When fruit gets bruised or rotten, it doesn't improve with time; you just have to toss it out. Marriages, however, often do improve over time. Nationally, about one in seven (13%) married individuals say that they have seriously thought about divorcing their spouse recently.<sup>3</sup> But more than 94% of married individuals—both men and women—who said that their marriage at some point was in trouble said they were glad they were still together. In another recent study,<sup>4</sup> married adults in a western state were asked if they ever thought their marriage was in trouble. Nearly half (47%) said yes, and nearly one in three (29%) said that at some time they had thought about divorce. About one in ten (11%) said they had talked to their spouse about a divorce in the last three years.

One such couple we know worked through a difficult situation with infidelity, one of the most difficult marital offenses to overcome. Four years after the affair they both said they had never been happier. The couple was happy that they had worked through the infidelity, which seemed impossible at the time of its discovery. As a result of working things out, their four children were able to have continued and uninterrupted access to each other as well as live in a home with both parents. Both spouses had gone through forgiveness, healing, and changing. Although this couple's decision may not be right for every couple, they were happy about their decision to stay married and report being stronger for having successfully worked through a very tough situation.

Individuals who are thinking about divorce can sometimes feel like they have to choose between just two competing options: "Do I divorce so that I can find happiness again, or do I stay together for the family's sake and remain unhappy?" We think this is a false choice. There is good evidence to suggest that with the proper help and willingness on the part of both spouses, many marriages that might otherwise end in divorce can become healthy, vibrant, and supportive. This chapter explains that if couples can stick it out through tough times, get decent support to look at their own contributions to the state of the marriage, and make thoughtful changes, their marriage is likely to become happy and healthy again. And there are helpful resources for those willing to work at it.

## A. Can unhealthy marriages become healthy again?

It may be difficult to face the issues that you and your spouse are struggling with, but research suggests that couples who courageously confront their problems, learn specific relationship skills, and stay together usually end up happy again down the road. Long-term unhappiness in marriage is uncommon. In a national study, only about 10% of individuals say at any particular time that they are unhappy in their marriages, and only about 2% say they are very unhappy.<sup>5</sup> As this study followed these couples over a 5-year period, they found that about 20% of the unhappy individuals did divorce. But about 80% hung on and were still married. The better news is that most of those who hung on weren't miserable. Half of unhappily married adults who avoided divorce were happily married to the same spouse 5 years later. Another 20% of unhappily married adults reported improvement; they were no longer unhappy but not yet in the happy range. About 10% of unhappily married individuals were still married but still unhappy 5 years later.

Couples can demonstrate incredible resilience. They seem to be able to overcome very serious problems in their marriages and often find happiness again. And fortunately, violence in these unhappy relationships was not very common; 23% of those that divorced and 15% of those that stayed together reported that an argument had gotten physical at least once.

Of course, we don't know your situation. Only you can decide what is best for you and your family. (And maybe this decision has been forced on you by your spouse.) You may benefit from Exercise 3.1, "Hanging On or Moving On?" at the end of this chapter.

In our interview with Aaron, he told us how he and his wife hung on through bad times in their marriage. Reflecting on those times more than 20 years later, he was grateful they hung on.

For a number of different reasons, we really struggled early on in our marriage. We were in love but we weren't prepared for things. We were more different from one another than we thought. I think people make too much about "compatibility," but yeah, I was amazed at how different we were. My expectations about what marriage was and how things would be were different from my experience of it all, you know, and I blamed her for that, I guess. I was kinda immature. And she brought some family baggage with her into the marriage that took a long time to work through. ... And a couple of times she spoke the "D-word" [divorce]. It

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

devastated me. It hurt like nothing I've ever felt. I felt like a failure. But somehow we hung on. I grew up more and became more realistic with my expectations. She was able to get some help and overcome some of her baggage from an abusive father. Over time, we just learned to love and accept each other more. And I guess having gone through hard times like that, you know, you just build an even stronger bond. I'm not saying we have a perfect marriage, but we have a strong, happy marriage ... and an intact family. We've built a wonderful life together and raised some wonderful children ... . It's scary to think about how close we came to maybe giving that up.

The rest of this chapter will discuss ways that individuals and couples can try to improve and strengthen their marriages, including self-guided efforts, seeking out marriage strengthening classes, and getting help from a marriage counselor. Perhaps in your circumstances, however, strengthening your marriage isn't an option. Still, it may be valuable for you to be aware of the information in the next few sections to help you build a healthier relationship in the future.

### B. Can couples improve their own marriages without outside help? How?

It may be surprising to learn that most couples who go from being unhappy to happy in their marriages do not get help from outside experts such as marriage therapists. Some are able to overcome serious issues by themselves with effort and the passage of time. Sometimes the problem has to do more with circumstances outside the marriage that place stress on a relationship—for instance, a job loss or the death of a family member or a health problem—and eventually the stress goes away.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, some couples seek help from a trained professional counselor or religious leader. And some seek informal help from trusted friends or family members; our research finds that about a third of individuals thinking about divorce have sought help by talking to friends of other family members. The most common ways of working to improve a struggling relationship are having serious talks with a spouse, working to fix a relationship problem, and forgiving a spouse (or asking for forgiveness); about 70% of couples do this. Fran told us her story about this. Her first marriage ended early when she discovered her husband's

*Chapter 3: Can Unhealthy Marriages Become Healthy Again?*

infidelity. She remarried, but hit some hard times with some basic differences common among men and women. Fran described her feelings about the looming possibility of another divorce:

For me, anxiety, fear, anger, failure again. Inadequate feelings. For him, anger, frustration, very similar feelings to mine, but only compounded with the male ego, which is a very strong source of energy. He was more emotional than I about it, because I had been thinking about it a long time, and he, being himself, said to me, "I didn't know anything was wrong." And then we talked. When I communicated how I felt, he, being the intelligent man he was, understood perfectly. . . . We knew that the children were the future. They were our future . . . . They were what we were actually about. We had more to gain from staying together than being apart. We both had to put our egos aside. . . . We both had to look at ourselves. . . . We started trying. We didn't just wait for things to happen. We scheduled things for ourselves. Not just routine, routine, routine. Every Saturday we had something to do for ourselves. We had a time for Deron and I, and we had a time for the family.

Fran and Deron worked through their hard times on their own with communication, understanding, and willingness to change. Years later as we interviewed Fran, she described a rich, rewarding, long-term marriage; she was sure she made the right decision to work through their problems.

Fran's and Deron's story is one marked by putting forth specific effort to make the relationship a priority. They had to carve out time in their busy schedules to be together. They had to talk about topics that made them a bit uncomfortable. They made a commitment to put their egos aside and take an honest and open look at their own contributions to their relationship problems. It was not easy to do any of these things because they had become accustomed to "letting the relationship come to them" instead of them investing in the relationship with hopes that their investment of time and attention would pay off with a healthier relationship.

In Box 3B, we provide a list of excellent books dealing with marriage and how to improve your relationship.

*Box 3B. Self-Guided Resources Related to Marriage and Divorce*

- ❖ *The Divorce Remedy: The Proven 7-Step Program for Saving Your Marriage*, by Michele Weiner Davis. Simon & Schuster, 2001.
- ❖ *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, by John M. Gottman & Nan Silver. Three Rivers Press, 2000.
- ❖ *Can My Marriage Be Saved? True Stories of Saved Marriages*, by Mae Chambers & Erika Chambers. Pass It On Publications, 2008.
- ❖ *Fighting For Your Marriage*, by Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, & Susan Blumburg. Jossey-Bass, 2010.
- ❖ *The Power of Commitment: A Guide to Active, Lifelong Love*, by Dr. Scott M. Stanley. Jossey-Bass, 2005.
- ❖ *Take Back Your Marriage*, by Dr. William J. Doherty. Guilford, 2001.

C. Are there classes that can help couples have a healthy, happy marriage?

Marriages don't come with an instruction manual, but maybe it would help if they did. It seems like you have to go through some formal training for just about any license you get, except a marriage license—simply register, pay the fee, and you're ready to get married. (Some states are trying to encourage couples to invest in premarital education and counseling, however. In these states, you can have all or part of the marriage license fee waived if you attend a certain number of hours of premarital relationship education.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, these new policies haven't been implemented very well in most of these states.<sup>8</sup>)

Research suggests that only about one fourth to one third of couples invest in any kind of formal relationship education or counseling before marrying.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, it seems that only a small percentage of married couples take marriage enrichment classes to enhance their marriage and improve their communication skills. Our study of married individuals thinking about divorce found that only 9% had recently taken a class to help with their marriage.<sup>10</sup> Maybe they are unaware of the many of these kinds of classes to help them form and sustain a healthy, happy marriage or to repair a struggling marriage.

Over the last 25 years, some states and communities have been investing in more resources to provide couples with marriage education classes.<sup>11</sup> And the federal government has funded hundreds of grants to community organizations to provide relationship education services to economically disadvantaged couples. Research suggests that these programs are having some small but positive effects.<sup>12</sup> Studies of the effectiveness of these marriage-strengthening programs for more advantaged couples show stronger, positive effects.<sup>13</sup> Some studies have looked specifically at the effectiveness of marriage education for couples who are in distress and may be thinking about divorce, and these studies generally find that distressed couples can benefit from marriage education. In fact, they seem to benefit even more than non-distressed couples.<sup>14</sup>

Marriage education is different from marriage counseling or therapy. It brings individuals and couples together, usually in groups of 10 to 20, and generally provides them with research-based information on what makes marriages work. Some classes are taught by highly trained professionals, but others are taught by individuals who just have a passion for strengthening marriages and have trained to teach a certain curriculum or program. Sometimes religious leaders or people they designate teach these classes. Both professionals and passionate lay people can be effective educators.<sup>15</sup>

Marriage education is offered in various places, such as churches, community settings, workplaces, schools, and colleges. Some classes are targeted to specific groups of people, such as couples of a similar ethnic, racial, or religious identity, Spanish-speaking couples, or remarried couples. Many marriage education classes are offered free, especially when they are run by religious organizations or supported by government funds. Other classes charge a fee or “tuition.” Depending on the program, those fees can range from the cost of materials—about \$20—to several hundred dollars. (While several hundred dollars seems like a lot of money, it is a lot less than the typical costs associated with marriage counseling or the cost of a divorce.) Most marriage education classes have about 12 hours of instruction and training, although some programs are a little shorter and a few are longer. Couples listen to instructors but also participate in group discussions and, importantly, engage in couple conversations and exercises to help them understand each other better and practice good relationship skills. Generally, couples are encouraged to attend marriage education classes together, but this may not be a requirement. Many classes now are

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

offered online rather than in person, as some people like the convenience and privacy of online delivery. Classes are interactive, but those who participate in the classes are not encouraged to share very private matters. Many who participate in marriage education classes say that it is helpful for them to hear others in the class talk about their challenges in marriage, but instructors usually control discussion so that people don't disclose highly personal and private issues that might make others uncomfortable.

Some who take marriage education classes are just trying to "tune up" their relationships to prevent serious problems. Others are experiencing serious problems and have considered divorce. Many participants are in between, motivated to attend the class to help them because of some current concerns but not thinking seriously about divorce. In these classes, the focus is on learning skills, attitudes, behaviors, and principles that can strengthen and support an intimate and caring relationship. In most classes, there is a lot of emphasis on discovering the key ingredients for good communication and problem solving and practicing good communication skills. Some, but not all, classes take on specific topics like dealing with in-laws, managing money, or building a mutually satisfying sexual relationship. But again, the classes are different from marriage counseling that is typically done one-on-one or with a couple and one therapist; marriage education does not deal openly with an individual's or couple's private issues but addresses more globally the key ingredients of a healthy relationship.

Overall, marriage education is able to help many couples build and maintain a healthier and happier marriage, even for those at the crossroads of divorce, like Jorge and Emily:

Jorge saw the HARP [Hispanic Active Relationships Center, in Dallas, Texas] billboard as he was driving home one day. Since his relationship was about to end, the billboard caught his attention. He wrote down HARP's number and once he was home, he told his wife about the billboard and that he wanted to call to get information. His wife, Emily, had given up on the relationship and was convinced that their marital problems did not have a solution. After Jorge called and received the workshop information, he convinced Emily to at least go and try it out. He asked her to give their relationship one last chance before signing their divorce papers.

Emily was very angry, resentful, full of mixed emotions, and did not want to get her hopes up too high. Both Emily and Jorge

### *Chapter 3: Can Unhealthy Marriages Become Healthy Again?*

ended up attending for the whole 12 hours of the program. They are still together and are determined to make their marriage work. Thanks to the HARP workshops, they learned that it is okay to forgive each other, and they discovered great tools to communicate better and resolve their issues. Emily and Jorge, standing in front of class with tears in their eyes, spoke about how their lives and relationship had changed for good and how they will be forever thankful to HARP for having such a huge impact on their lives.<sup>16</sup>

Other attendees have reported that since attending the classes there was a greater feeling of peacefulness and calm in their home because the fighting had stopped. A primary reason why couples decide to attend a marriage-strengthening program is to learn how they can stop fighting.<sup>17</sup> Still others have commented on how they have taught their own adult children some of the principles that they learned in marriage education classes and that their children have begun relating to one another in healthier ways as a result.<sup>18</sup>

A successful marriage is about more than just making a good choice of whom to marry; it is also the result of applying specific relationship skills. Brittany, a remarried mother with several children, expressed strong feelings about this when we interviewed her:

In my first marriage we didn't have a great of line of communication, so now my thing is, are you willing to go to a seminar together and learn how to communicate better? How much are you willing to sacrifice and do to make it [your marriage] successful?

Box 3C describes several well-known marriage education programs. Try googling “marriage education” or “marriage enrichment classes” in your area to find classes. Or go to this website: <https://usmarriage.org/classes>, which is trying to build a national map of available classes. If you're at all curious about how marriage or relationship education might help you or someone you know, you may benefit from Exercise 3.2 at the end of this chapter, “Thinking About Education to Strengthen Marriages.”

## D. Can marriage counseling help? How can I choose a good counselor and make counseling work for me?

Couples with serious and long-term relationship problems may need more than marriage education classes. They may need private help with a marriage counselor.

Some come to marriage having had negative experiences in childhood or in previous relationships. In some cases, our early experiences of close relationships may have left us with emotional wounds and scars that make forming intimate relationships harder.

### *Box 3C: Marriage and Relationship Education Programs*

- ❖ *PREP (or Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program)* (<https://prepinc.com>). This is the most researched and tested program, developed by researchers at the University of Denver, Drs. Howard Markman and Scott Stanley. There is an online version of this program—*ePREP*—that has shown good results in research (<https://lovetakeslearning.com>).
- ❖ *Art and Science of Love* (<https://www.gottman.com/couples/workshops/art-science-of-love>). This program was developed by one of the premier marriage researchers in the world, Dr. John Gottman, and his wife, Dr. Julie Gottman, at the University of Washington.
- ❖ *Couple LINKS* (<https://lovethinks.com/couples>). This program was developed by Dr. John VanEpp and emphasizes cultivating trust, reciprocally meeting needs, and improving sexual intimacy, all based in a Relationship Attachment Model.
- ❖ *OurRelationship* (<https://www.ourrelationship.com>). This online program was developed with struggling couples in mind and has shown good results in evaluation studies.
- ❖ *Smart Steps* (<https://www.stepfamilies.info/programs-services/smart-steps>). This program is designed specifically for remarriages and stepfamilies. It focuses on building couple and family strengths while addressing the unique needs and issues that face stepfamilies. Children and adults attend together in separate sessions then come together at the end for shared activities. The program was designed by Dr. Francesca Adler-Baeder at Auburn University and is well supported by evaluation research.

- ❖ *Marriage Encounter* (<https://agme.org>). This is a weekend marriage enrichment program. It is associated with the Roman Catholic Church but is open to all.
- ❖ *Retrouvaille* (<https://helpourmarriage.org>). This is a weekend program dedicated to helping couples with very serious problems and possibly headed towards divorce to “rediscover” their relationship. (The French word for rediscovery is *retrouvaille*, pronounced “reh-troo-vi,” with a long *i*.) It is associated with the Roman Catholic Church, but all couples are welcome.

In these cases, couple counseling can help get the issues out in the open and work toward the resolution of deep-seated hurt and sadness. It can do this in a safe environment where our partner can be supportive and understanding of what we are going through now and how the past may be shaping our present marital relationship.

Individuals and couples who are thinking about divorce should seriously consider seeing a licensed marriage and family therapist. Dr. William J. Doherty, a noted marriage scholar and therapist from the University of Minnesota, argues that just as it is strange for someone not to seek treatment for a life-threatening physical illness when there is a reasonable chance for a cure, it is odd not to seek help to overcome relationship problems that threaten a marriage.<sup>19</sup>

Studies show that marriage counseling can be very effective.<sup>20</sup> One review of research in this area found that 60%–80% of distressed couples see significant improvement in their relationship after visiting a trained marriage counselor, although about half of those who initially benefitted “relapsed” over time.<sup>21</sup> (And studies of the effectiveness of couple counseling may overstate somewhat its effectiveness because these studies are usually conducted in university clinics rather than community clinics.<sup>22</sup>) Unfortunately, surveys suggest that only about half who divorce get marital counseling (either religious or secular).<sup>23</sup> Our own research on married individuals thinking about divorce finds that a quarter sought out an individual counselor and a quarter worked with a couple counselor.<sup>24</sup> (Some sought both individual and couple counseling.)

For Doug and Keisha, a couple who had serious marital problems early in their marriage and talked at length about divorce, marriage counseling made a big difference:

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

One of the things we've worked on since [we decided to try and save our marriage]; we've actually gone to a lot of counseling. ... Yeah, it's been really helpful. ... I think it (counseling) opened up a backbone of stability for us.

A recent study of women who had been thinking about divorce but who ultimately decided to stay married discussed how therapy was helpful.<sup>25</sup> The women in this study said that therapy provided a "space" for the couple to discuss their relationship.

I would definitely say it (decision to not divorce) was influenced by therapy mostly because going to therapy creates space to have difficult conversations that I think couples in general do not have, because they're afraid to have them.

Therapy also offered a place where the spouses were more accountable to each another and where they were encouraged to act differently toward one another (e.g., more understanding and sympathetic). In therapy these individuals felt totally understood by another person, which then helped the couple reconnect and gain security in their marriage.<sup>26</sup> Most of the people in this study reported valuing their therapist's neutrality; they felt as though the therapist wasn't pushing for a specific outcome, either to divorce or stay married. But a few really appreciated a therapist who was up front about wanting to help the couple create a healthier marriage and avoid divorce.

Importantly, this study reported factors outside of therapy that also made a difference in deciding to stay married. Concerns about the children, seeing one's spouse work hard on the relationship, discovering hidden loving feelings, and realizing the tough road of divorce also contributed to the decision to stay married.

I feel like it would be more complicated to get divorced and then have me get remarried, him get remarried, and then we have a daughter together and then we have stepchildren. I feel like it complicates things beyond what we need to do to make our relationship work. And so that's been a real driving force for me and trying to stay positive and try to keep going to counseling and keep working through things.

One thing that people worry about is how to choose a good therapist; not all therapists are created equal when it comes to working on your marriage. Therapists who only work with individuals are more likely to see

only one side of a marital problem. In these cases, it is very difficult for the therapist to know if the version of reality that is being presented is 100% accurate. Without all sides of the marital story, it is extremely difficult to provide sound counsel or advice. In many cases therapists who work only with individuals use the standard of “personal happiness” to guide their counseling. This standard suggests “if you’re not happy in your marriage, you should get out, because your happiness is the most important thing.” While there is nothing wrong with the pursuit of happiness, research tells us that individual happiness waxes and wanes over the course of most marriages. So, using a standard of personal happiness at one moment in time to judge whether a marriage can be healthy and fulfilling may be misleading.

We also know that many couples become unhappy in their marriages because they stop investing in their relationship when the demands of young children and employment seem more urgent. Indeed, the seeds of most divorces begin to grow slowly with people taking their marriage for granted and stopping the investment of time and energy into their relationship. Once this happens it is very easy to declare, with some confidence, that the marriage is not “making me happy” and “I should consider moving on.” In reality, many of these marriages can be healed by turning more attention toward the relationship, dealing with past resentments, and discovering things about your partner that you never knew. Often, having a competent therapist can help facilitate this process.

Here are some tips on choosing a counselor or therapist and getting the most out of marriage counseling:

- ❖ *Find a counselor or therapist with specific education, experience, and a license to practice marriage and family therapy.* Therapists who advertise as couple therapists may only be trained in individual therapy, which differs dramatically from couple therapy. Ask potential therapists if they received formal education and supervised training in couple or marriage therapy. Also, ask what percentage of the therapist’s work is with couples.<sup>27</sup> Those who specialize in and do a lot of couple therapy have greater experience. In some states, there are formal associations of professional, licensed marriage and family therapists that maintain a list of licensed marriage and family therapists (LMFTs). (See <https://www.therapistlocator.net> to find a qualified provider in your area.)

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

- ❖ *Choose a counselor or therapist who is committed to helping you work on your marriage.* An effective marital therapist focuses on the couple as a unit, rather than as individuals. Focusing only on individual needs may lead a therapist to advocate divorce before working hard to solve relationship problems. Ask potential therapists about their views of marriage and divorce. Ask what they would choose between saving a troubled marriage and suggesting a couple separate. Also, ask how many of the couples they see stay together.<sup>28</sup> Another good idea (based on your comfort level) is to ask friends or co-workers if they have had good experiences in marriage counseling, or if they could make a recommendation. In doing this you may find that a concerned friend will be an advocate for you and your relationship. A good resource for finding a good marriage therapist is the National Registry of Marriage Friendly Therapists (<https://www.marriagefriendlytherapists.com>). Therapists listed there have the highest training standards in the country and also commit to a set of principles for doing therapy that assures that they will work very hard to help you repair your marriage before exploring the possibility of divorce.
- ❖ *Make sure your counselor or therapist has a clear plan of action that is followed through.* Effective marital therapy requires structure and direction. If counseling sessions do not seem to be going anywhere, consider a new therapist.<sup>29</sup>
- ❖ *Understand that different types of counseling or therapy produce different results.* Most forms of therapy produce short-term benefits. However, to achieve long-term results, therapy should focus on changing emotions and thoughts, rather than just teaching communication and other skills. Successful therapy helps couples truly understand one another and offers a plan for facilitating a connection between marital partners. If a therapist seems to focus only on changing what you should do (e.g., go on more date nights, bring her flowers), without also emphasizing the need to hear how your partner feels so that you can change how you feel and think in the relationship, the positive benefits may not last.<sup>30</sup>
- ❖ *Do not assume that more expensive counseling or therapy is better.* Just because a therapist requires a higher fee does not mean you are getting better therapy.<sup>31</sup> Also, although therapy seems expensive, if it can save your marriage, it will be less expensive in the long run than a divorce. Also, some therapists have sliding fees and will reduce the costs for lower income couples. Some people have accessed marital

counseling services through their company's Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Contact the human resource representative at your workplace to see if your company offers this kind of service. In addition, many universities have therapy training programs and offer counseling with therapists-in-training at low rates. (For a list of accredited Marriage and Family Therapy training programs located at a university in your area go to <https://www.aamft.org>) Also, some insurance companies will pay for a limited number of sessions with a therapist who can help you with your relationship. This is especially the case if your marital situation is causing you or your spouse emotional difficulties such as anxiety or depression. If you have insurance, check to see if your insurer will pay for this benefit. Some families receive assistance from Medicaid, which often helps pay for counseling for individuals, couples, and families.

- ❖ *Consider working with religious leaders or counselors.* Some people prefer to work with religious leaders or counselors because they are more confident that they will share similar values.<sup>32</sup> Our own research found that about one in six married individuals who were thinking about divorce sought out help from a religious leader or counselor.<sup>33</sup> Several of the people we interviewed while we were writing this guidebook mentioned how guidance from their religious leader was important to them. Sometimes a religious leader acts as a full-fledged marriage counselor. However, not all religious leaders have the training and experience to effectively counsel married couples. So, the considerations listed above should also be applied to religious counselors. In most cases, a religious leader will still be able to point you in the right direction even if she or he does not feel qualified to help you with your problems. Some religious groups also provide programs to help couples at the crossroads of divorce. For example, *Retrouvaille* (<https://helpourmarriage.org>), which is aligned with the Roman Catholic faith but available to all, is designed to help couples save their marriages from a faith-based perspective. The program is taught by couples that once had serious problems but successfully avoided divorce.
- ❖ *Stick with it.* The couples that show the most improvement in therapy are those who stick with it.<sup>34</sup> If the above guidelines are met, avoid dropping out early. Oftentimes it is easy to consider leaving therapy prematurely because the initial struggles you began working on will improve significantly—sometimes beyond your expectations. However, seasoned therapists will acknowledge that there is a big difference between early success in therapy that can eliminate some

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

surface issues and longer-term therapy that can get more at the heart of a couple's problems. Consider committing to a certain number of hour-long sessions, say 8–10, and then evaluate how successful they have been before leaving therapy altogether or switching to a different therapist. And it's common after leaving therapy that couples will experience some problems again in time. Don't think of this as failed counseling; instead, consider going back for some "booster" help. It may take a couple of times for improvements to really stick.

- ❖ *One-partner therapy can be effective.* While having both husband and wife together in therapy is ideal, if one partner cannot or will not attend, therapy can still be beneficial to the couple.<sup>35</sup> If only one partner will be attending therapy, it is even more important that the therapist is committed to helping you work on your marriage and is experienced in couple therapy. Avoid counselors who are not specifically trained in marriage therapy in this situation.

*Discernment Counseling.* Many couples at the crossroads of divorce would benefit from a form of counseling called "discernment counseling" being pioneered at the University of Minnesota. Discernment counseling was designed to help people who are considering divorce but are not 100% sure if it is the right decision. Usually one spouse is "leaning in" to the marriage while the other spouse is "leaning out." It is a short-term counseling model (1–5 sessions) that focuses more on seeing if a couple's problems can be solved rather than trying to solve them. Discernment counseling helps people decide if they want to work on their marriage or continue toward divorce. Discernment counseling is designed specifically for couples on the brink of divorce, where the couple has a difficult time seeing eye-to-eye, and is an ideal way of engaging couples to see if there is any possible way to restore health to their relationship. The overall goal of discernment counseling is to help people arrive at a place of clarity and confidence in determining the future of their relationship, whatever that may be. Our experience is that most people who are thinking about divorce have a lot on their mind and can get overwhelmed with all the things they are thinking about. A place to go to get clarity and confidence is a valuable resource. For more information about discernment counseling or the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project and a list of therapists (some in your area) who have trained in this model visit: <https://innovation.umn.edu/mncouplesonthebrink>

You may benefit from Exercise 3.3, “Thinking About Marriage Counseling,” at the end of this chapter.

## E. Is separation an option?

Sometimes couples making the decision either to divorce or to reconcile go through a period of separation. In fact, 6%–18% of still-married couples in the United States have at some time experienced a marital separation.<sup>36</sup> An estimated 10% of all married couples have separated and reconciled at least once.<sup>37</sup> For those who end up choosing to divorce, separation is much more common with 30%–44% of these couples having separated and even reconciled for some period of time.<sup>38</sup> Many people refer to these periods of time away from their spouse as a “trial separation.” When we go to the research to find out what we know about marital separation, we’re left scratching our heads. Most of that research has been done from a retrospective vantage point (looking back from a distance about what happened in the past), is very old, and seems only to be interested in what separation looks like if you’re a person in the middle class. All of these limitations impact what we can say with some precision about the usefulness of separation as a tool to help make a decision about divorce. The little we know seems to indicate that those who separate but stay in their marriages are less stable and happy after the separation than couples that never separate.<sup>39</sup> And, while not all separations end in divorce, we know that a certain momentum can lead many of these separations finally to result in divorce. One study estimated that more than half of couples who separate became divorced within 3 years and two thirds divorced within 5 years.<sup>40</sup>

So, will separating help you to know if you should leave your marriage or really dig in and try to work things out? Researchers from the University of Minnesota talked to 20 people from across the United States who were currently living separate from their marriage partner with the specific intent to see if the separation was helping them decide if they should stay together or divorce. What the researchers found was that the terms of the separation tended to be ambiguous. No one really knew how to answer the question, “How will we know if the separation is working/helping us?” No one could articulate how long the separation should be. Many people reported feeling like the separation answered some questions about the future of their marriage but brought up other, unexpected questions. All the participants

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

talked about the ambiguous nature of the separation. They reported not really feeling like they were married anymore, but they weren't really single either. In addition, they were unclear as to how the separation would end but knew that it couldn't go on forever, for their own sanity. This ambiguity permeated their lives, their relationships with extended family, and the lives of their children. This group also reported that separation was a very private and even lonely experience. There were only four people that talked about how the separation was beneficial for them. It is important to note that these four couples were experiencing more severe marital distress than the rest of the sample. The majority of the sample reported that the separation did not provide them the clarity they had wished it would.<sup>41</sup>

Marital separations can be as minimal as someone deciding to sleep on the couch for a night due to a heated argument or as extensive as establishing a new residence for a period of time. When considering the range of separation options, it is difficult to know how to determine if one type of separation would be more helpful than another to a couple experiencing marital distress. One thing we know is that there is very little helpful research on the topic. We need to know more about how separation works generally and also specifically with economically distressed couples. There is some evidence to suggest that separation may be more common and less ambiguous where there are high marital stress and low economic resources. For example, couples in these circumstances may stay married (on paper) but live separately with no intention of ever getting back together because they cannot afford to get a formal divorce. Once either partner finds a new marital partner, they may then formally pursue the divorce option so they can marry the new partner.

So, where does that leave someone trying to decide if separation is right for their situation? We think that asking a mental health professional about the up and down sides to marital separation will only result in you tapping into that therapist's beliefs about separation—the research just isn't there yet to inform decisions. However, a good relationship-oriented mental health professional can help you and your partner answer some important questions before a separation begins.

Here is our bottom-line advice: The decision to separate is probably best navigated with a lot of talking with your partner on the front end rather than sliding into separation without a clear understanding of whether the separation is fulfilling its intended purpose. If you are thinking about a possible separation, we encourage you to address the questions in Exercise

3.4, “Thinking About Separation and Reconciliation,” at the end of the chapter.

F. Do divorcing couples sometimes reconcile and get back together after separation? When is reconciliation likely to be successful?

Reconciliation means getting back together after a separation. It is a process that requires the full participation of both spouses. Unfortunately, there isn't much recent research on separation and reconciliation. One study of white couples found that about a quarter of them separated within the first 6 years of marriage and about a quarter of those reconciled at least once.<sup>42</sup> Another, older study estimated that 10% of married couples in the United States have experienced a separation and reconciliation.<sup>43</sup> Some more recent studies estimated that 10%–20% of married couples have experienced a separation and reconciliation.<sup>44</sup> Another dated study estimated that about one in three couples who separate later try to reconcile, but only about one third of those who try actually succeed.<sup>45</sup> Reconciliation often doesn't last; for most couples, a separation signals the likely end of a marriage.<sup>46</sup>

One couple we know that had several children reconciled after realizing that the grass was not greener on the other side of the divorce fence. After the divorce, one of the spouses was considering remarrying another person. Through dating the other man, she realized that no relationship is perfect and that although this new partner did not have some of the characteristics of her ex-husband that really bugged her, there were other problems and complications with the new guy that did not exist in her original marriage. She decided to talk with her first husband before remarrying. Instead of the wife marrying someone else, the couple was able to reconcile and remarry. Their children were elated after enduring the every-other weekend visiting schedule. The parents have now been happily remarried for many years.

In our interviews with various individuals who had been at the crossroads of divorce, we noticed that many tried to reconcile. But it's not easy, and success was elusive. Laura's story illustrates both the hope and the ultimate discouragement that can accompany reconciliation attempts:

[My husband] came back about a month [after the separation] with all of his stuff at the front door. When I opened the front door, he told me, “I am coming home.” And I'm like, “What?”

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

And we had kind of talked through things. The thing was that we were really, really good friends. ... [Later] I discovered that I was 5 months pregnant! I was in such shock I didn't know whether to be happy or sad. We (my mom and I) went up to see my husband and I couldn't even talk; I was in such shock. My mom told him that he was going to be a father and he was ecstatic. He truly, truly was, because he had wanted a child and he wanted me to be the mother of his child. ... I got really, really sick. Within a couple of days, I was in the hospital; I was bleeding already. ... Long story short, I couldn't get a hold of my husband [that night]. I was in the hospital the whole night and so I finally called his friend, and I said, "I know you don't want to hear me, but I can't find my husband and I just lost the baby, so if you could please just call him." My husband was at my mother's front door within probably about 10 minutes. I saw the stamp on his hand. He had been at a nightclub all night, and that just put it all in perspective for me. I said, "Mom, I don't care what it takes, but we need to push this divorce through."

There are a number of factors that make reconciliation more likely, many of which were not going in Laura's favor. Couples who have the same religion and attend religious services regularly are more likely to reconcile. So are those who were older when they got married, who are closer in age, and who have more education.<sup>47</sup> One researcher who interviewed couples who had faced difficult marital problems but had successfully reconciled discovered two interesting points that contributed to their success.<sup>48</sup> First, these couples made reconciliation their top priority. Commitment was essential and was demonstrated by their actions: accepting responsibility for their mistakes, changing behavior, and offering forgiveness. Second, they did not do it alone; they sought out religious and professional help and received the support of family and friends. Many of the couples had little hope of fixing things when they began but were able to persevere. They attended marriage education classes, seminars, or retreats, read marriage books, or went to counseling. Some made significant changes in their environment, such as moving or changing churches. They drew on the personal history they had built together that included their children, all they had invested in the relationship, and their years of friendship. They acknowledged the strengths in their relationship and cut out anything that would not aid in reconciliation.

Another couple we know who divorced realized too late that their hostile attitudes toward each other in a time of crisis led to their divorce. The problem escalated as family, friends, and co-workers got involved in the marital conflict. Neither spouse made a sincere attempt to communicate and because the divorce was filed in haste to show the seriousness of the problem, neither was willing to try and make the relationship work. A year later, as they sat down and discussed the issues that led to the divorce, they decided to make reconciliation their top priority. The couple regretted their hasty decision and lack of problem-solving skills at the time of their divorce. They remarried and have since had children and have been happily married for more than a decade.

In addition, researchers have found that insecure individuals are more likely to try to keep an unhappy marriage together, probably because they are afraid of not being in a relationship or afraid they will not find another relationship. Insecurity is grounded in feelings of low self-worth and fear of abandonment. Insecure individuals are more likely over time to feel unhappy in their marriages, but also more likely to be motivated to try to keep their marriages together, despite their dissatisfaction.<sup>49</sup> Related to feelings of insecurity are feelings of extreme dependence. A mutual dependence between spouses is important to a healthy marriage, but extreme dependence is a sign of insecurity; these individuals depend almost completely on their spouses to fulfill their feelings of self-worth and security. As a result, these individuals are more likely to try to keep their marriages together, even if they are in unhealthy relationships.<sup>50</sup> Good therapists can assist people with feelings of insecurity and extreme dependence,<sup>51</sup> helping perhaps to turn an unhealthy marriage into a happier and healthier marriage and avoiding the further negative effects of divorce on insecure adults and other family members.<sup>52</sup>

We recognize that reconciliation may not be wise in many cases, especially when there has been abuse in the family. (We discuss abuse and infidelity back in Chapter 2.) The reality is that many who try to get back together to make things work do not succeed. But some do succeed with dedication and effort and help. You may benefit from Exercise 3.4, “Thinking About Separation and Reconciliation,” at the end of this chapter.

## G. What if I'm willing to try to save my marriage but my spouse doesn't seem willing?

It is hard to imagine anything more frustrating than wanting to work on your marriage to get it to a healthier place when your spouse isn't interested. One national study found that in four out of five divorces, one spouse did not want the divorce.<sup>53</sup> Many spouses in this situation feel powerless; they don't believe that they "deserve" divorce. But in our legal system one spouse can make that decision alone regardless of the circumstances. Legally, you don't have a lot of options. Only half of states these days have mandatory waiting periods before granting a divorce; the typical waiting period for states that have them is only 30 days. A few states (Maine, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Utah) have "time out" laws that allow you to go to a judge and ask that the legal divorce process be suspended for a brief period to pursue marriage counseling. You can ask your divorce lawyer about this option, although some lawyers don't even know about these options.

You may feel that you would do anything to make things right. This desire can be a real turning point for some marriages. If you are willing to do whatever it would take to make your marriage work, think seriously about what your spouse is asking from you now—more space, more partnership with money or housework, more interaction with your children, less negativity, less time with buddies, less time on social media sites, etc. What might happen if you honored your spouse's request? Or what if you had an honest conversation about why it is difficult for you to honor the requests your partner has made? If your spouse were able to see you differently than he or she has before, what might be the result?

One book that may be helpful if you are in this situation is *The Divorce Remedy: The Proven 7-Step Program for Saving Your Marriage*, by couple counselor Michele Weiner-Davis. This book was written for the person who has just heard their spouse say, "I think I want a divorce." The focus of the book is on things that an individual can change (without going to couple therapy) that might help create a healthier relationship environment. Sometimes these individual changes are noticed by the leaning-out partner and that can give them some hope that maybe things could be different. This can be a slow-moving process and the person making individual changes needs to be clear that they are making the changes because they now see that they have been contributing to the ill health of the marriage. If there is

any hint that the changes are only being made to keep the marriage intact, without commitment to longer-term change, the leaning-out partner is likely to be suspicious of the “new” leaning-in partner.

Some spouses are willing to give things a second chance once they see that their partners are truly committed and sincere about change. Other spouses feel like there is just “too much water under the bridge.” Your marriage may or may not be possible to save at this point; your spouse may not reconsider, no matter how much you try to make things better.

Although it may be hard to imagine your future, and although it may seem too early even to consider it, many people do remarry. Understanding now what you can do to be a better spouse can help you in a future relationship. So you may want to consider: How did my marriage get to this point? What are some of the things that I could have done differently to make the marriage better a year ago, two years ago, or ten years ago?

## Exercises for Chapter 3

### 3.1: Hanging On or Moving On?

As was mentioned in Chapter 2, most individuals who say they are unhappy in their marriage, but have decided to hang on for a few years, end up saying that they are happy again. This exercise is designed to help you think about hanging on as a possible option for you. Of course, we realize that some people don’t have a choice; their spouse is insisting on a divorce.

A. What are some reasons for hanging on and trying to make things work out? List them here:

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B. Are there some reasons why it might not be wise to hang on and try to make things work out? List them here:

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C. What are the stresses on or within your marriage that are making things difficult? Consider both inside stresses (e.g., kids demand a lot of time) and outside stresses (e.g., demanding job, financial pressures)? Then think about

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

whether those stresses are likely to change in a positive way over the next few years. Are there things you could do to reduce those stresses?

What is the stress?

How likely is it to change?

What could you do to reduce the stress?

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What have you learned from thinking about these issues? What do you think will happen if you hang on for the next few years and try and make things work? Write down your thoughts here:

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### 3.2: Thinking About Education to Strengthen Marriages

What have you done recently to try and strengthen your marriage? Some couples, even those with some serious problems who are thinking about divorce, try some educational resources to try and improve their relationship.

A. What books have you read (or websites browsed) to try to strengthen your marriage? How helpful were they? If you haven't done this, look at the list of suggested resources in Box 3B in this chapter and pick one to read, either by yourself or together as a couple. Write down the title here and a set a goal for a date to read the book or browse the website.

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B. Have you ever taken a marriage-strengthening class together (including a marriage preparation education class)? If so, what do you remember about that experience? What did you learn? How did you feel about the experience? Do you think it was helpful? Write down your thoughts here:

C. Do you think you would benefit from taking a marriage-strengthening class, preferably together with your spouse, to help you understand each other better, resolve problems, communicate more effectively, and increase your satisfaction with your marriage? Why or why not? As you answer this question, consider whether you would feel comfortable or awkward in class

with other couples working on improving their marriages. Write down your thoughts here:

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E. Are you aware of some marriage-strengthening classes in your area? Does your church or other religious group offer marriage-strengthening classes? Box 3C lists a number of popular programs and their websites, including online programs. Do a little investigation of local resources and browse the online program sites. Write down a few possibilities that you might be interested in here:

### 3.3: Thinking About Marriage Counseling

People have different thoughts and feelings about seeking marriage counseling, some positive, some negative, and some just unsure. Interestingly, most couples do not get counseling before they divorce. This exercise is designed to help you sort out your own thoughts and feelings about getting some formal marriage counseling to help you with the challenges you are experiencing in your marriage.

A. Have you had some marriage counseling before?  No  Yes. If yes, how was that experience for you? Was it helpful? Did you give an honest effort or could you have done better? Why did you stop going?

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B. How comfortable do you think you would feel getting marriage counseling? Write down some of your thoughts and feelings about the following questions. Also, think about how your spouse might answer these questions.

- ❖ Are you willing to take an honest look at yourself and your part in how your relationship is struggling and how it could be improved?

SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

Your feelings:

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Your spouse's feelings:

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- ❖ Are you willing to allow a marriage counselor help you learn to communicate more effectively with your spouse?

Your feelings:

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Your spouse's feelings:

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- ❖ How willing are you to share deep, personal thoughts and feelings in a counseling session?

Your willingness to discuss feelings:

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*Chapter 3: Can Unhealthy Marriages Become Healthy Again?*

Your spouse's willingness to discuss feelings:

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- ❖ How willing are you to do "homework" assignments to work on your relationship outside of marriage counseling, if your counselor asks you to?

Your willingness:

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Your spouse's willingness:

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- ❖ Overall, how comfortable do you think you would be with marriage counseling?

Your feelings on the subject:

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Your spouse's feelings on the subject:

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SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

C. If you belong to a religious organization, do you know if it offers some type of marriage counseling?  No  Yes. If yes, do you think you would feel more or less comfortable with counseling from a religious leader?  More comfortable  Less comfortable. Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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D. In this chapter we suggested various ways that you could find a good marriage counselor. Review these suggestions. Then, if you were to decide to get some counseling, write down how you would go about finding a good marriage counselor.

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E. If you decide to get marriage counseling, how would you pay for it? Although some religious organizations offer free counseling, secular counselors charge a fee. Does your insurance company pay for marriage counseling?  Yes  No  Unsure.

If your insurance company will pay for marriage counseling, how many sessions will they help pay for? \_\_\_\_\_ sessions. (You may need to consult with your insurance company or employer’s human resources department to find this out.) If you would need to pay for marriage counseling yourself, how much would you be willing to pay? \$ \_\_\_\_\_. (In Chapters 7 and 8 you will read more about how expensive a divorce can be; effective counseling is less costly.)

F. So overall, how willing do you think you and your spouse would be to get some marriage counseling? (Check the box that fits best.)

	Not at all Willing	A Little Willing	Somewhat Willing	Very Willing
You				
Your Spouse				

### 3.4. Thinking About Separation and Reconciliation

A. *Separation.* Sometimes married couples think about separating as a way to get more clarity about whether to divorce or keep trying to work on the marriage or to get away from conflict. Separating usually means living in different places for a time. It's usually not a formal legal separation that is done with a lawyer and signed by a judge, although a few people do this (usually for financial reasons). Also, a few people separate after a decision to end the marriage—with no intention on reconciling—but don't formally divorce for a long time or ever. But for most who separate, it's a way to get some space, clear their heads, and think more about what direction they should go.

Unfortunately, many who separate slide into this arrangement without having talked carefully about their expectations. Here is a set of questions that is important to talk about before you separate. It is best if both you and your spouse can talk together about your responses to these questions. But just answering these questions for yourself can bring some clarity.

A1. How long should the separation last?

Your response:

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Your spouse's response:

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A4. How should you communicate with each other during the separation?  
How often?

Your response:

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SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

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Your spouse's response:

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A5. What are your expectations about seeing other people (romantically or platonically) while you are separated?

Your response:

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Your spouse's response:

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A6. Will separation include any individual or couple counseling? What would the goals of that counseling be?

Your response:

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Your spouse's response:

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*Chapter 3: Can Unhealthy Marriages Become Healthy Again?*

A7. What are you going to tell others (e.g., children, family, friends, clergy, co-workers) about the separation?

Your response:

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Your spouse's response:

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A8. What will the financial arrangement be during the separation? Who pays for what? Will you have separate bank accounts, credit cards, etc.?

Your response:

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Your spouse's response:

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A9. How will you know if the separation is working for you?

Your response:

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Your spouse's response:

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SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

A9. Would there be value in securing a formal, legal separation? (You will probably need to consult with a lawyer about the advantages and disadvantages in your state of a legal separation, including whether getting a legal separation makes it easier or harder to reconcile or divorce.)

Your response:

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Your spouse's response:

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Now, put it all together. Do you think a separation—after having talked with your spouse about these question—is a good option for you or not? Write your thoughts down here:

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**B. Reconciliation.** It's not uncommon for couples who are separated or heading for divorce to try and reconcile and keep trying to work things out. Sometimes reconciliation is successful but other times it is not. This brief exercise is designed to help you think about the possibility of reconciliation and how helpful it might be.

**Priorities.** Reconciliation is more likely to be successful when both spouses make strengthening the marriage a high priority. How committed would you be? How committed do you think your spouse would be? (Check the box that fits best.)

	Not at all Committed	A Little Committed	Somewhat Committed	Very Committed
You				
Your Spouse				

Chapter 3: Can Unhealthy Marriages Become Healthy Again?

If you decided to reconcile, what specific things could you do to make strengthening your marriage a high priority? Think about big things, like going together to a marriage education class or marriage counseling. Also think about some small things, like a regular time each day to talk and reconnect, verbally greeting each other when arriving home, kissing when leaving the house, praying together daily, a weekly date, dropping some demands on your time, developing some shared interests, etc. Brainstorm some ideas and write them down:

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Now think about these ideas. List some of the ideas that you think will be most effective below and make a plan for how you will do this:

Ways to prioritize my marriage:	How will I do it?
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.

*Support.* Having the support of family members and friends for reconciliation helps. List important family members and friends and evaluate how supportive they would be.

List Family Member/ Friend	<i>How supportive would this person be of reconciliation?</i>			
	Not at all Supportive	Somewhat Supportive	Very Supportive	Why?

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

List Family Member/ Friend	How supportive would this person be of reconciliation?			
	Not at all Supportive	Somewhat Supportive	Very Supportive	Why?

So overall, how much support would you have for reconciliation? Write down your thoughts here:

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### Endnotes to Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.lifesip.com/marriage-quotes.html>

<sup>2</sup> Yeats was a noted Irish poet and literary figure who won a Nobel Prize for Literature. Retrieved from [www.weird-websites.com/Quotes/Marriage-Wedding-Quotations-1.htm](http://www.weird-websites.com/Quotes/Marriage-Wedding-Quotations-1.htm)

<sup>3</sup> National Fatherhood Initiative. (2005). With this ring ... A national survey on marriage in America (see p. 34).

<sup>4</sup> Schramm, D. G., Marshall, J. P., Harris, V. W., & George, A. (2003). *Marriage in Utah: 2003 baseline statewide survey on marriage and divorce*. Utah Department of Workforce Services (see pp. 15, 19–20).

<sup>5</sup> Waite, L., Browning, D., Doherty, W., Gallagher, M., Luo, Y., & Stanley, S. (2002). *Does divorce make people happy? Findings from a study of unhappy marriages*. Institute for American Values (see p. 6).

<sup>6</sup> Waite, L., Browning, D., Doherty, W., Gallagher, M., Luo, Y., & Stanley, S. (2002). *Does divorce make people happy? Findings from a study of unhappy marriages*. Institute for American Values (see pp. 15–29).

<sup>7</sup> States that provide a discount on your marriage license if you participate in premarital education: Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah.

### Chapter 3: Can Unhealthy Marriages Become Healthy Again?

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## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

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### Chapter 3: Can Unhealthy Marriages Become Healthy Again?

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### Chapter 3: Can Unhealthy Marriages Become Healthy Again?

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# How Does Divorce Affect Children?

Divorce is a life-transforming experience. After divorce, childhood is different. Adolescence is different. Adulthood—with the decision to marry or not and have children or not—is different. Whether the outcome is good or bad, the whole trajectory of an individual's life is profoundly altered by the divorce experience.

—Dr. Judith S. Wallerstein, noted divorce researcher<sup>1</sup>

*Overview: Divorce generally puts children at two to three times greater risk for many kinds of problems. Despite the greater risk, however, most children of divorce do not experience those serious problems; most children are resilient, and most have returned to a pretty normal life after 2 to 3 years. The problems children of divorce may experience are often present even before the divorce, perhaps the result of conflict between parents, less attention from parents, depression, or other factors. Children in a high-conflict marriage situation generally are better off if their parents decide to divorce compared to children whose parents stay married and continue to experience high levels of conflict. Children in low-conflict marriage situations, however, generally do worse when their parents divorce compared to children whose parents stay married and keep trying to work things out. Children are developing physically, socially, emotionally, educationally, morally, and spiritually; research shows that divorce can affect children in each of these developmental areas. In adulthood, children of divorce are more likely to experience their own divorce compared to children whose parents did not divorce.*

When thinking about the possibility of a divorce, one of the most important things that people think about is how divorce will affect their children. Janet told us in our interview with her how central this concern had been to her:

My children would cry every time Daddy left the house [while we were separating]. They would just be sobbing and crying for Daddy, and I would be holding them. And, of course, I wanted the

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

marriage to work. And it was very difficult. What was difficult was to watch it hurting them and then not being able to do anything about that; to bring this pain into my children's life and not be able to stop that, because you are the guardian and caretaker of children.

It would be nice if we could provide you with a simple, straightforward answer to the question of whether divorce will be harmful to your children. In one survey of more than 2,000 California adults, two out of three divorced Californians said their divorce negatively impacted their children in some way.<sup>2</sup> The best circumstance for children is a stable home with two parents who are in a healthy relationship. If an unhappy marriage can be repaired and restored to a condition of health, this will probably be the best situation for the children. If, however, a divorce is necessary, it is important to know what research says about how divorce affects children. In this chapter we briefly summarize what we know from a large body of good research about the effects of family breakdown on children.

Before we dive deeper into specific issues, we will try to summarize briefly an enormous body of research on how divorce affects children. And a caution: Although we use the noun "effect" and the verb "affect," please understand that it is very difficult for researchers to prove that the processes associated with divorce actually *cause* problems for children. All they can do is compare the differences between children who do and do not experience the divorce of their parents and test ways that could explain those differences (e.g., a lower standard of living, poorer caregiving, less parental supervision, exposure to parental conflict, transitions of housing).

Overall, good research over many years using the most sophisticated statistical methods finds that children who experience the divorce of their parents are, on average, at higher risk for a wide range of negative effects, usually two to three times the risk compared to children who do not experience their parents' divorce.<sup>3</sup> These problems can exist before the divorce, but they increase after the divorce and can have long-lasting effects.<sup>4</sup> However, it's important to know that, even though there is more risk, almost all these negative effects are pretty small, on average. Also, researchers have shown that most children do not experience serious, lasting problems directly as a result of divorce, and some children actually receive benefits from divorce, especially those who experience relief from high-conflict marriages.<sup>5</sup> However, there is a small group of children who do experience serious, long-term negative effects.

Both young and older children can experience negative effects associated with divorce, although there is some evidence that younger children experience more problems, perhaps because they are exposed to more potential family transitions than are older children.<sup>6</sup> Some research finds that boys, on average, struggle to adjust to divorce a little more than girls,<sup>7</sup> although not all studies find this. This may be due to a disrupted relationship with their fathers. Unfortunately, it appears that children in the most disadvantaged families experience greater problems from divorce compared to children from more advantaged families.<sup>8</sup> It's as if divorce is piling on to the challenges they already have and a lack of resources to deal with them. Finally, divorce often marks a lengthy process of family instability, with multiple changes in parenting partners, stepparents, stepsiblings, residential moves, and other disruptions. Greater and ongoing instability adds significant stress to children's post-divorce lives that may explain the negative effects of divorce.<sup>9</sup> Most scholars agree that minimizing this ongoing instability is a primary way that parents help their children adjust to divorce.

Okay, that's our attempt at a broad summary. Now, let's dive into some more specific questions.

### A. Why are some children more affected by divorce than others?

This is a tough question. When we teach our university courses on divorce and the transitions it ushers into family life we often ask if students would be willing to share their personal stories of divorce. It never seems to fail—we'll have a handful of students who talk about how painful their parents' divorce was and how its effects linger to this day. Then, we'll have a separate group of students who talk about how their parents' divorce was the best thing that ever happened to their family; their parents are more civil to one another and get along better as co-parents than they ever did as spouses.

People rightly worry about the harm to children of divorce. But things are more complicated than a simple assertion of harm. First, although divorce generally puts children at greater risk for many kinds of problems, most children do not experience those serious problems, even though the experience of divorce is personally painful for almost all children. It turns out that children generally are strong and resilient. And research suggests

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

that even though divorce can be very upsetting to children, most adjust to their new life after 2 to 3 years.<sup>10</sup> Of course, this is a general statement; some children are not as resilient as others and are more likely to be affected negatively by the divorce. And even resilient children report long-term challenges. In one study of young adults attending a prestigious university who had experienced a divorce growing up but were generally well adjusted, half still said that they worried about big events, such as graduation and weddings, when both parents would be present. Similarly, nearly half felt that they had a harder childhood than most and that their parents' divorce still caused struggles for them. More than a quarter wondered if their father even loved them.<sup>11</sup>

A second complicating factor is that the problems children of divorce may experience are certainly not just the result of a divorce. That is, the problems children of divorce may experience are often present even before the divorce, perhaps because of conflict between parents, less attention from parents, a parent's depression, or other factors. So, divorce may just be an obvious target to blame when the bigger problem is that the children were experiencing problems associated with their parents' unhappiness or other problems. On the other hand, for many children, conflict between parents increases rather than decreases after divorce. So, in some instances the actual divorce may be the source of more difficulties and contention for children.

One child of divorce we know expressed his gratitude that his parents had never made him choose one parent over the other. His parents were able to talk through their problems and make decisions for the benefit of their child. He was grateful that he was not put in the middle. Another child of divorce we know had a very different experience; the parents forced each child in the family to decide when they were 10 years old on which parent they would live with. This was very difficult for the children. Still another individual we know grew up in a family with a marriage that was very rocky due to addictions. He felt his success in life was the direct product of the tremendous sacrifices his mother made. He and his siblings are very grateful that their mother and father worked through their difficult issues. All of the children in this family now have healthy marriages.

Life is complicated, circumstances are unique, and individuals are different, so there are no easy answers to the question of how divorce may affect children. But good research has been able to provide some general

clues that can help you understand how divorce *might* affect your children. Here are a couple of important factors to consider.

### *High-conflict vs. low-conflict marriage*

About half of all divorces come from marriages that were not experiencing high levels of conflict. In high-conflict marriages, conflicts and problems are probably visible to all members of the family, including children. In a high-conflict marriage there is yelling, screaming, and throwing things; sometimes there is even more severe violence and abuse. But in a low-conflict marriage in which one or both spouses are unhappy, the problems are usually not so public and noticeable; marital problems are more private and children are unlikely to know that something is seriously wrong. Research suggests that children in a high-conflict marriage are actually better off, on average, if their parents decide to divorce, compared to children whose parents stay married and continue to experience high levels of conflict.<sup>12</sup> These children almost expect or even sometimes hope that their parents will decide to separate.

But this is probably not the case for children in low-conflict marriages. These children generally do somewhat worse when their parents divorce compared to children whose parents stay married and keep trying to work things out.<sup>13</sup> In many situations, these children are not aware of their parents' unhappiness and the discovery that their parents are divorcing and the family is breaking up can be disorienting and devastating. It is important to note that different children may have their own perceptions of their parents' marriage, and a divorce can be devastating in any situation.<sup>14</sup> But the children who seem to be hardest hit by divorce are those whose parents weren't having a lot of visible conflict.

As we discussed earlier in Chapter 3, if you are in a low-conflict but unhappy marriage, there may be ways to make your marriage happy and healthy again. If this is possible, it will probably be best for your children. If you are in a high-conflict marriage, your children are probably aware of your problems and your unhappiness, especially if they are older; they may better understand that a divorce is needed to make life better for them and you. But it's important to remember that your children are not as sensitive to the quality of your marriage as you are. Above a certain point, it doesn't seem to matter to children if their parents are "very happy" or just "sorta happy" in their marriage.

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

A large body of research provides strong evidence that conflict between parents negatively affects their children's well-being.<sup>15</sup> Whether the parents stay married or divorce, it is important to minimize conflict. Many parents who struggle with marital conflict and divorce give their children less attention and may even reject or withdraw from their children.<sup>16</sup> Parents experiencing marital conflict tend to use harsher and more inconsistent discipline<sup>17</sup> and have more conflict with their children.<sup>18</sup> These negative parenting behaviors likely explain a great deal of the emotional, behavioral, social, and health problems some children experience after divorce.<sup>19</sup>

If parents maintain warm and positive relationships with their children, they lower the risk that their children will suffer these negative consequences.<sup>20</sup> Using consistent, appropriate discipline for misbehavior, such as setting appropriate limits and consequences,<sup>21</sup> can also help reduce misbehavior and other problems children may experience.<sup>22</sup> A specific technique that can help children deal with the stress of marital conflict or divorce is “emotion coaching,” which is helping your child become aware of his or her emotions and talking about and acting on them appropriately.<sup>23</sup> When children use this skill, they can avoid many of the negative outcomes associated with marital conflict.<sup>24</sup> Emotion coaching also can help parents handle their own emotions better and be less hostile in marital conflict. A book that can teach you this valuable skill of emotion coaching is *The Heart of Parenting: Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*, by Dr. John M. Gottman (with Joan DeClaire; Fireside, 1997). In addition, you may benefit from doing Exercise 4.1, “How Well Might My Children Adjust to Divorce?” at the end of the chapter.

### *Resilient vs. at-risk children*

One of the foremost researchers on the effects of divorce described children's experience of divorce this way: “For a young child, psychologically, divorce is the equivalent of lifting a hundred-pound weight over the head. Processing all the radical and unprecedented changes—loss of a parent, loss of a home, of friends—stretches immature cognitive and emotional abilities to the absolute limit and sometimes beyond that limit.”<sup>25</sup>

Some children are stronger or more resilient than others. Less resilient children are those most likely not to adjust well to the stresses, changes, and losses that usually accompany divorce. So, consider carefully characteristics in your children that might indicate that they will have a harder or easier time adjusting to the divorce. For instance, research suggests that a child's

temperament makes a difference in how a child adapts to stressful situations, such as divorce. If a child is agreeable and adapts easily to different situations, then she or he usually adjusts better to divorce. Similarly, if a child has good social skills—warm with others, understanding of others and their feelings, uses humor, etc.—then he or she usually adapts better.<sup>26</sup> Children with special needs, such as autism spectrum disorder, appear to be more vulnerable to the effects of divorce.<sup>27</sup>

For reasons that researchers are still trying to figure out, children nowadays are even more vulnerable to mental health problems than earlier generations. Some have even called this an epidemic.<sup>28</sup> Because of this greater risk, we think it is especially important now for parents to do all they can to avoid putting their children through the breakup of their family. If not possible, then parents need to be extra diligent in monitoring their children for serious mental health problems.

### *Parenting behavior*

Children's characteristics can make a difference in how they adjust to divorce, but research suggests that the quality of parenting children receive is the most important factor in how they adjust. Unfortunately, because of all the stresses in their lives, divorcing parents are less likely to be effective in their parenting and to be harsher or more permissive in their discipline. Janet was very honest about this with us in her interview:

And you're just such a ... wreck [right after the divorce]; you're just such a wreck for your kids, and for everyone. ... I lived with my parents [when I first got divorced]. ... But it was a little hard because ... little kids of divorce are usually poorly behaved, and there is a lot of compensating, and you're just so exhausted. You don't always have consistent discipline and love and everything.

One teenage girl we know confided that her parents had put her in the middle of their divorce. Her mother inappropriately confided in this young girl about many of her relationship problems. This stripped her of the carefree innocence she once had. The girl began to fail in school and felt burdened by her parents' expectations that she take messages back and forth and smooth conflicts between her divorced parents. Another couple we know divorced in a very friendly way and did it without using attorneys. Unfortunately, as soon as one of the spouses remarried, six months later,

they regularly ended up calling in the police to resolve their fights at parent time exchanges.

So as hard as it can be, you need to make good parenting a high priority in your life, regardless of whether you stay together or get a divorce. Some do a very good job of this. One couple we know decided after the divorce to make cooperative parenting their top priority. They were able to be very flexible in the way they used their parent time. They both came to all of the children's activities and were able to have an active life raising their children together but in different households. They were able to have monthly parenting meetings and communicate well regarding any issues with their children.

Box 4A has suggestions for good books to read about the effects of divorce on children and effective parenting after divorce.

If you divorce and have children, many states now require you to participate in a class designed to help with parenting and co-parenting after divorce. Research confirms that many of these classes can help parents be more sensitive to their children's needs after divorce and improve parenting and co-parenting.<sup>29</sup> And court-based programs appear to be cost-effective, saving future public funds (through reduced mental healthcare and criminal justice involvement).<sup>30</sup>

#### *Box 4A: Recommended Books About the Effects of Divorce on Children and Effective Parenting After Divorce*

- For Better or Worse: Divorce Reconsidered, Surprising Results from the Most Comprehensive Study of Divorce in America, by E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly. W.W. Norton, 2002.
- *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25-year Landmark Study*, by Judith S. Wallerstein, Julia M. Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee. Hyperion, 2000.
- Two Homes, One Childhood: A Parenting Plan to Last a Lifetime, by Robert E. Emery. Avery Press, 2016.
- The Truth about Children and Divorce: Dealing with the Emotions So You and Your Children Can Thrive, by Robert E. Emery. Viking Press, 2004.

We have been discussing the effects of divorce as if its effects were one general thing. But they are actually many different things. It's not simply the act of divorce that is so difficult, though it certainly is a starting point for many children. Divorce ushers in many transitions and changes that children are not expecting to have to navigate and the emotional energy it

takes to navigate these changes and transitions takes away from other processes that children need to master at different developmental stages. Next, we will summarize the research on the effects of divorce on children's specific developmental areas.

## B. How might divorce affect children's social, emotional, and physical health?

While many children grow up leading healthy and productive lives after a divorce occurs, they are at greater risk for emotional and physical problems. The strongest effects of divorce are on what researchers call "internalizing problems"—feelings of depression, sadness, loneliness, etc., that are not obvious to an outside observer.<sup>31</sup> Some children are more emotionally affected by divorce than others. But some do not experience serious, long-term emotional problems.

Persistent feelings of loneliness are common in children of divorce.<sup>32</sup> One study found that nearly half (44%) of children of divorce many years later said, "I was alone a lot as a child," compared to only about one in seven children from intact families.<sup>33</sup> That loneliness comes in several ways. It's common for children to "lose" a parent, usually the father, from divorce. While many fathers try to stay actively involved in the lives of their children, research shows that after a couple of years most fathers—maybe as many as 70%—do not have much contact with their children.<sup>34</sup> Of course, if mothers are working more (or get involved in dating again) after the divorce then children may feel a loss of time with their mothers, as well.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the loss of time with fathers and mothers explains that, later in life, adult children of divorce are about 40% less likely to say they see either their mother or father at least several times a week, and they rate their current relationships with both mother and father less positively than do children from intact marriages.<sup>36</sup> Children of divorce also can lose contact with grandparents and other extended family members.<sup>37</sup> Also, it is common for children to have to move when their parents divorce. This can result in a loss of friendships that contributes to children's feelings of loneliness.<sup>38</sup>

A child's emotional security also becomes more fragile during this difficult time of divorce. Fears that both parents will abandon the child are common. Depending on the age of the child, some of the ways a child might express this emotional insecurity may be:

- ❖ large amounts of anger, directed both toward others and themselves

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

- ❖ frequent breaking of rules
- ❖ sleep problems
- ❖ defying parents or teachers
- ❖ frequent guilt
- ❖ increasing isolation or withdrawal from friends and family
- ❖ drug and/or alcohol abuse
- ❖ early sexual activity
- ❖ thoughts of suicide or violence
- ❖ regressing back to earlier behaviors (becoming more clingy/needy, not sleeping through the night, more accidents once potty-trained, etc.)

Some young children of divorce believe that they caused the divorce or that they did something wrong that made one or both parents not want to be with them. These feelings can cause a child to feel sad, depressed, and angry.<sup>39</sup> These negative emotions can contribute to other problems, such as poor health, difficulty in school, and problems with friends, to name a few. Parents can help their children avoid some of the negative consequences of these emotions by using emotion coaching, as we discussed earlier in the chapter.

Children who experience the divorce of their parents generally are more likely to struggle socially compared to children from intact families. They are more likely to be aggressive, have poorer relationships with same-age children, and have fewer close friends.<sup>40</sup> Also, these children and teenagers appear to be less involved in extracurricular activities, such as sports or music, and other enrichment programs, such as after-school classes or summer programs. This is likely due to less money to pay for such activities, less availability of parents to drive the child and attend lessons and events, more frequent moves, and visiting and custody schedules that interrupt participation in team sports and other activities.<sup>41</sup> These are all examples of how the transitions associated with divorce are interconnected: having less money means more work for both parents, more work for parents means less time and attention with the kids, less money and less parent availability may mean less involvement in extracurricular activities, and so on.

Children and teenagers who experience the divorce of their parents may end up getting less parental supervision. In the past, researchers referred to these children as “latch-key” kids; meaning no one is home when the child gets home from school. While this term is no longer used to describe this family configuration, the phenomenon remains. Some scholars believe that these children may be more susceptible to the influence of their peers and this increases the chances of them getting involved in deviant behavior, including drug and alcohol use and smoking.<sup>42</sup>

One such family we know had problems with their daughter’s anorexia following divorce. Along with the eating disorder, the daughter got involved with drugs. The father, who had primary custody of the girl, worked hard to help her through these difficult issues and used many resources such as counseling and parent–teen mediation. Not surprisingly, there was ongoing conflict between the ex-spouses about the daughter. Another family we know had troubles with their son for several years after the divorce with depression and severe truancy issues. Quality parenting requires time and adult presence. It also requires a ton of cooperation between parents, whether the parents are together or divorced.

In addition, some scholars believe that some children of divorce are less likely to learn crucial social skills in the home, such as cooperation, negotiation, and compromise, that are necessary for success in life.<sup>43</sup> Children exposed to high levels of conflict between their parents, both before and after a divorce, may learn to model the poor communication of their parents. Children exposed to consistent, intense conflict between parents are more likely to develop lasting expectations of conflict. This can increase the likelihood of conflict in their own personal relationships as children and even as adults, which may make forming stable, satisfying relationships as adults more challenging.<sup>44</sup> Of course, some children vow not to repeat the mistakes they saw their parents make when they grow up. One common theme we notice among many couples on the brink of divorce, especially those adults who came from divorced homes, is the report that the homes they grew up in were high conflict homes, or in contrast, homes where conflict was experienced but not dealt with. Helping children understand that conflict is an inevitable part of married life and that conflicts can be resolved in calm and understanding ways is truly a gift parents (divorced or together) can give their children.

Generally, research has not found large differences in how boys and girls tend to adjust to divorce. However, it seems that boys, more than girls,

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

tend to be more aggressive toward others and this can lead to their friends and peers rejecting them.<sup>45</sup> Boys may be somewhat more likely to act in defiant ways at home and in school; girls may be somewhat more likely to experience anxiety and depression.<sup>46</sup> A child's age when his or her parents divorce is another factor that parents worry about. But overall, research on how a child's age might increase or decrease the effects of divorce on children has not shown a consistent pattern.<sup>47</sup> That is, there are challenges within any age group of children that experience a divorce, although the specific problems might differ for younger or older children.

Although these risks for children of divorce that researchers have found may seem overwhelming, most children and families do overcome them and adjust fairly well a few years after the initial crisis period of the family breakup. Remember, every child responds differently to a divorce, and though divorce does put them at greater risk of emotional and social problems, these problems are not inevitable.<sup>48</sup>

Given the added stresses of a family breaking up, it's not surprising that children of divorce experience more physical health problems. Children living with both biological parents have better health than children of divorce, even controlling for family resources and parental mental health.<sup>49</sup> Children of divorce are more likely to experience injury, asthma, and headaches than children from intact families.<sup>50</sup> Following divorce, children are more likely to develop health problems than children living continuously in two-parent families.<sup>51</sup>

Many of the physical symptoms experienced by children of divorce may be caused by their increased anxiety, stress, and emotional insecurity. Children of divorce sometimes lose health insurance coverage, as well. As a result of these health problems, some research has even found that children who experience a divorce will end up living fewer years, on average.<sup>52</sup>

### C. How might divorce affect children's educational success?

Another area of children's lives that may be at risk as a result of divorce is academics. Children of divorced parents, on average, do not do as well in school and have less academic success than children of intact families. However, in most studies, these differences are small rather than large.<sup>53</sup> Fewer children of divorce graduate from high school, however.<sup>54</sup> About 10% fewer children whose parents divorce go on to college and if they start

college, they are about 30% less likely to finish their college degree compared to children of married parents.<sup>55</sup>

The reasons for these modest differences in education are pretty straightforward. Academic performance may suffer if a child is experiencing stress or acting rebelliously as a result of parental conflict and divorce. Parents may be less able to carefully monitor the child's performance in school or help with homework because they may have less time and energy to devote to their children.<sup>56</sup> In addition, divorced parents are less able to afford private lessons, educational toys, books, home computers, and other goods for their children that may facilitate academic success. More financial strains may also force families to live in neighborhoods in which school programs are poorly financed and services are inadequate.<sup>57</sup>

Also, financial strains may limit parents' ability to help their children go to college. Many children of divorce do not set goals for college because they don't think that financial support from parents will be available.<sup>58</sup> If they do go to college, many children of divorce complain that they do not get financial help.<sup>59</sup> This was the case for one very bright and ultimately successful woman we know. She put herself through college working various jobs, eating baked potatoes and carrots, and depriving herself of sleep for four years. She got a little support from her mother, who was also struggling to survive financially, and none from her estranged father. Even decades later she gets emotional recalling that lack of support and those hard times in college. She also feels that some problems with her health may be a result of poor nutrition and sleep and constant stress during her college years.

Again, however, remember that most of the differences in academic performance of children of divorce are small, not large. Individual children respond differently to divorce; many do not struggle in their academic performance and achievement. Interestingly, research suggests that the effects of divorce on educational outcomes do not differ much between Black, Latino, and white children. Instead, decreased family income was a more important factor than race/ethnicity in how divorce affects educational outcomes.<sup>60</sup>

## D. How might divorce affect children's religious and spiritual development?

Along with the emotional, social, physical, and academic risks that divorce brings to children, many parents worry about the effects on children's religious beliefs and behavior. Until recently, not much research was done on this question and there is still much to be discovered in this area. One national study compared young adults who grew up with divorced parents with young adults whose parents stayed married. It found that those who grew up in divorced families considered themselves spiritual about as often as those from intact families, but they were less likely to consider themselves religious. They attended church less often than those whose parents did not divorce; those who did attend were less likely to be a member at that place of worship.<sup>61</sup> In addition, this study found that almost twice as many children of divorce believed they could find ultimate truth without help from a religion and many felt that religion didn't address the important issues in their lives. Another interesting finding was that these children were also more than twice as likely to doubt their parents' religious beliefs.<sup>62</sup>

One possible reason for a decline in these children's religious behavior could be the disruption in family church attendance as a result of divorce. Those in divorced families attended church less regularly and felt less encouragement from their parents to practice a religious faith.<sup>63</sup>

In many states, "standard visitation" in divorce cases requires that children spend every other Saturday and Sunday, the two most common days for congregational services, with the noncustodial parent. This can be a struggle for couples regardless of their religious denomination. In one family we know, the children were bounced back and forth on alternate weekends as required by court order. One parent became less active in religious services and would not take the children to church on his weekends despite his ex-wife's pleading. On a positive note, we know of many divorcing couples who work out a plan for their children's religious activity. This requires them to be flexible enough to work around activities and events held by church youth groups.

Another reason for the decline in the religious activity of children of divorce could be that they feel a lack of compassion from people in the church they attend.<sup>64</sup> Also, perhaps it is more difficult for children of divorce to believe in a caring God because of the lack of trust and the anger

they have had toward their parents. One girl expressed her struggle this way: “Faith? Faith in what? What am I going to believe in? I believed my parents were going to be there. . . . Now what do I believe in? I don’t want to deal with what-ifs or promises or dreams.”<sup>65</sup> Many children have similar feelings. In the study we mentioned earlier, one in five children of divorce agreed that it is hard to believe in a God who cares about them when they think about all the bad things that have happened in their life.

Although many have a hard time with faith and belonging to a particular religion or congregation, there are also some who turn to God for comfort. About four in ten children of divorce think of God as “the loving father or parent [they] never had in real life.”<sup>66</sup> The biggest factor in children’s religious involvement, however, is their parents’ religious involvement. If parents are faithful and active, children usually follow.

#### E. How might divorce affect children’s sexual behavior?

A divorce can bring more stress and loneliness for children. Children may lose the active presence of a parent. They are likely to see their parents dating again and even share a home with a parent’s unmarried romantic partner. Unfortunately, research confirms that children of divorce are more likely to engage in sexual behavior at earlier ages and to become pregnant (or get someone pregnant).<sup>67</sup> One important reason for this finding is that divorced parents are often less able to monitor their teenage children; poorer monitoring of teens is associated with earlier sexual activity and pregnancy.<sup>68</sup>

Research also shows that the quality of parenting is important to helping teenagers avoid early sexual activity and pregnancy, even more important than whether a family is divorced or intact.<sup>69</sup> But divorce can reduce a parent’s ability to be effective. For instance, it’s important to be consistent as a parent, and divorced parents struggle with this for various reasons. Inconsistent parenting contributes to greater sexual risk for teens.<sup>70</sup> It is also important to mention that much of the reported sexual abuse that happens within families occurs in blended families between male stepparents and teenaged daughters or between live-in male partners (non-married) who have no blood relationship to pre-teen and teenaged daughters.

F. How might divorce affect children's future adult romantic relationships? Do children of divorce have higher odds for their own divorce?

Parents who are thinking about divorce also sometimes worry that their example of divorce will hurt their children's chances of building a healthy, stable, life-long marriage. Unfortunately, research does confirm that children who experience the divorce of their parents are at greater risk for a divorce when they eventually marry. And interestingly, transmitting a greater risk for divorce to your children is more likely if the divorce followed a low-conflict marriage rather than a high-conflict marriage.<sup>71</sup> This suggests that parental divorce from a low-conflict marriage may transmit to children an example of less commitment to marriage. Also, if there are multiple divorces, each one adds risk to the next generation's likelihood of divorce.<sup>72</sup>

One important national study found that marriages in which one spouse comes from a divorced family were much more likely to dissolve than marriages in which neither spouse comes from a divorced family.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, marriages where both the husband and wife experienced the divorce of their parents growing up were even more likely to end in divorce than marriages where one spouse came from an intact family. And children of divorce are more likely than children from intact families to marry someone who also had this same experience. Again, these risks for divorce are even higher if the children's parents ended a low-conflict marriage rather than a high-conflict marriage.

Why is there a greater risk for children to divorce if their parents divorced? There are probably many reasons. First, there are differences between children whose parents divorce and children whose parents do not. For instance, they have fewer financial resources and tend to have less education. But even when these differences are accounted for by researchers, there are specific reasons for the greater risk. One of the most important reasons that researchers have identified is that children of divorce, in general, seem to have less commitment to the ideal of lifelong marriage than children from intact marriages.<sup>74</sup> Put another way, experiencing your parents' divorce tends to undermine your faith in marital permanence, so you are more likely to leave a marginal marriage than hang in and try to improve it. In addition, other research suggests that children of divorce have greater difficulty trusting people, including a spouse.<sup>75</sup> Perhaps

for these reasons, children of divorce are more likely to live with a boyfriend or girlfriend before deciding to marry. However, research shows that living together before marriage is not an effective way to increase your long-term odds of success in marriage, and it may even increase the chances of eventual divorce.<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, if couples are engaged before they begin living together, they do not seem to have a higher risk for divorce.<sup>77</sup>

## Exercise for Chapter 4

### 4.1: How Well Might My Children Adjust to Divorce?

It's important to consider how a divorce may affect your children. Divorce is generally a stressful experience for all children, but certain factors can make divorce harder or easier for children to deal with. As you answer these questions, keep in mind the personalities and characteristics of your children. Whether you divorce or not, answering these questions can help you better understand your children's needs at this time.

*A. Children's Perspectives.* In this chapter, you learned that children tend to have a more difficult time adjusting to divorce when their parents have a low-conflict marriage. On the other hand, in general, children tend to benefit from divorce when their parents had a high-conflict marriage. Either way, it is important to consider how your children experience your marriage. How do you think your children view your marriage? For each of these questions, circle the answer that best describes your situation.

	Unsure/Not Applicable	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
1. My children see or hear our marital conflict.	Unsure/NA	0	1	2	3	4
2. My children are aware of the topics of conflict between me and my spouse.	Unsure/NA	0	1	2	3	4
3. My children get involved in our marital conflict.	Unsure/NA	0	1	2	3	4

### SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

	Unsure/ Not Applicable	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
4. My children see violence between me and my spouse.	Unsure/ NA	0	1	2	3	4
5. My children act scared, hide, or leave home (or want to leave home) during our marital conflict.	Unsure/ NA	0	1	2	3	4
6. My spouse and I fight about our children.	Unsure/ NA	0	1	2	3	4
7. I (or my spouse) treats my children negatively or give them less attention during or after our marital conflict.	Unsure/ NA	0	1	2	3	4
8. My children are aware that my spouse and I are considering a divorce.	Unsure/ NA	0	1	2	3	4
9. My children see my spouse and myself express affection or support for each other.	Unsure/ NA	4	3	2	1	0
10. My children see my spouse and I resolving conflict in positive ways.	Unsure/ NA	4	3	2	1	0

Now add up your score for these 10 questions: \_\_\_\_\_

Higher scores indicate that your children are more likely to be aware of a lot of conflict between you and your spouse, while lower scores indicate that your children are less likely to be aware of conflict between you and your spouse. There is no specific score that indicates this, but if your score is **greater than 25**, then your children, if they are old enough, probably are aware of your marital conflict.

❖ Overall, how do you think your children view your marriage? How aware do you think they are of your marital problems?

**B. Changes.** Children may react more negatively to a divorce if it leads to other changes in their lives. Often a divorce can mean moving, less income, and less time with parents. Consider how your children’s lives would change if you divorced. Circle the answer that best describes your situation.

Chapter 4: How Does Divorce Affect Children?

Would my children . . .			
1. Maintain current levels of contact with me?	Yes	No	Unsure
2. Maintain current levels of contact with my spouse?	Yes	No	Unsure
3. Maintain contact with current friends/ neighbors?	Yes	No	Unsure
4. Maintain contact with my extended family?	Yes	No	Unsure
5. Maintain contact with my spouse's extended family?	Yes	No	Unsure
6. Live in their current home?	Yes	No	Unsure
7. Start sharing a bedroom (if children currently have their own bedrooms)?	Yes	No	Unsure
8. Attend a different daycare, school, or church?	Yes	No	Unsure
9. Participate in the same extracurricular activities?	Yes	No	Unsure

Now, think about the following questions and write down your ideas.

- ❖ How would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect my children's daily schedule during the school year?
- ❖ How would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect my children's daily schedule when not in school?
- ❖ How would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect my children's weekend routines?
- ❖ How would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect my children's activities during vacation time?
- ❖ How would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect how my children celebrate holidays?
- ❖ So, overall, how would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect your children's daily lives?

**C. Emotions.** Every child may have an individual and even unexpected reaction to his or her parents' divorce. But given what you know about your children's emotions, reasoning, and expectations, consider how your children might feel if you were to divorce. (You may need to consider this for each child, if their reactions would be different.) Circle any of the emotions listed below that you think your children might feel:

SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

Angry Confused Frustrated Hopeful Nervous Scared  
Annoyed Disappointed Guilty Left Out Relieved Surprised  
Betrayed Excited Happy Lonely Sad Worried

- ❖ What other emotions might your children feel?
- ❖ Why do you think your children would feel these emotions?

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D. *Resilience.* As you learned in this chapter, children who are more flexible or adaptive and who have better social skills generally have an easier time adjusting to divorce. Think about the following questions and write down your ideas:

- ❖ How flexible or adaptable are your children? Do they deal fairly easily with change and different situations or do those things tend to upset them? Are they usually secure or insecure? (You may need to think about this separately for each child.)
- ❖ Do your children have good social skills or do they struggle with relationships with other children and adults? Is getting along with others easy for them or hard? Do they fit in when they are in groups or do they struggle in groups? (You may need to think about this separately for each child.)

E. *Your Parenting.* Perhaps the most important element in how well your children might adapt to divorce is the quality of the parenting you provide them during the difficult changes of a divorce. The stresses of divorce and your own emotions can affect your parenting. Of course, maybe you are already feeling greater stress and emotions due to challenges you are facing in your marriage. Still, think about the following questions.

- ❖ Would you be more or less stressed if you got a divorce? How would stress affect your ability to be a good parent? Do you think you might be harsher in disciplining your children? More lenient or soft?

#### Chapter 4: How Does Divorce Affect Children?

How could you keep stress from making you less effective as a parent? Write your thoughts here:

- ❖ What aspects of parenting would change if you got a divorce? For instance, are there things your spouse usually does as a parent that you would need to take on? How would a divorce affect the amount of time and attention you give your children? Write down your thoughts here:
- ❖ How might a divorce affect the way you see and treat your children? For instance, would you need your children to be more mature and independent? Would your children need to take on more responsibilities in the home or be alone in the home more often? Would you need your children to be an emotional support to you? (Sometimes after a divorce, parents go to their children for support or sympathy or even advice. While a little of this is understandable, too much of this can place children in the uncomfortable role of acting like a parent to their parent.) Write down your thoughts here:
- ❖ Usually, the amount of time parents can care directly for their children decreases after a divorce. A divorce often requires different circumstances for caring for children, such as daycare, family care, or more babysitting. What kind of changes would you anticipate for caring for your children when you are not able to be there? How do you think your children will react to such changes?
- ❖ Children do better after divorce if their parents can cooperate with each other and hold down their anger. How well do you think you could cooperate and be civil with your spouse if you got a divorce? Would you be able to speak positively about your ex-spouse in front of your children? Would you feel good if your children wanted to spend a lot of time with your ex-spouse and openly expressed love for him or her? Write down your thoughts here:

*F. Putting It Together.* Now that you've considered these different issues—how your children might feel about your current marriage and how aware they may be of your marital problems, how your children's daily lives might change because of divorce, the emotions your children might feel if you divorce, the personal characteristics of your children that may affect how well they adjust to a divorce, and how a divorce might affect your parenting—how well do you think your children would adjust to a divorce? Write your thoughts here:

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#### Chapter 4: How Does Divorce Affect Children?

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# How Does Divorce Affect Adults?

Take it one day at a time. Build on your successes. Goals are important, but no life path is ever perfectly straight. There are always unexpected twists and turns. Be prepared for defeats and setbacks and take advantage of unanticipated opportunities. Also be prepared for the serendipitous. In divorce, as in life, sometimes things just happen. Energy expended trying to control the uncontrollable is wasted energy.

Dr. E. Mavis Hetherington  
noted divorce researcher<sup>1</sup>

*Overview: There are a number of factors that help individuals adjust better to divorce, such as the ability to embrace change. Compared to adults in a stable marriage, divorced adults, on average, have poorer physical and mental health. They experience more social isolation. On average, parent-child relationships are not as strong and warm after divorce. After a few years, most divorced fathers do not have regular contact with their children. For some divorced adults, new romantic relationships help rebuild self-esteem and happiness, but for others, new romantic relationships end up producing greater feelings of loneliness, unhappiness, and lower self-esteem. Some individuals struggle to manage their emotional ties to their ex-spouse; they continue to be dependent on them for emotional support and practical matters. They may remain deeply though conflictually attached even though the legal ties have been broken. Continuing strong attachment to the ex-spouse makes it harder for adults to adjust to divorce. While divorce can reduce conflict between spouses, it can also end up creating more conflict. Remarriage after divorce is less common than it used to be, but some do remarry. Unfortunately, divorce rates for second marriages are higher than for first marriages.*

Parents thinking about divorce have many questions about the possible effects of a marital breakup on their children. But they also have questions about how a divorce might affect them personally. And, of course, some divorcing couples do not have any children. This chapter examines the

research evidence on the effects of divorce on adults. We save a discussion of the financial effects of divorce for the next chapter.

## A. Why do some adults thrive and others struggle after divorce?

Nearly all people enter marriage with the hope and expectation that their marriage will be a lifelong, mutually rewarding relationship. So, it's not surprising that divorce is a painful experience for almost everyone.<sup>2</sup> Some newly divorced individuals experience temporary setbacks but end up adjusting well, while others find themselves on a downward slope that almost never seems to end.<sup>3</sup> Some people are better able to handle the stresses and challenges and new opportunities of divorce than others. Researchers have found a number of factors that help explain why some people seem to do better than others after divorce.

### *Breaking away from high-conflict marriages*

Although most divorces do not come from high-conflict marriages, individuals who are ending a marriage with chronic high conflict or violence are happier over time, on average.<sup>4</sup> Escaping the stress of a high-conflict relationship and the personal threat to safety, not surprisingly, can lead to a better situation, even with the other challenges that often accompany divorce. (Exercise 2.6, "Elements of a Healthy Marriage: How Important Are They?" at the end of Chapter 2, may help you assess the level of conflict in your relationship [especially items 22–30 in the relationship quiz], along with other aspects of your relationship.)

### *Embracing change (and more resources)*

As hard as it can be sometimes, embracing the opportunity for change helps many people deal better with divorce. The most successful divorced individuals are men and women who embrace the opportunity to make changes in their lives. They work on maintaining friendships or establishing new ones. They embrace employment opportunities and often return to school; they explore and test the options and avenues available to them.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this helps explain why people with more education adjust easier after divorce: They are better able to address their problems and they feel more in control of their lives during this difficult transition time.<sup>6</sup> Some

women report that the early years of divorce are a time of significant personal growth; they thrive on the increased independence and personal choices.<sup>7</sup> Those who can feel good about the possibilities for change after a divorce don't just talk about making a better life; they work and sacrifice to make life better. This attitude and effort then begins to open up new opportunities and relationships.<sup>8</sup> Each choice leads to another choice and these choices begin to fold into one another until they form a pattern and the individual is on the road to making life better.<sup>9</sup> Research has found that individuals tend to adjust better to divorce if they have more personal resources, such as higher income or education level.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that having resources such as these give individuals more positive opportunities, making it easier to embrace the change associated with divorce.

On the other hand, many struggle to take those first steps toward positive change in the early years following divorce. It's easy for newly divorced individuals, particularly those with fewer resources, to be preoccupied with the immediate stresses of life following divorce. When just getting through today's problems seems overwhelming, it's hard to do big-picture thinking and embrace long-term change. Worn down by day-to-day efforts just to get by, some divorced people become overwhelmed by the stresses they are experiencing. Some can sink into a sense of failure, purposelessness, or depression, causing some to turn to drugs or alcohol for a release from the stress. For some, divorce can set in motion a process in which they end up losing almost everything—jobs, homes, children, and self-esteem. Fortunately, studies have found that most of these problems—unhappiness, depression, alcohol abuse, etc.—have largely subsided two to three years after the divorce.<sup>11</sup> But this does not necessarily mean that divorced adults have rebuilt happy lives after a few years. Even when they eventually manage to rebuild a functional new life, some find limited joy and satisfaction in that new life.<sup>12</sup>

For some, what turns out to be the easiest part of divorce—the division of assets, or getting the actual, physical divorce—is surprisingly overshadowed by the much more complicated emotional divorce. In chapter 7, we go into some detail about the process of assessing and dividing property and setting schedules for joint custody. These can be difficult and emotionally heavy conversations and decisions. However, once made and entered into the divorce decree, they are largely done and over with. Getting an emotional divorce, however, can take years and some people going through divorce may never successfully leave their marriage emotionally.

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

What does this look like? These couples continue to have the communication problems they experienced in marriage; they continue to play out negative power dynamics regarding money and children. These are the divorces where neither partner can talk to the other without considerable emotional turmoil. You may know someone like this who, even years after their divorce, continues to vilify their ex, conspire with their children against their ex, and just cannot get past the trauma and hurt they experienced as a result of the divorce.

If you think that getting past the emotional aspects of a divorce will be a challenge for you, we strongly encourage you to consider counseling. Failing to emotionally divorce will perpetuate anger, hurt, bitterness, sadness, and even vindictive thoughts toward your former spouse. In extreme cases it is almost impossible to put the best interests of the children ahead of one's own emotional well-being. This can make healthy co-parenting unachievable. In good counseling you can learn to own your contributions to the decline of the marriage and can avoid blaming your former spouse for everything that is going wrong in your life.

### *Attitude toward the divorce*

Of course, it's easier to embrace change when you wanted the marriage to end and have an accepting attitude toward divorce.<sup>13</sup> In most cases, however, one of the spouses does not want the divorce.<sup>14</sup> When someone is still committed to the marriage and views the divorce as a personal tragedy, then he or she tends to have a more difficult time after divorce.<sup>15</sup> So, often the person who didn't want the divorce has a harder time adjusting to post-divorce life than the person who initiated it (usually the wife). Those who still have positive feelings toward their ex-spouses tend to feel more distress as the result of divorce.<sup>16</sup> Individuals in this situation may benefit from staying involved with others socially and developing a new romantic relationship.<sup>17</sup> However, holding negative feelings toward an ex-spouse also can make it harder to adjust to a divorce. Individuals may have an easier time adjusting to a divorce if they avoid conflict during divorce so that they experience less negative emotion toward their ex-spouses.<sup>18</sup>

### *Insecurity and attachment to the ex-spouse*

Those who are emotionally dependent on their spouses and/or have a fear of abandonment may also find it harder to adjust to divorce. And deep

attachments to a spouse don't automatically go away when a divorce is finalized. Research has found that insecure individuals are typically willing to stay in a marriage even if they are not satisfied.<sup>19</sup> Understandably, these insecure individuals tend to have a harder time adjusting to life after divorce; secure individuals tend to adjust to divorce better. First, they report only mild, rather than high distress as a result of their divorce, and they see it as less threatening.<sup>20</sup> These individuals also view themselves as being more capable of coping with divorce, and in fact, research shows that they use more effective problem-solving strategies, such as better negotiating and reasoning skills.<sup>21</sup> As a result, these individuals experience fewer physical and psychological health problems after divorce.<sup>22</sup> They also report feeling more comfortable with themselves and others and experiencing fewer problems with their former spouse.<sup>23</sup> In addition, these individuals also generally use more positive parenting skills after divorce,<sup>24</sup> which may help their children better adjust to life after divorce.

It's hard to know how divorce will affect you personally. It's hard to know if you are one of those who can embrace change with divorce or if you will be worn down by it. You may benefit from doing the Exercise 5.1, "How Will Divorce Affect Me Personally?" at the end of this chapter.

## B. How might divorce affect adults' emotional and physical health?

For some, leaving a very difficult marriage is a path—albeit a difficult one—to building a better, happier life. However, as we discussed earlier, for many others, divorce trades one set of challenges for another. Overall, researchers have found that, compared to adults in a stable marriage, divorced adults have poorer physical and mental health, other things being equal.<sup>25</sup> In our interview with Janet, who had been divorced for more than 15 years, she described herself as an emotional and physical wreck as a result of her divorce: "I weighed like 50 pounds less than I do now; ... stress makes me lose weight. Everyone would always ask me if I had an eating disorder, I was so thin."

Of course, researchers have also found positive benefits to divorce for some individuals, and we will review those findings too. But the overall picture documents how hard the process of family breakdown can be on adults, not just children. Below is a partial list of some of the physical and

emotional problems that are more common among divorced individuals compared to married individuals.

- ❖ *Sadness.* Divorced adults are generally less happy.<sup>26</sup> (We explored this in Chapter 2.)
- ❖ *Depression.* Divorced individuals are more vulnerable to depression. They have higher levels of psychological stress, lower levels of general psychological well-being, and poorer self-esteem.<sup>27</sup> This risk is primarily for those who have struggled with depression before the divorce; those who have not struggled with depression before the divorce usually don't experience a major episode after the divorce.<sup>28</sup> Also, those who have recently experienced a divorce are at much higher risk for suicide.<sup>29</sup>
- ❖ *Poor Health.* Divorced individuals see a doctor more often and are more likely to suffer from serious illnesses.<sup>30</sup> Some of these health problems diminish over time. Still, individuals who experience a divorce are more likely to die at somewhat earlier ages.<sup>31</sup> Most adults do not experience significant health challenges directly as a result of divorce. So, the negative effects of divorce on health come mostly from a small group—10%–15%—of divorced adults who do experience substantial health challenges.<sup>32</sup> Individuals who have an anxiety disorder or an attachment disorder are especially vulnerable to poor health after divorce.<sup>33</sup>
- ❖ *Alcohol/Drugs.* Divorced adults drink more alcohol than married adults and account for the highest proportion of heavy drinkers. This is especially true for men.<sup>34</sup> This isn't too surprising given that research shows that men and women—but especially men—generally reduce their use of drugs and alcohol when they marry.<sup>35</sup>

### C. How might divorce affect adults' social support?

The decision to divorce can bring about major changes in the partners' social lives. Compared to married individuals, divorced individuals are less involved in social activities<sup>36</sup> and report more social isolation.<sup>37</sup> Being involved socially is often difficult because accomplishing the day-to-day activities of home, work, and childcare are often more difficult to do alone.<sup>38</sup> Divorced adults often face greater loneliness than married adults. In addition to losing a spouse, they also lose many of their social contacts such

as in-laws, married friends, and neighbors.<sup>39</sup> The loss of these social contacts often results in the loss of emotional support.

Divorced individuals often find that friends disappear following the divorce. Friends—even close ones—may distance themselves from a divorced person because they do not know what to say or do to make the person feel better, or they are not interested in continually talking about the divorce and the changes associated with it. Although the newly divorced individual desires to maintain friendships and be involved socially, many complain they feel socially awkward because they struggle with whether they still fit into social activities as a single person.

Also, divorced individuals find they have less in common with their married friends. Many times, after divorce, friends sort themselves into “his” and “her” friends. And married friends may see the newly divorced person as a possible threat to the stability of their own marriage.<sup>40</sup> Married friends often find it difficult to sustain independent friendships with both sides of a divided couple because the newly divorced person is often wrapped up with the struggles and challenges of single life.<sup>41</sup>

The amount of social activity that men and women experience varies, because divorced men and women generally approach the transition into single life differently. Divorced men report a more lasting attachment to their ex-spouses than divorced women.<sup>42</sup> Often, to compensate for losing their spouse, male social activities tend to rise rapidly and dramatically following divorce.<sup>43</sup> Many divorced women seek out a support group to help in their adjustment to single life.<sup>44</sup> Friends help the newly divorced woman get a new perspective on the divorce.<sup>45</sup> Women often like to talk about their problems, while men are more likely to “tough it out” rather than “talk it out.”<sup>46</sup> Men often have fewer close friends to rely on for support after divorce. In addition to men losing their spouses, they are at greater risk of losing contact with their children.

One such man we know, devastated by divorce, began to drink heavily and use other addictive drugs. This problem, when discovered, resulted in legal changes to his co-parenting arrangement. He ended up having to pay for supervised visitation with his children until he became more stable. This was financially costly for both spouses because they had to use the court system to alter the divorce decree, given the new substance abuse issue and the conflict it caused following their divorce.

Following a divorce, children usually reside with only one parent, most often the mother.<sup>47</sup> This increases the amount of loneliness men feel after

divorce. Most fathers make real efforts to stay involved with their children even if they do not have custody and live together. But research indicates that after a few years, most divorced fathers do not have regular contact with their children.<sup>48</sup> The ex-wife and children of one father we know moved across the country after the divorce. His visitation is limited by the expense of the airline tickets to transport his children back and forth for visitation. Therefore, he can only afford about two visits a year, which makes it difficult to have a solid relationship with his growing and developing children. When a friend of his was considering a divorce, this divorced father encouraged him to think seriously and try as hard as possible to make the marriage work.

And it's not just the quantity of father-child contact that suffers; it is common for the quality of these relationships to deteriorate, as well.<sup>49</sup> The proportion of single fathers raising their children has tripled in the past generation.<sup>50</sup> However, having custody of the children often creates more social isolation because fathers must deal with the challenges of being a single parent.<sup>51</sup> Divorced men and women both find it difficult to be successful at work and home and still find time for a social life.

Even though parents love their children and want to be with them, the children often add an emotional strain on both mothers and fathers. Single parents struggle with trying to balance being a parent and being involved socially. The balancing act between being a parent and having a social life can have a negative effect on the parents' happiness.<sup>52</sup> Both men and women who have custody of their children face more isolation because they are less active in social activities and have fewer friends than married individuals.<sup>53</sup> Many divorced mothers report that meeting the needs of their children limits them from being socially active.<sup>54</sup>

Although work can be a source of stress for mothers during a divorce transition, it can also be a source of social support and career satisfaction. Newly divorced working women generally feel less depressed and less isolated than divorced stay-at-home mothers.<sup>55</sup> Working mothers have adult company and the possible rewards of work that can help them to feel better about themselves as they work to rebuild their lives.

## D. How might divorce affect adults' religious involvement?

For many people who have strong ties to a personal faith or religious group, marriage often plays a central part in their personal worship. For them, marriage is not just a vow with their spouse, but also a covenant made with God. Because couples can feel like God is a part of their union, approving it and sanctifying it, when these marriages dissolve, feelings of spiritual failure, guilt, and a broken relationship with God sometimes arise.<sup>56</sup> This is even stronger when individuals feel responsible for the breakup of a marital union.<sup>57</sup> Divorcing individuals may therefore feel cut off from a dimension of their life that gave them access to sacred, spiritual feelings and support. Some will even go so far as to believe that they deserve to be cut off from God or their religious friends, feeling that they were not as good or loving or forgiving or patient as they should have been.<sup>58</sup> This kind of sacred loss is linked to higher rates of depression.<sup>59</sup>

When one spouse feels that the other has purposefully violated sacred covenants, their marriage, which was once regarded as sacred, may now seem desecrated—something which was precious to them is now “dirty” or defiled—and this leads to even greater anger compared to other kinds of loss.<sup>60</sup> Sometimes, those with strong religious convictions may feel that their spouse could have violated such a sacred thing only if he or she were under the influence of evil forces or not living according to God's expectations. This outlook can cause a parent to guard the children from the ex-spouse and has potential to create long-lasting conflict after the divorce is over.

In many cases, adults (and children) end up leaving or switching their religious group as a consequence of divorce.<sup>61</sup> Some may feel embarrassment or resentment; others may feel that they are spiritual failures or outcasts. They may feel that they either deserve to be cut off or are not worthy to participate in worship services. Some families move to different neighborhoods or cities after a divorce, which may necessitate switching from a familiar to an unfamiliar congregation.

For some, however, religious beliefs and activities can be a powerful support to help families deal with the challenges they are facing. Counseling with trusted religious leaders and accepting their support during difficult times can be very helpful. Some religious adults are able to transform their divorce experience and imbue it with deep, sacred meaning.<sup>62</sup>

## E. How might divorce affect my relationship with my children?

This question weighs heavily on the minds of divorcing parents. Many other sections of this guidebook have touched on how parent–child relationships might change while the family is going through a divorce. But here we focus directly on this question. To answer it, it helps to distinguish between custodial parents (usually mothers) and noncustodial parents (usually fathers). About 85% of children live with their mothers after a divorce, although they may still have regular contact with their noncustodial father, and he may still be involved in making decisions about the children.

There’s been quite a bit of research on this question and unfortunately it suggests that divorce sometimes results in poorer relationships with your children, especially for noncustodial parents.<sup>63</sup>

A lot of research documents how fathers tend to lose regular contact with children after divorce. As we mentioned earlier in this chapter, while many fathers try to stay actively involved in the lives of their children, research shows that after a couple of years most divorced fathers—maybe as many as 70%—do not have much contact with their children.<sup>64</sup> Of course, if mothers are working more (or get involved in dating again) after the divorce, then children may feel a loss of time with their mothers, as well.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps the loss of time with fathers and mothers explains that, later in life, adult children of divorce are about 40% less likely to say they see either their mother or father at least several times a week, and they rate their current relationships with both mother and father less positively than do children from intact marriages.<sup>66</sup> Also, children of divorce can lose contact with grandparents and other extended family members.<sup>67</sup>

There are a lot of reasons why fathers tend to lose regular contact with their children. But it is seldom a result of fathers losing interest in their children. A straightforward explanation is that when you don’t live with your children and are not involved in all the little things of children’s daily lives, it’s harder to stay connected. Life goes on and it takes a lot of extra effort to stay involved in children’s day-to-day lives when you are not making them breakfast, supervising their homework, having a family dinner together, and helping them get ready for bed.

Another big reason for reduced contact with children after divorce, however, is repartnering and starting new families. Research shows that when fathers remarry or even repartner, they have weaker relationships over

time with the children they do not live with.<sup>68</sup> Also, compared to divorced fathers who have not repartnered, repartnered fathers have less contact with their children and provide them with less financial support. Often this is because they take on daily responsibilities for stepchildren or biological children from their new union. There are only so much time, energy, and resources to go around, and when much of those are invested in step- and new biological children, it can be hard to maintain relationships with preceding children. Parenting in a blended family is always more challenging than parenting in an intact family. Loyalties must be managed and navigated at every turn. The familiar refrain of “you’re not my real dad/mom” is a standard go-to comeback for non-biological children at multiple developmental levels; these moments can stress even the best adult parental (or romantic) relationship.

When fathers have been highly involved with their children before the divorce, then the divorce is less likely to have a negative effect on their relationship. And well-educated and financially well-off fathers don’t experience as much deterioration in their relationship with their children post-divorce. Maybe their greater resources allow them more time and resources to enhance their relationship. If there are high levels of conflict between parents before a divorce, then the divorce can sometimes actually help to improve the parent–child relationship.<sup>69</sup>

So, if your priority is to stay fully invested in the lives of your children, it’s a risk to take on responsibility for stepchildren or biological children from a new union. Fathers facing divorce, especially, will need to think hard and make tough decisions about this.

This doesn’t mean that custodial parents—usually mothers—are free from challenges with the children they live with. Research also documents how mother–child relationships can be negatively affected, although the negative effects tend to be smaller for mothers than for fathers.<sup>70</sup> Mothers may have less time and energy to invest in their children after a divorce and this can make it harder to maintain a positive relationship. This can be due to increased work demands and repartnering.<sup>71</sup>

## F. How might divorce affect my relationship with my ex-spouse?

It’s often easier to end a relationship legally than it is to end it emotionally. A court will divide up property and specify other

responsibilities, such as child support. But a court cannot decree a clean emotional break. Despite divorce, many have a continuing emotional attachment to their ex-spouses.<sup>72</sup> In the first two years after a divorce, ex-spouses commonly are still doing favors and chores for each other.

Researchers have found two kinds of continuing attachment. One is a continuing preoccupation with and/or dependence on the ex-spouse. A second kind of emotional attachment is ongoing hostility towards the ex-spouse. These ongoing connections were clear in our interviews with those who had experienced a divorce. Researchers have found that continuing emotional attachment to an ex-spouse is associated with a variety of psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, loneliness, anger, and feelings of powerlessness.<sup>73</sup>

Not surprisingly, hostile emotional attachments have the most negative effects. Researchers have found that the more hostile the divorce process and the higher the level of conflict after the divorce, the harder it is for individuals to adjust in healthy ways and move on with their lives. This also makes it harder on the children.<sup>74</sup> Researchers have found that some couples seem unable to let go of their hostility and conflict even a decade later.<sup>75</sup> It's helpful for both adults and children when ex-spouses try hard to hold down natural feelings of anger during the divorce and let those feelings go over time. Of course, this is easier said than done. In these cases, personal counseling to deal with the emotional transitions associated with the divorce can be very helpful.

One such couple we know were married in their teenage years. But they soon divorced. Their struggles to co-parent their children after divorce escalated as each thought the other was being unreasonable. The mother resented any visitation with the father and the father fought in court to enforce his visitation. They rarely spoke to one another and used their attorneys and the court to communicate and make decisions for their family.

What may be surprising to some is that many individuals struggle to cut their more positive emotional ties to their ex-spouse, as well. They continue to be dependent on them for emotional support and practical matters. They remain deeply attached even though the legal ties have been broken. About 15% even report having had sex with their ex since the divorce.<sup>76</sup> Researchers have found continuing strong attachment to the ex-spouse makes it harder for adults to adjust to divorce and can contribute to psychological problems.<sup>77</sup> Laura was struggling to move on because of how emotionally attached she was to her ex-spouse:

It's been two years since my divorce and you can see that we still have a major connection, and it's terrible. It's terrible to feel that way. Because even now we talk, "What the heck have we done?" ... It's still really, really hard. I really, really did and still do, deeply, deeply love him. ... Even now, it's just been a nightmare because we're still so connected. ... You've told this person everything in life. He knows everything about you. ... He's called me about a bazillion times to tell me how unhappy he is. In the three years since the separation and the two years since the divorce, the longest that we have gone without speaking to each other has been one week. ... I don't think there's another man on the earth that I care for as much as I do for him. But people don't understand that; they don't understand those feelings. ... And this is coming from a girl that was cheated on; he got another woman pregnant, and he really, really betrayed me.

A recent study illustrates how complex divorce can be. The study found that sometimes maintaining a good relationship with the ex-spouse and working together to be good parents to the children went hand-in-hand with continuing emotional attachment to the ex-spouse, which makes personal adjustment to divorce harder.<sup>78</sup> There is a fine line between maintaining a positive, business-like relationship with your ex-spouse and remaining emotionally dependent on him or her. Healthy post-divorce relationships have clearly established boundaries that define the former spouse as a co-parent you work with for the good of your children but not as a person you continue to rely on for emotional support.<sup>79</sup>

Research suggests that, for many couples, conflict actually increases after a divorce and post-divorce conflict between ex-spouses makes it more difficult for children to adjust to life after the divorce.<sup>80</sup> In all the emotional turmoil associated with an unhappy marriage, it may be hard to sort out whether conflict would decrease or increase if you divorced. A trusted religious leader and/or professional counselor may be able to help you sort your thoughts out. Also, you may benefit from doing exercise 5.2, "Thinking About Conflict After Divorce," at the end of this chapter. If your state requires you to attend a divorcing parents education class, this class also may help you find ways to minimize conflict between you and your spouse.

## G. How might divorce affect future romantic relationships?

Most who divorce hope to find a more satisfying relationship in the future. Exploring new romantic relationships after divorce can be both exciting and stressful. One important study that followed divorcing individuals for many years after their divorces found that a new romantic relationship after divorce often produced an increase in self-esteem, a decline in feelings of depression, and even decreased health complaints and visits to the doctor.<sup>81</sup> These positive outcomes were found when the new relationships provided a sense of security and support and when there was real concern for each other. However, this study also found that some divorced women and men (especially) used casual sex to find the closeness and intimacy they were missing. These researchers observed that casual sex frequently ended up producing greater feelings of loneliness, unhappiness, and lower self-esteem. Moreover, these feelings sometimes led to substance abuse, which made problems worse. So new romantic relationships after divorce are a bit of a double-edged sword: healthy, caring relationships can be helpful, but relationships based on casual sex can make things worse. When dating again, it makes sense to be cautious and go slowly.

In addition, we heard from several of the people we interviewed that moving on to another romantic relationship wasn't easy. Laura divorced her unfaithful husband but struggled to move on:

So yeah, do you move on? You try. Does it get any easier? No. And it doesn't matter who comes in your life. I have a great boyfriend right now. ... But [my marriage] was 12 long years. It's going to take a long time to get [past] that.

For Janet, trying to find a new love had left her exhausted:

I have really not dated [in a long-term relationship] since [the divorce]. Because ... when I finally extracted myself from that, I realized that, even though the circumstances were so different than my marriage, there were a lot of similarities. And as they say, the common denominator in all your failed relationships is you. ... I was exhausted from trying to make things work with people that it ultimately wasn't going to work with. ... And I sort of liken it to a love slot machine; you keep putting in coins hoping that it will pay out and you spend all of your time sitting in front of the slot machine and feeding it.

## H. What are my chances for remarrying and having a happy marriage?

People who divorce often do not give up on the idea of having a happy marriage. They may want to remarry sooner or later, hoping that it will be better the next time around. Some have referred to remarriage as the triumph of hope over experience. Remarriage rates have declined by about 50% in the United States. Still, many people do remarry, although it is still more likely for men than for women.<sup>82</sup> More than 40% of all U.S. marriages these days are remarriages for one or both spouses (about 20% are remarriages for both spouses).<sup>83</sup> About half who eventually remarry will have done so within 5 years of their divorce.<sup>84</sup> More couples now are deciding to live together rather than marry because of financial and other complications.<sup>85</sup>

There are some factors that may affect your chances of getting remarried. For example, if you have children, you are less likely to remarry, probably because divorced parents struggle to find time for dating.<sup>86</sup> And some people aren't enthused about marrying someone with children and perhaps taking responsibilities for those children. (Research has found that women who bring children from a previous union into a second marriage face a higher risk of eventual divorce, although for some reason, this is not true for men who bring children from a previous union into a second marriage.<sup>87</sup>) Also, chances for remarrying decline the older you are when you divorce, probably because there are fewer single partners available at older ages.<sup>88</sup> However, there are still many divorced people who remarry at an older age and with children.

Unfortunately, research shows that second marriages in general are not happier or more stable. The divorce rate for second marriages is even higher than it is for first marriages, and they break up even faster.<sup>89</sup> There often is more conflict in second marriages compared to first marriages. Much of this conflict comes from complications in blending families together.<sup>90</sup> These stresses usually subside after about 5 years, though. Because of this, if couples can endure these early years of remarriage and work to address their challenges, they usually find greater happiness.<sup>91</sup> These long-lasting remarriage relationships usually show characteristics such as friendship, support, and respect<sup>92</sup>—a recipe for happiness in any marriage.

## Exercises for Chapter 5

### 5.1: How Will Divorce Affect Me Personally?

It may be impossible to know for sure how you will be affected by divorce. But there are many things to think about that will give you a better sense of what may happen. Below are a series of questions about different aspects of your life after a divorce.

*A. Your Social Life.* In this chapter, you learned that many people report having a difficult time maintaining friendships and feeling lonely after divorce. This exercise is designed to help you think how a divorce may affect your social life. (A later part of this exercise will focus specifically on romantic relationships after divorce. For now, think about friendships and family relationships.)

*Friends.* Who are your strongest friends and how might those friendships be affected by a divorce? (Next you will focus on relationships with family members.) Write down your thoughts about this:

Name of Friend	How might your relationship be affected by a divorce? Why?

Chapter 5: How Does Divorce Affect Adults?

*Family.* Of course, family relationships are often the most important part of our social lives. Now consider how divorce may affect your social relationships with various family members. Include relationships with, for instance, parents, siblings, extended family, and in-laws. Of course, especially consider how divorce may affect your relationship with your children. (Next you will focus on your relationship with your ex-spouse.) Write down your thoughts about this:

Name of Family Member	How might your relationship be affected by a divorce? Why?

*Ex-Spouse.* Now think about how your divorce will affect your relationship with your ex-spouse. For some, conflict decreases after divorce but for others it increases. Some can cut the emotional and practical ties fairly easily, but others remain quite attached and dependent on the ex-spouse. Think about how this is likely to be for you. Write your thoughts here:

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## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

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*Future Romance.* Of course, most people who divorce hope to find a new and better love. What are your hopes and dreams? What barriers will you face to realizing these hopes? Be as realistic, honest, and specific as possible in assessing this. How can you meet and overcome these barriers? Write your thoughts here:

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*B. Your Religious Life.* In this chapter, you also learned about the effects that divorce may have on your religious life. You may not have thought much about this aspect of your life after divorce. This exercise is designed to help you do so.

*Beliefs.* What are your religious beliefs about divorce? How will they affect how you adjust to divorce? Will they be a source of strength to you or might they make adjustment harder? Why? Write down your thoughts here:

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Chapter 5: How Does Divorce Affect Adults?

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*Support.* Do you think you will have support and help from religious leaders and friends? Or do you think you might feel alienated from religious support as a result of your divorce? Why? Write down your thoughts here:

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*Activity.* Will you want to maintain your involvement with your religious group? Increase it? Decrease it? Why? What challenges will you face with respect to religious involvement after your divorce? Write down your thoughts here:

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*C. Change.* In this chapter you learned that those who can embrace the big changes that come with divorce and optimistically work to make their lives better are, not surprisingly, able to adjust better to divorce. Try to assess your personality and attitudes about change. First, rate yourself with the following questions.<sup>93</sup> Circle the answers that best describe you.

SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

How much or how often do these words or phrases describe you?					
	Never	Rarely	Some-times	Often	Very Often
A. Open-minded	0	1	2	3	4
B. Flexible	0	1	2	3	4
C. Easygoing	0	1	2	3	4
D. Adaptable	0	1	2	3	4

Now add up your score (it should be between 0–16): \_\_\_\_\_

(Higher scores indicate that you are more adaptable and flexible person.)

- ❖ If your score is **less than 10**, then adaptability and flexibility are probably not strengths of yours. You may struggle more than others to adjust to the significant changes brought on by divorce.
- ❖ If your score is **10 or higher**, then adaptability and flexibility are probably strengths of yours. Although this doesn't mean that you will have an easy time adjusting to a divorce, your ability to adapt to change may help you adjust better to the significant changes brought on by divorce.

Having completed this brief scale, now think about the following questions, answering them as honestly as possible:

*Flexibility.* Are you a person who can adjust fairly easily to changes or is that hard for you? Are you pretty flexible or pretty set in your ways? Write down your thoughts here:

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*Attitude.* What is your attitude about the changes that would need to come for you to adjust to divorce? Do you think you will embrace them or get worn down by them? Do you think you have the energy to pursue needed changes or will you struggle just to get by day to day? Would you welcome a divorce or would you dread it? Write down your thoughts here:

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D. *Putting It All Together.* So, having thought about how divorce might affect your social and religious life and whether you would embrace change or struggle with it, what does it all mean for you? How well do you think you would adjust to divorce? Or do you think it would be better for you to keep trying to repair your marriage and avoid divorce, if you could? Write down your final thoughts here:

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## 5.2: Thinking About Conflict After Divorce

Divorce may end some conflicts you have had with your spouse, but it can also be the beginning of other conflicts. This exercise is designed to help you think about what conflicts you have had and what will happen if you divorce. Also, this exercise helps you think about what other conflicts may arise if you divorce and how challenging those conflicts may be. It might be helpful to go through this exercise with a trusted friend or counselor who may be more objective about your life than you. Sometimes we can minimize certain realities when we're so focused on wanting a particular outcome.

A. *Current Conflicts.* What are the current conflicts you have with your spouse that cause the most difficulty and emotional pain? List those in the chart below. Then think about whether this conflict is likely to get better or worse if you divorce, and why.

### SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

What are your most difficult conflicts in your marriage?	If you divorce, do you think the conflict will get better, worse, or stay the same?			Why? Briefly explain.
	Better	Same	Worse	
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

**B. Conflicts After Divorce.** Now, try to think about what conflicts you might have if you divorce that would be the most difficult. These may be some of the same conflicts you currently have. But they may be new ones due to changes from divorce. List possible conflicts in the chart below. Then say how difficult you think each conflict will be. Finally, think about ways you could reduce this potential conflict.

What do you think your most difficult conflicts with your ex-spouse might be after a divorce?	How difficult do you think this conflict will be?			How could you reduce this possible conflict?
	Slightly Difficult	Somewhat Difficult	Very Difficult	
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				

C. Overall. Overall, how do you think a divorce would affect conflict with your ex-spouse? Write down your thoughts here:

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## Endnotes to Chapter 5

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- <sup>93</sup> These questions are taken from the RELATE Relationship Questionnaire and are used with permission. See Busby, D. M., Holman, T. B., & Taniguchi, N. (2001). RELATE: Relationship evaluation of the individual, family, cultural, and couple contexts. *Family Relations, 50*, 308–316.

## How Does Divorce Affect Finances?

When it comes to building wealth or avoiding poverty, a stable marriage may be your most important asset.

Drs. Linda J. Waite & Maggie Gallagher,  
noted marriage researchers<sup>1</sup>

*Overview: Divorce is financially stressful. Researchers estimate that divorcing individuals would need more than a 30% increase in income, on average, to maintain the same standard of living they had prior to their divorce. About one in five women fall into poverty as a result of divorce. Three out of four divorced mothers don't receive full payment of child support. Most men also experience a loss in their standard of living in the years after a divorce, a loss of about 10%–40%, depending on circumstances. Divorce also impacts communities. One national study estimated the cost of family breakdown in the United States at more than \$100 billion a year.*

Previous chapters have dealt with the social and psychological impacts of divorce for children and adults. This chapter focuses on the financial impact of divorce. Understandably, this is a worry for most people who are thinking about divorce. In our interview, Janet described the financial dilemma she faced at the crossroads of her eventual divorce:

[My husband] made good money and we had a house, and so the alternative to being there with this person who disliked me was being with two little kids on my own, trying to make it, or being in a comfortable home with a person who made a decent income and who loved my children.

Financial challenges associated with divorce are common. The process of divorce is expensive. The income that used to support one household is split and now must support two households. All possessions, money, financial assets, and debt acquired during (and sometimes before) marriage are divided between former spouses. Researchers estimate that divorcing individuals would need more than a 30% increase in income, on average, to

maintain the same standard of living they had prior to their divorce.<sup>2</sup> So divorce is financially stressful, especially for poorer couples. On the other hand, researchers have learned that a stable marriage is one of the best paths to building and maintaining wealth.<sup>3</sup> We also know that women, men, and children experience the financial consequences of divorce somewhat differently.

## A. How might divorce affect women and children financially?

Most children—five out of six—live with their mothers after a divorce, so the financial effects of divorce on women and children are largely the same.<sup>4</sup> Generally, both men and women experience short- and long-term financial loss as a result of divorce, but women generally suffer more from financial losses than men because of unequal wages for men and women and because women usually have more expenses associated with the physical custody of children after divorce.<sup>5</sup> Research has found:

- ❖ About one in five women fall into poverty as a result of divorce.<sup>6</sup>
- ❖ About one in three women who own a home and have children at home when they divorce lose their homes.<sup>7</sup>
- ❖ About three in four divorced mothers don't receive full payment of child support.<sup>8</sup>

The financial burden is greatest during the first year after divorce and varies for each woman depending on how much money she contributed to the family income before divorce and the ability and willingness of her former husband to make support payments. If she was already earning a decent income and her husband can be relied on to make full child support payments, then the financial stress of divorce will not be as great. Some research suggests that the economic costs of divorce have been declining somewhat because of growth in women's employment and income, as well as rising rates of child support payments.<sup>9</sup>

But many women are not financially prepared for life as a single parent. As a result, a significant number often need to rely on public assistance programs to supplement their family finances. This financial support is crucial for many women, although it is still unlikely to cover all financial needs. Home ownership is one of the most important ways that we develop

wealth. Unfortunately, divorced women have significantly less housing and financial wealth compared to continuously married women.<sup>10</sup> Divorced women also have less vehicle wealth and more debt than continuously married women. Also, many women lose their health insurance following divorce and for some this can last for a few years, not just a few months.<sup>11</sup> Loss of health insurance probably contributes to the health declines experienced by some divorced women after divorce.

Women thinking about divorce should evaluate their financial situation carefully. Good preparation for the financial challenges of divorce is important to minimize its negative effects. You may benefit from some thinking, planning, and calculations based on the activities and questions in Exercise 6.1, “Thinking About the Financial Consequences of Divorce,” at the end of this chapter.

One woman we know struggled after divorce when she realized it would be impossible for her to stay home with her children, which is something she really valued and enjoyed. The financial consequences of divorce showed her that it was very expensive to run two households for a family. She was not granted alimony payments to support her desire to be at home full time with her children.

For children, the financial burdens of divorce may affect their lives in a number of ways. A parent who may have previously been able to stay at home with children or work only part time often will find it necessary to work full time after the separation. Fathers paying child support may feel that they are doing all that is necessary or possible for their children financially. When combined with the mother’s (usually) lower income, that may mean the children will not be able to experience some opportunities, such as music lessons, sports camps, or summer activities, that their friends may participate in. Furthermore, public schools often charge fees for participation in extracurricular activities such as sports, choir, or drama, and divorced parents may not be able to pay for these “extras.” This not only deprives children of potentially valuable experiences but distinguishes them from their more affluent friends and leaves them without ways to constructively spend after-school time.

Finally, standard child support payments almost always end when a child turns 18—just at the time when the child needs additional financial help in order to continue education in college or a vocational program. Children may feel that the noncustodial parent does not care for them because of these lost opportunities—they may be aware of the custodial

parent's financial struggles, but unaware of the financial situation of the noncustodial parent.

Parents can negotiate higher child support than is mandated by a state's child support schedule, can require that an employed parent or parent with better employment benefits keep the children on a health insurance plan, and can negotiate help with school and other fees and even help with support for college. But these agreements can be ignored by the responsible parent—although he or she may have entered them in good faith. The other parent must return to court to enforce these agreements, as well as any unpaid child support payments owed, which is expensive and time-consuming. Also, emergencies or expenses related to the children's health that are not covered by insurance—for example a chronic illness or orthodontic care—may have been unforeseen at the time of divorce and will require further financial negotiation between the parents. Finally, if the noncustodial parent remarries and has additional children, the competing demands of that parent's new children with those of the children of the previous marriage may result in perceived and actual inequities between the children of the two families. These inequities may affect support and opportunities for the older children as well as their relationship with the noncustodial parent.

Even with careful preparation for the financial impact of divorce, money problems are common. Research suggests that women usually don't recover fully from the financial consequences of divorce until they remarry.<sup>12</sup> Alimony payments are uncommon these days, but if a spouse does receive them, they stop when the paying spouse dies or the receiving spouse remarries.

## B. How might divorce affect men financially?

Some people seem to believe that men are financially better off after a divorce than they were during their marriage. Good research shows that this is a myth. Because most families now have two incomes, most men experience a loss in their standard of living in the years after a divorce, a loss generally between 10%–40%, depending on circumstances.<sup>13</sup> Two factors contribute to this financial loss. First, if his ex-wife contributed a substantial income to the family, he will struggle to make up for this lost second income. Second, he is likely to be required to make child support and other payments.<sup>14</sup> This comes on top of having to pay for a separate

home or apartment. If a father has custody or shares custody of his children, there will be additional expenses.

Similar to women, how much men lose financially from divorce varies depending on the amount of money he contributed to the family's income. Men who provided less than 80% of a family's income before divorce suffer more financially from divorce. This is the case for most men nowadays. Men who provided more than 80% of a family's income before a divorce do not suffer as much financial loss, and they may even improve their financial situation somewhat.<sup>15</sup>

One man we know who was divorced three times was underemployed and felt the financial burden of paying child support to all three families. Most of his paycheck was garnished (taken directly from his check before it got to him) by the state's Office of Recovery Services. He could barely live on the remaining amount and was angry that he had no control over how much child support he could pay, because the amount is determined by a preset formula that does not take into account his special circumstances.

Men also may benefit from doing Exercise 6.1, "Thinking About the Financial Consequences of Divorce," at the end of the chapter, to get a better idea of how divorce would affect their finances. Of course, if you are able to repair your marriage rather than divorce, you will likely be better off financially in both the short and long term.

### C. What might be the broader financial impacts of divorce on communities and taxpayers?

Women and men thinking about divorce have a lot of financial issues to think about. It's understandable that they are focused on their personal financial concerns. But divorce is more than a personal issue; it is also a very public issue. Divorce is one of the most common ways that people, especially women and children, fall into poverty.<sup>16</sup> When people fall into poverty, they usually make use of government programs, services, and supports, paid for with taxes. In addition, children from divorced homes are more likely to get involved in deviant behavior and crime, which cost governments a great deal of taxpayer money.<sup>17</sup> Also, there are more long-term, hard-to-quantify financial impacts on society. Children from divorced homes struggle more to graduate from school and are less likely to be able to go to college.<sup>18</sup> Our economy depends on a well-educated workforce. And of course, personal incomes increase with education.

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

Although it is hard to get a solid estimate of the costs of divorce to taxpayers, one nationwide study conservatively estimated the public cost in the United States each year of divorce and unwed childbearing at \$112 billion.<sup>19</sup> A Texas study estimated the public cost in that state each year to be more than \$3 billion.<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that these costs are just for the welfare-related claims that could be made by families that experience divorce; they don't take into consideration the actual costs of the divorce itself (such as lawyer and court fees, counseling, or mediation).

Divorce is sometimes necessary. A just society recognizes this necessity and compassionately provides some financial help to those negatively affected by divorce. But we should also recognize that society takes on a financial burden when marriages fail. Marriage and divorce are public issues as well as private concerns.<sup>21</sup> The success and failure of our marriages have consequences beyond our personal lives.

## Exercise for Chapter 6

### 6.1: Thinking About the Financial Consequences of Divorce

Dividing the family finances when a couple divorces can be much more complicated and stressful than people often realize, even if you and your spouse can be cooperative and civil. It takes a lot of time and detailed work to separate your financial lives. This exercise encourages you to detail your family finances and think more about what effect divorce will have.

*A. Employment Details.* List employment details for yourself and your spouse.

Your Employer:	Your Job Title:
Your Gross Annual Income:	Your Gross Monthly Income:
Your Net Monthly Income:	Your Other Income (pensions, rents, child support, second job, etc.):
Spouse's Employer:	Spouse's Job Title:
Spouse's Gross Annual Income:	Spouse's Gross Monthly Income:

Chapter 6: How Does Divorce Affect Finances?

Spouse's Net Monthly Income:	Spouse's Other Income (pensions, rents, child support, second job, etc.):
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**B. Financial *Assets*.** List property and automobiles and fill in the information requested.

Real Property (homes, land, etc.):
Property #1 (list):
Address:
Date of Purchase:
Purchase Price:
Down Payment:
Source of Down Payment:
Owing Balance on First Mortgage:
Owing Balance on Second Mortgage:
Current Appraisal Value:
Monthly Payment:
Title Held By:
Equity:
Lot Description (Must have this for legal paperwork.):
Property #2 (list):
Address:
Date of Purchase:
Purchase Price:
Down Payment:
Source of Down Payment:
Owing Balance on First Mortgage:
Owing Balance on Second Mortgage:
Current Appraisal Value:
Monthly Payment:
Title Held By:
Equity:
Lot Description (Must have this for legal paperwork.):
Do you or your spouse have property that either of you will inherit? Value?
Do you have timeshare property? Value?
Automobiles, Recreational Vehicles, etc.
Vehicle #1
Year:

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

Model and Make:
Title Held By:
Balance Owed:
Monthly Payment:
Current Bluebook Value:
Equity:
Present Possession:
Vehicle #2
Year:
Model and Make:
Title Held By:
Balance Owed:
Monthly Payment:
Current Bluebook Value:
Equity:
Present Possession:
Vehicle #3
Year:
Model and Make:
Title Held By:
Balance Owed:
Monthly Payment:
Current Bluebook Value:
Equity:
Present Possession:

*C. Personal Property.* List your valuable personal property items (e.g., jewelry, computer), their financial worth, and any money you may owe on that item.

Personal Property	
Item: Worth: Balance Owing:	Item: Worth: Balance Owing:
Item: Worth:	Item: Worth:

Chapter 6: How Does Divorce Affect Finances?

Balance Owing:	Balance Owing:
Item:	Item:
Worth:	Worth:
Balance Owing:	Balance Owing:

**D. Financial Accounts.** List your (and your spouse's) joint and separate financial accounts, including checking, savings, retirement, stocks, etc.

Checking Account Amount:	Savings Account Amount:
Pension #1 Worth:	Pension #2 Worth:
401K #1 Worth:	401K #2 Worth:
Stock 1: Current Value:	Stock 2: Current Value:
Cemetery Plots:	
Life Insurance Plan #1 Premium: Beneficiary: Amount:	Life Insurance Plan #2 Premium: Beneficiary: Amount:
Are you expecting a federal or state income tax return this year? In what amount or amounts?	
IRA #1: Amount:	IRA #2: Amount:

**E. Business Interests.** List any business interests you and your spouse have and their value.

Business Interest #1:	Value:
Business Interest #2:	Value:

**F. Debts and Obligations.** List current debts and other financial obligations you and your spouse have and record the information requested about them. Include estimated federal or state income tax you may owe this year.



Chapter 6: How Does Divorce Affect Finances?

Other:		
Other:		
<b>Total Expenses:</b>		
Monthly Income		
Employment		
Interest Income		
Support Payments from Spouse		
Other income:		
Other income:		
<b>Total Income:</b>		
<b>Difference (Income - Expenses or Expenses - Income):</b>		

H. *Thinking Ahead Financially.* It has probably taken a lot of time and effort to fill out the information in the forms above. But if you have done this, you are in a better position to answer the following questions that are important to think about when you are considering divorce. Review some of your calculations above and try your best to answer honestly the following questions.<sup>22</sup> Some of the questions may not be applicable to your situation.

1. Do you have adequate money saved that would help support you and your children after the divorce, especially in the first few years when money can be extra tight?

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2. Do you have home furnishings, a car, and other possessions you will need after the divorce, or will you need to purchase them

3. 

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4. Have you paid off your debts as much as possible? How much debt will be assigned to you after the divorce?

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SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

5. Who will count the children as withholding exemptions for income tax purposes? Often, the parent who pays child support claims this right, but since child support is never enough to cover the overhead (home, utilities, car repairs, miscellaneous expenses) or pay half the expenses of rearing children, the custodial parent should insist on claiming this benefit.

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6. Also for federal (and some state) tax purposes, the custodial parent should claim the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) for heads of household with dependents. See the instructions to Form 1040 about dependents, withholding exemptions, support as it relates to custody arrangements, and the EITC.

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7. Do you have adequate education or training necessary to provide for your children and yourself after the divorce? If not, how will you get that education or training?

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8. Will you need and can you afford childcare if you work full time after the divorce?

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9. Will your work provide healthcare benefits for yourself and your children? Will your spouse's work cover health benefits for your children if they don't live with him/her?

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10. Does your work provide pension/retirement plans or can you invest for retirement as an individual? In order to receive half the value of your ex-spouse's retirement accounts (based on the years when you were married) at the time of his or her retirement, you must provide

Chapter 6: How Does Divorce Affect Finances?

a form called a QUADRO (Qualified Domestic Relations Order) to the administrator of each of your ex-spouse's retirement accounts at the time of the divorce. You will need an experienced lawyer's help with this.

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11. If you don't have all the things you will need to provide for yourself and your children after the divorce, how long will it take you to get them, and how will you get them?
- 
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12. Is it possible that you and your ex-spouse could set up college savings funds for your children, so they will not be disadvantaged by the divorce but still receive help with college? If possible, try to make this payment a part of the final divorce decree, separate from child support payments.
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13. It is difficult to maintain your financial lifestyle after divorce. What are some things that you could give up to save money?
- 
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14. There are many other smaller family expenses that we sometimes forget about, such as lessons for piano, ballet, karate, etc., extracurricular school activity fees (e.g., sports, choir, drama), summer camp, scouting, and many more. How would you cover these kinds of expenses that are important for your children?
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I. *What Does All This Mean?* Now, having considered all these things, what do you think about the possible financial consequences of a divorce? Are you optimistic that you can make things work? Are you concerned? Why? Write down your thoughts and feelings:

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## Endnotes to Chapter 6

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- <sup>2</sup> Emery, R. (2012). *Renegotiating family relationships*. Guilford; Sayer, L. C. (2006). Economic aspects of divorce and relationship dissolution. In M. A. Fine & J. Harvey (Eds.), *Handbook of divorce and relationship dissolution* (pp. 385–406). Lawrence Erlbaum.
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- <sup>5</sup> Sharma, A. (2015). Divorce/separation in later-life: A fixed-effects analysis of economic well-being by gender. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 36, 299–306; Sayer, L. C. (2006). Economic aspects of divorce and relationship dissolution. In M. A. Fine & J. Harvey (Eds.), *Handbook of divorce and relationship dissolution* (pp. 385–406). Lawrence Erlbaum.
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- <sup>12</sup> Smock, P. J., Manning, W. D., & Gupta, S. (1999). The effect of marriage and divorce on women’s economic well-being. *American Sociological Review*, 64, 794–812.
- <sup>13</sup> Sayer, L. C. (2006). Economic aspects of divorce and relationship dissolution. In M. A. Fine & J. Harvey (Eds.), *Handbook of divorce and relationship dissolution* (pp. 385–406). Lawrence Erlbaum.

- <sup>14</sup> McManus, P. A., & DiPrete, T. A. (2001). Losers and winners: The financial consequences of separation and divorce for men. *American Sociological Review*, *66*, 246–268.
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## What Are the Legal Options for Divorce? What Should I Expect During the Divorce Process?

Do not file for divorce in haste. Explore all options and make a conscientious decision, contemplating the short-term and long-term consequences. Once a decision to divorce has been made, remember the law of integrity. What you put into the divorce will surely be what comes out of the divorce. Aggression is normally combated with aggression and compromise is normally embraced with compromise. In the beginning of the separation, although difficult, invest the time and energy to build cooperative patterns for a long-term benefit for you and your children.

Tamara Fackrell, domestic attorney & mediator

*Overview. Divorce law varies from state to state in the United States. The divorce process can take anywhere from one month to several years. Some states have a waiting period for the divorce to be completed. Some people use lawyers when going through the divorce process but some do not. Complicated cases will likely need a lawyer. The divorce process can be expensive. There are some services available to help low-income individuals with their divorces, especially if there has been abuse in the marriage. For straightforward uncontested divorces, some states offer an online court assistance program, with online legal forms needed for divorce that individuals can fill out themselves. Many people choose mediation as an option for divorce. Mediation is a process where a trained, neutral professional will try to help couples reach agreements about issues related to their divorce. Divorcing spouses can still use their lawyers during the mediation process. Mediation is usually less expensive and faster than litigation. Some divorcing couples use “collaborative law,” in which they use lawyers who agree to work cooperatively to resolve issues surrounding divorce rather than in an adversarial manner. Typically, one spouse may not want the divorce, but it is probably futile to try and challenge the*

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

*divorce in court because of the way our laws are written and how those laws are interpreted by the courts.*

If a divorce may be on the horizon for you, whether you want it or not, it is best to understand the legal process that you are about to experience. And there are some legal choices you will need to make. This chapter will help you understand what lies ahead.

### A. What should I expect going through the divorce process?

For most people, the legal process of divorce is emotionally and financially draining. When children are involved, parents need to try to be their best selves for the benefit of the children, despite the stresses and challenges.

It is important to understand that divorce laws vary from state to state. Thus, this chapter provides a general overview of the laws related to divorce. We recommend that you look up specific information for your state.

Many states have a waiting period for divorce after a Petition (or Complaint) for Divorce is filed, usually 30–90 days.<sup>1</sup> A few states, such as Louisiana, require a waiting period of residential separation before the legal process can even begin. For some states, waiting periods may be longer if you have dependent children.<sup>2</sup> For instance, Louisiana has a 1-year waiting period for divorcing parents if they have minor children.<sup>3</sup>

Also, if you are in a marriage with children, many state laws require you to attend a class for divorcing parents before the divorce can be finalized.<sup>4</sup> Most programs are only a few hours long. (If the couple does not have minor children, these courses are not required.) Research on the effectiveness of these programs suggests that they help reduce co-parenting conflict, improve parenting, and improve parent and child well-being.<sup>5</sup> Many of these classes are now available online, making it more convenient for parents. Online divorcing parent programs also appear to be quite effective.<sup>6</sup>

Although it is uncommon for people who hire attorneys, some couples may decide to reconcile after they have filed the divorce. The divorce process is not final until the Decree of Divorce has been filed with the court, signed by a judge, and filed with the county clerk. Any time before the

divorce decree is filed, a couple can reconcile and their marriage is still legal and binding. Other couples choose an alternate route to divorce and have a time of separation. Separation can be done formally through the court or can be done more informally with agreement between the spouses. For informal separations, any agreements made on financial obligations, support, and visitation are best done in writing and signed by both parties. Some parties choose to involve the Office of Recovery Services (ORS), Division of Child Support (DCS), or a similar state agency to help with their case for child support even when they have decided just to separate. These are agencies that help parents collect child support. There is usually a small fee attached to the monthly collection. If a separated couple wants to use the ORS or DCS, most states will require a legal separation, declaration of paternity, or order of the court. (For more about the risks and benefits of separation, see Chapter 3.)

The divorce process can take anywhere from 30 days to several years, depending on how many issues can be resolved between spouses. Primary issues to be settled in divorce are commonly child custody, parent time, division of financial assets and debts, child support, and alimony.<sup>7</sup> And within each of these issues there are many things to be considered.

The logistics of taking a family and dividing it into two households can be difficult. Most of the time, this requires both parents to be employed. This may come as a shock to a parent who has not worked outside the home. Even if a person decides not to work and stay home after a divorce, the court usually will “impute”<sup>8</sup> income to that parent for child support and alimony calculation. Income imputation assigns a potential yearly wage to each parent based upon work history and education, even if the parent is not currently working. Child support may also deduct medical costs, childcare expenses, and have an offset for additional overnights spent with the other parent.<sup>9</sup> Most courts also require each spouse to show proof of income through current pay stubs and the previous years’ taxes.<sup>10</sup> Attorneys or mediators will also require documentation for all assets and debts to gather the legal information needed to divide up all your financial assets.

## B. Does getting a divorce require a lawyer or can I get a divorce without the help of a lawyer?

These days, some couples use lawyers to get a divorce and some do not. People who have a lower income *and* who have experienced physical abuse

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

from their spouse sometimes can qualify for a free attorney through the state. Other states have Legal Aid options that are available on the basis of the parties' incomes. But free, long-term legal services are available usually only if there is domestic violence involved in the marriage and if lawyers are available. Low-income individuals also can file paperwork to waive the filing fees associated with divorce.<sup>11</sup>

But you do not have to use a lawyer to divorce. Sometimes people choose to act *pro se*, which means people represent themselves in court without a lawyer. This is usually done in simple divorce cases where all matters are agreed upon. If the case has unresolved issues, this can be overwhelming and you will need to do a lot of research in order to file the correct legal pleadings. Further, if your finances involve self-employment businesses or large retirement funds, you may find it very difficult to proceed without a lawyer.

If the divorce is uncontested, which means that both spouses agree on every issue in the divorce, some states have online court programs where people can get access to legal forms and do their own paperwork. State courts usually have a website and forms may be available electronically. If the divorce is contested, mediation can be used to try to resolve the contested issues before, during, or after hiring lawyers. These options are discussed in further detail below.

### C. What does it cost to get a divorce?

It is no secret that divorces can be very expensive. Many attorneys require a retainer of several thousand dollars before taking the case. The more spouses disagree, the more the divorce process will cost. If the case goes to litigation in court, the process can cost anywhere from \$4,000 to \$50,000 dollars per person or even more. Courts rarely order one spouse to pay the other spouse's attorney's fees and costs, even if one of the spouses is or was engaged in infidelity, abuse, or other activities that undermined the marriage.

Having an uncontested divorce, where divorcing spouses agree on every item in the divorce, is the least expensive option. Some spouses will choose to have a "kitchen table negotiation" where they work out all the details of the divorce themselves. Then an attorney can be hired to file "uncontested paperwork," which usually costs between \$800 and \$3,000.

If a person does file uncontested paperwork, the question arises whether the couple should hire a single attorney or each spouse should hire his or her own attorney. According to the rules of ethics for lawyers, an attorney cannot represent both divorcing spouses.<sup>12</sup> Legally, the attorney is required to represent just one spouse. It is wise for the other spouse to at least get a 1-hour consultation with an attorney to review the uncontested paperwork. Sometimes attorneys will give a free initial consultation. Depending on the facts of the case, a person may not need to get an attorney, but at least having a minimum consultation is a good idea. Another option in these cases is using an Attorney-Mediator. If the mediator you choose is also an attorney, then some state laws allow the Attorney-Mediator to file the divorce paperwork.<sup>13</sup> However, a consultation with an independent attorney is still a good idea.

If the state in which a person resides offers an online option for divorce, this is often an affordable way to file uncontested divorce paperwork. This online system is only meant for those having uncontested issues with simple financial assets and debts, standard child visitation agreements, and court-dictated child support. This system works well for simple divorce cases where few adjustments need to be made. As a caution, however, many people will use the online systems but make substantial changes and then do not phrase the contract language correctly. This may result in future problems that require going back to court, which can be very expensive. If you or your spouse is unwilling or unable to agree on some items, divorce mediation may be a less expensive option to get the divorce issues resolved. (See the next section for more information.)

If you and your spouse cannot or will not agree, many states have statutory provisions that set guidelines for your divorce. Most states have mandated child support guidelines requiring that a certain amount of child support be paid (usually by the noncustodial parent only) based on the number of children and each parent's income. No parent can agree that a parent pay less than the guidelines provided, although they can agree to higher payments. You may benefit by doing Exercise 7.1, "Thinking About Child Support and Alimony," at the end of this chapter.

Similarly, detailed visitation guidelines provide for the noncustodial parent to spend time with the children, based on the age of the child and a complicated system that alternates years (even or odd) for how the child divides time between parents on Christmas, the child's birthday, school holidays, etc. Parents may want to take a look at these guidelines, which

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

specify times for pick up and return of the child, before they decide they can't come up with something easier on the child. The court can order supervised visitation (often by a social worker at a place with activities or toys for the child, for a fee) if a parent can be shown to be a potential threat to the child. The court can also order that the child be picked up and dropped off at a neutral site (such as a local park or restaurant with a play area) if parents fight or express hostility when the child is picked up or dropped off at the child's home. A common solution for high-conflict cases is to do a curbside drop off and pick up. This requires the person in the car to remain in a position where he or she can touch their vehicle at all times. The person in the home must remain in a position where they can touch the front door at all times. This is a good solution for high-conflict cases because the parents do not meet face-to-face and if the parent receiving the child is late, the child is safe in the other parent's home and more time is given to that parent. Some states have businesses that specialize in visitation and exchange centers for divorcing parents. Some of these facilities are established through state statute.<sup>14</sup> These businesses can do calendaring, help with parental communication, and facilitate exchanges of the children. High-conflict cases can benefit from using such services. Of course, these business services can be expensive, so not everyone can make use of them.

### D. What is divorce mediation? And what are the financial consequences of choosing mediation services for a divorce?

Mediation is legally defined as "a private forum in which one or more impartial persons facilitate communication between parties to a civil action to promote a mutually acceptable resolution or settlement."<sup>15</sup> So, mediation is a process where a neutral person goes through all the legal issues of the divorce with the divorcing spouses. This neutral person is called a mediator. The mediator is not a decision maker but will try to help the spouses negotiate the terms of their divorce. This includes dividing financial assets and debts, parenting time and custody, alimony, and child support. The mediator can help the divorcing spouses, if they are willing, to settle every issue in the divorce. The mediator will draft a Memorandum of Understanding detailing all the agreements between the two divorcing spouses. This memorandum can be filed with the court by lodging it with the court or changing it to a stipulation. The filed agreement with the court

can be legally enforced.<sup>16</sup> However, divorcing spouses must still file all their legal paperwork to finalize the divorce.

A mediator can be an attorney, a counselor, or another person specifically trained in mediation.<sup>17</sup> If mediators are attorneys, they will not be acting in their role as attorneys and will not give legal advice to either of the divorcing spouses. However, mediators are skilled in divorce law and this knowledge can be helpful to the process. Some states have a list of approved mediators.

Mediation for a divorce usually takes 2–10 hours and is done in one or several sessions, depending on the complexity of the case. The more divorcing parents can agree upon, the faster the process will go. So it is a good idea to do a lot of thinking about the issues you will need to settle before you begin meeting with a mediator. Most states require financial disclosures and forms are usually available online at your state court's website. The financial disclosures should be completed prior to the mediation process. You may also benefit from doing Exercise 7.2, "Preparing for Divorce Mediation," at the end of this chapter. You may also want to ask the mediator if you will be signing the agreement on the day of mediation. This will prepare you for the process of mediation and the expectations regarding the agreement.

Mediators who deal with family issues usually charge from \$100 to \$400 an hour. The cost of divorce mediation, therefore, generally ranges from about \$200 to \$4,000 dollars. Traditionally, this cost is divided evenly between the divorcing spouses (\$100 to \$2,000 per party). Using mediation forums, which require co-mediation, is usually not cost-effective because you are paying for two mediators instead of just one. Often people have attorneys and use them for legal counsel during mediation. Some people choose to bring their attorneys to mediation sessions, while others choose to confer (sometimes by telephone) with their attorneys at the end of the mediation before making a formal agreement. Other times, divorcing spouses choose to mediate before officially hiring an attorney. Mediators who are also attorneys—Attorney-Mediators—can also draft the legal documentation in some states.<sup>18</sup> The divorcing parents' attorneys can draft the legal documents or the parents can use the online forms if they are available in the state.

Compared to litigation in divorce proceedings, mediation appears to have several benefits. Good research has found that mediation produces better outcomes over time for children, parents, and the courts;<sup>19</sup> it helps to

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

decrease conflict between parents after divorce, increase some aspects of positive co-parenting after divorce, and improve satisfaction with how the divorce was handled.<sup>20</sup> Other studies suggest that, compared to litigation, mediation is better at helping divorcing parents work through their anger, accept the loss of divorce, and attain some realistic hope regarding future relationships.<sup>21</sup>

One very affluent couple we know used the divorce mediation process to divide up extensive property, develop a parenting plan, and decide on alimony and child support. The full range of issues was resolved in mediation so they could file uncontested paperwork through the courts. Although they had difficult circumstances, with the husband having a girlfriend waiting for the divorce process to finish, the mediation process helped to open the communication lines for the couple to be effective in co-parenting their three children. Both spouses were able to feel that their many financial assets were fairly distributed and each was able to give input to one another about their needs and wants. The opportunity to be heard by the other spouse was especially needed in this case for the spouse who was still coping with the idea of being divorced. Because divorce mediation focuses on the future co-parenting relationship, they were able to see hope in their future as parents, since they would be tied together for the rest of their lives through the children. They were very satisfied with the mediation process because of the reduced time and cost, as well as the voice they had in making decisions.

### E. What is collaborative law? How does it work in a divorce?

Collaborative law is where two attorneys are hired who are designated as “collaborative lawyers.” Collaborative law is defined as “a legal process where the attorneys for the parties in a family dispute agree to assist them in resolving the conflict by using cooperative strategies rather than adversarial techniques and litigation. Early, non-adversarial participation by the attorneys allows them to use practices of good lawyering not often used in the usual adversarial proceedings, such as use of analysis and reasoning to solve problems, generation of options, and creation of a positive context for settlement.”<sup>22</sup> These collaborative lawyers have the divorcing spouses sign an agreement where they indicate they understand the attorneys are hired in order to come to an agreement outside of court or formal litigation. The

attorneys work together with the divorcing spouses to try and come to a full agreement through negotiations.

Collaborative attorneys can usually be found by an online search. If the divorcing parents cannot agree on every issue, they will hire two new attorneys to go through the litigation process. This is rarely needed, however, as a well-known statistic shows that 96% of collaborative law cases settle outside of court.<sup>23</sup>

Not much research on collaborative law has been done yet. But one early investigation of divorcing parents who used collaborative law suggested that it may produce higher satisfaction with negotiations, more cooperation in negotiating, more creative solutions that meet family needs, and better communication between divorcing parents.<sup>24</sup> One prominent collaborative attorney<sup>25</sup> says:

It has been my experience that, compared to court-ordered outcomes, the result in a collaborative divorce is more unique and personally tailored to the divorcing couple and their family. It will generally be more enduring and when modifications might be necessary, the parties have experienced a process that they can hopefully repeat in crafting changes without having to resort to court processes.

States vary, however, in how much collaborative law is practiced.

## F. What if I don't want the divorce? Can I challenge a divorce in court?

Although it takes two people to agree to marry, it only takes one person to divorce. Historically, the law required a major reason for divorce, such as insanity or adultery, but now the law only requires one person to assert that there are “irreconcilable differences” in the marriage.<sup>26</sup> In 2010, New York was the last state in the United States to pass a no-fault divorce law.<sup>27</sup> So every state in the United States now has no-fault divorce, which means you can divorce your spouse for any reason. Once one spouse insists on ending the marriage, it is futile for the other spouse to challenge the divorce in court. In this situation, there are limited legal options for the spouse who wants to save the marriage. A few states (Maine, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Utah) have a law that allows a spouse to go to a judge to request a brief “time out” in the divorce proceedings to allow for marriage counseling. But many

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

lawyers are not even aware of these laws. In addition, three states (Arizona, Arkansas, Louisiana) have a way of entering into a marriage called “covenant marriage.”<sup>28</sup> Parties that choose a covenant marriage have special requirements in order to divorce, such as getting counseling first, and the grounds for divorcing parents are limited to such things as abuse, addiction, adultery, abandonment, and imprisonment.

### G. Can I seek modifications to a divorce settlement?

Once the divorce is final, most states require that a person can make modifications only because of a “substantial change in circumstances.”<sup>29</sup> Custody and parenting time can be modified through this substantial change in circumstances.<sup>30</sup> Assets and debts are rarely changed, but it is possible if a substantial change in circumstances is present.<sup>31</sup> Most states have rules regarding when child support can be modified. Alimony is usually harder to modify than child support. Some states require a substantial change “not foreseeable at the time of divorce” for modification of alimony.<sup>32</sup> Also, a person may feel that the court order is not in compliance with the actual law. In this case, the court order can be challenged through appeal within a specified amount of time after the divorce is final. Of course, these legal processes can be very costly. When a modification is needed, it is usually a good idea for people to try to use mediation before litigating with an attorney in court. Child support obligations cannot be avoided through bankruptcy.

## Exercises for Chapter 7

### 7.1: Thinking About Child Support and Alimony

A. *Child Support.* How much money would you receive in child support? Go online and do a search for “[Your State] Child Support Calculator.” Many states require different amounts of child support depending on the overnights that are spent with each parent.<sup>33</sup> Remember, child support is taxed to the person paying the support. Often the amount of child support awarded by the court is not the same as the amount expected and received. Some states may consider an imputed income, which means that even if you are not working you may be counted as receiving the income you

potentially could make for purposes of the child support calculation. It is extremely rare to have a “stay-at-home parent” who does not earn income right after a divorce.

Would you have enough to provide for yourself and your family? How would you supplement your income, if needed? What does this mean for your children as far as ample visitation? Write down your thoughts here:

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B. *Alimony*. Alimony is rarely given in marriages of short duration and rarely goes for longer than the length of the marriage.<sup>34</sup> Alimony is taxed to the person who is receiving the support and cannot be set aside in bankruptcy.<sup>35</sup> Men or women can pay alimony depending on which spouse is the higher wage earner and how much discrepancy there is in their incomes.<sup>36</sup> Some states have an alimony calculator, but the majority of states have no set guidelines for alimony. Some states have a statutory list, others use standard of living, and some states have fault as a consideration for alimony.<sup>37</sup> Some states award alimony on an equalization basis to make sure each party has equal funds. Some states may consider an imputed income, which means that even if you are not working you may be counted as receiving the income you potentially could make for purposes of the alimony calculation. Other alimony standards are based on the parties’ budgets and their earning capacities. Some people choose to go back to school after getting divorced and “rehabilitative alimony” may be appropriate. Rehabilitative alimony is a short-term alimony that helps a person get job training or schooling.

Review your answers on Exercise 6.2, “Thinking About the Financial Consequences of Divorce,” or do the exercise now. After reviewing your budget, add together the expected amount of monthly income and the estimated child support paid or received. Is there a deficit? If so, how much? How will you make modifications in your budget to meet your finances? How do you feel about paying or receiving alimony? What would be a reasonable time frame? Write down your thoughts here:

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## 7.2: Preparing for Divorce Mediation

The more thinking you do ahead of time about the issues you will need to settle in divorce mediation, the smoother things will go, the less time it will take, and the less it will cost. So, to help with this, answer the questions below as best you can.

Problem Definition	
What are main items for mediation from your perspective? 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	How do you think your spouse is defining the items for mediation? 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
What are your goals for mediation? 1. 2. 3.	What are your goals for your children? 1. 2. 3.
Option 1: Status Quo Continues	
What options are you considering if there are no changes in current temporary arrangement? 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	What options do you think the other side is considering if there are no changes in temporary arrangement? 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Option 2: Listing Non-Negotiables (An item about which you are not willing to make any concessions.)	
What is non-negotiable for you?	What do you think is non-negotiable for your spouse?

## Chapter 7: What Are the Legal Options for Divorce?

Option 3: Creating New Options	
What options would make you satisfied? 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.	What options do you think would make your spouse satisfied? 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
Option 4: Commitment to Process	
What are you willing to offer and make a commitment to?	How would you like to communicate with your ex-spouse if a future problem arises?
Option 5: Learning from the Past	
If you could go back in time, what would you do differently?       Why?	Are you willing to learn from the past problem and move forward?       Are you willing to move forward with a cooperative co-parenting relationship?

## Endnotes to Chapter 7

- <sup>1</sup> See American Bar Association. (2013). A review in the year of family law, “Grounds for divorce and residency requirement.” *Family Law Quarterly*, 46, 530–533.
- <sup>2</sup> For a list of requirements for your state, we recommend that you consult the American Bar Association website: [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/family\\_law/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/family_law/)
- <sup>3</sup> See La. Civ. Code art. 103.1: <https://casetext.com/statute/louisiana-revised-statutes/civil-code/book-1-of-persons/title-5-divorce/chapter-1-the-divorce-action/section-1031-judgment-of-divorce-time-periods>
- <sup>4</sup> Pollet, S., & Lombreglia, M. (2008). A nationwide survey of mandatory parent education. *Family Courts Review*, 46(2), 375–394.
- <sup>5</sup> Fackrell, T. A., Hawkins, A. J., & Kay, N. M. (2011). How effective are court-affiliated divorcing parents education programs? A meta-analytic study. *Family Court Review*, 49, 107–119.
- <sup>6</sup> Wolchik, S. A., Sandler, I. N., Winslow, E. B., Porter, M. M., & Yun-Fein, J. (2022). Effects of an asynchronous, fully web-based parenting-after-divorce program to

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

reduce interparental conflict, increase quality of parenting and reduce children's post-divorce behavior problems. *Family Court Review*, 60, 474–491.

- <sup>7</sup> See Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-32 to § 30-3-37; Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-5(1); Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-5(1); Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-5(8); Utah Code Ann. § 78-45-7.1–7.11.
- <sup>8</sup> See Utah Code Ann. § 78-45-7.5(7).
- <sup>9</sup> See American Bar Association. (2013). A review in the year of family law, “Child support guidelines.” *Family Law Quarterly*, 46(4), 528–529.
- <sup>10</sup> See Utah Code Ann. § 78-45-7.5(5)(b).
- <sup>11</sup> An Affidavit of Impecuniosity can be filed for low-income parties. See Utah Code Ann. § 78-7-35 (Supp. 2006).
- <sup>12</sup> See Utah Rules of Professional Conduct 1.7.
- <sup>13</sup> See Utah Code Ann. § 78-31b-7(3) and Utah Rules of Professional Conduct 2.4(c).
- <sup>14</sup> Texas Family Code §153.014.
- <sup>15</sup> See Utah Code Ann. § 78-31b-2.
- <sup>16</sup> See Utah Code Ann. § 78-31b-7(3).
- <sup>17</sup> See Utah Code of Judicial Administration 4-510.
- <sup>18</sup> See Utah Code Ann. § 78-31b-7(3) and Utah Rules of Professional Conduct 2.4(c).
- <sup>19</sup> Emery, R. (2012). Renegotiating family relationships: Divorce, child custody, and mediation. Guilford.
- <sup>20</sup> Emery, R. E., Laumann-Billings, L., Waldron, M., Sbarra, D. A., & Dillon, P. (2001). Child custody mediation and litigation: Custody, contact, and coparenting 12 years after initial dispute resolution. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 69, 323–332; Sbarra, D. A., & Emery, R. E. (2008). Deeper into divorce: Using actor-partner analyses to explore difference in coparenting conflict following custody evaluation. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22, 144–152, 144.
- <sup>21</sup> Ackerman, M. J. (2001). *Clinician's guide to child custody evaluations*, 2nd ed. John Wiley & Sons.
- <sup>22</sup> Definition found on <http://www.cflutah.org/about%20collaborative%20law.htm>
- <sup>23</sup> This is a well-known statistic in legal cases. See [abanet.org](http://abanet.org) and *GP Solo18*(4), June 2001.
- <sup>24</sup> Macfarlane, J. (2005) *The emerging phenomenon of collaborative family law (CFL): A qualitative study of CFL cases*. [http://canada.justice.gc.ca/eng/pi/pad-rpad/rep-rap/2005\\_1/2005\\_1.pdf](http://canada.justice.gc.ca/eng/pi/pad-rpad/rep-rap/2005_1/2005_1.pdf)
- <sup>25</sup> Brian Florence is a prominent collaborative lawyer in Utah.
- <sup>26</sup> See Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-1.
- <sup>27</sup> See New York Domestic Relations Law § 170.
- <sup>28</sup> Nock, S. L., Sanchez, L. A., & Wright, J. D. (2008). *Covenant marriage: The movement to reclaim tradition in America*. Rutgers University.
- <sup>29</sup> Custody and parent time can be modified if there is a “substantial change in circumstances.” See *Fullmer v. Fullmer*, 761 P.2d 942, 946 (Utah App. 1988) and Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-10.4. Assets and debts are rarely changed, yet the court could modify them if a substantial change has occurred. See Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-5(3) (Lexis Supp. 2007) and *Childs v. Callahan*, 993 P.2d 244, 247 (Utah App. 1999). To

## Chapter 7: What Are the Legal Options for Divorce?

modify alimony, the court requires a substantial change “not foreseeable at the time of divorce.” Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-5(8)(g)(ii) (Lexis Supp. 2007).

<sup>30</sup> See *Fullmer v. Fullmer*, 761 P.2d 942, 946 (Utah App. 1988) and Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-10.4.

<sup>31</sup> See Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-5(3) (Lexis Supp. 2007) and *Childs v. Callahan*, 993 P.2d 244, 247 (Utah App. 1999).

<sup>32</sup> Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-5(8)(g)(ii) (Lexis Supp. 2007).

<sup>33</sup> See American Bar Association. (2013). A review in the year of family law, “Custody criteria.” *Family Law Quarterly*, 46(4), 524–527.

<sup>34</sup> See Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-5(8)(h) (Lexis Supp. 2007).

<sup>35</sup> See 11 U.S.C.S. § 523(a)(5) (Lexis Supp. 2007) and 26 U.S.C. § 71(a) (2000).

<sup>36</sup> See Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-5(8)(a) (Lexis Supp. 2007). The seven factors for alimony are: (1) the financial condition and needs of the person who is to receive alimony, (2) the earning capacity of the person who is to receive alimony, (3) the ability of the person who is to pay alimony to provide support, (4) the length of the marriage, (5) whether or not the recipient spouse worked in a business that was owned or operated by the payor spouse, and (7) whether or not the recipient spouse directly contributed to an increase in the payor spouse’s skill “by paying for education received by the payor spouse or allowing the payor spouse to attend school during the marriage.”

<sup>37</sup> See American Bar Association. (2013). A review in the year of family law, “Alimony/spousal support factors.” *Family Law Quarterly*, 46(4), 522–523.



## If We Get a Divorce, What Do Custody and Co-Parenting Look Like?

Co-parenting is not a competition. It's a collaboration of two homes working together with the best interest of the child at heart. Work for your kids not against them.

Dr. Anne Brown, psychotherapist and speaker

*Overview. If parents decide to divorce, one important issue to resolve is custody and time with children. Physical custody refers to where children will reside. All states have an option of joint custody for parent time. Many states have a legal assumption of joint custody that orders joint custody for parent time unless there are limiting factors demonstrating that joint custody is not in the best interest of the children. Research suggests that joint physical custody is associated with better outcomes for children than sole physical custody. We review the various parent time schedules that courts commonly approve. Legal custody refers to which parent will have access to records and make major decisions for the children concerning school, religion, and medical treatment. Most parents share joint legal custody, which means that both have access to records and work together to make major decisions for children. There are only four major considerations in joint legal custody decision making: education, medical, religion, and extracurricular activities. Regardless of legal arrangements, we conclude with recommendations for best co-parenting practices.*

A. If we get a divorce, what does sharing the children's time with the other parent look like?

One of the most important issues to settle in a divorce, if there are children involved, is how the children will allocate their time with each parent. It's important that parents try to decide this with the best interests of their children in mind rather than just considering their own wishes.

There are two types of custody: physical custody and legal custody. Physical custody refers to where the children will reside. Visitation with the noncustodial parent where the other parent has sole physical custody is

usually defined by state statute or through standards established by the majority of divorcing parents; it is most commonly every other weekend, mid-week visits, holiday visits, and extended time in the summer. In the case of joint physical custody, children will have more overnights with each parent. Sometimes, people think that joint custody means fifty-fifty time. This is true for the most extreme joint custody, but there are also many other options for joint custody depending on your state standards. In Utah, for instance, any parent time that involves more than 111 overnights per year is considered joint custody.

All states have an option of joint custody for parent time. Many states have a legal presumption that orders joint custody for parent time unless there are limiting factors demonstrating that joint custody is not in the best interest of the children.<sup>1</sup> A study that reviewed current studies on sole physical custody vs. joint physical custody<sup>2</sup> demonstrated that joint physical custody is associated with better child outcomes than sole physical custody on academic and cognitive development, self-esteem, depression, anxiety, behavioral problems, drug and alcohol abuse, and the parent-child relationship.<sup>3</sup> Still, some experts question this research. One leading expert asserts that joint physical custody is best for children when it works, but only about a quarter of families will be able to make it work over time.<sup>4</sup> When parental conflict remains high, joint physical custody can be very hard on children. Also, joint physical custody—which results in overnights in two different households—is probably not good for infants and toddlers who need more stability in their daily lives.<sup>5</sup>

If the parties live more than 45 miles apart, often joint physical custody is not an available option for parent time since getting the child to school on weekdays normally is part of the parent time arrangement. Commonly, people who have joint custody live within 20 miles of one another.

In most states, the court requires parents who do not agree on custody to hire a custody evaluator. This is a qualified person who is a therapist or PhD who looks at factors to give a recommendation to the court on parent time for the children. The cost is commonly between \$4,000 and \$15,000 for the custody evaluation per family. Usually the custody evaluator recommends that children have consistent midweek overnights in a two-week period, as well as exchanges that occur at school so that parent-to-parent exchanges are limited. Parent time is viewed in a two-week period because most commonly the weekend visitation rotates every other weekend.

Exchanges at school are optimal. As an analogy, children are like a square at Parent A’s house and a circle at Parent B’s house. This is because there are different rules and interactions with different people. When children have to transfer from their circle-self to their square-self in front of their parents, it can be difficult for the child. Thus, custody evaluators often recommend that exchanges are done at school so that the child naturally transitions from Parent A to Parent B during the school day. Sometimes when parents exchange children face-to-face, conflict occurs in front of the children and the children see fear or unkind feelings or actions between their parents. Parents can be late, and this also can cause conflict with the child. When the exchanges occur at school, the child is better shielded from these conflicts.

You may benefit from doing exercise 7.1, “Thinking About Parenting Time with Children” at the end of this chapter.

## B. What are the most common joint custody schedules?

Research does not find that one kind of schedule is better for children; it depends on a wide range of factors that influence each family’s unique situation.<sup>6</sup> The three most recommended joint custody schedules are as follows:

1. **50/50 custody in the 2/2/5 arrangement:** This has equal time-sharing and is the joint custody arrangement with the most parent time for both parents. The 2/2/5 schedule is one of the most common and popular schedules for 50/50 custody. All the drop-offs and pick-ups during the school year occur at the children’s school. One parent has every Monday and Tuesday overnight with drop-off Wednesday morning for school. The other parent has Wednesday and Thursday night with the drop-off to school Friday morning. The weekends alternate beginning after school Friday and continuing until Monday morning with drop-off to school. During the summer, the pick-up typically occurs at 9 a.m.

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Week 1	X	X	○	○	X	X	X
Week 2	X	X	○	○	○	○	○

*The 2/2/5 Parent Time Schedule*

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

The 2/2/5 schedule is often recommended by custody evaluators because it has consistent midweek days for the children and the drop-off and pick-up occur at school. With one parent dropping off and the other parent picking up, the parents are not in the same place at the same time. This minimizes potential parental conflict.

One of the benefits of this schedule for children and parents is that the children know well into the future where they will be on either a Monday or Thursday and so can better plan their activities and time with friends. In addition, there are only four exchanges in a two-week period. Many custody evaluators believe that more than four exchanges in a two-week period are excessive transitions for a child.

Further, co-parents do not have to coordinate activities on weekdays because a parent who has Tuesday could always take their child to an activity without needing the cooperation of the other parent. Also, many children do not like to spend a full week without seeing one of their parents. This schedule is recommended for younger children because they benefit from seeing both parents more frequently.

2. **50/50 custody week on/week off arrangement:** This has equal time-sharing with the child staying with one parent for a week and alternating to the other parent for the following week. Exchanges most commonly occur on Mondays at school.

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Week 1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Week 2	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

*A Typical Week On/Week Off Schedule*

There are only two exchanges in a two-week period. This schedule is commonly recommended for teenagers. All activities between co-parents must be agreed upon and cooperative because there is no consistent day for either parent. Thus, this schedule is not typically recommended for high-conflict co-parents who have children involved in activities.

3. **60/40 joint custody arrangement:** The 60/40 custody arrangement (also known as the 5/14 schedule, which is five overnights every

*Chapter 8: What Do Custody and Co-Parenting Look Like?*

fourteen days) is a common schedule because of consistent days and exchanges that occur at school. The weekends alternate from after school on Friday with pick-up from school until Monday morning with drop-off to school. Then the parent has an overnight midweek. Commonly, this is Thursday or Monday so that it is contiguous to the parent's weekend, eliminating additional transitions for the child during the week. For co-parents with children under the age of five, doing a Tuesday or Wednesday midweek can allow more frequent contact until there is secure bonding or attachment. Then in first grade the child can transition to Thursday or Monday. [Transitioning from Wednesday (Dad) Thursday (Mom) and then Friday (Dad) can be difficult for older children.]

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
Week 1	X	X	X	O	X	X	X
Week 2	X	X	X	O	O	O	O

*A Typical 60/40 Schedule*

This 40/60 schedule is akin to minimum parent time with every other weekend and one night a week, but the exchanges occur at school. This allows for a “home base” for the child, but also allows liberal parent time for both parents. This schedule has four exchanges for every two-week period. (If you do a Tuesday or Wednesday there are six exchanges every two-week period; this is commonly recommended to be transitioned in first grade to four exchanges with a Thursday or Monday overnight.)

Two other joint custody schedules to mention briefly are the 4/14 (four overnights every 14 days) and the 6/14 (six overnights every fourteen days). These are less preferred because they result in either a parent-to-parent exchange or an inconsistent midweek. This solution is used for parents who have work schedules that need accommodation or a compromise to parent conflict about overnights. This schedule is not typically in the best interest of the children as it puts more weight on the parent's schedule than the child's consistency of care.

Summer-time arrangement have three common solutions sets:

1. Each parent receives half of the summer, which is most commonly divided as a week on and a week off, with

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

exchanges commonly occurring on Monday morning at 9 a.m. Sunday exchanges are discouraged because people travel and often get home late on Sunday.

2. The parent with less custody receives four weeks in the summer (two weeks are uninterrupted and the other two weeks are commonly interrupted with one midweek visit per week from 9 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.) and the other parent getting two uninterrupted weeks in the summer.
3. Both parents receiving two uninterrupted weeks in the summer.

### C. What are the considerations in legal custody or decision making for the children?

Legal custody refers to which parent will have access to records and make major decisions for the children concerning school, religion, and medical treatment. Most parents share joint legal custody, which means that both have access to records and work together to make major decisions for the children.

Some co-parenting agreements designate a process for decision making. There are often five sequential steps in decision making. However, the decision-making steps need to be specifically mentioned in your decree of divorce.

- (1) The first step should always be a discussion between co-parents to come to an agreement.
- (2) Seek a third-party expert to give advice on the subject.
- (3) Attend mediation.
- (4) One parent may be designated as having final say.
- (5) The parents can go to court.

Sole legal custody means that only one parent will make major decisions for the child. Sole legal custody rarely occurs now.

There are only four major considerations in joint legal custody decision making:

1. *Education.* The biggest conflict is commonly centered around where the children will attend school. Commonly, school will be attended in the neighborhood school of the parent who has the majority of the overnights. For those who opt into 50/50

custody, parents commonly agree that the school and matriculating schools will remain the same as the one the child attended during the marriage unless mutually agreed in writing otherwise by the parents. Special education needs can be another consideration for education. Often parents use the advice of the experts at the school to help make special education decisions.

2. *Medical.* Medical decisions refer to who will be responsible for making medical decisions for the child. Emergency and sick care decisions are made by the parent who has the child at the time of the occurrence and notification about the issue to the other parent should be made as soon as possible. Elective surgeries, medication, and therapy are common points of conflict in medical decision making.
3. *Religion.* Religious decision making usually pertains to rites of passage and religious ceremonies involving children that are practiced within a specific religion. If parties cannot reach an agreement on these events, then most commonly the event will not be performed until the children can make their own decisions at the age of 18. Each parent commonly practices their religious beliefs with their children on their own parent time. Thus, you cannot force a co-parent to have your children attend church services during their parent time. Because weekends exchange every other weekend, it is common for children to attend religious services only every other weekend.
4. *Extracurricular Activities.* Extracurricular activities are commonly decided by the parent who has the relevant parent time. However, many extracurricular activities have weekend commitments that require cooperation with both parents, since the vast majority of parent time schedules have a rotating weekend. Commonly, the parent with the relevant parent time gets to make the decision regarding the extracurricular activity. It is best for children to have both parents agree on activities that share time so the children aren't forced to attend only every other weekend for their commitments.

Most disputes regarding children are actually day-to-day disputes (e.g., bedtime, discipline, nutrition, haircuts, sleepovers). However, this is not within the realm of joint legal decision making. The rule is that the parent

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

who is exercising the parent time will make the decisions during their parent time. Exceptions to this rule may be made by the court if there is a safety concern or extreme behavior.

### D. What are best recommendations for co-parents?

While there are a lot of legal rules involved in co-parenting, common courtesy and common sense are just as important. Here (repeated, for some of them) are our

#### *Top Ten Recommendations for Co-Parents*

1. Long hellos and short goodbyes between parents and children are best.
2. Realize that when your children are with your co-parent, the co-parent gets to make all the day-to-day decisions.
3. Transition from being ex-spouses to being effective business partners. This involves actions such as: being proactive in communication; using a co-parenting app for communication, calendaring, exchanges, and receipts; never asking your child to relay a message or give a check to the other parent; and promptly paying all child-related bills on time. You don't need to like the person you do business with, but being consistent and respectful business partners will benefit your children.
4. No ghosting. Do not cut off communication with your co-parent. This then forces children to do the communication and is putting the child in the middle.
5. Be civil and kind to each other at exchanges or children's events. Don't transact co-parenting business in front of the children. This is yet another way to put your children in the middle. Instead, use your co-parenting app to exchange co-parenting information.
6. Never talk negatively about the other co-parent in front of the children and do not allow third parties to do so either. Children are half of mom and half of dad and hearing negative things can affect their self-esteem.
7. For the benefit of your child, you should treat your co-parent at least as well as you would treat the grocery clerk. If you cannot

do this, you have still not achieved an emotional divorce from your spouse. Seek help from a counselor.

8. You should not tell the child about possible changes to the parent time schedule unless you have a prior agreement with the co-parent. Suggesting a possible change in schedule prior to a co-parent agreement is putting the child in the middle. Any changes in schedule outside the court order should be made between co-parents rather than between parent and child.
9. There is no make-up time for missed parent time unless it is mutually agreed upon in writing between the co-parents. Use it or lose it. You need to work your commitments around your parent time schedule instead of having your child's time work around your schedule. Consistency in the parent time schedule is paramount for the stability of children.
10. Do *not* require your own parental discipline measures to be enforced on the other parent's time.

## E. What are other considerations to stay cooperative as a co-parent?

It's helpful to understand that children commonly tell Parent A one story and Parent B a different, conflicting story. Because of this, the best practice is to reach out to the other co-parent before assuming what actually occurred. In a cooperative example, you may send a communication asking, "What is your perspective on the incident that occurred today with you and Jimmy? I want to understand what happened from your point of view." In the law, no one is found guilty before they have an opportunity to defend themselves. It is also wise to allow open communication between co-parents to occur so that conflict does not escalate.

Develop a routine to your communication with your co-parent as you would in any other business setting. If there is a problem, approach the problem as you would a problem at work. As a rule of thumb for respect, if you wouldn't send your communication to your boss, then don't send it to your co-parent. Remember that if there is a conflict, the judge will read all your communication to your co-parent. Thus, it is wise to write communications assuming a judge will read them. Use the BIFF Response, suggested by co-parenting expert Bill Eddy.<sup>7</sup>

## SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

- **Brief.** Keep your response brief, perhaps no longer than a paragraph. Concise writing gives the other co-parent less to respond to and allows you to summarize your main point.
- **Informative.** Give information that is straightforward. If the co-parent is being hostile, you do not need to respond to her or his emotions. Stay cooperative for the benefit of your children. Again, remember that anything you write can be shown to the judge in your case.
- **Friendly.** Keep a business-like friendly tone. This is your child's parent. Respect should come because of the love you have for your child. Judges demand respect in co-parenting relationships. End communication with a friendly greeting.
- **Firm.** Be firm with your responses. Set boundaries. Do not be harsh, but rather be clear about the questions you need the other parents to answer.

We encourage co-parents to stay cooperative regardless of the other co-parent's behavior because co-parenting is about the child, not the other co-parent. Even just one parent staying cooperative can make a big difference in the child's life. Use the reasonable co-parent standard. If there was an audience of 100 co-parents and ten were called up on the stage, what would the majority of reasonable co-parents do? Would they, for instance, allow the child to go to the other parent for a grandmother's funeral even though it is their parent time? We believe a reasonable co-parent would agree.

Co-parenting is about raising responsible children. If you decide that divorce is the right step for you, please be a responsible and respectful co-parent. This can be difficult, as this chapter amply attests. But for the sake of your children, make it a priority.

## Exercise for Chapter 8

### Exercise 8.1: Thinking about Parenting Time with Children

Below, think about a possible responsibility and time-sharing plan that you feel would be in the best interests of your children and, as much as possible, fair to both parents. First, think about who will have physical custody of the children. Then, consider time-sharing during the school year and time-sharing when children are out of school, such as the summer

Chapter 8: What Do Custody and Co-Parenting Look Like?

months. Then think about time-sharing on special occasions, such as birthdays and holidays.

In the best interests of your children, who will have physical custody of the children, or will you share physical custody of the children? Why is this the best situation for your children? Write down your thoughts here:

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*B. Time-Sharing Calendar—School Year.* On the calendar below, map out a possible time-sharing schedule for your children for those times of the year when they are in school.

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
			<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>31</b>	

*C. Time-Sharing Calendar—Summer.* On the calendar below, map out a possible time-sharing schedule for your children for those times of the year when they are not in school.

SHOULD I TRY TO WORK IT OUT?

SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT
			<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>19</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>31</b>	

*D. Time-Sharing on Special Occasions.* Sometimes it can be difficult to decide who will have the children on special occasions, such as birthdays and holidays. Below, make a list of possible special days and indicate how time with children will be shared or allocated on these occasions. Think of the best interests of your children.

Special Occasion (e.g., birthdays, holidays):	How could time with children be shared or allocated?

## Resource List

Below are resources that some people who have divorced have found helpful. Although we do not endorse these organizations or their services, we believe that they can be helpful for many people.

*Center for Divorce Education:* <https://divorce-education.com/>

*National Family Resiliency Center:* <https://www.nfrchelp.org/>

*National Parents Organization:* <https://www.sharedparenting.org/>

*Association of Family and Conciliation Courts:* <https://www.afcnet.org/>

*National Stepfamily Resource Center:* <https://www.stepfamilies.info/>

## Endnotes to Chapter 8

<sup>1</sup> See: American Bar Association. (2013). A review in the year of family law, “Custody criteria.” *Family Law Quarterly*, 46(4), 524–527.

<sup>2</sup> Joint physical custody was defined in most studies as each parent having more than one third of the parent time.

<sup>3</sup> Nielsen, L. (2018). Joint versus sole physical custody: Children’s outcomes independent of parent–child relationships, income, and conflict in 60 studies. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 59, 247–281.

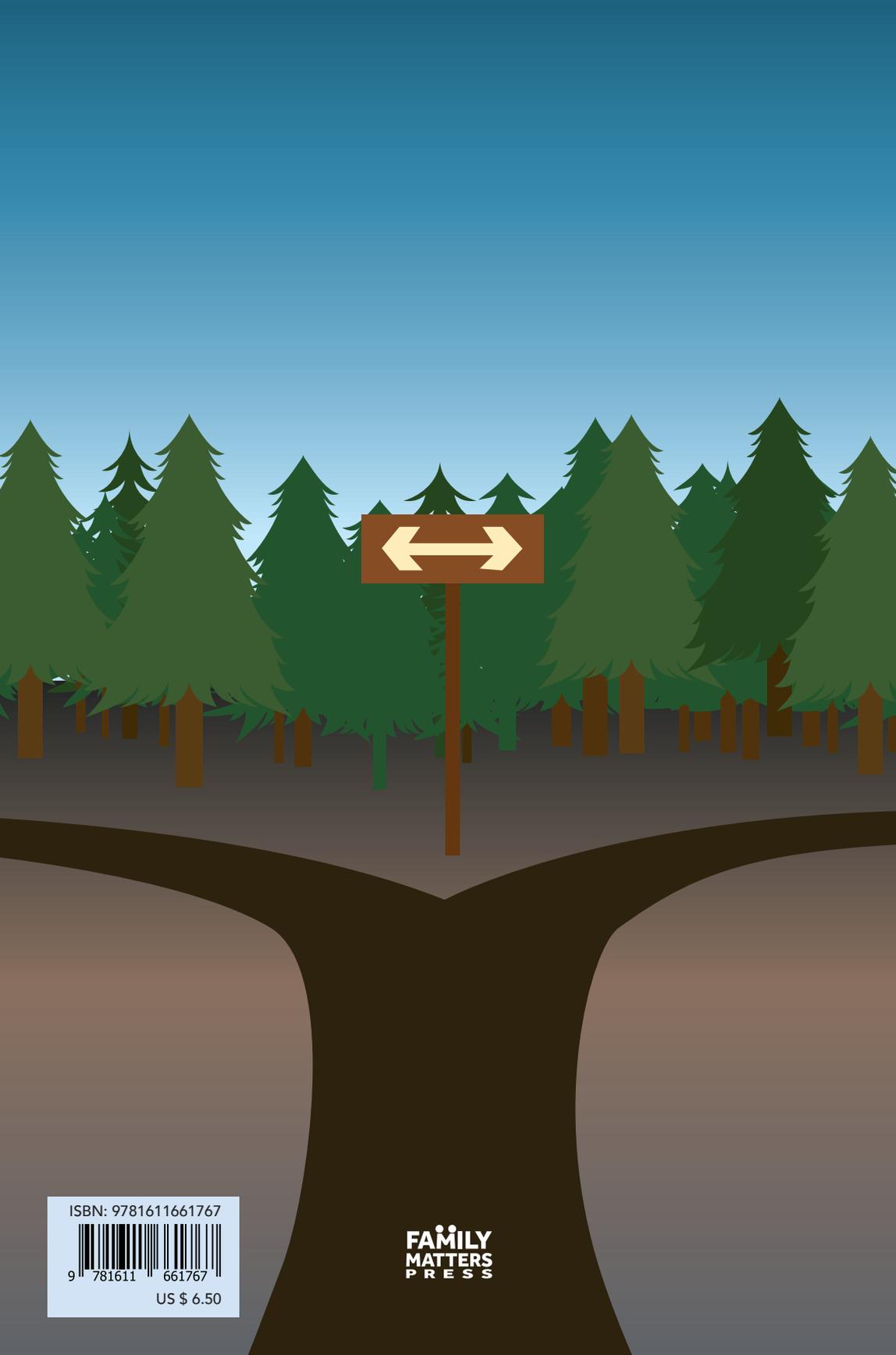
<sup>4</sup> Emery, R. (2012). *Renegotiating family relationships: Divorce, child custody, and mediation*. Guilford.

<sup>5</sup> Emery, R. (2012). *Renegotiating family relationships: Divorce, child custody, and mediation*. Guilford.

<sup>6</sup> Emery, R. (2012). *Renegotiating family relationships: Divorce, child custody, and mediation*. Guilford.

<sup>7</sup> Eddy, B. (2018, September 30). BIFF: 4 ways to respond to hostile comments. *Psychology Today Blog*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/5-types-people-who-can-ruin-your-life/201809/biff-4-ways-respond-hostile-comments>.





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