

Divorce/Separation: When is it Traumatic?

Adapted by Ria Severance, LMFT
from Ellie Izzo, Ph.D., CDI Streamlined Protocols Training, June, 2 2013

One in 2 marriages ends in divorce. Do some of those who stay married do so to avoid the trauma of divorce? Given that it's so common, can divorce also be traumatic? Yes! Ellie guesses that many of those who have divorced would describe it as an agonizing ordeal.

Some factors associated with divorce being experienced as traumatic:

- Degree of trauma/distress in each partner's family of origin's history of divorce, and/or personal history with divorce – *may not be evident*.
- Degree and severity of conflict expressed emotionally, verbally, physically, financially and/or legally (e.g. acting out, defensiveness, verbal attacking, pulling the kids into the middle, fear, hostility, aggression etc.).
- The specific, larger meaning "divorce" or "separation" has for a given partner, and the meaning of "leaving" or "being left" – *may not be evident*.
- A partner's coping skills (e.g. ability to regulate emotions, tolerate distress, verbally negotiate effectively, consider the other's perspective, empathize, stay focused on values, wellbeing of all family members, and goals).
- A partner's beliefs, values, cultural perspective, spiritual views regarding divorce – *may not ever have been identified*.
- Degree and quality of available support and the nature of reactions from family, friends and helping professionals.
- Degree partners' standards of living may fall, the presence of very young children, and the degree of change required (e.g. change schools, change living location, change in childcare, proximity to extended family and other support systems) are, understandably, associated with increased levels of fear and anxiety for children as well as parents.

Those experiencing divorce/separation/custody disputes as traumatic, are at risk to:

- Struggle to sustain close relationships,
- Struggle to choose friends or new partners wisely,
- Experience sexual challenges,
- Experience periods of hostility,
- Argue repeatedly with friends, family and colleagues,
- Withdraw socially, and/or
- Feel threatened constantly.

If you or someone you care for is suffering through a divorce/separation/custody dispute, meet with a collaboratively-trained and qualified Divorce Coach, Child Specialist who also works with adults or a Co-Parenting Specialist. These skilled Professionals can:

- Help a partner transition more effectively, rather than being at the effect of trauma,
- Assess and enhance a partner's ability to integrate and finally accept the experience of divorce/separation,
- Facilitate effective parenting during this traumatic time, and
- As necessary, support and build coping skills that mitigate the traumatic effects of a high-conflict divorce/separation/custody disputes.