

Divorce for Grownups

Divorce Need Not be Destructive--Here's Why
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The Six Signals of Divorce

Divorce should not be a surprise. Here are signals to watch.

On many occasions I have written about the issue of mutuality in [divorce](#). In few cases do both partners reach the decision to divorce at the same time. Invariably, one of the partners, perhaps the one with a lower pain threshold, decides that she just can't live with the [marriage](#) any longer, and notwithstanding all the loss and dislocation of divorce, decides that it would be better than continuing the marriage. Although the initiator can be and frequently is the husband, it is the wife in about seventy five percent of divorces who initiates the ending of the marriage. The non-initiating spouse may be close behind and may quickly agree that divorce is the best option. Or, he may be resistant, arguing that the marriage can be salvaged if only they try one more time and a little harder. In some cases the non-initiator is completely thunderstruck arguing that they have an acceptable marriage and is she out of her mind to want to put the family through a divorce?

The issue of mutuality is very important because the way it is managed generally determines whether the divorce will be amicable or bitter. As I have explored the reasons for this elsewhere I won't go into depth here.

All I want to do is to set the stage for a discussion of how one tells if a divorce is imminent. My goal is to educate the otherwise oblivious spouse who is surprised by the divorce even though the warning signs have been evident for a long time. It is not my mission here to explore why marriages fail. My goal is limited to helping people recognize the warning signals as early as possible.

Marriages don't break; they erode over time. Each time a sarcastic or hurtful remark goes without repair or apology some of the bond that holds a couple together washes away. Each time a spouse fails to identify an emotional need of the other and attend to it, a little more glue disappears. Each time a conflict is avoided because the couple despairs of constructive discussion and resolution there is more erosion. And each time [sex](#) is refused or avoided because one of the partners feels emotionally disconnected the process accelerates.

There are numerous other sources of erosion including the displacement of time and attention to the marriage by obsessive concerns with [career](#) or children. And even though there may be some explosive precipitating event such as an affair revealed, most of the time there is severe erosion by the time of the discovery. So how does one tell that the erosion has brought the marriage to the point of divorce?

The next time you are in a restaurant look for the sad couple eating dinner in silence. They make little or no eye contact and have little or no conversation. They are completely disengaged and are simply enduring the meal until they can finish and leave. That's a couple on the verge of divorce. It may not happen soon and may not happen at all because there are couples who are held together by nothing but inertia and [fear](#). But at least one or both of these unfortunates are thinking about divorce.

There are six signals of impending divorce. There are probably many more but these are the big ones.

1. No Conflict Resolution

The noted researcher John Gottman has argued that it is not lack of communication that sinks a marriage but, rather, lack of effective conflict resolution. Couples who have not evolved a way to resolve differences without injury to the relationship end up avoiding disagreement and conflict. One or both has arrived at a point of despair that it is pointless to try to resolve a difference with his/her mate. It may be that one or both are simply conflict avoidant. Or one or both may regard every conflict as a fight to be won by [bullying](#) the other into submission. What matters is that someone has given up. Differences are submerged resulting in a loss of respect, increasing distance and gradual withdrawal.

2. Emotional Disengagement

Emotional engagement is a minimum requirement for the development and maintenance of intimacy. Willing discussion of feelings, one's own feelings and the other's feelings are a part. Interest in the emotional life of the other and empathic engagement of each other's emotional life all constitute the required elements for an intimate relationship.

3. Disaffection

Emotional engagement is generally accompanied by the withdrawal of affection. If your wife has disengaged emotionally from you she probably doesn't feel much love for you. Divorcing people commonly say that "they have fallen out of love." And depending on how sour the relationship has become one or both probably don't like each other very much.

4. Lack of Sex

Sex both expresses and reinforces emotional connectedness. When a couple has not had sex in a long time it is usually a reliable indicator that emotional disengagement is advancing steadily. It is yet another indicator that the partners take no pleasure in each other and that the bonds are rapidly eroding if not already in a terminal state.

5. Increased Focus outside the Marriage

Empty marriages are very boring. Some couples compensate by pouring themselves into their children so that child centered activity becomes the sole content of family life. Others pour themselves further into careers working late every night so the time with the other is minimized. And as emotional satisfaction is sought exclusively outside the marriage the probability of an affair soars. The majority of affairs I see in my practice have started with a coworker who takes an interest and is fun to be with.

6. Preparation for a Single Life

I recall a couple I worked with many years ago in which the husband, as part of his planning for the coming divorce, took a second mortgage on the house to pay for a hair transplant to improve his [dating](#) prospects. Although this was a bit extreme it is typical for the initiating spouse to begin preparing herself or himself by getting in shape, losing weight, attending to hair and wardrobe and other things to enhance appearance. And particularly with women who have stayed home we often see a new interest in refreshing or acquiring a career to be less dependent on the earnings of the husband. We also will often see the initiator taking up an activity such as tennis or golf without involving the other spouse and generally beginning to build a [social network](#) as a single rather than as a couple.

What to Do?

If you see yourself in this scenario it would be understatement to say that your marriage is in serious trouble. I would not try to prognosticate about the precise tipping point beyond which a marriage is absolutely doomed. But I can say that these signals, or at least most of them, are present in almost every divorce I

mediate. At a minimum it is time for a long and honest talk with your spouse. If you can't have that talk without it deteriorating into blaming and recrimination, suggest an urgent session with a marriage counselor or family therapist. Because if you are heading for divorce, the sooner the two of you face the issue and plan for an amicable separation, the better your chances of achieving a good and non destructive divorce.