

# Should I Keep Trying to Work It Out?



A Guidebook for  
Individuals and  
Couples at the  
Crossroads of Divorce  
(And Before)

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# 1.

## Introduction and Overview

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*Divorce is such a gut-wrenching experience, and there isn't anyone I know that hasn't come through it with their whole world just turned upside down.*

—“Janet,” a divorced, single mom

**Overview:** In this chapter you will learn about the general purpose of this guidebook. It is designed to be a resource to individuals at the crossroads of divorce, that is, for individuals who are thinking about divorce or whose spouse is thinking about divorce. You will learn about the requirement in Utah for divorcing parents to participate in a divorce orientation education class intended to help individuals at the crossroads of divorce understand the effects of divorce, and to carefully consider their options, including repairing their relationship and keeping their family together. You will also learn why the Utah Legislature thought this class would be valuable, including information about the number of divorces in Utah, the estimated costs to the taxpayers of divorce, and a brief summary of the effects of divorce on children and adults.

James and Shelly (names have been changed) were considering divorce. They have three children. As with many couples who divorce, they had a big fight. 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. After the big fight, Shelly took the children an hour away from her home to her mother's house. Shelly 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. Sam decided he was ready to move on and 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 in the current marriage.

Felicia and Rolando were also at the crossroads of divorce. Felicia had yelled about an issue regarding their children. Rolando had stayed calm, but Felicia was heartbroken and refused to talk about the problem. The couple separated abruptly and Felicia took the children with her. They needed to decide if this separation was going to become a permanent fixture in their lives.

This guidebook is a way to help couples like Sam and Hilary, James and Shelly, and Felicia and Rolando make important choices that come when a couple is deciding between working through marital problems or divorcing.

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

This guidebook is designed to be a resource to individuals who may be thinking about getting a divorce or whose spouse is thinking about divorce. These individuals are 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. This guidebook contains research-based information about important questions that individuals at the crossroads of divorce often have, such as:

- ❖ Can my marriage be repaired and can we be happy again?
- ❖ Is divorce a dependable path to happiness?
- ❖ What are the effects of divorce on children, adults, and the communities they live in?
- ❖ 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.

We know that these are sensitive and difficult questions to answer. Circumstances are different for everyone. We believe there are valid reasons for a divorce. And many individuals going through divorce want to keep working to save the marriage but their partners do not. The law allows one partner to end a marriage without the consent of his or her spouse. 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, we try to present the scientific research on marriage and divorce accurately and fairly. And the research is clear that, in general, the process of family breakup marked by divorce has potential problems for children, adults, and the communities they live in. In some instances, divorce actually improves the lives of



those involved, but for the most part, researchers have found that divorce generally has negative effects. Also, research suggests that some—maybe even many—individuals at the crossroads of divorce may be able to repair their marriages and avoid those potential negative consequences. A lot of good research identifies the knowledge and skills that individuals need to form and sustain a healthy and happy marriage. And there are good resources available to help those who want to work to keep trying to improve their relationship. If you decide to divorce, there are legal options to consider that may be better for you and your children. This guidebook can give you solid information that will help you make good choices in your individual circumstances.

In 2007, the Utah Legislature passed a first-of-its-kind law to require individuals who file for a separation or divorce and who have children under 18 years old to participate in a divorce orientation education class. The purpose of the class is to help individuals considering a divorce to 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. This guidebook can be an additional resource for individuals who take the divorce orientation education class.

We hope this *Crossroads of Divorce* guidebook can be useful to people in other circumstances, as well. For instance, individuals who may not be thinking too 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 of 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 struggling with their marriages want valid information, like the information in this guidebook, to share with loved ones. In addition, perhaps the information in this guidebook can help those who have already experienced a divorce understand some of the challenges they have faced and better prepare for future relationships. Marriage counselors, religious leaders, and mediators who are working with couples facing a possible divorce may want to use or recommend this guidebook. And because most people think that divorce is a serious problem in our society, this guidebook has general educational value; it is not limited just to those who are currently going through a divorce.

Research suggests that some—maybe even many—individuals at the crossroads of divorce may be able to repair their marriages and avoid potential negative consequences.

## **Using 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 guidebook, so there may be some repetition of information in the various chapters. Select the parts that are most helpful to you. You may want to look over the table of contents to see which parts might be most helpful. Brief overviews are at the beginning of each chapter. In addition to all the research that is presented, sprinkled throughout the guidebook are stories and quotations from real people we have interviewed in Utah and a handful of other states who have been at the crossroads of divorce, 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 get from all the research findings we present. (We have changed the names of these individuals to preserve their privacy.)

Also, at the end of each chapter, there are some exercises or self-guided activities so that you can evaluate your own situation and think about your best course of action. These

The exercises provided in this book may help you think more clearly about your decision to divorce or not to divorce.

exercises are one of the most valuable parts of the guidebook. Sometimes at the crossroads of divorce people can be caught up in emotions it can be difficult to sort out your thoughts and feelings. Moreover, they often lack helpful information about marriage and divorce. In these situations, people often make decisions that satisfy them for the short run but may not be an optimal decision for the long run. 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.

Many students, research assistants, and colleagues provided us with help and guidance while writing this guidebook. We are grateful to them for their help and contributions. In addition, members of the Utah Commission on Marriage that oversees the Utah Healthy Marriage Initiative reviewed this guidebook and made suggestions. They endorsed this guidebook. But we, as the authors, take responsibility for the content.

## **B. Why is a divorce orientation education class needed?**

When the Utah Legislature passed the divorce orientation education legislation, they wanted to encourage Utahns thinking about a divorce to consider their options carefully. After careful consideration, if some marriages can be repaired and families remain intact, then everyone probably is better off. If individuals choose a divorce, then it is important for them to be well informed of what to expect and what legal options are available.

The Utah Legislature is concerned with the number of divorces in Utah and the economic, social, and personal costs involved. There are about 10,000 divorces a year in Utah,<sup>1</sup> and a little more than half (52%) of these divorces involve children.<sup>2</sup> About one in five (18%) Utahns have ever been divorced.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, nearly one in three (29%) married Utahns report that they thought their marriage had, at some point, been in serious trouble and had thought about divorce.<sup>4</sup> More than 90% of Utahns think that divorce is a serious problem in our society.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the personal costs of divorce to families, a recent study from Utah State University estimated the financial costs of Utah divorces to Utah taxpayers to be more than \$180 million a year, or about \$18,000 per divorce.<sup>6</sup> A lot of these costs come from the fact that divorce is one of the most common ways that adults and children fall into poverty and thus receive some government assistance.<sup>7</sup> Another, more rigorous national study conservatively estimated the cost nationwide of family fragmentation—divorce or having children without marrying—to be \$112 billion a year, and the cost to Utah taxpayers was estimated to be about \$276 million a year.<sup>8</sup>

For these reasons, the Utah Legislature has required that divorcing parents, before proceeding with a divorce, be given information that may help them decide if a divorce is the right thing for them, give them resources for how to improve their relationship, or help them be better prepared for the challenges of a divorce. A recent survey of 2,000 California adults showed that more than 80% agreed that when a married couple with children is considering a divorce, they should be required to attend some kind of marriage education class or counseling before the divorce is granted.<sup>9</sup> We suspect that Utahns' attitudes are similar. Indeed, one Utah divorced single parent—"Brittany"—shared with us her strong personal feelings about this idea:

*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].*

We believe that you and your children deserve nothing less than careful consideration of whether divorce is the right thing to do and to make that decision based on the best information possible. We encourage you to take the time to review the information and do the exercises in this guidebook. Whatever your decision, we wish you and your family the best.

Like James and Shelly, in the example at the beginning of the chapter, you may decide that counseling will help you make a more 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 happy 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 all of the issues in their divorce. They continued to work well together as co-parents for the sake of their children. We hope you won't be like Felicia and Rolando, whose emotions drove them almost unthinkingly toward divorce, blocking any communication with each other and preventing any attempt to salvage civility in the relationship even though they will be co-parents to their children for the rest of their lives. They fought an expensive battle in court and the litigation over the children continued as each of them remarried.

If parents decide to divorce, the Utah Legislature requires them to take another brief course to help them make plans to minimize the negative effects of divorce on their children. The course to help divorcing parents minimize the negative effects of divorce is different from (and in addition to) the required divorce orientation education class that is designed to help individuals at the crossroads of divorce carefully consider their options.

## 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 Contents on pages 3-4 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 at the crossroads of divorce often have. Next, you may want to skim the overview at the beginning of each chapter you have noticed to see if it is something you are interested in. Then think about how valuable the information in the chapter will be to you. 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. Please consider carefully; make this a contract with yourself to help you think clearly at this challenging crossroad in your life.

Then, 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 better understand what might have gone wrong in your marriage and learn what you can do better the next time. Whatever your goal might be, write it down.

Chapter 2: Can unhappy marriages become happy again? How?				
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: How common is divorce and what are the reasons?				
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: Does divorce help adults become happier?				
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 5: What are the possible consequences of divorce for 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:	
Chapter 6: What are the possible consequences of divorce for 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 7: What are the financial consequences of 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 8: 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:	

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

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## 2.

# Can unhappy marriages become happy again? How?

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*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>10</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>11</sup>

**Overview:** Most unhappy marriages become happy again, if couples can stick it out. While some divorces are necessary, some marriages can be repaired. Some individuals and couples read books or use other resources on their own to help improve their marriages. Others participate in marriage education classes to improve their relationship skills; some resources for finding good marriage education classes are reviewed here. 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. 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 repair your relationship. Ten characteristics of a healthy marriage are discussed.

Some may be surprised to learn that many unhappy 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. In a recent study,<sup>12</sup> married Utahns were asked if they ever thought their marriage was in trouble. Nearly half (47%) said "yes." (Utahns were even more likely than Americans in general to report this.) Nearly one in three (29%) married Utahns said that at some time they thought their marriage was in trouble and had thought about divorce. About one in ten (11%) said they had talked to their spouse about a divorce in the last three years. Nationally, about one in seven (13%) married individuals say that they have seriously thought about divorcing their spouse recently.<sup>13</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.

One such couple we know worked through a difficult situation with adultery. Four years later they both said they had never been happier. The couple was happy that they had worked through the adultery, which seemed impossible at the time of discovery. Their four children were able to have a complete family and both spouses had gone through forgiveness, healing, and changing. Although this decision may not be right for every couple, this couple was happy about their decision to stay married.

Four years after a situation with adultery, one couple said they had never been happier and were glad they worked through what seemed impossible.

Individuals at the crossroads of divorce sometimes struggle with a false choice: "Do I divorce so that I can find happiness again, or do I stay together for the family's sake and remain unhappy?" But as the next section explains, if they can stick it out, their marriage is likely to become happy again. And there are helpful resources for those willing to work at it.

## **A. Can unhappy marriages become happy again?**

It may be difficult to face the issues that you and your spouse are struggling with, but research suggests that couples that are able to stick it out and stay together usually end up happier down the road than couples who divorce. (Chapter 4 shows that divorce is often not a way back to happiness.) 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>14</sup> As this study followed these couples over the next five years, they found that about 15% of these unhappy individuals did divorce. But 85% hung on. The better news is that those who hung on weren't miserable. About two out of three unhappily married adults who avoided divorce ended up happily married to the same spouse five years later. And the unhappiest individuals improved the most; more than three-quarters of the unhappiest individuals who avoided divorce said they were now happy. Couples overcome very serious problems



in their marriages and often do find happiness again. Incidentally, violence in these unhappy relationships was not common; 77% of those that divorced and 85% of those that stayed together reported that an argument had never gotten physical.

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.) We do hope, however, that you will give serious thought to the possibility of trying to strengthen their marriage rather than ending it. You may benefit from exercise 2.1, "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 twenty 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 a lot different than we thought. I think people make too much about "compatibility," but yeah, I was amazed at how different we were. And my expectations about what marriage was and how things would be were upset, 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 devastated me. It hurt like nothing I've ever felt. I felt like a failure. But somehow we hung on. I grew up more. She was able to get some help and overcome some of her baggage from an abusive father. And over time, well, 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. We still have things that are hard. But we've built a wonderful life together and raised some wonderful children, and . . . . It's scary to think about how close we came to maybe giving that up.*

As we will discuss in Chapter 4, some divorced individuals express regret that they and their ex-spouse did not work harder to try to save their marriage, and divorce, in general, does not make life better. The rest of this chapter will discuss ways that individuals and couples can try to improve and strengthen their marriages, including seeking out marriage education classes, getting help from a marriage counselor, and self-guided efforts. 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 unhappy to happy in their marriages do not get help from outside experts such as marriage therapists. Of course, some do seek help from a trained, professional counselor, and some seek help from a

religious leader. Some seek informal help from trusted friends or family members. But 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>15</sup> Others work on improving their relationship by themselves. “Fran” told us her story about this. Her first marriage ended early on when she discovered her husband’s 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. And years later as we interviewed “Fran,” she described a rich and rewarding long-term marriage; she was sure she made the right decision to work through their problems.

In Box 2.1, we provide a list of excellent books and websites dealing with marriage and how to improve your relationship that may help you. Some of the websites listed have “relationship inventories” or questionnaires that you can take to assess the strengths and weaknesses of your relationship. Some of these websites introduce you to programs you can do on your own to improve your relationship. In Box 2.2 we highlight one excellent resource, a book by perhaps the leading marriage and relationship expert in the world, Dr. John Gottman. The book has many exercises you can do on your own to improve your relationship.

### **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. (The Utah Healthy Marriage Initiative has a guidebook for engaged and newlywed couples called *The Utah Marriage Handbook: Keys to a Healthy Marriage*. It is available at [www.utahmarriage.org](http://www.utahmarriage.org).)

## Books

- *The Divorce Remedy: The Proven 7-Step Program for Saving Your Marriage*, by Michele Weiner Davis. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.
- *Can My Marriage Be Saved? True Stories of Saved Marriages*, by Mae Chambers & Erika Chambers. Hendersonville, TN: Pass It On Publications, 2008.
- *Fighting For Your Marriage*, by Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, & Susan Blumberg. New York: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- *The Power of Commitment: A Guide to Active, Lifelong Love*, by Dr. Scott M. Stanley. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.
- *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, by John M. Gottman & Nan Silver. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000.
- *The Great Marriage Tune-Up Book: A Proven Program for Evaluating and Renewing Your Relationship*, by Dr. Jeffrey H. Larson. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.
- *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*, by Linda J. Waite & Maggie Gallagher. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

## Websites

- [www.utahmarriage.org](http://www.utahmarriage.org)—Maintained by the Utah Commission on Marriage, the same people responsible for this guidebook.
- [www.prepare-enrich.com](http://www.prepare-enrich.com)—Contains an on-line, self-guided relationship questionnaire for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses in your relationship, called “Couple Checkup.” Click on the “Couple Checkup” button to investigate this inexpensive service. The program is done in your home with computer-generated feedback. It was developed by one of the world’s leading relationship educators.
- [www.couplecare.info](http://www.couplecare.info)—Introduces you to an inexpensive, mostly self-guided program to work on improving your relationship. You do the work in your home; a trained facilitator will call you from time to time to ask if you have questions and discuss how things are going. The program was developed by some of the world’s leading relationship educators.
- [relate-institute.org](http://relate-institute.org)—Features a “relationship inventory” that, for a small cost, you can take to get feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of your relationship. The RELATE questionnaire has hundreds of questions to help evaluate your relationship. You take the questionnaire over the Internet and then get quick feedback emailed back to you. It is one of the most thoroughly researched and tested relationship inventories. It has been developed by a team of researchers at Brigham Young University and other universities during the past 25 years.
- [www.divorcebusting.com](http://www.divorcebusting.com)—This website has resources associated with the facts behind divorce topics.
- [www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com)—Resources for marriage education classes, literature, statistics, and more.
- [www.healthymarriageinfo.org](http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org)—Developed by the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, which is funded by the federal government, has helpful links associated with forming and sustaining healthy marriages.



Couples who are at a crossroads may need resources that will help them to repair their marriages. Here we highlight one excellent resource you can use on your own from perhaps the foremost marriage and relationship expert in the world, Dr. John Gottman:

*The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*

Dr. John M. Gottman and Nan Silver. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000.

The book focuses on the seven, researched-based principles at the heart of healthy, successful marriages. In addition, there are numerous exercises or activities throughout the book that help couples learn more about each other, where their marriage might be weak, or where they have the biggest strengths. Some of the exercises help couples rebuild friendship, respect, and admiration. Other exercises help couples analyze their communication and problem-solving skills and improve them. The exercises are based in solid research and counseling experience. They are short and easy to take, either alone or with your spouse.

A recent survey in Utah found that only slightly more than one in four (27%) Utahns reported that they had any kind of formal relationship education or training before marrying, although almost all think that it is valuable to do so.<sup>16</sup> A good piece of news is that those who have married more recently apparently are more likely to have had some kind of preparation for marriage. Still, most Utahns do not invest in formal preparation for marriage. Similarly, we suspect that even fewer Utahns take marriage enrichment classes periodically during their marriage to enhance their marriage and improve their communication skills. Probably most are unaware of the many resources available to help them form and sustain a healthy, happy marriage, or to repair a struggling marriage. The Utah Healthy Marriage Initiative maintains a website of marriage education classes in the state (see [www.utahmarriage.org](http://www.utahmarriage.org), or call 801-526-9317).

In addition to marriage preparation classes, many states have also been focusing on classes for couples to take during their marriage. Since the mid-1990s, a growing number of states and communities have been investing in more resources to provide couples with marriage education classes.<sup>17</sup> Marriage education is different from marriage counseling or therapy. It brings individuals and couples together, usually in groups of 10–20, 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>18</sup> Marriage education is offered in various places, such as churches, community settings, workplaces, hospitals, schools, and colleges. Some classes are targeted to specific groups of people, such as Hispanic couples, new-parent couples, remarried couples, or

Catholic couples. Many marriage education classes are offered for free, especially when they are run by religious organizations. 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 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. Many Utah colleges and universities offer semester-long marriage enrichment classes. Generally, couples are encouraged to attend marriage education classes together, but this may not be a requirement. The 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 and 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. And 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 done one-on-one or in a small group with a therapist; marriage education does not deal openly with an individual’s or couple’s private issues.

Those who take a marriage and relationship education class almost always report that they enjoyed the class and felt that it helped their marriage. So what does the scientific research show? Can marriage education classes help couples—even struggling ones—improve their marriages? A lot of research has been done on this question. Many marriage education programs have been scientifically evaluated over the past 30 years. A study that reviewed all of the evaluation research on the effectiveness of marriage and relationship education concluded that it was helpful in strengthening communication and problem-solving skills and improving marital satisfaction for both men and women.<sup>19</sup> So there is pretty good evidence that marriage education can be helpful for couples. Also, research suggests that the effectiveness of marriage education doesn’t wear off after just a couple of weeks; couples retain the skills they learned, at least for a while.<sup>20</sup> Of course, these are averages. Some couples may not benefit much from marriage education, but others benefit a great deal. Only a few studies have looked specifically at the effectiveness of marriage education for couples who are in serious distress and may be thinking about divorce, but these few studies suggest that distressed couples can benefit from marriage education.<sup>21</sup>

Overall, marriage education is able to help many couples build and maintain a healthier and happier marriage. A successful marriage is about more than just making a

good choice of whom to marry; it is also a learned skill. “Brittany,” a remarried mother with several children, expressed strong feelings about this when we interviewed her:

*In my first marriage we didn't have that great of lines of communication, so 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 2.3 describes several well-known and well-tested marriage education programs. You may benefit from exercise 2.2 at the end of this chapter, “Thinking About Education to Strengthen Marriages.”

## **D. Can marriage counseling help? How can I choose a good counselor?**

For couples with serious relationship problems, marriage education classes may not be enough or even appropriate. Individuals and couples who are thinking about divorce should seriously consider seeing a marriage counselor or therapist. Dr. William J. Doherty, a noted marriage scholar and therapist, argues that individuals have a responsibility to themselves, their children, and their communities to try and save a marriage when there are serious problems. He argues that just as it is wrong for someone not to seek treatment for a life-threatening physical illness when there is a reasonable chance for a cure, it is wrong not to seek help to overcome relationship problems that

### Box 2.3: Well-Known Marriage and Relationship Education Programs

An excellent source of information about marriage and relationship education is the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center ([www.healthymarriageinfo.org/indiv\\_couple/marriage\\_edu.index](http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/indiv_couple/marriage_edu.index)). It has information on common elements of these kinds of programs and finding a program for you. In addition, below is some information about some well-known programs.

- *Art and Science of Love* ([www.gottman.com/marriage](http://www.gottman.com/marriage)). This program was developed by one of the premier marriage researchers in the world, Dr. John Gottman, at the University of Washington.
- *CC or Couple Communication* ([www.couplecommunication.com](http://www.couplecommunication.com)). This is one of the most common programs, developed by researchers Drs. Sherod Miller, Daniel Wackman, and Elam Nunnally, at the University of Minnesota.
- *ME or Marriage Encounter* ([www.wwme.org](http://www.wwme.org)). This is a weekend marriage enrichment program. It is associated with the Roman Catholic Church but is open to all.
- *PREP or Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program* ([www.prepinc.com](http://www.prepinc.com)). This is one of the most tested programs, developed by researchers at the University of Denver, Drs. Howard Markman and Scott Stanley. Many Utah educators are trained to offer this program. A list of those educators can be found at [www.utahmarriage.org](http://www.utahmarriage.org).
- *RE or Relationship Enhancement* ([www.nire.org](http://www.nire.org)). This is one of the earliest programs, developed by Dr. Bernard Guernsey, Jr., at Penn State University. It emphasizes listening with empathy.
- *Retrouvaille* ([www.retrouvaille.org](http://www.retrouvaille.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.

•Smart Steps ([www.stepfamilies.info/SmartSteps.php](http://www.stepfamilies.info/SmartSteps.php)). This is a six-session relationship enhancement program 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.

threaten the marriage.<sup>22</sup> Studies show that 80% of couples see some improvement in their relationship after visiting a marriage counselor.<sup>23</sup> Forty to fifty percent say almost all of their major problems were resolved.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, only about half of Utahns who divorce get marital counseling (either religious or secular).<sup>25</sup>

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

*One of the things we've worked on since then [when they decided to try and save their marriage], we've actually gone to counseling a lot. . . . Yeah, it's been really helpful. . . . I think it (counseling) opened up a backbone of stability for us. We've done some things that we never thought we'd do.*

One thing many people worry about, however, is how to choose a good therapist; not all therapists are created equal when it comes to working on your marriage. Here are some tips on choosing a counselor or therapist and getting the most out of marriage therapy:

- Find a counselor or therapist with education and experience in couples therapy. Therapists who advertise as couples therapists may only be trained in individual therapy, which differs from couples therapy. Ask potential therapists if they received formal education and supervised training in couples therapy. Also, ask what percentage of the therapist's work is with couples.<sup>26</sup> In Utah, the Utah Association of Marriage and Family Therapy website ([www.uamft.org](http://www.uamft.org)) maintains a list of licensed marriage therapists in your area.
- Choose a counselor or therapist who is committed to helping you save your marriage. An effective couples 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. And some therapists believe that if someone is unhappy in their marriage then the best solution is usually a divorce rather than trying to work things out. 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>27</sup> An excellent resource for finding a marriage therapist is the National Registry of Marriage Friendly Therapists ([www.marriagefriendlytherapists.com](http://www.marriagefriendlytherapists.com)). Recently founded by Dr. William J. Doherty (who was quoted earlier), 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. The number of Utah therapists on this list is growing.

- 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>28</sup>
- 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. If a therapist seems to focus only on changing what you should do, without also changing what you feel and think, the positive benefits may not last.<sup>29</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>30</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 universities have therapy training programs and offer counseling with therapists-in-training at low rates. Some insurance companies will pay for a limited number of sessions (probably about 4) with a therapist. If you have insurance, check to see if your insurer will pay for this benefit. Some families receive assistance from Medicaid. Medicaid often helps pay for counseling for individuals, couples, and families.
- Consider working with religious leaders or counselors. Many people prefer to work with religious leaders or counselors because they are more confident that they share their values.<sup>31</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. Some religious groups also provide programs to help couples at the crossroads of divorce. For example, Retrouvaille ([www.retrouvaille.org](http://www.retrouvaille.org)), sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church but available to all, is designed to help religious couples save their marriages. The program is taught by couples that once had serious problems but successfully avoided divorce. A national organization called Marriage Savers ([www.marriagesavers.com](http://www.marriagesavers.com)) works with churches in a community to improve marriage and avoid divorce. Both programs report high rates of success.<sup>32</sup>
- Stick with it. The couples that show the most improvement in therapy are those that stick with it.<sup>33</sup> If the above guidelines are met, avoid dropping out early.



- One-partner therapy can be effective. While having both husband and wife together in therapy is usually ideal, if one partner cannot or will not attend, therapy can still be beneficial to the couple.<sup>34</sup> If only one partner will be attending therapy, it is even more important that the therapist is committed to your marriage and is experienced in couples therapy.

You may benefit from exercise 2.3, “Thinking About Marriage Counseling,” at the end of this chapter.

Reconciliation is a process of getting back together that requires the full participation of both spouses and is experienced by as many as 10% of married couples.

### **E. Do divorcing couples sometimes reconcile and get back together? When is reconciliation likely to be successful?**

Reconciliation is a process of getting back together that requires the full participation of both spouses. Researchers estimate that 10% of married couples in the United States have experienced a separation and reconciliation.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, in Utah, it appears that about 10%–15% of couples who file for divorce decide not to go through with it, at least at that time.<sup>36</sup> One study estimated that about one-third of couples who attempt to reconcile were still married a year later.<sup>37</sup> Researchers also estimate that about one in three couples who actually divorce later try to reconcile, but only about one-third of those who try actually succeed.<sup>38</sup>

One couple we know who had several children reconciled and realized that “the grass was not greener” on the other side of the divorce fence. One of the spouses after the divorce was considering remarrying another person. She realized that no relationship is perfect and that although this new partner did not have some of the characteristics that created conflict with her ex-spouse, there were other problems that did not exist in her first marriage. She decided to talk with her first husband before marrying. Instead of remarrying 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 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, and me opening the front door. And he told me, “I am coming home.” And I’m like, “What?” 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 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 ten 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 and who are closer in age, and who have more education.<sup>39</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>40</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/or professional help and received the support of family and friends. Many 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 reconciliation.

Couples who have the same religion and attend religious services regularly are more likely to reconcile, as well as those who were older when they married, closer in age, and have more education.

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 then 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>41</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 unhealthy relationships.<sup>42</sup> Good therapists can assist people with feelings of insecurity and extreme dependence,<sup>43</sup> helping perhaps to turn an unhappy marriage into a happy marriage and avoiding the further negative effects of divorce on insecure adults and other family members.<sup>44</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 in Chapter 3.) And many who try to get back together and make things work do not succeed. But some do succeed with dedication and effort. You may benefit from exercise 2.4, “Thinking About Reconciliation,” at the end of the chapter.

## **F. 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 save your marriage but your spouse isn't interested. 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.

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 this 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 nagging, less time with buddies, less time on the computer or the TV. What might happen if you honored your spouse's request? 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 Michele Weiner Davis.

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

## **G. 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 is a “healthy” marriage. Perhaps some grew up in a home and neighborhood without seeing good examples of a healthy marriage. So we should probably pause here and 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>45</sup>

- ❖ **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. Commitment involves dedication and constraints. We talk more about commitment in Chapter 3.
- ❖ **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, satisfying relationships. About 90% of married people at any one time say they are very satisfied with their marriage.<sup>46</sup>
- ❖ **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>47</sup>
- ❖ **Effective Conflict Resolution:** Virtually all couples have serious differences and disagreements. How they handle these disagreements can make the difference between a healthy and unhealthy relationship. An important indicator of a healthy marriage is a couple’s ability to deal with a conflict without criticism, contempt, or defensiveness.<sup>48</sup>
- ❖ **Lack of Violence and Abuse:** While conflict is 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 also is unacceptable.
- ❖ **Fidelity or Faithfulness:** Spouses are sexually faithful to each other; they keep intimate physical relationships within the bonds of marriage. Virtually all

married individuals endorse this value. Infidelity is one of the most common reasons people give for a divorce. And individuals can be emotionally unfaithful to their spouse without actual sexual involvement.<sup>49</sup> Most married individuals remain sexually faithful to their spouses; only about 10–15 percent of women and 25 percent of men report they were unfaithful to their spouse while they were married.<sup>50</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.
- ❖ **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>51</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 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>52</sup> Marriage represents an important legal status. Marriage is not only a commitment to another person but also a public commitment to society to behave in certain constructive ways. And in turn, society supports the relationship and the children in that union.<sup>53</sup>

It's important to remember that couples have healthy marriages to varying degrees; it's not an either/or situation. And 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 2.5, "How Healthy Is My Marriage?" at the end of the chapter.

## Exercises for Chapter 2

### 2.1: Hanging On or Moving On?

As was mentioned in Chapter 2, most individuals who say they are unhappy in their marriage, if they can 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 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 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?

<u>What is the stress?</u>	<u>How likely to change?</u>	<u>What could you do to reduce it?</u>
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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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## 2.2: Thinking About Education to Strengthen Marriages

What have you done recently to try and strengthen your marriage? Some couples, even ones 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 to try and strengthen your marriage? How helpful were they? If you haven't done this, look at the list of suggested books on page 13 in this guidebook and pick one to read, either by yourself or together as a couple. Write down the title here and set a goal for a date to read the book.

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**B. What websites** have you visited to try and strengthen your marriage? How helpful were they? If you haven't done this, look at the list of suggested websites on page 13 in this guidebook and pick one to browse, either by yourself or together as a couple. Write down the name and address of the website and set a goal for a date to visit the site or do it right now.

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**C. 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:

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**D. Do you think** you would benefit from taking a marriage-strengthening class, either by yourself or with your spouse, to help you resolve problems and 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? The Utah Healthy Marriage Initiative website ([www.utahmarriage.org](http://www.utahmarriage.org) or call 801-526-9317) lists marriage education classes in the state. Box 2.3 lists a number of popular programs and their websites. Do a little investigation of local resources and write down a few possibilities that you might be interested in here:

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## 2.3: 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? Was it enjoyable? Why or why not?

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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?

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 feelings:

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Your spouse's feelings:

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- How willing are you to do “homework” assignments to work on your relationship, if your marriage counselor asks you to?

Your feelings:

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Your spouse’s feelings:

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

Your feelings:

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Your spouse’s feelings:

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**C. Does your religious** organization offer 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? (Circle your answer.)

	Not at all Willing	Maybe a little Willing	Somewhat Willing	Very Willing
You	√	√	√	√
Your Spouse	√	√	√	√

## 2.4: Thinking about 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.

**A. 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? (Circle your answer.)

	Not at all Committed	Maybe a little Committed	Somewhat Committed	Very Committed
You	√	√	√	√
Your Spouse	√	√	√	√

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, 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 2–3 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 this?
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.

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

Family Member/Friend	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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**C. 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/him to you? What did you enjoy doing together? Write down some of your thoughts here:

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

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- What do you remember about your engagement? Your wedding? What are some of the positive memories from these times? Write down your thoughts here:

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• 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:

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

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• 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:

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## 2.5: Elements of a Healthy Marriage: How Important Are They?

**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? (circle one)		
	Not important 0	Somewhat Important 1	Very Important 2
1. <u>Commitment</u> : each spouse has a long-term perspective of the marriage and an intention to persevere through hard times; each spouse is committed to the well-being of the other.	0	1	2
2. <u>Satisfaction</u> : the marriage is a source of happiness for each spouse.	0	1	2
3. <u>Communication</u> : the couple is able to talk and communicate with each other in positive and respectful ways.	0	1	2
4. <u>Conflict resolution</u> : the couple is able to handle differences and conflicts and solve problems in a positive way.	0	1	2
5. <u>Lack of violence</u> : neither spouse is abusive of other or their children, physically, psychologically, or sexually.	0	1	2
6. <u>Fidelity</u> : spouses are sexually faithful to one another; sex is reserved for one's spouse and no one else.	0	1	2
7. <u>Friendship/time together</u> : spouses are friends; they like and respect each other; they know each other well; they enjoy spending time together.	0	1	2
8. <u>Intimacy/emotional support</u> : spouses trust, care, and love each other; they are affectionate.	0	1	2
9. <u>Commitment to children</u> : each spouse is committed to the well-being of all of their children.	0	1	2
10. <u>Duration/legal status</u> : a couple makes a formal legal commitment (marriage) and plan for the marriage to endure.	0	1	2

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.

The questions come from a research study that looked at the quality of relationships.<sup>54</sup> The study included 1,550 couples who 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	Sometimes	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

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
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	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
8. Worrier	5	4	3	2	1
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 current SPOUSE violent toward you?	5	4	3	2	1
30. How often are YOU violent toward your current partner?	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 30–150.

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. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

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

3. \_\_\_\_\_

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. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

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

3. \_\_\_\_\_

There are easy ways to get a more detailed, in-depth look at all the different aspects of your relationship. For instance, here are some relationship inventories, or questionnaires, that you can access over the Internet 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.

Relationship Inventory	Web Address	Associated University
• FOCCUS	<a href="http://www.foccusinc.com">www.foccusinc.com</a>	Creighton University
• Enrich	<a href="http://www.prepare-enrich.com">www.prepare-enrich.com</a>	University of Minnesota
• RELATE	<a href="http://relate-institute.org">relate-institute.org</a>	Brigham Young University



# 3.

## How common is divorce and what are the reasons?

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*Marriage is a counter-cultural act in a throwaway society.*

—Dr. William H. Doherty, noted marriage scholar and therapist <sup>55</sup>

**Overview:** In the United States, researchers estimate that 40%–50% of all first marriages, and 60% of second marriages, will end in divorce. 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 marriage, a premarital pregnancy, no religious affiliation, coming from a divorced family, and feelings of insecurity. The most common reasons people give for their divorce are lack of commitment, too much arguing, infidelity, marrying too young, unrealistic expectations, lack of equality in the relationship, lack of preparation for marriage, and abuse. Some of these problems can be fixed and divorce prevented. Commitment is having a long-term view of the marriage that helps us not get overwhelmed by the problems and challenges 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. Commitment is clearly a factor in why some couples stay together and others divorce. Divorce is necessary at times, and it may even help to preserve the moral boundaries of marriage. But parents have a responsibility to do all that they reasonably can to preserve and repair a marriage, especially when the reasons for divorce are not the most serious ones. Barriers to leaving a marriage, such as financial worries, can keep marriages together in the short run. However, unless there is improvement in the relationship, eventually the barriers are usually not enough to keep a marriage together in the long run.

Divorce is both very personal and all too common. But there are many myths about divorce. Individuals at the crossroads of divorce may benefit by knowing the research facts about divorce rates, factors that are associated with a higher risk of divorce, and common reasons that people give for divorcing.

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

In the United States, researchers estimate that 40%–50% of all first marriages will end in divorce or permanent separation.<sup>56</sup> The risk of divorce is even higher for second marriages, about 60%.<sup>57</sup> Utah's divorce rate is just slightly above the national average.<sup>58</sup>

Divorce has always been present in American society.<sup>59</sup> Although divorce has always been a concern, it has become more common in the last 50 years. The highest divorce rates ever recorded were in the 1970s and early 1980s. Since then the divorce rate actually has decreased a little, but it still remains at a historically high rate.<sup>60</sup>

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

To say that nearly half of all first marriages end in divorce sounds a lot like saying marriage is just a game of chance. But a lot of research has identified various factors that are associated with a higher risk for divorce. So some people actually 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 you will divorce; they simply increase your risk. Here are some factors that appear to increase the risk of divorce the most. But it is not a complete list of risk factors.

1. **Young age.** Marriage at a very young age increases the likelihood of divorce, especially in the early years of marriage. Those who marry in their teens have much higher divorce rates. By about age 21 or 22, however, that risk goes down dramatically.<sup>61</sup> Utahns do tend to marry young compared to the national average. The average age at first marriage for Utah is 22 for women and 23 for men.<sup>62</sup> Those who delay marriage until their 20s are probably more mature and able to make better marriage decisions and handle the challenges of married life better than those who marry in their teens.
2. **Less education.** Researchers have estimated that individuals who have some college education (vs. not finishing high school) have a lower chance of divorce.<sup>63</sup> Utahns are more likely to graduate from high school and get some college education than Americans in general.<sup>64</sup> Apparently, investing in education is a good way to build a foundation for a better marriage, not just a better job.
3. **Less income.** Closely related to education is income. Researchers have 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>65</sup> Finances can be stressful. Apparently having at least a modest income can help couples avoid stresses that can lead to divorce.



4. Premarital cohabitation. Couples who live together before marriage appear to have a much higher chance of divorce if they marry.<sup>66</sup> However, this risk is mostly for those who live together with more than one partner. Most only live together with one partner (whom they later marry) and these couples don't seem to be at a lot greater risk for divorce.<sup>67</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>68</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 if you live together with several people before marrying. Researchers have found that those who live together already have or develop more lenient attitudes about divorce. But some researchers also think that living together may hinder building a strong commitment to each other and the importance of marriage.<sup>69</sup>
5. Premarital childbearing and pregnancy. Pregnancy and childbearing prior to marriage significantly increase the likelihood of future divorce.<sup>70</sup> In America, more than one-third (37%) of children are born to parents who are not married,<sup>71</sup> and few of these parents eventually marry.<sup>72</sup> Most of those parents will separate before the child begins school, and some will never really get together. Fortunately, Utah's rate of unwed births is one of the lowest in the nation.<sup>73</sup>
6. No religious affiliation. Researchers have estimated that individuals who report belonging to some religious group have a somewhat lower chance of divorce than those who say they have no religious affiliation.<sup>74</sup> And if couples share the same religious affiliation, their chances of divorce are even lower.<sup>75</sup>
7. Parents' divorce. Of course, some risk factors for divorce you can't control. If you experienced the divorce of your parents, unfortunately that doubles your risk for divorce. And if your spouse also experienced his or her parents' divorce, then your risk for divorce more than triples.<sup>76</sup> This is scary, but it doesn't doom your marriage to failure. It does suggest that individuals who experienced the divorce of their parents need to work even harder to make good marriage choices and to keep their marriage strong and happy.
8. Insecurity. Researchers have found that some personality factors put people at more risk for divorce. One of the most important is feeling insecure about yourself and your self-worth. Insecure individuals are more likely to become

It is interesting to note that a significant number of divorced individuals—maybe up to about half—report that they wished they or their ex-spouse had tried harder to work through differences.

unhappy in their marriages over time and to divorce.<sup>77</sup> However, even feelings of insecurity and other personality characteristics can be overcome.<sup>78</sup>

### **C. 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 generally don't 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 reasons.

Researchers have identified the most common reasons people give for their divorces. A recent national survey<sup>79</sup> 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%.) A recent survey of Utah adults found results similar to this national survey.<sup>80</sup> Looking at this list, some believe that it is possible to fix many of these problems and prevent some divorces. Couples can learn how to avoid destructive arguments and solve their differences better; they can create more realistic expectations for their marriage; and they can create more equal partnerships. Even such damaging problems as infidelity (affairs) sometimes can be overcome, especially with professional and/or religious help. (We discuss recovering from infidelity later in this chapter.)

It is interesting to note that a significant number of divorced individuals—maybe about half—report to researchers that they wished they or their ex-spouse had tried harder to work through their differences.<sup>81</sup> When Utahns were asked this question, 31% of men who had divorced said they wished that they had worked harder to save their marriage (and 74% said they wished their ex-wife had worked harder to save the marriage); 13% of women who had divorced said they wished that they had worked harder to save their marriage (and 65% said they wished their ex-husband had worked harder to save the marriage).<sup>82</sup> As we mentioned in Chapter 2, researchers estimated that about one in three couples who actually divorce later try to reconcile.<sup>83</sup> This suggests that they ended up regretting their decision to divorce. You might benefit from doing exercise 3.1, "Thinking About Your Reasons For a Possible Divorce" at the end of this chapter.

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

As we noted above, the number one reason people give for why their marriage didn't succeed is a lack of commitment on one or both spouses' parts. It may be helpful to focus on this issue of commitment. Researchers have found that about half of all divorces come from relatively low-conflict relationships.<sup>84</sup> Interestingly, when viewed at one

point in time, these low-conflict marriages that end in divorce look very similar to happy marriages that don't end in divorce. In fact, researchers have a hard time distinguishing between these two groups of married couples except for one important factor. The difference appears to be in the 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 and make things better rather than divorce to see if they could be happier in another relationship.<sup>85</sup>

One prominent marriage researcher 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 day to day. We keep our eyes focused on the valued prize—a healthy, stable marriage—and work to get there.<sup>86</sup>

Researchers have identified two elements of commitment.<sup>87</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 highly. But constraints also can serve the purpose of keeping us from jumping ship when leaks appear in our marriage, as they always do. This is the kind of commitment “Keeshaw” was referring to in our interview as she discussed how she and her husband, “Doug,” were able to halt their path to 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 this 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 unusual because she has struggled with these feelings for nearly 20 years; it’s 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 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 other possibilities. When there is high dedication commitment in a relationship, we feel safer and are willing to give more for the relationship to succeed. Personal dedication is the kind of commitment that was saving “Keeshaw’s” and “Doug’s” marriage:

*(“Keeshaw”) 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 3.2, “Thinking About Commitment in My Marriage,” at the end of this chapter.

### **E. Are there clearly valid reasons for divorce? Are abuse, infidelity, or addictions valid reasons?**

Research can provide important facts, but research alone can’t answer questions of moral judgment. Most Americans (70%) believe that divorce, in general, is a morally acceptable choice.<sup>88</sup> And many feel that divorce is a personal, private matter and that it is their choice alone whether or not to divorce. Legally, this is correct. Some individuals may feel that a few months of arguments and disappointments justifies their divorce, while other couples will stay together even through infidelity and abuse. In our opinion, it is important for the law to allow the option of divorce. Divorce actually protects and highlights the moral boundaries around marriage. There are circumstances and behaviors that clearly violate those boundaries. Individuals have the right to be physically and emotionally safe in a relationship. And society has the right to try to protect the moral boundaries of marriage to preserve the integrity and even sacred nature of such an important institution as marriage. The stakes are even higher when children are involved because those children have a stake in the marriage. And society has a stake in the well-being of the next generation. As we will discuss in Chapter 5, family breakdown puts children at greater risk for many serious problems. Most children are better off when their

parents can resolve their difficulties and keep the family together. (Of course, our current laws allow one spouse to end a marriage at any time for any reason without the agreement of the other spouse. So many times a divorce is not a choice for an individual but an unwelcome fact.)

While we believe that divorce is necessary and right at times, we also believe that parents have a heavy responsibility to do all that they reasonably can to preserve and repair a marriage. This is especially true when the reasons for divorce are not the most serious ones. We don't think this is a radical perspective to hold about divorce. In fact, public opinion polls suggest that nearly half of Americans (43%) agree that, in the absence of violence and extreme conflict, parents who have an unsatisfactory marriage should stay together.<sup>89</sup> About one in three Utahns (31%) say that, when there are children in a marriage, parents should stay married even if they don't get along.<sup>90</sup> But when individuals are deeply unhappy in their marriages, for whatever reasons, it is only natural in our society to wonder if things wouldn't be better for everyone if the marriage were ended. In some circumstances, we believe—and research supports—that divorce is the better option. In other circumstances, we believe—and again research supports—that the best option for all would be to repair the relationship and keep the family together, if possible. (We will review this research later.)

What you believe about divorce, however, is more important to your circumstances than what we believe. You may benefit from doing exercise 3.3, “Personal Philosophy About Divorce,” at the end of the chapter.

**Abuse in marriages.** Abuse in marriages deserves special consideration. As we said earlier, there are behaviors that are clearly outside the moral boundaries of marriage. And all have the right to be safe—physically, emotionally, and sexually—in their marriages. This includes adults and children. 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. Abused wives who divorce usually are better off than those who remain in this unsafe relationship.<sup>91</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>92</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>93</sup> One of the unfortunate facts of family life is that severe abuse seldom corrects itself. 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 “intimate partner terrorism.”<sup>94</sup> Usually when we talk about abuse we mean the latter. Intimate partner terrorism 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. Intimate partner terrorism can be physical or psychological control. It can be sexual force. (Utah has a law against marital rape.) It can involve severe economic control, such as not

There are at least two different kinds of relationship violence including situational couple violence and intimate partner terrorism.

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 and more severe over time. If you are the victim of 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” 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 intimate partner terrorism. It involves things like pushing, shoving, kicking, slapping, shouting, name-calling, etc., and it appears that it does not escalate to more severe aggression.<sup>95</sup> Situational couple violence often comes when someone is experiencing a lot of stress about something. 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>96</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 is a factor. 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 be able to avoid divorce. (See chapter 2 about resources to improve your problem-solving skills and relationship.)

You may want to look at Box 3.1, “Signs of Abuse.” Also, you may benefit from doing exercise 3.4, “Is There Abuse in My Marriage?” at the end of this chapter. There are



resources and services for victims of domestic abuse in many counties in Utah. You can simply call 211 for a list of those services in your area or go online at [www.211utah.org](http://www.211utah.org).

One final thought about abuse to consider. Some people think that because there is a risk of abuse in marriage, they won't marry. 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>97</sup> So when people are in romantic relationships, marriage is the safest relationship.

### Box 3.1: 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.
- 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 to 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.
- Ignored your feelings regarding sex.

**Infidelity in Marriage.** 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>98</sup> And even though we live in a sexually tolerant society, still more than 90% of Americans say infidelity is morally wrong.<sup>99</sup> Although it is hard to do research on how common infidelity is, about 4% of married men and 2% of married women report anonymously to researchers that they were unfaithful to their spouses in the last year. Although most married people appear to be faithful, research suggests that about 10%–15% of women and 20%–25% of men tell researchers that they were unfaithful to their spouse while they were married.<sup>100</sup> Of course, it's possible the actual numbers are somewhat higher than this.

The discovery of infidelity is usually traumatic and recovering from infidelity is difficult.<sup>101</sup> Therapists who help couples deal with infidelity describe three stages in the process of recovering from infidelity:<sup>102</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 her or his desire to punish the participating partner. Often the offending spouse has to find a way to let go of his or her 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%) 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>103</sup> This was the case for “Fran.” She found out about her husband's infidelity when she discovered she had contracted a venereal disease:

*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, personally.*

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, 50%–60% of married couples who experience infidelity stay together.<sup>104</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 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. Because even though it's been a few years, still, you seem to doubt. . . . In my head I thought, "I love these kids so much, and I want them to have [their parents] together for the rest of our lives." Marriage is a lot of work, and people don't realize that. They just think, "Well, we're married and everything should be total bliss and we should be totally happy for the rest of our lives." Period, end of conversation. And they're not going to have trials. But that is just so not the case.*

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. 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>105</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.

**Addictions in marriage.** 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 turn around in his life and the family has been flourishing for several years now. Unfortunately, this family's experience may not be the norm.

In recent years, addiction to pornography has become a challenge to many marriages. Early research suggests that "cybersex addictions" are a major factor contributing to separation and divorce for many couples.<sup>106</sup> Many women view pornography as a form of infidelity.<sup>107</sup> The Internet is used by more than half of Americans and 20%–30% of those people who use the Internet use it for sexual purposes.<sup>108</sup> The majority of people who have sexual addictions involving Internet pornography are married, heterosexual males.<sup>109</sup> Not surprisingly, early research on pornography and marital relationships has found that frequent pornography use tends to be associated with sexually aggressive behavior, sexual deviance, decreased intimacy, decreased sexual satisfaction, and increased marital dissatisfaction.<sup>110</sup> 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

addiction. It was a long and arduous path that included having a candid talk about the pornography use, working with a church leader, using support groups, regularly initiating conversation about pornography issues for both the husband and the wife, monitoring computer use, 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 her or him.

## **F. 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>111</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>112</sup> Similarly, some will decide to stay with the marriage if they don't think their prospects for a better relationship are good. Also, if individuals have invested many years in a marriage, have children together and a home and other possessions, then they are more hesitant to leave.<sup>113</sup> As we mentioned earlier, barriers to leaving a marriage can keep marriages together in the short run. However, unless there is improvement in the relationship, eventually the barriers are usually not enough to keep a marriage together in the long run.<sup>114</sup> Eventually, the rewards of a healthy and happy marriage—love, friendship, and a shared life—are the stronger glue that keeps couples together.

## Exercises for Chapter 3

### 3.1: 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, or not a problem in your marriage and may have you thinking about a divorce. (If something is a problem for your spouse but not for you, go ahead and circle 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 2 discussed 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
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
Other: _____	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a

## 3.2: 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, 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	
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	

*Continued*

Possible Divorce Constraint	3 = Big 2 = Little 1 = Not a Concern (circle one)	Why?
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	
20. Other:	3 2 1	

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.

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**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>115</sup>)

Dedication Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Some-what Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Some-what 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 in my life.	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
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 and 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 so 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 2–3 of the happiest times in your marriage? Why?

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3. What are 2–3 of the most difficult times in your marriage that you have been able to overcome?

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4. What 2–3 important values do you feel you still have in common with your spouse?

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5. What 2–3 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. 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 and 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:

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**E. 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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### 3.3: 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 will invite 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 the 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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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.

## 3.4: Is There Abuse in My Marriage?

As we discussed in this chapter, there are at least two kinds of violence: “situational couple violence” and “intimate partner terrorism.” 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, intimate partner terrorism, 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 Intimate Partner Terrorism.**<sup>116</sup> This questionnaire can help you judge whether there is intimate partner terrorism in 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 (0)	Rarely (1)	Sometimes (2)	Often (3)	Almost Always (4)
1. Makes me feel like I'm walking on eggshells to keep the peace	0	1	2	3	4
2. Keeps me away from family and friends	0	1	2	3	4
3. Yells at me often, and calls me names	0	1	2	3	4
4. Doesn't care about my needs and expectations	0	1	2	3	4
5. Is unpredictable or has sudden mood swings	0	1	2	3	4
6. Puts me down, to look better	0	1	2	3	4
7. Retaliates when I disagree	0	1	2	3	4
8. Breaks or hits things in my presence	0	1	2	3	4
9. Is forceful with things like affection and/or sex	0	1	2	3	4
10. Controls all the money and gives me little or none	0	1	2	3	4
11. Is possessive of me, or jealous of me	0	1	2	3	4
12. 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>117</sup> This questionnaire can help you judge whether there is situational couple violence in your marriage, such as slapping and pushing. Although this kind of physical aggression in marriage is not as serious as intimate partner terrorism, 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 spouse, during the past 12 months . . .							
1. How many times, if any, has your spouse hit you?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
2. How many times has your spouse twisted your arm or hair?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
3. How many times has your spouse pushed, shoved, or kicked you?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
4. How many times has your spouse grabbed you forcefully?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
5. How many times has your spouse slapped you?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
Now, thinking about yourself, during the past 12 months . . .							
6. How many times, if any, have you hit your spouse?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
7. How many times have you twisted your spouse's arm or hair?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times

8. How many times have you pushed, shoved, or kicked your spouse?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
9. How many times have you grabbed your spouse forcefully?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
10. How many times have you slapped your spouse?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times

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 marriage education resources suggested in Ch. 2 to improve your communication and problem-solving skills. Write down your thoughts and plans here:

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## 4.

# Does divorce help adults become happier?

*Divorce is too complex a process to produce just winners and losers. People adjust in many different ways, and these patterns of adjusting change over time.*

—E. Mavis Hetherington, noted divorce researcher<sup>118</sup>

*That was the easy part—getting the divorce. It's the aftermath that's the hard part. When you're living it, it's so magnified. It literally takes the air out of you.*

—“Laura”

**Overview:** A large majority of individuals in unhappy marriages who hang in there and avoid divorce end up reporting their marriages are very happy a few years later. For the most part, those who divorced and even those who divorced and remarried were not happier than those who stuck with their marriages. About half of all divorces come from marriages that are not experiencing high levels of conflict; individuals from these marriages generally experience a decrease in happiness over time. When individuals end high-conflict marriages, however, they increase their happiness, on average. About two in ten individuals appear to enhance their lives through their divorce, but about three in ten seem to do worse; about four in ten individuals build future romantic relationships but they have mostly the same kinds of problems as they did in their previous marriage. Divorce can eliminate some of the problems with your spouse, but it can also cause others; for many couples conflict actually increases after a divorce. Many people report having mixed feelings and even regrets about their divorce. Studies suggest some divorced individuals wished they and/or their ex-spouse had tried harder to work through their differences. About three of four divorced people will eventually remarry. However, second marriages have even higher rates of divorce, although if couples can hang on through the challenging first five years

of remarriage, their chances for success are high. More than 90% of young people believe they will meet and marry their “soul mate.” But with this attitude comes the risk that when couples run into serious problems in their marriage they may think that they made the wrong choice rather than think that they need to work out their problems.

## **A. Are people happier as a result of divorce?**

Many people assume that the answer to this question is “yes.” People thinking about a divorce may think that it will solve a difficult problem and eventually make them happier. And sometimes it does. But studies have found that most adults are not happier when they divorce. However, there are many different factors that influence how divorce affects individuals. This chapter will review what research tells us about this complex issue.

A recent summary of research in this area found that, compared to married individuals, divorced individuals had lower levels of happiness, more psychological distress, poorer self-concepts, and felt more alone.<sup>119</sup> Of course, some of the poorer outcomes for divorced individuals can be explained by the unhappiness in the former marriage and the ongoing stress of divorce. Perhaps even more informative is a national study that followed happily and unhappily married individuals for a five-year period.<sup>120</sup> Many of these unhappy individuals remained married but some divorced. Those who divorced were no happier when interviewed again 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.

Another recent national study found that about half of all divorces come from marriages that were not experiencing high levels of conflict but one spouse (or both) was still unhappy.<sup>121</sup> When individuals ended high-conflict marriages, they increased their happiness and sense of well-being, on average. However, when individuals in a low-conflict marriage ended their marriage, they experienced a decrease in happiness, on average. This study suggests that ending a marriage that may be unhappy at the time but does not produce a high level of conflict is not a reliable path to improved happiness. One couple we know ended their low-conflict marriage because of differences in finances. Both remarried to other people. As they reflected back on their first marriage both spouses admitted that they should have worked harder to make their first marriage work. They realized after remarrying how much hard work goes into making a good marriage. They both agreed that if they would have put the same effort into their first marriage that they are putting into their second marriages, the first marriage could have worked.

One of the best long-term studies of divorce found that divorce generally does not lead to a better life.<sup>122</sup> These researchers found that about two in ten individuals appeared



to enhance their lives, including building more satisfying romantic relationships, through divorce, but about three in ten seemed to do worse after their divorce. About four in 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.)

It is hard to work through a difficult marriage, but it is also hard to work through a divorce. Some people are happier as a result of divorce.<sup>123</sup> On the other hand, many marriages that experience very serious problems, such as alcoholism, infidelity, and emotional neglect, are now happy after working through their problems.<sup>124</sup> As we mentioned in Chapter 2, it may surprise you to learn that about three in ten currently married Utahns have at one time or another thought their marriages might be in serious trouble and have thought about divorce.<sup>125</sup> But more than 90% of these individuals said that they were glad that they were still together.

“Fern” and “Deron” were one such couple we interviewed. They struggled early in their second marriage and considered divorce. But they hung on and years later were grateful that they did.

*We knew that we trusted each other and we knew how hard it is for children in the streets and in the world today. “Deron” wanted his children to be protected and cared for, and I wanted mine to be protected . . . It was so important for us not to be selfish. We knew we loved each other. The challenges were the life we had to deal with, and we weighed and measured and we both came up with the same decision. It’s better for all concerned if two like-thinking people and people that love each other, even though we have had our rough spots, you know, he could not imagine himself with someone else, and I could not imagine myself, so we knew we would just condemn ourselves to being lonely, ol’ angry people, and we also knew that the children needed both of us.*

The decision to divorce may be the most difficult decision you ever face. One myth about divorce is that children will be better off because a divorce will make for happier parents. Research does not confirm that parents, on average, become happier as a result of divorce. Moreover, children are not nearly as tuned in to the quality of their parents’ marriage as their parents are. If there isn’t a lot of conflict in the marriage, research suggests that the children probably will be better off if their parents stay married.<sup>126</sup> (We will review the research about the effects of divorce on children later in Chapter 5.) Fortunately, most unhappy couples who avoid divorce will eventually be happy in their marriages again. Especially if you are currently unhappy in your marriage but not experiencing high levels of conflict with your spouse, think hard about the possibility of continuing to work to improve your relationship and being patient for things to get better. If you can do this, you and your family will probably be better off down the road. You may benefit from doing exercise 4.1, “Imagining a Happy Ending,” at the end of this chapter.

## B. Does conflict between spouses decrease as a result of divorce?

Some people see divorce as the cure-all; they hope that ending the marriage will be the beginning of the end of all their unhappiness. But while divorce can eliminate some problems with your spouse, it can also cause others that are very difficult to manage. 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 the divorce.<sup>127</sup> Remember that most couples that divorce did not experience high levels of conflict, so the marital difficulties and unhappiness may have been hidden from the children. Divorce adds the potential for a whole new set of problems with your ex-spouse. When you are unhappy in your marriage, it's easy to underestimate how difficult the problems of un-marrying can be. 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 it likely is more visible to the children.

In one such “nightmare” divorce we know about, one spouse would literally count the minutes of the Christmas holiday and divide it in half, subtracting out the Christmas-time visits. The inflexible spouse insisted on an exchange right to the minute. If the other spouse was even a minute late there was a big scene at the parenting exchange. This is just one example of all the demands that came from the ex-spouse. There was no flexibility from anything in the divorce settlement. The spouse was always looking for a reason to take the ex-spouse back to court. The children felt much resentment about the divorce situation and knew that any mention of the other parent would be a source of conflict.

Many studies have shown that conflict with an ex-spouse continues after divorce and adds a great deal of stress to life.

Another divorcing spouse we know expressed frustration that comes when their children are looking forward to a visit from the other (non-custodial) parent and the parent never shows up or calls. The hopes of the children have been dashed time and time again, yet the parent legally was entitled to every other weekend with the children. This caused a lot of conflict for the divorcing couple and they had to return to court to try and resolve issues.

Many studies have shown that conflict with an ex-spouse continues after divorce and adds a great deal of stress to life.<sup>128</sup> Some of the new stresses include:

- ❖ Your and your ex-spouse's emotional response to the divorce (e.g., anger, retaliation, resignation, acceptance, relief).
- ❖ Reactions of the children to the divorce.

- ❖ Moving households.
- ❖ Custody and visitation struggles.
- ❖ Child support payments.
- ❖ Financial struggles.
- ❖ Health problems, including greater risk for abusing drugs and alcohol.
- ❖ New romantic relationships or marriages that can bring both joys and headaches, happiness and sadness.
- ❖ Family conflicts with ex-in-laws and other family members.<sup>129</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 4.2, “Thinking About Conflict After Divorce,” at the end of this chapter. If you attend the divorcing parents education class required by Utah law, this class also will help you find ways to minimize conflict between you and your spouse if you divorce.

### **C. Do some who divorce later wish they had worked harder to try to save their marriage?**

This is a sensitive subject, but some recent research suggests that some people do harbor some regrets about their divorces. One national expert who counsels many divorced individuals reports that ambivalent or mixed feelings about the divorce are very common.<sup>130</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.<sup>131</sup> As we mentioned in Chapter 3, a handful of other surveys in various states have found that perhaps half of individuals wished they and/or their ex-spouses had tried harder to work through their differences.<sup>132</sup> A statewide survey of Utahns on this question was interesting. The Utah survey found that three in ten divorced men wished they had tried harder to save their marriages, while just one in eight divorced women said that they wished they had worked harder.<sup>133</sup> Interestingly, however, when asked if they wished their spouse had worked harder to save their marriage, three-quarters of divorced men and two-thirds of divorced wives said that they wished that their spouse had worked harder to save their marriage. It seems clear that most people wish their spouse had been willing to work harder to save their marriage, but research suggests that some divorced individuals also think that they should have worked harder.

As we interviewed people about their experiences at the crossroads of divorce, we were struck by these sentiments of regret or uncertainty, even from divorced individuals

who described very serious problems in their marriage. “Brittany” was one such individual.

*Now that I’m older and more mature, I look back and I think, “Oh my goodness, the issues were really not as big as we made them out to be.” And truly, I wish I would have done things differently to maybe work on that relationship further. Because he is a wonderful, amazing person.*

“Laura’s” thoughts on this were similar:

*The grass is not greener. . . . I would have done it a different way. . . . I would not have made the same decision. I would have worked really hard. . . . I would say [to others facing a decision to divorce], do not evaluate with anger because your anger is an emotion and it will guide you towards a decision that you might not be happy with down the line. I always tell people—and I have plenty of friends who . . . [are] having problems with their sex lives or this, that, and the other, and I say, “I don’t care what it is. Figure it out. . . . And be extremely prayerful about it. Make sure 100% that this is not an emotion-based decision. Because when you base it off of an emotion, you’re going to be sorry about the consequences later on.” . . . Don’t make these decisions based on emotion. Try to see past it. Or give yourself some time to step away. . . . I always steer people not to get a divorce, even though I have had one. And they always say, “Well you did it.” Yeah, well, if I had a chance to go back, I probably wouldn’t have done it. I tell people, “Look, if he’s beating the crap out of you, we’ve got an issue. . . . But if it’s about anything else, you can work through it.” . . . People are imperfect. I know he loves me, and I was too stupid and too prideful, even though he did me wrong.*

“Janet,” who endured nearly a decade of intense problems and marital unhappiness, almost from the first week of her marriage, surprised us with her ambivalence, even 15 years after the divorce:

*I don’t think that I had a choice [about divorce]; I know that I didn’t have a choice. I have mixed feelings about that, interestingly enough. . . . I think right now we are better off. But the intervening 15 years were so difficult and so draining. . . . I think that the cost to all of us was so great, that I’m not sure we would have gotten there, you know. I think you mature and you work through things. And had we been together, I think a lot of those things would have worked themselves out. And I think it is possible we would have been better off together.*

Of course, we can’t say what your experience will be. And you may not have a choice in the matter. If you do have a choice, right now a divorce may look like the only solution. But these individuals’ experiences suggest that you think hard about trying to repair the relationship.

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

People who divorce usually are not giving up on the idea of marriage. Most of the time they want to remarry again 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. The chances that you will marry again are good; about three of four divorced people will eventually remarry within 10 years.<sup>134</sup> About half who will eventually remarry have done so within five years.<sup>135</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>136</sup> And some people aren't enthused about marrying someone and perhaps taking responsibilities for their 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>137</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>138</sup> However, there are still many divorced people that remarry at an older age and with children.

Unfortunately, research shows that second marriages, in general, are not happier or more stable. A generation ago, scholars thought that easier divorce would help to strengthen marriage. They reasoned that if people were freer to leave an unhappy marriage they could find a better match and a happier marriage. But this line of thinking appears to have been short-sighted. The divorce rate for second marriages is even higher than it is for first marriages, and they break up even faster.<sup>139</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>140</sup> These stresses usually subside after about five years, however. Because of this, if couples can endure these early years of remarriage, they usually find greater happiness.<sup>141</sup> These long-lasting remarriage relationships usually show characteristics such as friendship, support, and respect<sup>142</sup>—a recipe for happiness in any marriage.

Of course, bringing children into a remarriage can be very difficult for the children involved. Children in stepfamilies often experience an increase in stress, even though it probably means more financial security. The increase in stress can put children at more risk for problems. (We give more details about the challenges faced by children of divorce in Chapter 5.)

Although most people who experience a divorce will marry again, there is no guarantee that the second time around will be better. This is another reason why individuals and couples at the crossroads of divorce should think carefully and consider whether it would be better to try to repair their current relationship rather than look for another one.

## E. Is the idea of finding and marrying your “soul mate” a myth?

More than 90% of young people believe that they will meet and marry their “soul mate.”<sup>143</sup> It’s not surprising then that many young (and older) people believe that the secret to a healthy, successful marriage is searching until they find their soul mate. Once you have found her or him, then a successful marriage is virtually guaranteed, or so the reasoning goes. But one of the problems with this attitude is that it is easy to believe that a marriage to your soul mate should be effortless. When problems arise in marriage, it’s easy to think that your spouse is not your true soul mate, and that there is someone else out there for you. In reality, marriage takes a lot of effort, even for soul mates. While it is good to search for someone who shares similar values and dreams and with whom you have a deep connection, the reality is that many individuals who could build a healthy, happy marriage with you, so the idea of finding and marrying a one-and-only soul mate is a myth.

## Exercises for Chapter 4

### 4.1: Imagining A Happy Ending.

**A. As we discussed** in this chapter, most people who are unhappy in their marriage, if they hang on for a few years, report that they are happy again. Try imagining that in three years both you and your spouse will be happy again in your marriage. What could happen that would explain this change for the better? Imagine a series of events, changes in circumstances, shifted attitudes, new behaviors or actions, etc., that could result in a happy marriage down the road in a few years. Write down your thoughts here. If you can’t imagine this scenario at all, then write down why this is the case.

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**B. Now think** what steps you and your spouse could take and changes in circumstances that could potentially turn your imaginings into reality. Write down your thoughts about this:

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## 4.2: 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.

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

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? (Put an x in the box.)			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 and cause you the most emotional pain. These may be some of the same conflicts you currently have. But they may be new ones due to changes from divorce. You may want to review some of the stresses that commonly come as a result of divorce in section B of Chapter 4. List possible conflicts 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? (Put an x in the box.)			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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## 5.

# What are the possible consequences of divorce for children?

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*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>144</sup>

**Overview:** Divorce generally puts children at greater risk for many kinds of problems. However, most children of divorce do not experience those serious problems; most children are strong and resilient, and most have returned to a pretty normal life after 2–3 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 2–3 times more likely to experience a divorce compared to children who did not experience a divorce growing up.

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 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.*

In a 2008 survey of more than 2,000 California adults, two out of three divorced Californians said their divorce negatively impacted their children.<sup>145</sup> It would be nice if we could provide you with a simple, straightforward answer to whether divorce will be harmful to your children. Yes, overall, good research over many years does find that children who experience the divorce of their parents are at higher risk for a wide range of negative consequences, usually two to three times the risk compared to children who do not go through a divorce. The best circumstance for children is a stable home with two parents who are happy. If an unhappy marriage can be repaired over time so that both partners can be reasonably happy, 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 good research about the effects of family breakdown on children.

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

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 that even though divorce can be very upsetting to children, most adjust to their new life after 2–3 years.<sup>146</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 (and were doing well) who had experienced a divorce growing up, 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>147</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 the problems of their parents' unhappiness and associated problems. On the other hand, for many children, conflict between parents increases after divorce rather than decreases. So sometimes the actual divorce is the source of more difficulties 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 a decision 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 make a decision when they were ten 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 happy marriages.

There are no easy answers to the question of how divorce may affect children.

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.** In earlier chapters, we explained that half or more 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 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 anything 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>148</sup> These children almost expect or even sometimes hope that their parents will decide to separate. This is probably not the case for children in low-conflict marriages, however. These children generally do somewhat worse when their parents divorce compared to children whose parents stay married and keep trying to work things out. It seems 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 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>149</sup>

But the children who seem to be hardest hit by divorce are those whose parents weren't having a lot of conflict. As we discussed earlier in Chapter 2, if you are in a low-conflict but unhappy marriage there may be ways to make your marriage happy again. If this is possible, this 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.

**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>150</sup> Some children are stronger or more resilient than others. The less resilient children are the ones most likely not to adjust well to all the stresses and changes and losses that usually accompany divorce. So consider carefully characteristics in your children that might indicate that they will have a harder time adjusting to the divorce. For instance, research suggests that a child's temperament makes a difference in how a child adapts to 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. Also, interestingly, research suggests that children who are more physically attractive have an easier time adjusting.<sup>151</sup>

**Parenting behavior.** Children's characteristics can make a difference in how they adjust to divorce, but research suggests that the quality of parenting they receive is probably the most important factor. Unfortunately, because of all the stresses in their lives, divorcing parents are less likely to be effective in their parenting, to be harsher or more permissive. "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 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, 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 5.1 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, you will be required by the State of Utah to participate in a class designed to help with parenting after divorce. Classes like this can help parents be more sensitive to their children's needs after divorce.<sup>152</sup> If you do not divorce, it is still important to understand how the quality of your marriage can affect your parenting.

A large body of research provides strong evidence that conflict between parents negatively affects their children's well-being.<sup>153</sup> Whether the parents stay married or divorce, it is important to minimize the 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>154</sup> Parents experiencing marital conflict tend to use harsher and more inconsistent discipline<sup>155</sup> and have more conflict with their children.<sup>156</sup> These negative parenting behaviors likely explain a great deal of the emotional, behavioral, social, and health problems some children experience after divorce.<sup>157</sup>

If parents maintain warm and positive relationships with their children, they lower the risk that their children will suffer these negative consequences.<sup>158</sup> Using consistent, appropriate discipline for misbehavior, such as setting appropriate limits and consequences,<sup>159</sup> can also help reduce misbehavior and other problems children may experience.<sup>160</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>161</sup> When children use this skill, they can avoid many of the negative outcomes associated with marital conflict.<sup>162</sup> Emotion coaching also can help parents handle their own emotions better and be less hostile in marital conflict. In Box 5.2 we highlight a book that can teach you this valuable skill of emotion coaching. In addition, you may benefit from doing Exercise 5.1, "How Well Might My Children Adjust to Divorce?" at the end of the chapter.

Setting appropriate limits and consequences for misbehavior can help reduce problems with children.

We have been discussing the effects of divorce as if effects were one general thing. But they are actually many different things. The process of family disruption marked by

divorce can affect children in many developmental areas. Next we summarize the research on the effects of divorce on children's specific developmental areas.

#### Box 5.1: Recommended Books about the Effects of Divorce on Children and Effective Parenting

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

## **B. What are the possible social, emotional, and physical health consequences of divorce?**

While many children grow up leading healthy and productive lives after a divorce occurs, they are at greater risk for emotional and physical problems. 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>163</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>164</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>165</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>166</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>167</sup> Children of divorce also can lose contact with grandparents.<sup>168</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>169</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
- ❖ frequent breaking of rules



Research has found that children who are able to deal with their emotions experience increased confidence, greater physical health, and better academic performance and social relationships. Research by Dr. John Gottman has shown that principles of emotional intelligence can even help children escape some of the consequences associated with marital conflict, which may be particularly helpful for children whose parents are at the crossroads of divorce.

*The Heart of Parenting: Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*  
Dr. John M. Gottman, with Joan DeClaire. New York: Fireside, 1997.

This book focuses on five principles of emotional intelligence that parents can use to help children of any age master their emotions. These principles involve being aware of a child's emotions, recognizing emotional expression as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching, listening empathetically and validating children's feelings, labeling emotions in words a child can understand, and helping children come up with an appropriate way to solve a problem or deal with upsetting issues or situations.

- ❖ 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

Many 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>170</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,” a process of helping children be aware of and talk about their emotions. See Box 5.2 to learn about a book that can help you learn this skill. (Also, you may be interested in looking at the Resource List for helpful community resources for your children at the end of Chapter 8.)

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>171</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>172</sup>

Children and teenagers who experience the divorce of their parents may end up getting less parental supervision. As a result, 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>173</sup>

One such family we know had problems with their daughter and 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.

Children of divorce may be less likely to learn how to cooperate, negotiate and compromise, some scholars believe.

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. The problems associated with parenting children require much cooperation between parents, whether the parents are together or divorced.

In addition, some scholars believe that 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>174</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>175</sup>

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, tend to be more aggressive toward others and this can lead to their friends and peers rejecting them.<sup>176</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>177</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>178</sup>

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 break-up. 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>179</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.<sup>180</sup> Children of divorce are more likely to experience injury, asthma, and headaches than children from intact families.<sup>181</sup> Following divorce, children are 50% more likely to develop health problems than children in two-parent families.<sup>182</sup>

Many of the physical symptoms experienced by children of divorce are caused by their increased anxiety, stress, and emotional insecurity. Children of divorce sometimes lose health insurance coverage. As a result of these health problems, some research has even found that children who experience a divorce will end up living fewer years.<sup>183</sup>

### **C. What are the possible educational consequences of divorce?**

Another area of children's lives that may be at risk as a result of divorce is academics. Children of divorced parents perform more poorly in school and have less academic success than children of intact families. However in most studies, these differences are modest rather than large.<sup>184</sup> Fewer children of divorce graduate from high school, however.<sup>185</sup> About 10% fewer children go on to college if their parents are divorced and they are about 30% less likely to receive their college degree compared to children of married parents.<sup>186</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>187</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>188</sup>

Also, financial strains may limit parents' ability to help their children go on 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>189</sup> If they do go to college, many children of divorce complain that they do not get financial help.<sup>190</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 starving 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, constant stress, and lack of parental guidance during her college years.

Again, however, remember that most of the differences in academic performance of children of divorce are modest, not large. Individual children respond differently to divorce; many may not struggle in their academic performance and achievement.

## **D. What are the possible religious and spiritual consequences of divorce?**

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. A recent 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 to be religious. They attended church less often than those whose parents did not divorce, and those who did attend were less likely to be a member at that place of worship.<sup>191</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>192</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>193</sup>

In many states, including Utah, "standard visitation" in divorce cases requires that children spend every other Saturday and Sunday, the two most common days for church congregational meetings, with the non-custodial 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>194</sup> Also, perhaps it is more difficult for children of divorce to believe in a caring God because of the lack of trust and 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>195</sup> Many children felt 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 when they think about 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>196</sup>

### **E. What are the possible consequences of divorce for sexual behavior?**

A divorce can bring more stress and loneliness for children. Children may lose the active presence of a father (or mother). 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 cause a pregnancy).<sup>197</sup> One important reason for this finding is that divorced parents are often less effective at monitoring their teenage children; poorer monitoring of teens is associated with earlier sexual activity and pregnancy.<sup>198</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>199</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>200</sup> Obviously, then, parents at the crossroads of divorce need to be concerned about the potential risks that divorce has for teenagers’ sexual behavior.

### **F. What are the possible consequences of divorce on children’s future adult romantic relationships? What are the odds of divorce for children of divorce?**

Parents at the crossroads of 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. Professor Nicholas Wolfinger, a University of Utah researcher, found that marriages in which one spouse comes from a divorced family are about twice as likely to dissolve as marriages in which neither spouse comes from a divorced family.<sup>201</sup> Moreover, those marriages where both the husband and wife experienced the divorce of their parents growing up are almost three times more likely to divorce than marriages where both spouses come from intact families. And children of divorce are more likely than children from intact families to marry someone who also had this same experience. 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 your children to divorce if you divorce? There are probably many reasons. First of all, 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. They also tend to marry younger. But even

when these differences are accounted for by researchers, there are 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>202</sup> Put another way, experiencing your parents' divorce tends to undermine your faith in marital permanence so you are more likely to leave an unsatisfying relationship 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>203</sup> Perhaps for these reasons, children of divorce are more likely to live with a boyfriend or girlfriend before making a decision to marry. However, research shows that living together before marriage, or cohabiting, is not an effective way to increase your odds of success in marriage, and it may even increase the chances of eventual divorce.<sup>204</sup>

## Exercises for Exercises for Chapter 5

### 5.1: 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 (0)	Rarely (1)	Sometimes (2)	Often (3)	Very Often (4)
1. My children see or hear our marital conflict.	Unsure/Not Applicable	0	1	2	3	4
2. My children are aware of the topics of conflict between me and my spouse.	Unsure/Not Applicable	0	1	2	3	4
3. My children get involved in our marital conflict.	Unsure/Not Applicable	0	1	2	3	4
4. My children see violence between me and my spouse.	Unsure/Not Applicable	0	1	2	3	4

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

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**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.

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 own)	Yes	No	Unsure
8. Attend a different daycare, school, or church?	Yes	No	Unsure
9. Participate in the same extra-curricular 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?

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- How would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect my children’s daily schedule when not in school?

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- How would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect my children’s weekend routines?

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• How would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect my children's activities during vacation time?

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• How would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect how my children celebrate holidays?

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• So, overall, how would a divorce (and the custody arrangement) affect your children's daily lives?

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**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:

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?

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- 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.)

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- 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.)

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



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• 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:

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• 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:

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• 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, more babysitting, etc. 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?

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• 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:

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**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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## 6.

# What are the possible consequences of divorce for adults?

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*[I]ndividuals who make the decision to divorce need to be well-informed about its potential costs to themselves, their partners, and their children. When spouses are preoccupied with own immediate frustrations and disappointment, family experts have a responsibility to remind them of the long-term investment they have in each other and in their children.*

—Drs. Linda J. Waite & Maggie Gallagher, noted marriage researchers<sup>205</sup>

**Overview:** Compared to adults in a stable marriage, divorced adults, on average, have poorer physical and mental health. They experience more social isolation. 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. Many 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 remain deeply 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. There are a number of factors that help individuals adjust better to divorce, such as the ability to embrace change.

Parents at the crossroads of divorce have many questions about the possible effects of family break-up on their children. But parents also have questions about how a divorce might affect them. 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>206</sup> Some newly divorced individuals experience temporary setbacks while others find themselves on a downward slope that almost never seems to end.<sup>207</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 us understand why some people seem to do better than others after divorce.

**Breaking away from high-conflict marriages.** Individuals who are ending a marriage with chronic, high conflict or violence, on average, are happier over time.<sup>208</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 2.5, “How Healthy Is My Marriage?” 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. Exercise 3.4, “Is There Abuse in My Marriage?” at the end of Chapter 3 may help you assess whether there is violence in your relationship.)

**Embracing Change.** 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, and they explore and test the options and avenues available to them.<sup>209</sup> Perhaps this helps explain why people with more education adjust easier after divorce; they are better able to solve their problems and they feel more in control of their lives during this difficult transition time.<sup>210</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>211</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>212</sup> Each time a divorced person makes a choice—about how to earn a living, about where to live, about what kind of daycare center or school to send their children to, or about when to start dating—he or she is making a choice about whether or not to embrace the chance for positive change following a divorce. 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>213</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>214</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 so 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 brittle and easy to break. They sink into a sense of failure, purposelessness, or depression, and sometimes make things even worse by abusing alcohol or drugs. For some, divorce seems to set in motion a process in which they end up losing everything—jobs, homes, children, and self-esteem. Fortunately, studies have found that most of these problems—unhappiness, depression, alcohol abuse, etc.—have largely subsided 2–3 years after the divorce.<sup>215</sup> This does not necessarily mean that divorced adults have rebuilt happy lives after a few years, however. Even when they eventually manage to rebuild a functional new life, some find little joy and satisfaction in that new life.<sup>216</sup>

**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>217</sup> In most cases, however, one of the spouses does not want the divorce.<sup>218</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>219</sup> So, unfortunately, often the person who didn't want the divorce usually has a harder time adjusting to divorce than the person who initiated the divorce. Those who still have positive feelings toward their ex-spouses tend to feel more distress as the result of divorce.<sup>220</sup> Individuals in this situation may benefit from staying involved with others socially and developing a new romantic relationship.<sup>221</sup> However, holding negative feelings toward an ex-spouse 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>222</sup>

Those who still have positive feelings toward their ex-spouses tend to feel more distress as the result of divorce.

**Insecurity and attachment to the ex-spouse.** As we mentioned in Chapter 3, insecure individuals—those who are emotionally dependent on their spouses and/or have a fear of abandonment—may also find it harder to adjust to divorce. Research has found that insecure individuals are typically willing to stay in a marriage even if they are not satisfied with the marriage.<sup>223</sup> Understandably, these insecure individuals tend to have a harder time adjusting to life after divorce. On the other hand, 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>224</sup> These individuals also view themselves as being more capable of coping with divorce, and in fact, research does show that they use more effective problem-solving strategies, such as better negotiating and reasoning skills.<sup>225</sup> As a result, these individuals experience fewer physical and psychological health problems after divorce.<sup>226</sup> They also report feeling more comfortable with themselves and others and experiencing fewer problems with their former spouse.<sup>227</sup> In addition, these individuals also generally use more positive parenting skills after divorce,<sup>228</sup> which may help 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 6.1, "How Will Divorce Affect Me Personally?" at the end of this chapter. It will help you think about these issues and your personal circumstances.

## **B. What are the possible emotional and physical health consequences of divorce?**

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 in Chapter 4, 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>229</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 some 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.

- ❖ **Happiness.** Divorced adults are generally less happy.<sup>230</sup>
- ❖ **Depression.** Divorced individuals, particularly women, are more vulnerable to depression. They have higher levels of psychological stress, lower levels of general psychological well-being, and poorer self-esteem.<sup>231</sup>
- ❖ **Health.** Divorced individuals see a doctor more often and are more likely to suffer from serious illnesses.<sup>232</sup> Some of these health problems diminish over time. But individuals who experience a divorce are more likely to die at earlier ages.<sup>233</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>234</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>235</sup>

Although divorced individuals do go through a period of stress, many bounce back after a few years. (See the Resource List at the end of Chapter 8 for helpful resources within your community.) Some individuals will bounce back quicker given certain circumstances, such as divorcing at younger ages, higher income and education, and higher levels of social support from family and friends.<sup>236</sup>

### **C. What are the possible consequences of divorce for social support?**

The decision to divorce can bring about major changes in the social lives of individuals. Compared with married individuals, divorced individuals are less involved in social activities<sup>237</sup> and report more social isolation.<sup>238</sup> Being involved socially is often difficult because accomplishing the day-to-day activities of home, work, and childcare is often more difficult to do alone.<sup>239</sup> Divorced adults often face greater loneliness than married individuals. In addition to losing a spouse, they also lose many of their social contacts such as in-laws, married friends, and neighbors.<sup>240</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. Often friends, even close friends, distance themselves from the divorced individual because

Divorced men and women approach the transition into single life differently.

they do not know what to say or do to make the person feel better. Although the newly divorced individual desires to maintain friendships and be involved socially, many complain they feel socially awkward because they struggle with whether or not 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 friends sort themselves into “his” friends and “her” friends. And married friends may see the newly divorced person as a possible threat to the stability of their own marriages.<sup>241</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>242</sup>

The amount of social activity that men and women experience varies, because divorced men and women approach the transition into single life differently. Divorced men report a more lasting attachment to their ex-spouses than divorced women.<sup>243</sup> Often, to compensate for losing their spouse, male social activities tend to rise rapidly and dramatically following divorce.<sup>244</sup> Many divorced women seek out a support group to help in their single-life adjustment.<sup>245</sup> Friends help the newly divorced woman get a new perspective on the divorce.<sup>246</sup> Women like to talk about their problems while men are

more likely to “tough it out” than “talk it out.”<sup>247</sup> Men often have fewer close friends to rely on for support after divorce. In addition to men losing their spouses, they usually lose custody of their children as well.

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 to deal with the substance abuse and control the conflict in their divorce.

Following a divorce, children usually reside with only one parent, most often the mother.<sup>248</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>249</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.

After a few years, research indicates that most divorced fathers do not have regular contact with their children.

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>250</sup> The proportion of single fathers raising their children has tripled in the past generation.<sup>251</sup> However, having custody of the children often creates more social isolation because fathers deal with the challenges of being a single parent.<sup>252</sup> Men as well as women 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>253</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>254</sup> Many divorced mothers report that meeting the needs of their children limits them from being socially active.<sup>255</sup>

One single mother we know admitted how difficult it is to parent full time with little or no breaks. When visitation comes for the children’s father, she is happy to be able to spend a little time on herself. Still, her work schedule and the back and forth on the



weekends associated with her children's visitation with their father limits her ability to socialize.

Although work can be a source of stress for mothers during a divorce transition, it can also be a source of social support. Newly divorced working women generally feel less depressed and less isolated than divorced stay-at-home mothers.<sup>256</sup> Working mothers have adult company that helps them to feel better about themselves as they work to rebuild their lives.

## **D. What are the possible consequences of divorce for religious involvement?**

For many people who have strong ties to a personal faith and a religious group, marriage often has a sacred component. For them, marriage is not just a vow with your spouse, but also a covenant 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>257</sup> This is even stronger when individuals feel responsible for the breakup of a marital union.<sup>258</sup> Divorcing individuals may therefore feel cut off from a dimension of their life that gave them access to sacred, spiritual feelings. Some will even go so far as to feel 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>259</sup> This kind of sacred loss is linked to higher rates of depression.<sup>260</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” and defiled—and this leads to even greater anger compared to other kinds of loss.<sup>261</sup> Sometimes, those with religious backgrounds may feel that their spouse could have violated such a sacred thing only if he or she were under the influence of evil forces. This outlook can cause a parent to guard the children from the ex-spouse, and has potential for long-lasting conflict after the divorce is over.

Spouses with strong religious convictions also may be vulnerable to “using” God in a manipulative way in their conflicts. They may try to convince the other spouse that God is on their side. Sometimes spouses may seek for help from God in prayer but avoid directly communicating with each other.<sup>262</sup> Also, sometimes each spouse tries to spiritually one-up the other, which sets the stage for difficulty in trying to cooperate as co-parents and can impede personal recovery from divorce.<sup>263</sup>

In many cases, adults (and children) end up leaving or switching their religious group as a consequence of divorce.<sup>264</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. Many families move to different neighborhoods or cities with a divorce, which may necessitate switching familiar congregations. But for many, 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 these difficult times can be very helpful for many, as well.

## **E. What are the possible consequences of divorce for 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>265</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 that they were missing. These psychological 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 two-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, and I feel bad because he always wants to be better than [my ex-husband]. 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 then [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 hoping that it will pay out and you spend all of your time sitting in front of the slot machine and feeding it.*

## F. What are the possible consequences of divorce for your relationship with your 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>266</sup> This was clear in our interviews with those who had experienced a divorce. 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. 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>267</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

Some couples seem unable to let go of their hostile feelings even as much as a decade later.

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>268</sup> Researchers have found that some couples seem unable to let go of their hostility and conflict even a decade later.<sup>269</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 after the

divorce. Of course, this is easier said than done.

One such couple we know were married while they were teens. 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 often to enforce his visitation. They rarely spoke to one another and used their attorney 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. 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. 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>270</sup> "Laura," as you just read 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 billion 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.*

To show how complex divorce can be, one 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>271</sup> There is a fine line between maintaining a positive, working 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>272</sup>

## Exercises for Chapter 6

### 6.1: 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?
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**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?
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Name of Family Member	How might your relationship be affected by a divorce? Why?
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**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 for others they remain quite attached and dependent on their ex-spouse. Think about how this is likely to be for you. Write your thoughts here:

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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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**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, not surprisingly, are able to adjust better to divorce. Try to assess your personality and attitudes about change. First, rate yourself with the following questions.<sup>273</sup> Circle the answers that best describe you.

How much or how often do these words or phrases describe you?					
	Never (0)	Rarely (1)	Sometimes (2)	Often (3)	Very Often (4)
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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# 7.

## What are the possible financial consequences of divorce?

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*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>274</sup>

**Overview:** Divorce is financially stressful. Researchers estimate 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 experience a loss in their standard of living in the years after a divorce, as well, a loss generally about 10%–40%, depending on circumstances. Divorce impacts communities, as well. One study estimated the average cost to Utah taxpayers of a divorce to be more than \$18,000. At about 10,000 divorces a year, that adds up to more than \$180,000,000 of taxpayer money. Another national study estimated the cost of family breakdown in the United States at more than \$100 billion a year and, in Utah, about \$276 million 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 at the crossroads of 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 as a result of 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 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>275</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>276</sup> We also know that women, men, and children experience the financial consequences of divorce differently.

## **A. What are the possible financial consequences of divorce for women and children?**

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>277</sup> Generally, women 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>278</sup> Research has found:

- ❖ About one in five women fall into poverty as a result of divorce.<sup>279</sup>
- ❖ About one in three women who own a home and have children at home when they divorce lose their homes.<sup>280</sup>
- ❖ Three out of four divorced mothers don't receive full payment of child support.<sup>281</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. But many women are not prepared financially for life as a single parent. As a result, they often need to rely on public assistance (welfare) programs to supplement their family finances. This financial support is crucial for many women, although it is still unlikely to cover all financial needs. Women at the crossroads of 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 7.1, “Exploring the Financial Impact 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—alimony is not as common these days.

Even with careful preparation for the financial impact of divorce, however, money problems will still be common. Research suggests that women usually don't recover fully from the financial consequences of divorce until they remarry.<sup>282</sup> (There is more information about remarriage in Chapter 4 of this guidebook.) Alimony payments are less common, but if a spouse does receive them, they stop when the paying spouse dies or the receiving spouse remarries.

## **B. What are the possible financial consequences of divorce for men?**

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

It is a myth that men are financially better off after a divorce.

circumstances.<sup>283</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>284</sup> This comes on top of having to pay for a separate home or apartment. In addition, 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 may even improve their financial situation somewhat.<sup>285</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 since the amount is determined by a preset formula that often does not take account of special circumstances.

You may benefit from doing exercise 7.1, "Exploring the Financial Consequences of Divorce," at the end of the chapter, to get a better idea of how divorce would affect you. 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 run.

## **C. What is the financial impact of divorce on communities and taxpayers?**

Women and men at the crossroads of 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. This may be hard for individuals at the crossroads of divorce to remember. Divorce is one of the most common ways that people, especially women and children, fall into poverty.<sup>286</sup> When people fall into poverty, they usually take advantage of government programs, services, and supports, all 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>287</sup> Also, there are more long-term, hard-to-quantify financial impacts on society. Children from divorced homes struggle more in school and are less likely to be able to go to college.<sup>288</sup> Our economy depends more and more on a well-educated workforce. And of course, personal incomes increase with education.

Utah State University researchers estimated that the average cost to Utah taxpayers of a divorce is more than \$18,000. At about 10,000 divorces a year, that adds up to more than \$180,000,000 of taxpayer money each year. And this doesn't count an even bigger public tab picked up by the federal government (and paid for by federal taxes).<sup>289</sup> An even more rigorous, national study conservatively estimated the cost of divorce and unwed childbearing in Utah to be \$276 million a year. Nationwide the cost to taxpayers each year was \$112 billion.<sup>290</sup>

Divorce is sometimes necessary. And a free and 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 heavy financial burden when marriages fail. Marriage and divorce are public issues as well as private concerns.<sup>291</sup> The success and failure of our marriages have consequences beyond our personal lives. Individuals at the crossroads of divorce help not just themselves and their families but their neighborhoods, communities, and nation when they are able to repair their relationships and establish a healthy, stable marriage.

## **Exercises for Chapter 7**

### **7.1: Exploring the Financial Impact 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:
Spouse's Net Monthly Income:	Spouse's Other Income (pensions, rents, child support, second job, etc.):

**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 have property that you will inherit? Value?
Do you have timeshare property? Value?
Automobiles, Recreational Vehicles, etc.
Vehicle #1
Year:
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: BALANCE OWING:	ITEM: WORTH: BALANCE OWING:
ITEM: WORTH: BALANCE OWING:	ITEM: WORTH: BALANCE OWING:
ITEM: WORTH: BALANCE OWING:	ITEM: WORTH: BALANCE OWING:
ITEM: WORTH: BALANCE OWING:	ITEM: WORTH: BALANCE OWING:
ITEM: WORTH: BALANCE OWING:	ITEM: WORTH: BALANCE OWING:
ITEM: WORTH: BALANCE OWING:	ITEM: WORTH: BALANCE OWING:
ITEM: WORTH: BALANCE OWING:	ITEM: WORTH: BALANCE OWING:

**D. FINANCIAL ACCOUNTS.** List your (and your spouse's) 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 TAX REFUND THIS YEAR? HOW MUCH?	
IRA #1: AMOUNT:	IRA #2: AMOUNT:

**E. BUSINESS INTERESTS.** List any personal business interests you and your spouse have and their value.

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

**E. DEBTS AND OBLIGATIONS.** List current debts and other financial obligations you and your spouse have and record the information requested about them.

Name of Debt:	Incurred for:	Balance Owing:	Monthly Payment:	In Whose Name:

**F. ANTICIPATED MONTHLY EXPENSES AFTER THE DIVORCE.** Do some financial planning about how you will meet your monthly financial expenses if you divorce. Estimate the amount for each expense (if it applies to your situation). Then add up the expenses. Finally, try to estimate your anticipated monthly income. Then compare your expenses to your income.

MONTHLY EXPENSES	ESTIMATED \$	COMMENTS
Mortgage/Rent		
Property Tax		
House/Rental Insurance		
Food/Household Supplies		
Utilities		
Clothing		
Uninsured Medical Expenses		
Uninsured Dental Expenses		
Child Care		
Health Insurance Premiums		
Education Expenses		
Automobile Loan Payment		
Automobile Gas, Maintenance, Insurance		
Donations to Church and other Charities		
Entertainment funds		
Misc. for Children:		
Other: Retirement Savings (401k, employer pension plan, IRA)		
Other:		
Other:		
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES:</b>		
<b>MONTHLY INCOME</b>		
Employment		
Interest income		
Support payments from spouse		
Other income:		
Other income:		
<b>TOTAL INCOME:</b>		
<b>DIFFERENCE (INCOME–EXPENSES):</b>		

**G. 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 consider when you are considering divorce. Review some of your calculations above and try your best to answer honestly the following questions.<sup>292</sup> Some of the questions may not be applicable to your situation.

1. Do you have adequate money saved that would support yourself 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?

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

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4. Who will count the children as withholding exemptions for income tax purposes? Often, the exemption is alternated yearly between mother and father.

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5. 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.

6. 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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7. Will you need and can you afford childcare if you have to go to work full time after the divorce?

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8. 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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9. 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 may need to provide 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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10. 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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11. 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.

12. 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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13. There are many other smaller family expenses that we sometimes forget about, such as lessons for piano, ballet, karate, etc., extra-curricular school activity fees (e.g., sports, choir, etc.), summer camp, scouting, and many more. How would you cover these kinds of more minor expenses (but important expenses for your children)?

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**H. 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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## 8.

# What are the legal options for divorce? What should I expect during the divorce process?

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*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.** Utah law requires divorcing parents to attend two classes before finalizing a divorce: a divorce orientation education class and an education for divorcing parents' class. The divorce process can take anywhere from two months to several years. Most people use lawyers when going through the divorce process. 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 and “uncontested” divorces, there is an Online Court Assistance Program with the legal forms needed for divorce that individuals can fill out themselves. All contested divorces in Utah are required to go through mediation, in which a trained, neutral mediator 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. One spouse may not want the divorce, but it is futile to try and challenge the divorce in court because of the way our laws are written and interpreted by the courts.

If a divorce is 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 need to make. This chapter will help you understand what lies ahead.

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

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

If a couple has children, Utah law requires them to attend two classes—a Divorce Orientation Education class and an Education for Divorcing Parents class—before the divorce can be finalized.<sup>293</sup> (Those who have not filed for a divorce are welcome to attend, as well.) More information about these classes, including times and locations, is available on the web at [www.utcourts.gov/specproj/dived.htm](http://www.utcourts.gov/specproj/dived.htm). If the couple does not have children, these courses are not required, but the law requires a 90-day waiting period before a divorce can be finalized.<sup>294</sup>

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. Anytime 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, 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) to help with their case for child support even when they have decided just to separate and not divorce. (See the Resource List at the end of Chapter 8 for ORS contact information.)

The divorce process can take anywhere from 90 days to several years, depending on how many issues can be resolved between spouses. Issues to be settled in divorce are commonly parenting time, division of financial assets and debts, child support, and alimony.<sup>295</sup> And within each of these issues there are many things to be considered. You may benefit from doing exercise 8.1, “Thinking About Parenting Time With Children,” at the end of this chapter. Exercise 7.1, “Thinking About the Financial Consequences of



Divorce,” at the end of Chapter 7, will help you think about all the details associated with dividing your finances. We recommend that you do that exercise. Then, you may benefit from doing exercise 8.2, “Thinking About Child Support and Alimony,” at the end of this chapter.

The logistics of taking one family and dividing it into two households can be difficult. Most of the time, this requires both parents to be employed. Even if a person decides not to work and stay home, the court may “impute”<sup>296</sup> income to that parent for child support calculation. Imputation assigns a potential yearly wage to each parent, even though the parent is not currently working. The court also requires each spouse to show proof of income through current pay stubs and the previous years’ taxes.<sup>297</sup> Attorneys or mediators will also require documentation for all assets and debts in order to gather the legal information needed to distribute all your financial assets.

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

In the State of Utah, approximately 50% of divorcing couples<sup>298</sup> use lawyers when going through the divorce process. People who have a low income and who have experienced physical abuse from their spouse can qualify for a free attorney through Utah Legal Services (see [www.andjusticeforall.org/uls](http://www.andjusticeforall.org/uls) or call 1-800-662-4245). Others choose to use a service such as Legal Aid (<http://legalaidsocietyofsaltlake.org> or 801-328-8849) to get initial consultations for divorce. But free, long-term legal services are available

You may be able to qualify for a free attorney. See the Resource List at the end of this chapter for legal service options.

only if there is domestic violence involved in the marriage and if lawyers are available. (Agencies such as Utah Legal Services are often swamped with cases. Please see the Resource List at the end of Chapter 8 for information about legal service options within your county.) Low-income individuals also can file paperwork in order to waive the filing fees associated with divorce.<sup>299</sup> (Paperwork called the “Affidavit of Impecuniosity” will waive the filing fees. These can be printed off of the

Online Court Assistance Program [OCAP] System [see below]. Of course, attorneys also have these forms. Often, the clerks of the court also will be able to give you information on filing the “Affidavit of Impecuniosity.”)

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, there is the Online Court Assistance Program (OCAP) service provided by Utah Courts and the Utah State Legislature, where people can get access to legal forms and do their own paperwork (see [www.utcourts.gov/ocap](http://www.utcourts.gov/ocap)). If the divorce is contested, mediation can be used to try to resolve the contested issues before 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 expensive the divorce process will cost. If the case goes to litigation in court, the process can cost anywhere from \$3,000 to \$10,000 dollars or even more for each spouse. Courts rarely, if ever, 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 of the details of the divorce themselves. Then an attorney can be hired to file "uncontested paperwork," which usually costs between \$800 and \$2,000.

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.

An attorney cannot represent both the divorcing husband and wife.

According to the rules of ethics for attorneys, an attorney cannot represent both the divorcing husband and wife.<sup>300</sup> Legally, the attorney is required to represent just one spouse. It is wise for the other spouse to at least get a one-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 the law allows the Attorney-Mediator to file the divorce paperwork.<sup>301</sup> However, a consultation with an independent attorney is still a good idea.

The OCAP system (described above) is also 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 OCAP

system and 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, the Utah Legislature has written a partial divorce decree for you. The Utah Child Support Guidelines require 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 parents can agree that a parent pay less than the guidelines provide, although they can agree to higher payments. 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 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 the local police station) if parents fight or express hostility when the child is picked up or dropped off at the child's home.

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

In May 2005, Utah legislation required that all family-related court cases that are contested go through mediation.<sup>302</sup> 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>303</sup> So, mediation is a process where a neutral person goes through all of 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 of the agreements between the two divorcing spouses. This memorandum can be filed with the court and used to enforce agreements.<sup>304</sup> However, divorcing spouses must still file all of their legal paperwork to finalize the divorce.

A mediator can be an attorney, a counselor, or another person specifically trained in mediation and approved on the court roster.<sup>305</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. A listing of court-approved mediators can be found at [www.utcourts.gov/mediation](http://www.utcourts.gov/mediation). Those mediators who have MM (Master Mediator) next to their name are very experienced mediators; they have at least 300 hours of mediation experience. The

designation of DM is for a Domestic Mentor, which is a mediator who has at least 300 hours of mediating issues specifically related to families. Finally, the designation of DV (Domestic Violence) means the mediator has gone through specialized training in dealing with domestic violence.

Mediation for a divorce usually takes 2 to 7 hours and is done in several two-hour sessions. The more divorcing parents are able to 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. You may benefit from doing exercise 8.3, “Preparing for Divorce Mediation,” at the end of this chapter.

Mediators who deal with family issues usually charge from \$100 to \$300 an hour. The cost of divorce mediation therefore generally ranges from about \$200 to \$2,000 dollars. Traditionally, this cost is divided evenly between the divorcing spouses. 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 conference 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.<sup>306</sup> The divorcing parents’ attorneys also can draft the legal documentation or the parents can use the OCAP system (described above in section B).

Mediators can save you time and money; be prepared with the issues you will need to settle beforehand.

Compared to litigation in divorce proceedings, mediation appears to have several benefits. An important study found that mediation helps to 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>307</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>308</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 up 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.

You may benefit from a public website offering a wealth of information to residents of Utah on divorce, mediation, custody evaluation, and other related topics: [utahcustody.com](http://utahcustody.com).

## **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>309</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 be found through CFLU (Collaborative Family Lawyers of Utah) located at [www.cflutah.org](http://www.cflutah.org). The benefits of Collaborative Lawyering, as defined by CFLU, are as follows: “This process is generally less costly than litigation. You are a vital part of the settlement team (consisting of both parties and both attorneys). You are each supported by your lawyers and yet you work cooperatively with your spouse and his/her lawyer in resolving your issues. The process is much less fear and anxiety producing than utilizing Court proceedings or the threat of such proceedings. Everyone can focus on settlement without the imminent threat of ‘going to Court.’ The possibility exists that the participants can create a climate that facilitates ‘win-win’ settlements. The proceeding is much less time consuming. It can be finalized within a short time following the parties reaching agreement, rather than getting bogged down for many months

Collaborative lawyering is generally less costly, and much less fear and anxiety producing.

waiting for a court date. You control the proceedings—your destiny is in your hands rather than in the hands of a third party (the courts).”<sup>310</sup>

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>311</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>312</sup> A prominent collaborative attorney in the State of Utah, Brian Florence, says that, “When lawyers and parties commit to the collaborative process, by implication and to some extent, by specific terms in the signed Collaborative Participation Agreement, they understand and embrace these process concepts.”

According to Florence, “using all of these concepts, 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.”

## **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>313</sup> Once one spouse insists on ending the marriage, it is futile for the other spouse to challenge the divorce in court. In this situation, the only option is for the spouse who wants to save the marriage to seek help to reconcile the marriage before divorcing, such as marriage counseling.

Once the divorce is final, a person can make modifications only because of a “substantial change in circumstances.”<sup>314</sup> Custody and parenting time can be modified through this substantial change in circumstances.<sup>315</sup> Assets and debts are rarely changed, but it is possible if a substantial change in circumstances is present.<sup>316</sup> A rule of thumb for child support changes is that a parent must have a 25% change (increase or decrease) in income. For alimony changes, the court requires a substantial change “not foreseeable at the time of divorce.”<sup>317</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 them with an attorney in court. Child support obligations cannot be avoided through bankruptcy.



**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.

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	



**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.

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

**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?
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Special Occasion (e.g., birthdays, holidays):	How could time with children be shared or allocated?
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## 8.2: Thinking About Child Support and Alimony.

**A. CHILD SUPPORT.** How much money would you receive in child support? Go to the Internet site <http://www.utcourts.gov/childsupport/calculator>. Calculate support twice, once for Sole Custody and another calculation for Joint Custody with the hypothetical amount of 115 nights. (It is easiest to just fill in line 1 with the number of children you have and then line 2a with your income and your spouse’s income. Then, for line 7, the joint calculator, only choose 115 nights for the appropriate parent.) Then press calculate. If your case is more complex, you can access the directions online as well.

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.

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>318</sup> Alimony is taxed to the person who is receiving the support and is cannot be set aside in bankruptcy.<sup>319</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>320</sup> There is no set formula for alimony. Some people choose to go back to school after getting divorced. For financial aid for “displaced homemakers” (those who have devoted themselves to full-time homemaking rather than employment outside the home), contact the Utah Department of Workforce Services.

Review your answers on Exercise 7.1 F (BUDGET) 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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## 8.3: 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.

<p><b>Problem Definition:</b> What are main items for mediation from your perspective?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> <li>5.</li> </ol> <p>What are your goals for mediation?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol>	<p>How do you think the other person is defining the items for mediation?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> <li>5.</li> </ol> <p>What are your goals for your children?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Option 1: Status Quo Continues</b> What options are you considering if there are no changes in current temporary arrangement?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> <li>5.</li> </ol>	<p>What options do you think the other side is considering if there are no changes in temporary arrangement?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> <li>5.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Option 2: Listing Non-Negotiables:</b> An item about which you are not willing to make any concessions. What is non-negotiable for you?</p>	<p>What do you think is non-negotiable for the other side?</p>
<p><b>Option 3: Creating New Options</b> What options would make you satisfied?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> <li>5.</li> </ol>	<p>What options do you think would make the other party satisfied?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> <li>5.</li> </ol>

<p>Option 4: Commitment to Process          What are you willing to offer and make a commitment to?</p>	<p>How would you like to communicate with the other person if a future problem arises?</p>
<p>Option 5: Learning from the past.          If you could go back in time what would you do differently?</p> <p>Why?</p>	<p>Are you willing to learn from the past problem and move forward?</p> <p>Are you willing to move forward with a cooperative “co-parenting” relationship?</p>

## Resource List for Separated and Divorced Families

There are many resources available to help separated and divorced families in Utah. Each county has different resources. To find the resources in your county, please go online to:

- [www.211utah.org](http://www.211utah.org)
- or simply call 211.

After dialing 211, a resource assistant will answer your call and help you locate needed resources within your county.

Below is a list of the categories for resources available. We have highlighted the resource list categories for single-parent families. Please check the website for updated information in your county:

Alcohol Abuse and Support Groups

Dental Resource List

English as a Second Language

Food Resources List

General Resource List for Spanish Speaking

Health Resource List

Low Cost Housing for Senior and People with Disabilities

Spanish Resource List

Senior Resource List

\* Single Parent Resource List

- Advocacy Groups
- Child Abuse
- Child Care/After School Programs
- Clothing/ Furniture/Household Items
- Domestic Violence
- Espanol
- Ethnic/Minority Groups
- Financial Counseling

- Food Assistance Programs
- Health Information
- Housing Utilities
- Job Training Education
- Legal Assistance
- Parenting Classes/Counseling
- Pregnancy Testing
- Rape/Sexual Assault
- Recreation Youth Guidance
- Runaways & Related Situations
- Shelter, Emergency (such as domestic violence)
- Support Groups
- Welfare and Financial Service

Substance Abuse Support Group

Youth Resource List

Helpful Statewide Numbers:

Baby Your Baby: Statewide: 1-800-826-9662

Children's Aid Society: 1-800-273-8671

CHIP (Children Health Insurance Program) 1-888-222-2542

Health Hotline: 1-800-472-4716

Office Of Recovery Services: (Child Support Issues): 1-800-255-8734

PCN (Primary Care Network) 1-888-222-2542 Health insurance for adults related to CHIP.

RX Connect Prescription Help: 1-888-221-0265

WIC: 1-800-WIC-KIDS

## **A Summary of Key Points in this Guidebook**

- ❖ Since 2007, Utah has required that parents considering divorce participate in a divorce orientation course intended to help them carefully consider their options, including repairing the relationship and keeping the family together. This class and guidebook are in addition to the class for divorcing parents.
- ❖ There are about 10,000 divorces a year in Utah. One study conservatively estimated that these divorces cost Utah taxpayers about \$180,000,000 each year. A national study estimated the annual cost of the breakdown of marriage in the United States to be \$112 billion.
- ❖ Many unhappy marriages become happy again. Two out of three married individuals who say they are unhappy in their marriage will, when asked 5 years later, report their marriages are happy, if they stay together. Another 20% say their marriage has improved.
- ❖ Only 27% of Utahns and about 33% of Americans prepare for marriage with any formal education or training. Even fewer ever participate in marriage enhancement classes.
- ❖ Some people read books or use other resources to repair their marriages on their own. Others participate in marriage education classes that teach valuable relationship skills. Still others seek professional marriage counseling or guidance from a religious leader.
- ❖ 80% of couples show improvement after visiting a marriage counselor and up to 50% say that most of their major problems were resolved. But only about half of Utahns seek formal marriage counseling before they divorce.
- ❖ 40%–50% of first marriages end in divorce. About 60% of second marriages end in divorce. The most common reasons that individuals give for their divorce are lack of commitment, too many arguments, infidelity, marrying too young, unrealistic expectations, and a lack of equality. However, about half of divorces come from low-conflict marriages; these divorces are hardest on the children.
- ❖ About three in ten currently married Utahns have at one time or another thought their marriage might be in serious trouble and thought about divorce, but more than 90% of these individuals said that they were glad that they were still together.
- ❖ About half of all divorces come from marriages that are not experiencing high levels of conflict; individuals from these marriages generally experience a decrease in happiness over time. When individuals end high-conflict marriages, however, they increase their happiness, on average. About two in ten individuals appear to enhance their lives through their divorce, but about three in ten seem to do worse after divorce; about four in ten individuals build future romantic relationships



after divorce but they have mostly the same kinds of problems as they did in their previous marriage.

- ❖ 40%–60% of divorced individuals wish they and/or their ex-spouse had tried harder to work through their differences.
- ❖ About three out of four divorced people will eventually remarry someone else. However, second marriages have even higher rates of divorce, although if couples can hang on through the challenging first five years of remarriage, their chances for success are high.
- ❖ The challenges of divorce can have negative consequences on children’s social, emotional, intellectual, physical, moral, and spiritual development. Research suggests that children who experience divorce are generally at 2–3 times the risk for various problems. However, many children are resilient; even though the experience can be painful, most do not experience serious long-term problems from divorce.
- ❖ Children caught in high-conflict marriages generally do better if their parents divorce, compared to children who remain in high-conflict marriages. But children in low-conflict marriages generally do worse when their parents divorce compared to children who remain in low-conflict marriages.
- ❖ In adulthood, children who experienced the divorce of their parents are 2–3 times more likely to divorce, compared to children who did not experience the divorce of their parents.
- ❖ Compared to adults in a stable marriage, divorced adults, on average, have poorer physical and mental health.
- ❖ A few years after divorce, a large majority of divorced fathers no longer have regular contact with their children.
- ❖ 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 financial well-being after a divorce, a loss generally of about 10%–40%, depending on their circumstances.
- ❖ All contested divorces in Utah are required to go through “mediation,” in which a trained, neutral mediator 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. Compared to litigation, couples who go through mediation are, on average, more satisfied with their divorce settlement, have less anger about the divorce, have fewer conflicts after divorce, and are more cooperative with their ex-spouse on parenting matters.

## Endnotes

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- 313 See Utah Code Annotated § 30-3-1.
- 314 Custody and parent-time can be modified through “substantial change in circumstances.” See *Fullmer v. Fullmer*, 761 P.2d 942, 946 (Utah App. 1988) and Utah Code Annotated § 30-3-10.4. Assets and debts are rarely changed, yet the court could modify and a substantial change must be present. See Utah Code Ann. § 30-3-5(3) (Lexis Supp. 2007) and *Childs v. Callahan*, 993 P.2d 244, 247 (Utah App. 1999). For alimony the court requires a substantial change “not foreseeable at the time of divorce.” Utah Code Annotated § 30-3-5(8)(g)(ii)(Lexis Supp. 2007).
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- 320 See Utah Code Annotated § 30-3-5(8)(a) (Lexis Supp. 2007). The seven factors for alimony are as follows: (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.”



## **About the Authors Cont.:**

for all contested divorces. She is a Domestic Mentor for the State of Utah and does one-on-one training for those who are becoming divorce mediators in the State of Utah. She helped to initiate the Victim Offender Mediation Program in the Fourth District Juvenile Court and also the Provo School District Truancy Program. She has taught thousands of at-risk youth and professionals principles of conflict resolution, communication, mediation, and negotiation. Dr. Fackrell is a Master Mediator and Primary Trainer for the State of Utah and performs certifications in mediation and divorce mediation for professionals. She received an honorary award from the Juvenile Justice Services and the Slate Canyon Youth Program in 2004, 2005, and 2008.

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