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Divorce, effects on adults

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Divorce is the legal dissolution of a marriage. Divorce is a complicated and painful experience that includes an emotional, financial, and social dissolution of a couple. Divorce is listed among the most stressful events an individual can ever encounter. However, the effects of divorce are not the same for all adults. For some it is a stressful negative crisis, and for others it can be a welcome relief. But for most there is probably a combination of both positive and negative effects. The effects of divorce to be discussed in this entry include changes to the psychological (e.g., life satisfaction, happiness, divorce adjustment), physical (e.g., acute and chronic disease, mortality), and financial well-being (job loss, financial stability) of former spouses. Divorce adjustment is measured in a variety of ways, which include how happy one is with the divorce, whether the individual perceives the divorce as a good or bad idea, and how attached the individual is to the former partner. The effects of a divorce on adults can vary based on several factors, including individual characteristics, the quality of the marriage pre-divorce, and the presence of children. This entry will review the positive and negative effects of divorce on adults as influenced by various individual and situational factors as well as by the differences of gender.

Negative Effects of Divorce

Divorce is a stressful significant life event that represents loss and transition. One loses a valued relationship and the emotional and material resources provided by that relationship. This loss requires numerous adjustments as one transitions from a married to a single lifestyle. As with any change, an individual may encounter feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and doubt. Divorce also requires individuals to manage responsibilities (household tasks, childcare duties, financial matters, etc.) that one's spouse may have previously handled. These additional duties can serve as daily hassles that can be further sources of stress. In general, the accumulation of stress associated with divorce can have a negative impact on the well-being of those affected.

Accordingly, scientists have found that the well-being of divorced adults is substantially lower than that of married adults. When compared to married adults, divorced adults have lower rates of life satisfaction and happiness; higher rates of depression, anxiety, and acute and chronic disease; higher likelihood of alcohol abuse, suicide, and death; more social isolation; and lower economic stability and wealth. Divorced adults also have higher rates of institutionalization in correctional facilities, mental institutions, hospitals, and convalescent homes than married adults. The negative effects of a divorce subside after a few years for some, but for others they persist indefinitely. The emotional support provided by repartnering or remarrying is largely credited for resolving the negative effects of divorce for most adults.

Divorce negatively affects the financial stability and wealth of most individuals. However, compared to men, women are more likely to be affected due to the higher likelihood of maintaining custody of the children, the low levels of child support most receive, and the gender disparities in salaries and employment opportunities. Furthermore, married women are more likely to be unemployed and responsible for childcare and household duties, which negatively impact their professional development and earning potential when they return to the workforce postdivorce. Men fare better after a divorce than women do because their new households are generally smaller and because they do not contribute the same proportion of their income to their former households after the divorce as they did prior. In addition, being married and

having children does not negatively affect their career advancement. In general, men do not equally share in the domestic chores; therefore, they are more likely to remain continuously employed and thereby able to consistently sharpen their professional skills and protect their earning potential.

Positive Effects of Divorce

Most studies that examine the effects of divorce on adults primarily focus on negative outcomes; however, there are some positive consequences following divorce. For many, divorce is often interpreted as a second chance at life. For example, research shows that divorced adults report higher rates of autonomy, personal growth, self-awareness, and occupational success than married adults. These benefits may be related to their increased sense of freedom and independence. However, these advantages are more likely when there are adequate levels of financial and social support from friends, family, or new partners. Employment also provides divorced adults with financial support and alleviates the stress of reentering the workforce. In fact, individuals who are employed at the time of their divorce report less divorce-related stress than those who are not employed. Moreover, divorced individuals with new partners show greater positive adjustment and life satisfaction than those who have not developed new romantic relationships. A new partner positively affects well-being because it lessens the anxiety, depression, and social isolation experienced after the loss of a companion.

There also is assistance with household tasks and expenses.

Individual and Situational Differences

The adjustment to and distress experienced after a divorce may depend on a variety of factors. One such factor is an individual's perception of the meaning of marriage. Individuals who perceive marriage as a lifetime commitment experience higher levels of depression after divorce than those who view marriage as just another relationship that comes and goes. In addition, individuals who endorse several dysfunctional attitudes about divorce (e.g., getting divorced means the people are damaged goods or divorce will permanently damage the children) report higher levels of postdivorce distress than those who endorse a few of these attitudes.

A person's perception of the cause of the divorce also can affect adjustment to divorce. Individuals who blame themselves or external factors, such as work or family interference, for their divorce have poorer adjustment than those who attribute the divorce to incompatibility (partners too dissimilar or too young for marriage) or to their spouses (spouse cheated). Paul Amato and Denise Previti suggest that people who believe the divorce was avoidable because of the choices they made have more difficulty recovering from the divorce and letting go of their former spouse than those who believe the relationship itself or their spouse was flawed.

The distress experienced postdivorce also may vary depending on whether or not the individual initiated the divorce and/or wanted the divorce more than his or her former spouse. Although studies suggest that both initiators and noninitiators are likely to experience distress, there are differences in the timing of the distress. Cheryl Buehler asserts that the initiator is more likely to have started the grief process before the legal separation is final, whereas the noninitiator is not likely to begin the grieving process until the legal process becomes a reality. Overall, however, the initiator reports more

positive divorce adjustment than the noninitiator. Similarly, the spouse who wanted the divorce most reports higher levels of divorce adjustment and life satisfaction. Scientists believe initiating the divorce may aid in divorce adjustment because one is taking an active role in finding a solution to a problem, and this decision gives the individual the perception of control over one's life.

The age at divorce and duration of marriage also are associated with divorce adjustment. Older individuals and those who have been married longer have a more difficult time adjusting to divorce. Amato and colleagues explain that this difference in adjustment could be due to greater marital investments made into the marriage (children, emotional effort, and financial support) and the perception of fewer dating opportunities once divorced. It could also be that older adults have less favorable perceptions of divorce.

The quality of the marriage prior to the initiation of a divorce is another factor related to divorce adjustment. Some argue that divorce serves as an escape from a poor marriage. In support of this perspective, research has found that individuals from highly distressed marriages report greater levels of happiness following divorce than those from low-distress marriages. In addition, adults dissolving unsatisfactory or unfair marriages are less depressed than those dissolving satisfying and fair marriages. (Divorces in these cases were probably not mutually desired.) However, relief does not come for all who leave unsatisfactory marriages. Adults who leave marriages high in conflict (e.g., verbal or physical aggression) do not immediately experience relief. Instead, these adults face a greater likelihood of depression following divorce because divorce may trigger more conflict from abusive spouses.

Gender Differences

Research shows that divorce is more detrimental to the psychological well-being of women than to men. Specifically, women have been found to experience higher rates of depression and lower levels of happiness following divorce than men. The likelihood of depression and a decline in happiness is even greater if women have preschool-aged children at the time of the divorce. In addition, women who have small children are more likely to abuse alcohol postdivorce than women who do not have small children or older children. The gender differences in psychological well-being following divorce have been partly attributed to the differential economic changes that accompany divorce. It has been consistently found that women suffer more financially after divorce and are more likely to maintain custody of the children. For example, women who experience divorce with young children will likely require full-time childcare. These childcare costs can drastically affect her household budget. In addition, as the custodial parent, she must deal with the difficulties of misbehavior and illness, which can be a financial strain and can affect her own psychological and physical well-being.

Nonetheless, the picture is not completely bleak for divorced women. Studies show that since women are more likely to be the initiators of divorce, they also are more likely to recover successfully from the divorce. In addition, women are more likely than men to be satisfied with the legal settlements associated with divorce in terms of custody, visitation, and asset allocation. Being the initiator of her divorce and thereby taking an active role in changing her life, receiving a favorable legal settlement, and having a higher likelihood of seeking support from family and friends all allow women to effectively adjust to the challenges a divorce brings.

Although men are not as likely as women to openly express the hurt and pain they are experiencing, divorce is not easy for them. Research shows that men have an increase in alcohol abuse following divorce. In addition, men who are fathers of preschool-aged children have higher rates of depression postdivorce. This depression may be due to the loss of daily contact with their children or to the diminished parental control they have over their children's lives. Divorced fathers are significantly less likely than divorced mothers to maintain custody of their children, and many fathers have strong concerns about the courts' favoritism toward mothers in determining custody and visitation arrangements.

There also are differences in the psychological well-being between divorced adults with children (particularly preschool-aged children) and those divorced adults with no children or adult children. These differences can be partly explained by the continued contact with the former spouse due to parenting obligations. Continued contact may exacerbate the conflict and feelings of anger and hostility between former spouses. The conflict may include legal, verbal, and physical disputes. Divorced individuals with no children or adult children do not have to maintain a relationship with their former spouses and can more effectively escape the conflicted relationship.

In the future, researchers should examine the dynamics of nonmarital relationship breakups now that fewer adults are marrying and are cohabitating with their partners instead. It will also be important to understand the characteristics of successfully remarried divorced adults in order to help the divorced prepare for their next marriage since the second marriage is at a higher risk of divorce than the first.

- divorce
- divorce adjustment
- effects of divorce
- effects of divorce on adults
- spouses
- marriage
- adjustment

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See also

- [Divorce, Children and](#)
- [Divorce, Prevalence and Trends](#)
- [Divorce and Preventive Interventions for Children and Parents](#)
- [Longitudinal Studies of Marital Satisfaction and Dissolution](#)

Further Readings

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