

HANDLING THE STRESS OF DIVORCE

Divorce is one of the most stressful events in a person's life. In fact, psychologists have found that it is second only to the death of a spouse in terms of the amount of disruption it causes.

TYPES OF DIVORCE

We tend to think in terms of one divorce, but in reality, you will undergo several kinds of divorce. First you'll undergo an **emotional divorce**; meaning the change in relationship with your spouse. Once love and affection characterized the relationship, but now it has deteriorated into a different set of emotions such as antagonism, anger, resentment and fear. The second kind of divorce you are about to embark upon is a **legal divorce**, and that is where your choice of attorney will have a profound impact. The third type of divorce is a **community divorce**. For many years you have been part of a couple. Divorce alters your position within the community. The community divorce brings challenges in relationships with friends and in-laws. Many divorced people find that their social life no longer functions effectively and they need to develop new support networks. The fourth kind of divorce is **psychological divorce**. Divorce changes the way individuals view themselves. The psychological divorce occurs when an individual must separate himself or herself from the influence of a spouse and learn to function more independently. It requires the development of a sense of autonomy and self-esteem. Divorce requires change in almost every aspect of your life. It occurs in major areas like place of residence, employment and child care responsibilities, and minor areas like sleeping and eating patterns. The rate of wear and tear on your system as you adjust to these many changes is what stress is all about. The stress response is nonspecific, meaning your body responds the same way to positive changes as it does to negative changes.

THE STRESS RESPONSE

You will go through three stages as you handle the stress of divorce. The **first** is called Alarm. During this stage, you recognize the stressor and prepare for action. Adrenaline is released into the bloodstream causing an increase in respiration, heart rate and perspiration. Blood sugar is elevated, pupils become dilated and digestion slows down. The body is ready to defend against the stressor. At this point you are prepared to beat up or run away from the source of your stress. This is the fight or flight response.

The **second** stage of the stress response is called Resistance. Once the fight or flight response has begun, the body must repair the damages caused by the Alarm Stage. The body's systems must be brought back down to normal and homeostasis restored. During the Resistance Stage, a balance is restored in your life and

you are prepared to meet the challenge of the next stressful event you will encounter. Alternating between Alarm and Resistance gives one the experience of being on an emotional roller coaster. One moment you may feel overwhelmed and out of control and the next numb and depressed.

Most people are able to handle stress pretty effectively. However, if the stress continues or many changes occur in a short period of time, you cannot regain your balance and you enter into the **third stage**, the exhaustion stage of the stress response. When your adaptive resources, your abilities to cope are depleted, you may develop stress-related disorders.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

We all express the effects of stress differently. On an emotional level stress can take the form of sadness, anger or anxiety. Some individuals have a feeling of being overwhelmed, or of anxiety, fear or boredom. Depression is a common symptom of stress. On a behavioral level, stress can be expressed as irritability, violent actions, or impulsivity. People under stress frequently have difficulty sleeping and have nightmares. Poor concentration, and with that an increase in accidents and low productivity, are associated with stress. An increase in the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs is another sign of stress. On a physiological level, stress may be experienced as a pounding of the heart, dryness of the mouth, weakness or dizziness, pain in the neck or lower back or trembling and tics. Psychosomatic illness, those problems resulting from physiological changes induced by stress can develop. Stress-related illnesses include headaches, coronary problems, ulcers and gastro-intestinal complaints. Your immune system shuts down when you are under stress and you may be more susceptible to colds and infections.

It's important to recognize what your stress signals are and to take corrective action. The symptoms described above are warning signs. Heed them. Don't let the millions of tasks involved in going through a divorce prevent you from taking care of yourself.

COPING WITH STRESS

Coping with stress means developing a lifestyle that promotes physical and mental health. It is not difficult to attain, but it does take time and commitment. Improving your ability to cope with stress means that you probably need to change your lifestyle in very specific ways. Quite simply, the way you live determines the way in which you handle stress. And many people going through divorce do not live in ways that promote physical or mental health. Coping with stress is a commitment to developing and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Developing a healthy lifestyle is as easy as one, two, three. It means (one) taking care of your body, (two) practicing rational thinking and (three) learning to love and enjoy people.

TAKING CARE OF YOUR BODY

Your body is your most important possession. In fact, it is the only thing you really own. You can't do anything without it. Taking care of your body is the first step to developing a healthy lifestyle and improving your ability to cope with stress. Unfortunately, we usually take better care of our cars than our bodies.

1. **Health Inventory**

Our cars get regular tuneups and our bodies should too. How's your blood pressure today? When is the last time you had your teeth, eyes or cholesterol level checked? For women, how about an annual Pap test and those monthly breast examinations?

A health inventory is a good way to be sure that all your parts are working. It will help you spot trouble in the early stages. And we all know that the earlier you spot the trouble the easier it will be to treat. Regular checkups keep us health conscious and help to keep us involved in a healthy lifestyle.

2. **Kicking the Junk Food Habit**

How your body is fueled is one of the most important determinants of health. What you eat can enhance or hinder your ability to respond to the stress of life. In fact, it has been estimated that up to 60% of all cancers in women are diet-related.

Despite the fact that Americans are getting bigger and living longer, we are not physically fit. Some maintain that we are suffering from subclinical malnutrition.

Dr. Richard Kunin suggests the following "nutritional prescription" for improving your overall health:

1. Think first in terms of raw foods.
2. Increase your vegetable intake in general.
3. Make a point to get at least two servings of "whole" foods a day - those foods that have not been altered from their natural forms.
4. Where cooking is absolutely necessary, don't overcook and do use the liquid resulting from cooking in soups and gravies.
5. Avoid white bread and grains - add whole wheat breads, wheat cereals, oatmeal and brown rice to your diet at least once a day.
6. Make it a habit to take multi-vitamin/mineral supplements.

3. **Exercise**

Exercise is an excellent way of being true to our biology. Our bodies were designed to run, stretch and lift. We were meant to hunt, travel and farm without the aid of machinery. The saying "use it or lose it" is true for our bodies. The lack of exercise leads to the development of many medical problems. Obesity, heart disease and even osteoporosis are related to the lack of exercise.

- (6) Do not worry about whether you are successful in

If we don't use our muscles, they simply fade away.

Exercise makes us feel better. When we have strength, endurance and flexibility we also have high self-esteem and confidence in ourselves. Exercise makes us look better by firming up our muscles and putting energy into our step. Exercise also has tranquilizing and antidepressant effects.

Another benefit of exercise is that it is a natural release for stress. The stress response prepares your body to take action in a very physical way. It readies you to run away from the stressor or to subdue it. It worked well when we were running away from saber-toothed tigers and marauding bands of cavemen. But now we are civilized and those responses aren't always appropriate. We can't run away from an ex-spouse or beat up a judge! Consequently, we do not discharge stress products as we were designed to do. We hold back anger and frustration and develop migraine headaches and ulcers. Exercise allows us to complete the stress response in a civilized and healthy manner.

An exercise program that provides activities to develop and maintain flexibility, endurance and strength is essential to coping with stress.

4. **Relaxation**

How many times have you been told to take it easy, cool it, relax? The hectic pace of life while divorcing sometimes prevents you from slowing down and giving your body a chance to catch-up. Your systems need a chance to return to normal or else illness will occur.

Relaxation is a simple process of lowering your body's arousal level. Unfortunately, relaxation is an unnatural state for many people. They are tense, wired and hyped-up. This results in a chronically elevated arousal level. Their poor little bodies never get back down to normal.

Relaxation can be learned and there are a variety of techniques to use. They all work. The important factor is that the relaxation technique you choose should be one that can be incorporated into your daily life.

Herbert Benson, a Harvard Medical School cardiologist, evaluated a host of relaxation techniques and distilled the essential ingredients. Below are the six steps to his Relaxation Response:

- (1) Sit quietly in a comfortable position.
- (2) Close your eyes.
- (3) Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up to your face. Keep them relaxed.
- (4) Breathe through your nose. Become aware of your breathing. As you breathe out, say the word "ONE" silently to yourself. For example, breathe IN...OUT, "ONE", IN...OUT, "ONE," etc. Breathe easily and naturally.
- (5) Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. You may open your eyes to check the time, but do not use an alarm. When you finish, sit quietly for several minutes, at first with your eyes closed and later with your eyes opened. Do not stand up for a few minutes. achieving a deep level of relaxation. Maintain a passive

attitude and permit relaxation to occur at its own pace. When distracting thoughts occur, try to ignore them by not dwelling on them and return to repeating "ONE." With practice, the response should come with little effort. Practice the technique once or twice daily, but not within two hours after any meal, since the digestive processes seem to interfere with the elicitation of the Relaxation Response.

Every religion incorporates a form of the Relaxation Response. It's called prayer. Prayer is a time of quiet reflection that is as effective as biofeedback. It's not widely recommended by psychologists, but prayer may be the relaxation technique that works best for you.

TUNING UP YOUR THINKING

Human beings are unique among the animal kingdom not because we have an oppositional thumb or we stand erect. We are unique because we are capable of self-reflection. Our ability to think and to reflect gets us into trouble when the thinking is irrational. We look into the future and worry. And we look back to the past and feel guilty. We also tell ourselves a lot of crazy things about ourselves and believe them. Epictetus, an ancient Greek philosopher wrote, "It's not the world that distresses man, but the way in which he perceives the world." When our perceptions are not supported by facts, when they are irrational, we create and maintain psychological disturbance.

Dr. Albert Ellis developed a list of twelve commonly-held irrational ideas. Check it out. How many of them do you hold?

1. The idea that it is a dire necessity for an adult to be loved by everyone for everything he does - instead of his concentrating on his own self-respect, on winning approval for practical purposes, and on loving rather than being loved.
2. The idea that certain acts are awful or wicked, and that people who perform such acts should be severely punished -instead of the idea that certain acts are inappropriate or anti-social, and that people who perform such acts are behaving stupidly, ignorantly, or neurotically and would be better helped to change.
3. The idea that it is horrible when things are not the way one would like them to be - instead of the idea that it is too bad, that one would better try to change or control conditions so that they become more satisfactory, and, if that is not possible, one had better temporarily accept their existence.
4. The idea that human misery is externally caused and is forced on one by outside people and events - instead of the idea that emotional disturbance is caused by the view that one takes of conditions.
5. The idea that if something is or may be dangerous or fearsome one should be terribly upset about it - instead
It is important to love yourself and take time for yourself, too. All work and no play make Jack and Jane not only dull people but reduces their ability to cope. We need to balance our lives. We

of the idea that one would better frankly face it and render it non-dangerous and, when that is not possible, accept the inevitable.

6. The idea that it is easier to avoid than to face life difficulties and self-responsibilities - instead of the idea that the so-called easy way is invariably the much harder in the long run.
7. The idea that one needs something other or stronger or greater than oneself on which to rely - instead of the idea that it is better to take the risks of thinking and acting independently.
8. The idea that one should be thoroughly competent, intelligent, and achieving in all possible respects - instead of the idea that one would better do rather than always need to do well and accept oneself as a quite imperfect creature, who has general human limitations and specific fallibilities.
9. The idea that because something once strongly affected one's life, it should indefinitely affect it - instead of the idea that one can learn from one's past experiences but not be overly attached to or prejudiced by them.
10. The idea that one must have certain and perfect control over things - instead of the idea that the world is full of probability and chance and that one can still enjoy life despite this.
11. The idea that human happiness can be achieved by inertia and inaction - instead of the idea that humans tend to be happiest when they are vitally absorbed in creative pursuits, or when they are devoting themselves to people or projects outside themselves.
12. The idea that one has virtually no control over one's emotions and that one cannot help feeling certain things - instead of the idea that one has enormous control over one's destructive emotions if one chooses to work at changing the bigoted and unscientific hypotheses which one employs to create them.

LOVING

Loving is an essential ingredient in stress management. Without it we can't survive. Babies who are fed and kept clean but are not cuddled and held, die. Social workers call it failure to thrive. Without love, infants don't live. People going through divorce also suffer from lack of the love. They shrivel up inside.

Loving covers a multitude of human interactions. I'm not speaking just of intimate relationships, although those are certainly important. You need to pay attention to how you relate to your children, friends and colleagues. Are you irritable with them? More important, do you have any time for them? Relationships take time and energy.

need time to play as well as time to work. When that balance is lost, you're in for trouble. You owe it to yourself to have fun.

You are not a failure because your marriage ended. People come together and separate all through their lifetimes. Think of relationships as the coupling and uncoupling of boxcars of a train. You are not a terrible, awful, worthless person. Divorce was not planned, certainly not something you looked forward to experiencing. Your life will be much different than you had anticipated, but it can still be good.

THINGS TO AVOID

No review of stress management techniques would be complete without mentioning those things that weaken your ability to handle stress. I'm sure they will come as no surprise. Alcohol, drugs, and smoking are to be avoided or at best used in moderation. Alcohol, drugs and cigarettes all give the illusion that things are well when in reality they may be destroying you. If they are getting the best of you, professional assistance may be necessary.

A NEW BEGINNING

Divorce is not just an ending, it is a new beginning as well. Imagine that you could live five different lives, not be five different people. But if you had the chance to decide on five different life paths, what would you choose? As an example, one woman said that she would have liked to have been a ballet dancer, a cloistered nun, incredibly rich and a writer. Her choices were similar to most people. Many of us want to express ourselves artistically, to enhance our spirituality, to help others and to be financially independent. Marriage frequently requires that we place parts of ourselves on the back burner. Divorce is an opportunity to express those aspects of our nature. While this woman will never dance with Rudolph Nureyev, she can still take ballet classes at the Y.

Divorce is the beginning of a new kind of life for you. It is not the one you asked for, but it is the only one you have. Remember that you are entering this phase of your life with much more experience and wisdom than you entered into your marriage. Use this difficult period as a time for building on that strength and wisdom. Going through the stress of divorce is moving on to a different, but rewarding life.

The foregoing has been excerpted from, and is based upon, an article which originally appeared in the September, 1989, Michigan Family Law Journal. It is provided courtesy of Wayne C. Shehan, attorney at law, in hopes that it will help you, or someone you are close to, through a very difficult time of life. The original article has been edited by Mr. Shehan, who is a 1969 graduate of the University of Detroit School of Law, from which he received a JURIS DOCTORATE degree. Mr. Shehan has been licensed to practice law in all courts of the state of Michigan since 1969 and in the United States Supreme Court since 1972.

As a member of the State Bar of Michigan, Mr. Shehan holds membership in the following sections: the Family Law section, the General Practice section, the Legal Economics section, and the Probate and Estate Planning section. He is also a member of the Macomb County Bar Association, and the Michigan Trial Lawyers Association.

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Mr. Shehan has joined a very select group of attorneys who have been recognized for their legal expertise and professional reputation; having been bestowed **the highest rating possible** by the publishers of the **MARTINDALE HUBBELL LAW DIRECTORY**. Mr. Shehan is listed in the Eighth Edition of the eminent publication **WHO'S WHO IN AMERICAN LAW**, in the Forty-Ninth Edition of **WHO'S WHO IN AMERICA** and the Twelfth Edition of **WHO'S WHO IN THE WORLD**, in recognition of his outstanding achievements in the practice of law.