



Adult Children of Divorce

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The divorce of one's parents is generally one of the most painful events in life. Researchers have found that children experience many fairly predictable stages as they learn to accept the finality of the divorce and begin to build sometimes changed relationships with each of the parents. Most of the current studies concerning the effects of divorce discuss younger children and their responses to this stressful family situation.

However, some research has explored the impact parental divorce has on adult children. The results indicate that the disruption through divorce of the parent/child relationship as late as early adulthood may still produce some negative effects. Perhaps not surprisingly, older adolescents and adult children experience much of the same trauma as younger children of divorcing parents. Young adult children sometimes revert emotionally to a younger stage when they have to face the changes in the family structure. They are in the process of exploring their own independence, and are still leaning on the foundation of family stability. They often struggle to find ways to accept the changes in their family relationships (Hines, 1997).

Obviously, arrangements concerning custody, child support, and visitation are no longer issues, but parent/child contact and emotional support are often greatly affected. Traditionally, young adults are still dependent on their parents to assist them in making the transition to independence. They have the expectation that their parents will always be the "same," and when one or both parents follows new directions in their new lives, their child often experiences a powerful sense of loss. Accepting change is frequently difficult for anyone, but because the adult child is in a period of major transition in his or her own life, it is even more difficult for him or her to readily accept the changes that the parent(s) are, of necessity, experiencing.

The stressors may, for a time, have a negative impact on the quality of the parent-child relationship (Shapiro, 2003).

The adult child can reasonably expect to go through a grieving process when his or her parents divorce, even if he or she is well aware of a history of discord in their marriage. This will probably include periods of anger at one or both parents. There may be a strong feeling that their family is irretrievably fragmented. Feelings of confusion concerning how to relate positively to the parents are normal. Adult children will likely question how holidays and other family traditions can ever be meaningful again.

However, there is good news. A longitudinal study by Hetherington and Kelly (2002) found that although the first years after a parental divorce are painful and often confusing, most of the adult children do negotiate the changes successfully. They do this through a variety of different paths, and although some lead to unhappiness, most lead to happy satisfying lives.

Tips for Coping

- The young adult should firmly, but lovingly, refuse to be drawn into the middle of the conflict. There may be pressure to choose sides, but he or she needs to remain as loving as possible with both parents. If one parent seems to be more "at fault" or "to blame" than the other, the adult child will likely be angry at that parent. However, that issue should be resolved between the parent and the child with professional assistance, if needed.
- The parents have to work out their own divorce and financial agreements. This is not an appropriate role for their child.
- The adult child may need to seek out a support group to allow a "safe" place to let out feelings and to share with

others who are experiencing similar concerns. It may also be helpful to get professional help for a time to help work through some of the changes and stresses.

- The grieving process is normal! A parental divorce creates a situation of painful loss for the young adult. There will be times to cry, times to yell, and times to feel sad. It's OK.
- Take one day at a time. Determine your own priorities and work toward fulfilling them. A focus on your future can help you cope.
- Although it's often difficult, it's important to try to forgive parental weaknesses and faults. Everyone heals easier and sooner with a little understanding and reasonable expectations. Holding on to anger only slows the healing and keeps one from moving forward to a more positive new life.
- Family rituals are still important. However, some of them may need to be adjusted to meet the changed family situation. Be flexible.
- Create new traditions and family activities. This helps the healing process and strengthens the family members. As young adults begin to create their own families, they can build their own traditions and incorporate the favorites from their own childhood.

- Spend positive time together in the new family groupings. Find fun things to do to help deal with stress and to begin rebuilding. Find things to laugh about together.

Accepting parental divorce when one is just beginning to get used to his or her own new independence can be very stressful. It helps to remember that life will get back to normal in time, even if normal looks different from what was expected. The newly arranged family can still be strong, loving, and supportive of its members. Life, although changed in perhaps unexpected ways, can still be positive with continued strong family relationships.

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