

UNHAPPY ENDINGS



BY FRITZ ESKER

When movies end with a marriage, the implication is always that the husband and wife will live happily ever after. In real life, people enter marriages with similar hopes, i.e. that they've found the person they will share the rest of their lives with. But in real life, happy endings don't always happen. For any number of reasons (money, infidelity, changing personalities), marriages end in divorce. When a person watches his/her happy ending go down in flames, the question is "What now?"

Even if a marriage is unhealthy and even if a divorce is healthier for both partners in the long run, it still counts as a major life change. "Any significant change is stressful, good or bad," said Dr. Morris Burka, a clinical psychologist with Ochsner Health System. It's even misleading to refer to divorce as a life change; it's really changes in the plural. The end of a marriage can trigger a number of changes: emotional/self-esteem changes, financial changes, residence changes, and if children are involved, changes in the amount of a time a parent gets to see his/her kids.

Obviously, divorce can be brutal on a person's emotions. "It's like a death," said Burka. "Dreams that people had when they got together are shattered." People spend so much time investing themselves in a marriage, that when it falls apart, it can lead to feelings that all those years have been wasted. In addition to this, divorcees often cope with feelings of guilt or failure. In a divorce, people often second guess themselves, feeling guilty about things that happened. According to Burka, if one person leaves another, the left spouse will often blame themselves, asking questions like "What did I do wrong? Why am I being rejected?" Just as often, the person doing the leaving will feel guilt over abandoning their spouse.

Entering the dating game again can be stressful for new divorcees as well. This is especially true for

people who've been married for many years. It's hard to re-enter the dating world when a person has been with one person for a long time. And many fear a stigma being attached to them because of a divorce, the idea that they've failed at a relationship once and would fail again.

While it is of course possible for divorced people to remarry and find happiness with their second partner, it is important to not jump into a relationship immediately after a divorce. "A lot of people try to jump into a relationship right away," said Lisa Clark, manager of the employee assistance program at West Jefferson Medical Center.

Divorce can also create a number of financial issues for partners. People who are used to living in a two-income household find themselves having to get by with a single income. "Frequently, women have a very large financial loss, particularly if they weren't working during the marriage," said Dr. Jonathon Rynning, medical director of psychiatry for East Jefferson General Hospital. If a divorced spouse does not get the house in the settlement, then he/she will have to go through the stress of finding a new place to live. Sometimes, divorced spouses must move in with parents or other friends/family, creating even more stress.

The financial issues can create stress in other ways, too. Couples can use the settlement proceedings as a way to unleash every resentment they've bottled up during the marriage. They can get so caught up in the who-gets-what battle that they devote needless amounts of energy, time, and money to the battle. "It does nobody any good," said Rynning. "They end up paying their lawyers more than the stuff is worth."

So what can people do to

combat all of this, or at least weather the storm? First and foremost, people should take care of themselves by eating right, exercising, and getting a healthy amount of sleep (although sleeping can be difficult to do when under the stress of a divorce). Sadly, many people fail to do this. "People neglect themselves, which leads to medical problems, which leads to more emotional problems," said Clark.

While it's important to take care of yourself physically, it's just as important to care for yourself emotionally. Support systems are crucial, whether it be through friends or through professional counseling. "A lot of people isolate themselves and put up a wall and this will lead to greater problems," said Clark. New hobbies can also help. Clark said that it's a good idea for divorcees to do things that deviate from their normal routines, since tried-and-true routines will often remind people of their past, which can lead to depression.

It's also vitally important to acknowledge emotions and to allow yourself to grieve the loss of the relationship. According to Clark, people often attempt to avoid unsettling feelings. Sometimes, people will get lost in drugs or alcohol. Other times, people will become workaholics, hoping that by working enough hours, they won't have time to think about their loss. Neither is healthy. While it's not a good idea to dwell on sadness, it must be acknowledged before a person can move on.

While no one goes into a marriage expecting to get divorced, it sadly does happen. And like any event in life that's momentous in a bad way, there's no way to truly prepare for it. It will be heartbreaking and exhausting. But, it is something people can move on from and go on to live a happier life **HFM**