

Preparing for divorce pays off

Realistic look at what life will be like after separation can make couples rethink decision



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If you're contemplating divorce, you might want to make a little time – keeping in mind it will cost you \$125 an hour – to sit down first with Deborah Moskovitch.

She's not only been through a "really difficult" divorce herself, she wrote the book on it. *The Smart Divorce* is a guide, of sorts, to getting out without going bankrupt.

During the course of a few hours in the uptown Toronto boardroom where she regularly meets with clients, Moskovitch will sketch out a rough portrait of your life post separation. First she'll ask the \$64 million question (and that's not such a reach given the crippling cost of a long and ugly courtroom battle): "Are you *sure* your relationship is over?"

"I can't tell you the number of times I've heard people say in social situations, 'Had I realized how difficult it is being divorced, I would have worked harder at my marriage.' I want to be sure when clients make this decision, they don't look back with regrets."

Divorce Educator

Moskovitch calls herself a "divorce educator" and offers seminars as well as one-on-one sessions (see thesmartdivorce.com.) She isn't a lawyer or a marriage counsellor, but a divorce that took seven years to finalize, and ongoing research for two more books, have made her a kind of canary in the marriage mine shaft. She's seen the carnage and the collateral damage of divorce firsthand and finds, quite often, divorced people, with the exception of those escaping violent relationships, don't end up in quite the sunny situation they pictured after the divorce papers are signed.

"You have to feel really comfortable being alone," she warns as a starter. "People think it's easy just to bounce into another relationship and they're single for a lot longer than they thought they might be. So there's the loneliness. Being a single parent is challenging. And it's very much a Noah's Ark society as I like to call it – the world is very couples oriented. Often you'll be on your own on the weekends because you're no longer part of the social circle you were in when you were married."

If your partner was a top executive, or came from a big, boisterous family, you'll especially feel the drop in what Moskovitch calls "social status."

Arm yourself

She presses home a point that may be lost on couples in the heat of battle: That you need to arm yourself for divorce psychologically first. You have to work hard to "remove emotion from the legal process so that you deal with it separately. You want to make your decision based on facts, not on revenge, shame, anger, blame."

She has a list of trained professionals, from marriage counsellors to psychiatrists (covered by OHIP), who can help you do that.

And most of all, you need to do the math. If you can't, she'll help you find a financial adviser who's good with a calculator and some hard reality checks.

One divorced woman, now almost 18 years into her second marriage to a divorced man, says she can pick out at a party who's still married to their first wife or husband by the number of trips they take, the size of their home, if they have a cottage: "Divorce follows you the rest of your life, financially," she says.

And be forewarned: You're unlikely to be remarried within five years (contrary to popular belief) and if you do find another partner, he or she will probably be a lot like the one you left. Okay, the sex may be better – at least for a while.

But you'll stand an even higher chance of ending up in divorce court again, according to the research she's studied for her books: While 38 to 50 per cent of first marriages end up in divorce, that number is closer to 60 per cent the second time around.

"When I tell people this they listen because I've been through it myself. I've experienced a gamut of emotions and experiences. Personally, I have never looked back with regret, and I think a big part of that is because I did the (mental preparation) work up front."

Marriage counselling should be a prerequisite to divorce, she believes, but acknowledges it can be almost impossible to pull couples back from the brink if one partner has had an affair or walked out: "The person who was left feels ashamed. They want to blame someone. That can wreak havoc on lives and often their parenting skills are diminished because they're sad and angry. So they try to gain justice through the legal system and that's not going to happen.

"I really try to drill home that you might have been a victim, and if you continue to play that game, you're only hurting yourself. You have to move on. Therapy isn't for everyone, but you can't ignore your feelings because somewhere along the way, they will catch up with you."

Get help

Researchers in York University's department of psychology are in the midst of groundbreaking "emotion-focused couple's therapy" with couples on the brink of divorce, many of whom have failed at traditional marriage therapy, that shows it may not just be enough to forget past "injuries." You have to forgive.

Professor Leslie Greenberg and clinical psychology doctoral student Catalina Woldarsky Meneses have been working with couples since 2000 to help them identify incidents or "wrongs"

that may have started pushing the relationship off the rails at least two years prior and have festered – in some cases without even their direct knowledge – into a seething resentment that has badly damaged the marriage.

"Basically, we're finding that emotion really drives both thoughts and behaviour, so we've really got to get to the underlying emotions and have them expressed to the partner in non-blaming ways. We're not dealing with people who are in the crisis of just discovering an infidelity. We're dealing with festering resentments that haven't been resolved," says Greenberg.

That can range from (and these are true stories) a husband who forgets to pick up his wife from surgery, to the husband (sorry, guys) who hangs up on his wife, saying he's too busy, before she can let him know she's in labour.

Even more damaging than age-old affairs is a new marriage threat, the researchers say: Internet "cheating" and porn.

"In some ways, it's more complicated (than a traditional affair) because there's often repetition (and multiple online partners). We've seen a number of couples where the partner says, `You promised not to do it and then I found you doing it again,'" says Greenberg.

"The first time may not be as big a betrayal as an actual affair, but when they are caught again, it becomes a kind of repeated set of injuries."

A lot of marriage counselling traditionally takes the view, `Put this behind you and get on with your life,'" he adds. "We're finding that you have to forgive first. That that has a positive affect in terms of relationship rebuilding."

Greenberg and Woldarsky Meneses are looking for at least a dozen more couples who think they could benefit from 10 free therapy sessions (usually worth about \$200 an hour) as part of their research. Call 416-416-736-2100, ext. 33766, to see if you qualify.



In his work with troubled couples, professor Leslie Greenberg found that it may not be enough to forget past "injuries," you have to forgive. COLIN O'CONNOR FOR THE TORONTO STAR