

On Breaking Up

The devastating effect of divorce on some men!

By Jackie Unitt

I have been listening to stories told by men who are going through the deeply painful experience of separation and divorce. The men are relatives, friends, acquaintances, and in one case a perfect stranger. They pour out their stories over and over but, while listening ears are welcomed and may provide some support, right now these men can neither be objective about what is going on nor find the strength to create a new life for themselves. Their reactions to the sudden loneliness in their lives, their loss of family, their status as a father, as a husband, and homeowner, range from complete surrender to extreme violence. I listen to their grieving, I look at the pain in their faces and the dejection in their bodies and I cannot find adequate words of comfort or advice. I feel at a loss. I listen and I feel their suffering.

Some feel that they are losing everything that makes their life worth living. They surrender entirely. They go through the motions each day and try not to feel their pain. They cannot face it. They are numb. When people ask them how they are, they cannot answer because they have stopped feeling. They submit to emotional abuse from their spouses, to constant aggressive questions, suspicion and criticism and are able to do nothing. I can see the change in them from week to week and I worry about their strength.

A couple of them try appeasement. Anything their spouse wants, they give. They renovate their spouse's houses and landscape their gardens. They pay for the vehicles that their spouses drive. They accept their spouse's refusing to sell the family home as originally planned. The appeasement never ends. The demands just keep growing.

I asked one why he would hand over all his resources and keep nothing for himself. His response was, for his children. Then he added that he was just too tired of it all, he knew his wife would be very confrontational if he tried to get anything for himself. If he took nothing, she wouldn't be constantly telephoning for more. I couldn't convince him that he needed some fullness in his life, that his life really mattered. He said that once his children are established, then he will plan for his own life. One, two, three or four years - how long is a lifetime? It pains me to think of his losing even a day of life as it could be.

Another described how an accident on the job put him in hospital. He burst into tears when telling how he came home to an empty house, everything gone.

One father was faced with his wife and her new spouse taking their child overseas. He fought this in court and lost. His child was gone and he was left to pay thousands to the lawyers.

A stranger began talking to me as I stood in line at a store. He told me he was on his way to

court that morning to try to gain access to his two-year-old. He was dispirited saying that mothers usually win.

A violent reaction came from a very successful professional who was married and had six children. He went to court and lost his home and his children plus he faced paying a huge amount each month to support his family. This friend was an immigrant who had made his way through university and medical school by delivering newspapers on several routes. He prized his belongings and worshiped his family life, perhaps inordinately. He shot his wife, went to his office and committed suicide.

An admirable arrangement was set up by a couple who, on separation, decided to keep the family home where their three children would live every day. They purchased a condominium and the parents took turns living in the house or in the condominium, week about. However, when I told my brother, who has been divorced and remarried for many years, he laughed at himself but still felt enough sting to say, "That would never have worked for me. If she moved so much as a salt shaker I'd have been in a rage."

The biggest problem for many men is trying to cope with not being in a family situation, missing their children and their homes terribly. Because women traditionally are the caregivers, it is not always recognized or remembered that fathers love their children just as deeply. To add to the burden for fathers, they are conditioned to be strong men, providers, invincible, shelterers. Because they internalize their pain, without release they are in trouble. As one man said, "We males tend to hide our emotions when we are hurting. It just makes it worse for us."

When men and women are under stress there is usually a desperate need to talk about it with a sympathetic person. Many of the women I know seem able to share their feelings readily with another woman. Men, however, generally find it too embarrassing to share their intimate emotions with another man. Such behaviour is not part of the male stereotype. When a separation occurs the man loses the one person with whom he might comfortably share his intimate feelings. Another woman could be a sympathetic listener, but sharing such personal feelings can be awkward. It was thirty years ago that my brother went through his pain and did not speak about it, and it seems that nothing has changed to day.

Support for men is not totally lacking. For example, one man described Parents Without Partners as supportive. They meet, socialize and discuss mutual concerns. Friends, especially if they have themselves gone through a breakup, can be particularly helpful. One said, "I try not to be bitter and to get on with my life." On the whole, however, men are not as organized as women to even recognize, let alone seek their rights. With what is available to men, the hard part seems to be getting them to take advantage of it.

Perhaps if they won't go to another location, they would, in the privacy of their own home, log onto a website and read what other men are saying about their experiences. Men who have experienced break-up could add valuable information about what was most helpful to them. In addition they might find information from individuals and groups who specialize in giving the kind of support that men need. Practical information about the settlement process and the legal system could be reported. For example, not everyone may be aware that there are several steps

in divorce litigation before reaching a final court appearance. These steps can take several months, with the possibility of an agreement being reached at any point along the way. The steps drag things out so that there is time to promote settling. The point is, you just don't go to court a week after you have filed. There is time between the steps to consider and reconsider and possibly to settle. In addition, there are other less confrontational and less expensive options such as mediation.

A woman who has recently been through this process suggests that prenuptial agreements should be required by law. She also believes that alimony should not be a life long sentence. If there is an imbalance there should be a negotiated agreement, a plan for supporting that person as they get retraining.

In any event, there needs to be a place where men can communicate. Not only could they read how others have managed to endure their pain but also they would be able to express their own feelings. Ask questions and feel accepted rather than judged. In addition they could learn how others have dealt with difficult decision-making at a time when they are barely able to get themselves through the day. Practical information could be available about what they may be facing., what the choices are and the implications of these choices.

It is my hope to provide such a forum. David Shackleton has generously offered the Everyman website for this use. I'm new at this but I am dedicated to finding a way to provide a source of information, communication and support to those who need help I welcome suggestions and assistance.

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