

THE CENTER FOR DIVORCING FAMILIES

Breaching The Barriers To Service

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Divorce is a situational crisis for Jewish families who experience old and new barriers to mastery of the crisis. Twenty-five years of experience led to the development of the Center for Divorcing Families, which is grounded in five fundamental concepts regarding the dynamics of divorce. These concepts dictate that services must empower individuals so they can restructure their families and maintain their connection to the Jewish community.

The Jewish family has changed drastically in the past 25 years as the rate of divorce has risen steadily. Divorced families have become a significant part of the Jewish community, yet they are also a part that tends to feel alienated. Both internal and external barriers perpetuate their alienation from the community. The internal barriers are a result of the profound loss of the primary attachment figure and the loss of sense of self that ensue when a marriage ends. There are two external barriers. Financial difficulties have always accompanied divorce, leading to lower standards of living for both partners. Previous patterns of activity, residence, and friendship change. A second and more recent external barrier is our decreasing sensitivity to the magnitude of the crisis as divorce has become a "routine" part of life. As it has become predictable that one out of two marriages will end in divorce, the event seems ordinary. It has become easy to assume that only the unusual divorcing family needs intervention when, in fact, every divorcing family will benefit from well-designed, appropriately timed interventions.

When people are personally disorganized by the acute losses of divorce, they are not able to identify their service needs. In addition, because divorce is a transitional state, they do not organize into an advocacy group to request services from the community.

They tend not to come to agencies and institutions as a group to demand services. Therefore, outreach is required.

The Jewish Family Service Association of Cleveland has been working with divorcing families through special programs since 1968, because we have seen them as a population with special needs. With the dramatic increase in the divorce rate, the number of special programs has increased significantly over the years. Programs were devised to respond to specific needs as they were identified. These services were recently reorganized into The Center for Divorcing Families.

CONCEPTS REGARDING THE DYNAMICS OF DIVORCE

The development of the Center has been guided by our understanding of the divorce experience, some of which has been discussed in two previously published articles (Levine, 1973; Schwartz, 1968). Our thinking is grounded in five basic concepts.

1. Divorce is a situational crisis.
2. Divorce is not an event, but a process.
3. Families need not be destroyed by divorce, but can be restructured for healthy functioning.
4. Empowerment through the divorce process enhances the chance of successful resolution.

5. A variety of services are appropriate for all family members throughout the divorce process.

Regardless of what leads to the decision to divorce or who makes it, each member of the family is placed in a situational crisis.

The crisis is characterized by acute loss of a major attachment figure, which can cause the feeling that one's sense of self is becoming fragmented. Inevitably, those going through such a crisis experience a temporary regression. They are apt to use more primitive defenses, such as denial and splitting, in an effort to manage the crisis and avoid the pain of the loss. This regression can result in a diminished capacity to parent and a negative reconstruction of the spouse—a rigidified, unrealistic view of the spouse as a monster. Viewing the spouse in this way allows one to deny one's own role in the marital problems and avoid the narcissistic blow resulting from feelings of failure and rejection.

Divorce is a process, not an event; it can last 1 to 3 years after the legal divorce is obtained (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

The process begins as the couple becomes disillusioned with their marriage. This is a time of great ambivalence, which eventually becomes resolved temporarily when the decision is made to divorce. At this point, splitting is somewhat adaptive, as viewing the spouse in a predominantly negative way enables the decision to divorce to be made. For the spouse who has not made the decision, splitting can also be adaptive in that it offers some protection from what could be an overwhelming narcissistic wound. Primary issues for the spouse being left are loss of identity, the need to be viewed as the victim, and the need to find a way to view divorce as a positive by denigrating the marriage (Rossiter, 1991). At this point, anger serves for both spouses as a motivator to the kind of action needed to plan for one's own life.

As the divorce process proceeds through the stages of mourning and recovery, prior

defenses reassert themselves, the regression subsides, and the splitting diminishes as the individuals return to their prior level of functioning.

Families need not be "broken" when there is a divorce, but can be restructured in a way that enables parents to co-parent effectively and continue to promote growth in their families.

If individuals can learn to tolerate their ambivalence again, acknowledging both the good and bad in themselves and in their ex-spouse, they can restructure their families and truly get on with their lives. However, if individuals cannot get past the view of themselves as victim and of their ex-spouse as villain, they remain stuck in the regressed state of the initial crisis and the family will truly be broken.

Empowering divorcing couples to take charge of their lives greatly increases the chances of the couple being able to effectively co-parent and move ahead with their lives.

When people feel empowered, they do not need to cling to a view of themselves as victim and therefore to a view of their ex-spouse as villain. Empowered individuals can let go of their rage and trust that they can tolerate the loss that the rage defends against.

Each family member needs services during the whole process of divorce and for years beyond.

When a family comes for help depends on many factors, including how the decision was made to divorce, the ages of the children, reactions of the children, the life-cycle stage of the spouses, and individual dynamics of the family members. Events occurring even years after a divorce — for example, remarriage of an ex-spouse or planning a milestone celebration, such as a Bar Mitzvah—can reignite the old feelings from the divorce crisis. Intervention can enable unfinished business to be reworked.

The Center for Divorcing Families was established to offer services to families no matter where they are in the divorce pro-

cess. The D. case illustrates the application of these five concepts in helping a couple move through the process.

CASE STUDY

The D. family was at risk of becoming chronically embattled. The services of the Center for Divorcing Families were used diagnostically to intervene. Both the services selected and the timing of their use were based on an assessment of what would help this family to achieve a restabilized, but different way of life.

Mr. D. called to request divorce mediation. He was very concerned that his wife would make unrealistic demands because she was very angry. They had been married for 10 years and had two children aged 6 and 4. The marriage had been very stormy. Despite that, Mrs. D. claimed she still loved Mr. D. and could not understand why he wanted a divorce. When they came in for mediation, Mrs. D. was very angry, exploding each time that Mr. D. spoke. She was enraged that Mr. D. would leave her. She completely denied her pain and sadness and could only focus on her anger. Her anger was so intense that it was decided to put the mediation on hold while Mrs. D. began to regain some control over her feelings. She was referred for individual counseling.

Mrs. D. had been severely emotionally abused by her alcoholic mother and had married Mr. D. to escape her home and find "perfect love." Inevitably from the beginning of the marriage, however, Mr. D. had disappointed her, and her anger began to emerge. The D.'s developed a hostile-dependent relationship in which Mrs. D. consistently reacted in a hurt and angry way and Mr. D. consistently reacted in a guilty and withholding way. The divorce stirred up the rage of being emotionally abandoned by her mother.

The individual counseling helped Mrs. D. understand her feelings and empowered her to gain some control over them. However, she had suffered severe narcissistic damage

as a child and was left with characterological problems that impaired her ability to manage the divorce process. She was referred to Surviving Separation, our support group for newly separated or divorced adults, to give her peer support through the process in addition to the individual counseling.

The D.'s were then referred to our Children of Divorce Evaluation Service to help them consider their children's needs. This service helped them refocus from their own acute losses to the losses of their children.

After Mrs. D. regained some control over her feelings, mediation was resumed. Much of the mediation was done through caucusing individually with the D.'s because, although Mrs. D. was calmer and had accepted the divorce, feelings of abandonment overwhelmed her when she was with Mr. D. and her anger would get out of control. The D.'s were able to complete the mediation process and obtain their divorce. Mrs. D. continued in individual counseling, and Mr. D. entered a Surviving Separation group once the divorce was final.

Mrs. D.'s regression during the divorce crisis intensified her tendency to split and protect her ego integrity with denial and rage. Through counseling, participation in a support group, and then later through mediation, Mrs. D. was able to feel empowered and to reconstitute her defenses to their predivorce level. Because Mrs. D. entered the process having suffered severe narcissistic damage as a child, the potential for her to get "stuck" in the divorce process was great. The D.'s could easily have become the kind of battling couple who remain forever in litigation. Intervening at the point of crisis, however, allowed Mrs. D. to maximize her level of functioning, rather than remain in the kind of regressed state that destroys divorcing families.

THE CENTER FOR DIVORCING FAMILIES

The services of the Center for Divorcing Families were designed to help families

who enter the divorce process with serious deficits, as well as those families who normally function at a much higher level. It is often difficult to distinguish between these types of families when they appear in the initial crisis of divorce. The adaptive or maladaptive regression normally present in the first stage of the divorce crisis provides a diagnostic challenge. The task is to develop a plan that will help every individual move on to the next stage in the process, regardless of his or her pre-crisis level of functioning.

The basic service of The Center for Divorcing Families is individual, couple, and family counseling. This service is used by family members at any point in the divorce process. Our other services are specific to certain phases of divorce. Research has shown that different types of services are more effective at different stages in the process. Mediation and support groups are especially useful during the litigation, restructuring phase. Services to children and follow-up counseling are especially useful after the legal divorce has been obtained (Lyon et al., 1985).

Some individuals call the Center knowing exactly which service they would like. Some only use one service and some use several. Many call in pain, not knowing which service they need, but only that they need help. Assessing a family's needs and providing the appropriate service for each family member are crucial roles for all the staff at the Center. When we get a call, we need to consider where the family is in the divorce process, how the family is reacting to the crisis, who is asking for help, and who may not be asking for help but is in pain and should be offered service.

In addition to counseling, The Center has the following five services. The Divorce Education Seminar is a one-session educational workshop for anyone contemplating divorce; that is, it is designed for the very earliest stage of divorce. A legal professional, a mediator, and a mental health professional describe all the issues facing

divorcing individuals. Education is central to empowerment because it defines realistic expectations.

The Divorce Mediation Service is geared to couples who have made the decision to separate or divorce or those who have already divorced, but are having post-decree conflicts. The process is a mutual search for reasonable solutions, and neither partner can "win" at the other's expense. Mediation empowers couples by enabling them to remain in control of their divorce. In contrast, the traditional adversarial process encourages splitting and a victim-villain view of the issues. Mediation discourages splitting by focusing on the future, a fair settlement, and on the welfare of the children.

The Children of Divorce Evaluation Service is a structured short-term service to help parents identify their children's specific difficulties and plan how they can help their children through the divorce process. The service includes interviews with both parents and the children. It provides coaching to parents on how to talk to their children about divorce and gives parents guidance in developing a plan for healthy parenting during and after the divorce.

The Center offers a variety of short-term therapy groups for those in the beginning stages of divorce. Surviving Separation is a 6-week therapy group for newly separated and divorced adults. Sadness, anger, and loneliness are part of the experience of becoming single again. Helping individuals stay in touch with both the sadness and the anger helps them move through the mourning process. Kids and Divorce is a six-session therapy group for children adjusting to what is happening in their lives. Research has shown that children have many difficulties handling their parents' divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Through activities and discussion, children begin to recognize and accept their feelings, learning to talk about them as they arise.

The Center also offers groups for children and adults in the later stages of the divorce process. These groups include Non-

custodial Parents, Teens and Divorce, For Wives in a Second Marriage, Issues to Consider Before Remarrying, Strengthening Stepfamilies, Custodial Fathers, When Mommy or Daddy Gets Married, For Adults Whose Parents Are Divorcing, and Grandparents and Divorce.

Long-term support groups help single parents learn to establish themselves in the single world. Support has long been documented as an effective intervention in helping individuals manage a crisis (Weiss, 1975). Because people in acute crisis do feel alienated, they need to find new ways to attach. Support groups are crucial to that process.

CONCLUSION

The increasing prevalence of divorce over the past 25 years has numbed our sense of how significant a crisis it is for each family. Although the stigma of divorce for Jewish families has faded as the divorce rate has soared, the sense of alienation and barriers to full participation in Jewish communal life remain.

The economics of divorce create a barrier as both spouses are poorer during and after divorce (Weizman, 1985). Women especially need affordable educational and social facilities because in most cases they have custody of the children. However, they have less than half of the family's pre-divorce income (Weitzman, 1985). The fact that the Jewish Family Service Association of Cleveland has created special programs is an important statement that the Jewish community is reaching out to keep them connected.

In addition to the economic barrier, a more subtle barrier has been erected recently: The stigma of divorce is in danger of being replaced by indifference. The desensitization we have all experienced as divorce has become a routine part of our lives has resulted in our minimizing the impact of the personal crisis for each divorcing family.

The Center for Divorcing Families addresses these barriers by providing a vehicle

for educating the community and reaching out to those in need of services. Individuals in this crisis of personal identity need special help in finding ways to become connected to others in spite of their alienated state. Jewish tradition, as expressed through JFSA programs, embodies the need and right of each Jew to belong to the community.

Organizing our divorce services into the easily definable recognizable entity of the Center For Divorcing Families enables us to market the services in a coherent way. Doing so enhances our ability to teach the community to be continuously sensitive to the needs of families as they deal with the divorce crisis. It also teaches people in the process of divorce to respect their own struggle and makes services accessible to those who often do not even know what they need.

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