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SURVIVING THE LOSS OF A LOVE RELATIONSHIP

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In the forward of the book *REBUILDING - When Your Relationship Ends* by Dr. Bruce Fisher, Virginia Satir described divorce as "metaphorical surgery" that affects all areas of an individual's life. She says it is a broken experience, and before individuals can go on with their lives, they must be able to pick up the pieces and have time to mourn what was hoped and to realize that "the hope will not manifest itself." It is her belief that "many, many, many people marry with the idea that life is going to be better. Perhaps only a fool would enter into marriage thinking that would not be the case. The depth of disappointment at the time of divorce will depend upon how much more one wants to get out of life or how much more one feels it necessary to add someone to one's life to make life worthwhile."

Virginia Satir's comments on divorce appear to be an apt description of the hurt, chaos and confusion experienced by many individuals dealing with the loss of any partner relationship. Disputes over the division of marital assets, child support as well as custody and access issues often result in long-term bitterness that negatively impact the lives of the children of divorcing/separating parents. Children may feel caught in the crossfire of their parent's disputes and experience torn loyalties, hurt, anger, sadness and confusion as they struggle to comprehend adult problems with a child's understanding. Adults who have not worked through divorce/separation issues often carry them into their next partner relationship, issues that can become the seeds for the demise of their next coupleship.

Counsellors and mediators who work with separating couples are often challenged to help men who are angry at the new child support guidelines and at a Court system which, they believe, favours women in custody/access issues; men/women who are abusive and/or threatening toward former partners as well as those who are devastated by losses such as the marital home, financial security and family attachments. Many are unable to articulate their feelings or cope with their losses, and some become suicidal or clinically depressed. Additionally, there are those whose standard of living or quality of life is severely impacted by long delays in the Family Court system in resolving child support, alimony, custody and access issues.

There are also many separating/divorcing individuals who feel unsupported in their efforts to parent angry, confused children and parents who experience little, if any, cooperation or emotional support from former partners or in-laws. As counsellors and therapists, we also see children who are depressed and angry with one or both parents for involving them in parental disputes or pressuring them to choose one parent over another. Then, of course, there are the couples who are trying to build a successful second relationship when one or both has not dealt with the loss of the former partner and old issues are resurfacing. When a relationship ends, there are painful feelings to overcome as one makes the transition from coupleship to aloneness, feelings such as denial, fear, loneliness, guilt/rejection, anger, etc. Belonging to a support group, such as Loving Choices, provides individuals with an opportunity to interact with others who are healing from similar losses and gives them a safe place to share feelings, common hopes, strengths and experiences.

At this point, you might well be asking: "Is there anything that can be done to minimize the damage of divorce/separation on my child/children? On myself? On my former partner? Just what is a good separation? How can I learn from my past relationship failure and make it a creative learning experience? How can I rebuild my life and learn to be contented on my own? What is a healthy relationship?" The Loving Choices Support Group helps group members find their own answers to these and many other questions.

Some useful advice for separating couples:

1. Do not "bad mouth" a former partner, especially in front of the children. On some level children understand that their gene pool is comprised of genes from both parents. If they hear that mom or dad is "bad", children may begin to believe that part of them is "bad." Children need all the self esteem and love they can get in this world, and it is neither healthy nor helpful to teach them to view a parent as the enemy.
2. Mediation can be helpful and less costly for separating couples. However, both parties need to be willing to set aside their anger and desire for revenge and be willing to work toward agreements that are fair to both.
3. Do not involve the children in parental disputes, make them privy to information that is age inappropriate or of an intimate nature or pump them for information about a former partner's new life.
4. Grief counselling with a professional can help both parents and children work through their sadness and losses. Remember, children will also need to grieve the losses of the life that was before they can accept what is. It is not uncommon for children to withhold their anger for a long time, especially if one or both parents are acting out their own pain. Just when parents begin to adjust, the child or children may feel safe to act out their hurt and anger.
5. Family and friends may mean well but may not always be the best sources of advice, as it may be difficult for them to set aside their personal feelings and achieve objectivity.
6. If you experience prolonged feelings of sadness, grief and/or depression, you may need to seek medical attention from your family doctor.
7. Be careful not to introduce a new relationship into your child/children's lives too soon after the separation. Your child/children may need your undivided attention for a time as they adjust to the dramatic changes that often occur following a separation/divorce, such as learning to live between two homes. Remember, children are often upset because adults made decisions that greatly impacted their lives and yet nobody consulted them.

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