

Divorce: Is it better to be the leaver or the left?

Elisa Reiter, Daniel Pollack, and Jeffrey Siegel | April 7, 2025



Attorneys and mental health professionals are frequently asked by clients and patients *why* a marital relationship is ending. Theories abound about whether it is better to be the leaver or the left, and whether it behooves a party to be the petitioner or the respondent in a divorce action. An article published in March 2025 in the [Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#) explores the issue of how relationships deteriorate, using measurements that can be tracked. Researchers Janina Larissa Bühler of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, and Ulrich Orth of the University of Bern, analyzed data from four long-term studies using

information from different countries. How does being the “leaver” as opposed to being the party who is “left” impact legal proceedings? Or in confronting family changes in counseling?

The end of a romantic relationship is rarely a symmetrical experience. When a marriage dissolves, the dynamics between the person who initiates the separation and the person who is left behind, create dramatically different emotional journeys and recovery trajectories. Recent research on the decline in relationships shed new light on how these different roles shape not only the immediate aftermath of separation but also shape long-term psychological well-being.

This asymmetry in relationship dissolution represents one of the most profound yet under-discussed aspects of divorce psychology. While popular culture often portrays breakups as mutually understood conclusions to failing relationships, the reality is far more complex, with significant implications for how individuals process grief, rebuild identity, and eventually move forward.

The Asymmetry of Separation: Different Timelines, Different Pain

When a relationship ends, the partners are rarely at the same emotional stage simultaneously. For the leaver, the emotional disconnection typically begins long before the actual separation. [Dr. Diane Vaughan](#), whose research on "uncoupling" remains foundational in this field, identified that leavers often experience what she termed "transitional feelings" – a gradual emotional withdrawal that may occur months or years before they verbalize their desire to end the relationship.

The person who initiates the breakup has typically undergone an internal grieving process while still in the relationship. By the time they announce their intention to separate, they have often already:

- Mentally rehearsed life without their partner
- Emotionally detached from the relationship
- Begun to establish a vision of their post-relationship identity
- Started building support systems outside the relationship

But these have all been done in private. The spouse often notices their partner has “changed” but there is no acknowledgement of it. In fact, attempts to confront those changes – “Is anything wrong?” – can be met with, “No, I’m not sure what you’re talking about.” Often, the departing spouse creates a separate life apart from the partner and the children. It is far beyond a “midlife crisis” or an “emotional affair,” although these often signal the problem, like a faraway lighthouse.

The left spouse has often felt the distance and is left to wonder just what is really going on. Sometimes, conversations with concerned friends and family lead to, “Have you thought about hiring a private investigator?” The impression of the left partner is often verified by gut feelings which in many cases is verified by the P.I., thus leaving the left partner feeling deceived, upset, angry and alone.

The person who is left behind experiences shock and disruption, having their emotional timeline forcibly compressed. They must process the end of the relationship without the preparation period the leaver experienced, often while simultaneously managing practical disruptions to their living situation, financial stability, and parenting arrangements.

Terminal Decline: The Buhler and Orth Perspective

Bühler and Orth’s research on “terminal decline” in relationships provides crucial insights into how relationships deteriorate *before* their formal conclusion. Their

longitudinal study tracked couples over a seven-year period, measuring relationship satisfaction, communication patterns, and emotional investment.

What makes their research particularly valuable is their identification of distinctive patterns that precede relationship dissolution. They found that relationships typically do not simply "end." Rather, they experience a period of terminal decline characterized by:

1. Accelerated decrease in relationship satisfaction
2. Diminished emotional responsiveness between partners
3. Increased emotional withdrawal, particularly by the eventual leaver
4. Reduced investment in shared future planning

Most significantly, Bühler and Orth demonstrated that this terminal decline is usually recognized by only one partner – typically the eventual leaver – creating an asymmetry in awareness that profoundly shapes the separation experience. Their research suggests that the leaver often enters a "knowing" phase approximately 12-18 months before initiating separation, during which they silently acknowledge the relationship's inevitable end while outwardly maintaining its routines.

Psychological Impact of Being the Leaver

Contrary to popular belief, initiating a divorce or separation does not necessarily result in an easier emotional journey. Leavers often struggle with distinct psychological challenges:

Guilt and Ambivalence

Leavers frequently report overwhelming guilt about causing pain to someone they once loved deeply. This guilt can be particularly acute when children are involved

or when the left partner demonstrates continued emotional investment in the relationship.

Many leavers experience periods of ambivalence and second-guessing even after separation. According to Bühler and Orth, more than half of leavers reported significant doubt about their decision within the first six months after separation, despite having initiated it.

Identity Reconstruction

While leavers have often begun the process of identity reconstruction before separation, they still face the challenge of fully actualizing their new identity. Having conceptualized a life without their partner, they must now navigate the reality of that life, which may not align with their expectations.

Social Consequences

Leavers frequently face social judgment and may experience alienation from shared social circles. They often report feeling misunderstood by friends and family who may perceive them as having abandoned their commitment without sufficient cause.

Leavers may have also been angry for an extended period, have denied their responsibility and blamed their spouse. These leavers have very little insight and use blame and projection (“gaslighting”) to soothe themselves. They do not want to go to counseling because “My spouse just won’t understand.” Translated, this can mean they do not want to be forthcoming, or taking responsibility with a third party that will hold them accountable for their actions – be that third party their lawyer or their therapist.

Psychological Impact of Being Left

The experience of being left creates a different but equally challenging psychological landscape:

Trauma and Abandonment

Being left often triggers profound abandonment wounds, especially for individuals with pre-existing attachment insecurities. The sudden restructuring of one's expected future can create symptoms consistent with psychological trauma, including intrusive thoughts, emotional dysregulation, and hypervigilance in subsequent relationships.

Identity Crisis

The left partner typically experiences a more acute identity crisis, having had less time to conceptualize themselves outside the relationship. The left partner often struggles with questions of self-worth and desirability that can persist for years after the separation. They may be overwhelmed with feelings of anger and inadequacy.

Narrative Control

Perhaps one of the most overlooked aspects of being left is the loss of narrative control. The left partner often struggles to make sense of the relationship's end, lacking the internal dialogue that guided the leaver's decision-making process. This absence of narrative coherence can significantly complicate grieving and closure.

Recovery Trajectories: Timing and Patterns

[Studies](#) have documented differences in recovery patterns between leavers and those who are left. Potential ramifications include:

- Leavers typically begin their emotional recovery process earlier but often experience unexpected secondary waves of grief 6-12 months after separation.
- Those who are left experience more acute initial distress but may ultimately achieve more complete emotional resolution once recovery begins.
- Leavers are more likely to engage in transitional relationships that mirror aspects of their previous relationship.
- Those who are left are more likely to avoid relationships initially but may form more distinctly different relationship patterns when they do re-partner.

The Special Case of Mutual Decisions

It is worth noting that not all relationship dissolutions fall neatly into the leaver/left dichotomy. Some couples reach a mutual recognition that their relationship has run its course. Even in supposedly mutual separations, there is often an initiator who first voiced the possibility, and a responder who eventually came to accept it. These distinctions may be subtle but still create different psychological experiences for each partner.

Implications for Therapeutic Approaches

Understanding the distinct psychological journeys of leavers and those who are left has profound implications for counseling interventions. Effective therapists now recognize that these different roles require tailored approaches:

For the Leaver

- Processing guilt and self-forgiveness work
- Clarifying decision narratives to reduce ambivalence
- Navigating social consequences and judgment
- Addressing unexpected secondary grief that often emerges months after separation
- Setting healthy boundaries with the former partner while maintaining compassion

For the Left

- Trauma-informed approaches to address abandonment wounds
- Narrative reconstruction to create coherence and meaning
- Identity rebuilding exercises and self-worth reinforcement
- Grief processing with acknowledgment of the compressed timeline
- Skills for managing acute emotional dysregulation

As noted by Amato (2000) in "[The consequences of divorce for adults and children,](#)" initiator status significantly impacts adjustment outcomes, with non-initiators typically experiencing greater distress in the short term. This research supports the importance of therapeutic approaches that acknowledge these different experiences.

Impact on Legal Proceedings

The leaver/left dynamic often manifests in counterproductive ways during divorce proceedings, creating additional challenges for legal professionals and potentially complicating resolution:

Emotional Readiness Disparities

One of the most significant complications arises from the different emotional timelines. The left partner is often still in acute grief during initial legal proceedings, while the leaver has already processed much of their grief. This disparity creates radically different priorities and decision-making capacities during crucial early legal stages.

Negotiation Dynamics

The leaver/left dynamic influences settlement approaches:

- Leavers may offer overly generous settlements driven by guilt.
- The left partner may resist reasonable settlements as a form of emotional protest.
- Leavers often prioritize speed and closure over optimal outcomes.
- The left partner frequently seeks prolonged processes as a means of maintaining connection.

Custody and Co-Parenting Complexities

Bühler and Orth's research resonates in other ways. The leaver/left dynamic may significantly impact co-parenting arrangements. The left parent often exhibits higher levels of parental gatekeeping behaviors, while the leaver may initially accept suboptimal parenting arrangements due to guilt. These patterns, if not addressed, can establish problematic precedents that harm family functioning for years.

Mediation Effectiveness

Acknowledging and directly addressing the leaver/left dynamic during mediation may enhance the prospect of settlement. Mediators trained in recognizing these patterns can implement specialized strategies including:

- Separate emotional preparation sessions
- Staggered decision-making timelines
- Recognition and normalization of role-specific reactions
- Strategic scheduling to accommodate different emotional readiness

Integration of Legal and Therapeutic Support

Progressive family law practices are increasingly advocating for integrated approaches that acknowledge how these psychological dynamics impact legal proceedings. Divorce coaches who understand the leaver/left framework can help clients:

- Recognize how their role affects their legal decision-making
- Develop realistic expectations about their former partner's capacity for rational negotiation
- Implement communication strategies tailored to their specific dynamic
- Create boundaries that respect different emotional timelines

Conclusion

The distinction between being the leaver or the left fundamentally shapes the experience of relationship dissolution. Bühler and Orth's research on terminal decline helps illuminate how these different trajectories begin long before the formal separation, creating asymmetrical preparation and different grieving timelines.

When a relationship dissolves, the emotional and legal implications for each party can vary greatly depending on their perceived role in the breakup – whether they initiated the split or were left by their partner. These distinctions are crucial for both lawyers and mental health professionals working with individuals navigating the complexities of separation. Recognizing and addressing the unique psychological experiences of "leavers" and "left" parties can lead to more effective therapeutic interventions and legal strategies, potentially mitigating emotional distress and reducing the financial and social burdens often associated with protracted legal battles.

As research in this area continues to evolve, the integration of psychological insights about the leaver/left dynamic into divorce processes offers hope for more humane and effective approaches to relationship dissolution – approaches that honor the different experiences of all involved while facilitating healthier transitions to post-relationship life.

Elisa Reiter, a Senior Attorney with Calabrese Budner, LLP in Dallas, Texas, is Board Certified in Family Law and in Child Welfare Law by the Texas Board of Legal Specialization. In addition to her law practice, she also serves as an Adjunct Professor at SMU Dedman School of Law. Mrs. Reiter is admitted to practice in the District of Columbia, Massachusetts, and New York. Contact: elisa@calabresebudner.com.

Daniel Pollack, MSW, JD is a professor at Yeshiva University's School of Social Work in New York City. He was also a Commissioner of Game Over:

Commission to Protect Youth Athletes, an independent blue-ribbon commission created to examine the institutional responses to sexual grooming and abuse by former USA Gymnastics physician Larry Nassar. Contact: dpollack@yu.edu.

Jeffrey C. Siegel, Ph.D., ABPP is a forensic and clinical psychologist in Dallas, Texas. In practice since 1981, he conducted child custody evaluations for over 40 years in multiple states and has provided court testimony over 300 times. He currently conducts court-ordered “parenting-focused psychological evaluations” and serves as a consultant to attorneys in family law matters. Dr. Siegel is board certified in Clinical Psychology and Family Psychology through the American Board of Professional Psychology and a Fellow of the American College of Forensic Psychology. Contact: jeff@siegelphd.com.

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