

DIVORCE ANESTHESIA

When a spouse leaves the marriage for another person

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From my experience working with people going through or recovering from divorce, I have observed a vast emotional difference between the spouse who leaves the marriage to be with someone else, or for the hope of being with someone else, and the one who has been left.

Divorce for most people is like surgery—the cutting of norms on many levels. What was every day experience no longer exists. People feel shaky and weak. Can't eat or sleep in the early days. The initial feeling is like being untethered, like the characters in the movie *Gravity*. Floating out there in space, alone. The ground has disappeared. Silence.

The type and intensity of these feelings is different for each person. The initiator has less intensity and the non-initiator obviously has more. This is true in every case. When the initiator leaves the marriage to be with another person, he or she is further anesthetized by the feelings of infatuation, making the divorce seem easier and more doable. "What's the big deal?" he may ask. "It happens all the time," she may think. "My kids want to see me happy. They will understand, won't they?" (No, not necessarily.)

What is real to the two people varies widely. The initiator will attempt to justify his or her wanting to leave by finding fault and seeing only the negative in the spouse. This will confound the spouse since it seems they can't, or never could, do anything right. What once was normal now becomes a minefield.

In his or her mind, the initiating person will compare the spouse of ten, twenty or thirty years with their new object of affection, who is wrapped in the pink cloud of infatuation. There is no way the spouse can measure up to the illusion of perfection and compatibility. That too will shift in time, but for now, the romantic connection and fantasy soothes a lot of the worry, fear and strife during the adaptation to separation.

The non-initiating spouse experiences a deeper, more intense surgery, and without the emotional anesthesia, so the pain is obviously more intense and raw. This partner can't understand the matter-of-fact and casual attitude of the spouse about ending a very

significant relationship, often with children in the balance. The ego of the rejected spouse is blown to bits. It takes months and often years to pull oneself out of the emotional trauma, rebuild, and feel grounded again.

The emotional blows often follow along these lines, with weeks or months in between:

- My spouse is leaving me.
- My sense of reality is shattered. I did not expect this
- I am told that it's mostly my fault.
- S/he says s/he never really loved me the way s/he should have
- I have a sense that my spouse may has someone else
- I get confirmation of this. I am being replaced.
- I am told that this other person had nothing to do with my spouse wanting a divorce. The marriage was over a long time ago. Of course, I don't believe it.
- Now this outsider has met my in-laws and some of my friends
- Then my children...

Each of these steps is a setback for the spouse. The initiator feels this is a natural progression and going way too slowly. The spouse, however, feels like s/he is facing one shock after another. Just as he or she may be adapting to the current situation, a new challenge on the list arises.

The initiator and his or her attorney may have little patience for the raw state of the one who has been left. This person may be perceived as weak, emotionally immature, or histrionic. While it can be seen as a regression, is likely temporary and may not be indicative of his or her normal level of functioning. The longer the marriage, the longer it usually takes to come back up to normal functioning. The solution to the two widely different perspectives is time.

Eventually, the non-initiating spouse will realize

- There's really nothing I can do to make it go back to the way it was.
- The most important focus is on my own life and my children now
- I will take care of myself and make *myself* happy
- I can only be the best mom or dad I can be, regardless of what the other person does or doesn't do

- I will investigate exactly what would make me happy and pursue it.

As we say in the Twelve Step programs, it's okay to look back, but don't stare.

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