

BOTTOM LINE PERSONAL

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Carol Hughes, PhD

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR PARENTS DIVORCE

And You're Already a Grown-Up

Heading home for the holidays is a treasured tradition in many families. But what do these families do if their aging parents divorce?

The divorce rate among couples age 50 and up more than doubled between 1990 and 2010, according to a study by researchers at Bowling Green State University, and it shows no signs of falling. It isn't just the older divorced parents who endure the emotional consequences of these splits. The dissolution of their marriages can take a toll on their adult children, too—at any time of year.

Here is what the adult children of divorced or divorcing parents need to know...

YOU MIGHT FEEL ABANDONED

It might not come as a surprise that the divorce of one's parents can be traumatic. What is surprising is that this trauma can be deeper and longer-lasting than living through a natural disaster.

Reason: People tend to get over shared traumas faster than private ones. In the wake of a shared trauma, they feel understood and supported...and they see other people coping with the same trauma and getting on with their lives. But in a private trauma, they feel alone, lost and abandoned in their pain.

This can be the case for adults whose parents divorce. Intellectually they know that other adults' parents have divorced, but the topic and its emotional consequences are discussed so rarely that they feel they are experiencing this alone. And when these adult children mention how much they are hurting, they often do not receive much sympathy. Other people don't understand how adults who most likely have been living on their own for years can be so traumatized.

In fact, these feelings of abandonment and pain are perfectly normal. Your parents' marriage forms part of the foundation of who you are. If that marriage ends, it can feel as if your foundation has crumbled, leaving you unsupported.

What to do: Find people who have endured the same trauma. Speaking with them can transform the private trauma into a shared one, likely speeding the recovery process. Start with your siblings—they are enduring your parents' divorce, too. Complex family dynamics and differing emotional responses to divorce mean that this won't be the answer for everyone, however. Other possibilities include friends whose parents have divorced...therapists or clergy members...and support groups for people experiencing grief.

IT CAN HURT YOUR MARRIAGE

People learn how to be husbands and wives in part by watching their parents during childhood. If those parents later split, it is only natural to ask yourself, *Did I really learn how to sustain a marriage? Am I good marriage material?*

Meanwhile, one or both of the divorcing parents might lean heavily on an adult child for financial or emotional support. This new demand for the adult child's time, money and/or emotional resources means that he/she has fewer resources to devote to his spouse, kids and career, opening the door to difficulties in these areas.

What to do: If you begin to question your own marriage, consider that this might be a stage in your grieving process, not a sign that you truly are headed for divorce. Speak with a therapist trained in the treatment of grief if these concerns persist.

If one (or both) of your parents leans heavily on you emotionally during or after the divorce, help that parent find a broader and more appropriate support system. Ask the parent's friends and church leaders whether they can assist...and/or help the parent find a local support group for divorced people.

If a parent leans on you heavily for financial assistance, pay a certified financial planner to determine how much support you can provide without jeopardizing your other fi-

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nancial responsibilities. Invite the parent to a meeting with this adviser.

CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Divorcing parents sometimes battle each other through their adult children. They discuss their former partners' flaws and failings with their adult children either out of spite or despair or in hopes of convincing the children that the divorce was the other parent's fault.

And sometimes children of divorcing parents argue with each other (or with other family members)—because they blame different parents for the split...or because a sibling cuts off contact with the parent who seems to be at fault while another sibling does not.

What to do: If your parents' divorce causes you to fight with your siblings, say, "Our parents are splitting up, but that doesn't mean we have to. In fact, it's more important than ever that we stick together." Say words to this effect each time anger arises between you. If you simply cannot discuss this topic calmly, agree not to discuss it any more than is absolutely necessary.

If your parents try to fight battles through you, explain that you have no interest in listening to bad things about either of them. Do not be surprised if you have to repeat this boundaries discussion many times.

THE HOLIDAYS ARE HARD

The holidays can be the time of year when the parents' divorce truly hits home for adult children if gathering together had been a tradition.

What to do: Create an entirely new holiday tradition. Take your immediate family somewhere fun and interesting for the holidays. Or invite members of your extended family—including your parents—

More from Carole Hughes, PhD

Four Ways Divorcing Parents Can Limit the Fallout for Their Adult Children

Parents' behavior during and after their divorce can significantly affect how much their adult children suffer. Parents should...

- **Break the news together**, in person and without blame or anger, if possible. Say something along the lines of, "We've decided we're not going to stay married. It's no one's fault." When pressed for reasons, simply say, "We have problems that we haven't been able to solve." This will be especially difficult if you feel that your spouse is at fault, but expressing blame and anger will only make the divorce more difficult for your adult children.

If the children already know (or are likely to find out) that one parent has clearly wronged the other, the "wronged" parent could admit that the situation is not quite as clear-cut as it seems. *Example:* "You already know that your mother had an affair, but you should know that we had been growing apart for years. Neither of us was the best spouse we could have been." This gives the children permission to continue having a positive relationship with the parent who seems primarily to blame. Even if you are very angry at your soon-to-be-ex-spouse, your kids still have a right to

have a relationship with both of their parents.

If the divorce follows from one parent coming out as gay, it's best to say this. It might be a difficult conversation, but it gives your children an understanding of who their parents truly are and why the divorce is happening.

- **Emphasize what won't be changing.** *Example:* "We both still love you kids, and we always will," and "We'll remain friends/friendly/amicable with each other." (Choose the most positive word you feel you can here.)

- **Seek emotional support from people other than your children.** Your kids deserve to live their own lives, not suffer through your problems.

- **Role-model effective problem solving.** When you are tempted to lament your situation or act petty toward your ex in front of your adult child, consider what lesson you wish to teach in this moment. Children learn from their parents' example even during adulthood. This is an opportunity to teach a lesson about handling difficult times with grace and maturity. That lesson could be part of the legacy you leave behind after you are gone.

over to your house. If your parents can't treat each other civilly or if it's painful for one of your parents to see the other, you could invite them on different days during the holiday season.

YOU MAY FEEL RELIEVED

When parents have been fighting for years, their adult children sometimes feel glad when they hear that

their parents are divorcing. They might then feel guilty about this initial reaction.

What to do: If you think the divorce is warranted, let your parents know this. They probably will be relieved that you are not angry with them. Your positive reaction could help other family members admit their relief, too. **BLP**