

Suffering in the world- Divorce

People go through a variety of painful experiences through their life journey. Some of the painful experiences are predictable (e.g. physical pain when injuries happen, sadness following loss of loved ones to death or migration, disappointments if failing exams or not achieving aims...etc.). All of these predictable experiences are temporary, common and have a predictable outcome, we all know that time will provide healing or a new better opportunity. After these experiences we live with hope that things will get better.

Other pains can be very unpredictable. That makes them extremely painful, difficult to cope with and can change our view to life, our self confidence and our opinion of the closest people to us forever (e.g. disability after major accidents, famines, wars, and family breakdown/ divorce). These are considered major crisis situations that people do not expect to be part of it.

In this modern world one of the very common but always unexpected and heart breaking crisis is family breakdown and divorce. When young people get married they start the marriage to continue for life together. Their only expectation is that they will start to build a life and a family to share for the rest of their life. They see themselves growing older together, supporting each other and being companions through all life difficulties, mainly in old age till death.

When one of the married couple breaks this eternal bond of marriage for whatever reason, the shock and stress that is imposed on the other partner and children is too extreme that in many cases it can lead to irreversible damage that lasts for the rest of their life.

We all see more cases of divorce around us. You would probably have at least one friend whose parents are divorced. Some people take it lightly as a fact of life that some partners will just not get along well and it would be better to live apart.

In other cases when domestic violence or verbal abuse is an issue, divorce gets encouraged very early on before giving a chance to counselling. When there is a risk for children safety being breached we would all understand that there is a good reason for and necessity to protect them.

Divorce in the opinion of the Coptic church

What do you think is the Coptic Church's opinion regarding divorce?

Allow the students to mention their knowledge of the church's opinion on this matter.

The Coptic Church does not give the option of divorce and does not permit it except in case of one of the married couple committing adultery and the other partner does not accept to live with it.

(In many cases if the partner at fault is remorseful and the other partner can trust that they can work on the relationship and not repeat the same mistake again or that a divorce will have a harmful effect on their children or themselves then they can continue the marriage).

The divorce is not granted by the church but the church allows the partner who was deceived to marry again to have an appropriate chance at raising a family. The divorce is usually granted first in court then the couple or one of them request the church's permission to marry again.

The other situation that the church would allow a second marriage, is when there was a deception before marriage (e.g. If a significant mental illness that was known before marriage was not disclosed. An illness that would have a major impact on judgement or pose risk on the partner e.g. psychosis/ schizophrenia, naturally the partner have the right to be informed. The partner who was not informed -in this case -did not have the chance to judge for themselves if they can live with such condition or not. It would probably be the same in case of an illness like HIV. In this case the deceived partner would be granted ailment (as if marriage did not happen).

What if one partner in the marriage developed a mental illness after marriage?

There is no divorce or ailment in this case as there was no deception, it is like any illness any one could develop. The other partner is expected to be there for better or worse, as he or she would expect from his or her partner if he or she gets a heart attack or diabetes or a stroke. People do not go for divorce for these reasons but they stay by the side of the ill partner for the rest of their life with love, care and support.

For all the other reasons that people feel they could not live together for it, the church does not permit divorce or a second marriage.

The Bible does not define marriage as such, but a definition can be derived from the following words of our Lord Jesus Christ. *“But from the beginning of the creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one flesh; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Mark 10:6-9).*

Why -in your opinion- the church takes this stand against divorce?

Is the church right in taking a stand against divorce?

What is the effect of divorce on the divorced couple?

What is the effect of divorce on children?

Let us find out first what the research has confirmed to be a consequence of divorce:

- Pre-divorce changes in the family often negatively influence the psychological states of parents; parental stress, anxiety, and depression, in turn, inhibit effective parenting. Paul R. Amato and Alan Booth (1996) conducted a rare longitudinal study on a national sample and documented problems in parent-child relationships as early as eight to twelve years prior to parental divorce. Other studies observe that, before parental divorce, U.S. and U.K. children and adolescents suffer due to high levels of marital discord, ineffective and inconsistent parenting, diminished parental wellbeing, and reduced parent-child affection (Demo and Cox 2000; Rodgers and Pryor 1998). Taken together, these studies suggest that the alterations in family functioning that

occur during a pre-divorce process lead to children witnessing their parents fighting, parents' emotional and psychological states deteriorating, and diminishing levels of parental warmth, affection, and supervision. It is important to note that these changing family dynamics contribute to children experiencing behavior problems prior to parental divorce and that children's behavior problems, in turn, strain marital relationships, undermine parental well-being, and increase the chances of parental divorce (Acock and Demo 1994; Cherlin et al. 1991). Consequently, some researchers would argue that the negative effects of divorce on children begin *well before* an actual divorce occurs.

- Substantial research evidence shows that, on average, children who have experienced parental divorce score somewhat lower than children in first-marriage families on measures of social development, emotional well-being, self-concept, academic performance, educational attainment, and physical health (Amato 2000; Furstenberg and Kiernan 2001). This conclusion is based on group comparisons that consistently show small differences between the average adjustment level of children in first-marriage families and the average level for children whose parents have divorced. Equally important, but less well understood, is that children and adolescents in divorced families vary widely in their adjustment (Demo and Acock 1996). That is, many children exhibit delinquent behavior, difficulties with peers, and low self-esteem following their parents' divorce, while many others adjust readily, enjoy popularity with friends, and think highly of themselves. A useful way of thinking about this is that children's adjustment within any particular family structure (e.g., first-marriage families, divorced families, stepfamilies) varies along a continuum from very poor adjustment to very positive adjustment. That is dependent on the personality, resilience and amount of support those children are getting.
- Studies have shown that custodial mothers often face dramatic economic losses following divorce, leading to feelings of stress that adversely affect parenting. Economic loss may trigger multiple transitions for the child (e.g., moving, changing schools, taking in other household members), adversely affecting child well-being.

Effects of Divorce on adults

Divorce affects the couple economically, mentally, emotionally and physically.

- **Economic outcome:** Both partners experience decline in their economic situation as the income that used to go towards one household is now divided

on two houses. The custodial mother would suffer more financial difficulties than the father.

- **Mental and emotional outcomes:** divorced individuals exhibit higher levels of depression and anxiety than do individuals who are married, and those divorced also tend to have poorer self-concepts and exhibit more symptoms of psychological distress (compared with those who are married).
- **Physical outcomes:** Divorced individuals also have more health problems and higher mortality rates than married persons. Divorced adults exhibit more risk-taking behaviors (e.g., elevated rates of drugs and alcohol use/abuse). Particularly among those recently divorced, there is an increased risk for illness, likely due to poorer immune system functioning from the stress associated with divorce. (Kitson and Morgan 1990).
- **Relationship outcomes:** Relationships and social networks are influenced in various ways by divorce. Divorced individuals generally experience more social isolation and have smaller social networks than do married individuals. This is explained in terms of them having less in common with married friends following divorce. Moreover, friendships can become divided between the couple like other marital assets, as friends may choose sides.

Very interesting research findings:

- Life expectancies for divorced men and women are significantly lower than for married people (who have the longest life expectancies).³
- A recent study found those who were unhappy but stay married were more likely to be happy five years later than those who divorced.⁴
- The health consequences of divorce are so severe that a Yale researcher concluded that “being divorced and a non smoker is [only] slightly less dangerous than smoking a pack a day and staying married.”⁵
- After a diagnosis of cancer, married people are most likely to recover, while the divorced are least likely to recover,⁶ indicating that the emotional trauma of divorce has a long-term impact on the physical health of the body.
- Men and women both suffer a decline in mental health following divorce, but researchers have found that women are more greatly affected.

Effects of divorce on children

- **Fear of Change:** The children in a divorcing family know that nothing will ever be the same again, and their previously secure world is in a state of change. Many things will change, not just that their mother or dad will not be around. They may lose contact with extended family on one side or the other. Their bedtime, mealtime and after school routines may change. It is a state of upheaval.
- **Fear of Being Abandoned:** When mom and dad are at odds and are either separated or considering separation, children have a realistic fear that if they lose one parent, they may lose the other. The concept of being alone in the world is a very frightening thing for a child.
- **Losing Attachment:** Children who have a natural attachment for their parents also fear losing other secure relationships-friends, pets, siblings, neighbours, and so on. Sometimes children are simply attached to their surroundings, and moving into new surroundings can cause an understandable negative reaction.
- **Coping with Parental Tension:** Even though many divorces follow years of tension between husband and wife, the tension level typically increases during and shortly after

a divorce. And parents who try to turn their children against the other spouse create an absolutely impossible situation for that child.

- **Trying to Bring Parents Back Together:** Some children have the mistaken notion that the breakup of the family is somehow their fault. These children typically either “act out” in negative ways, or try to be perfect in an effort to be “so good” that the parents won’t need or want to divorce.
- **Aggression and Defiance:** I know that some parents will think that this is just normal behaviour even when there are no marital differences. The key is being aware of uncharacteristic aggression in some children. Are they more angry and uncooperative than usual?
- **Depression and Withdrawal:** Many children in a family under stress will withdraw or show signs of depression. These might include hermit-like behaviour, the early signs of eating disorders, discussion or threats of suicide and the like.

Children (and adult children) have the attitude that their parents should be able to work through and solve any issue. Parents, who have given the children life, are perceived by the children as very competent people with supernatural abilities to meet the needs of the children. No problem should be too great for their parents to handle. For a child, divorce shatters this basic safety and belief concerning the parents' abilities to care for them and to make decisions that truly consider their well-being.

Children have the strong belief that there is only one right family relationship and that is Mom and Dad being together. Any other relationship configuration presents a conflict or betrayal of their basic understanding of life. In divorce, children [tend to] resent both the custodial and absent parent.¹

While virtually every child suffers the lost relationship and lost security described above, for many, the emotional scars have additional, more visible consequences. More than 30 years of research continues to reveal the negative effects of divorce on children. Most of these measurable effects are calculated in increased risks. In other words, while divorce does not mean these effects will definitely occur in your child, it does greatly increase the risks. The odds are simply against your kids if you divorce.

More interesting findings:

Research comparing children of divorced parents to children with married parents, shows:

- In divorce, children [tend to] resent both the custodial and absent parent.¹
- Children from divorced homes suffer academically. They experience high levels of behaviour problems. Their grades suffer, and they are less likely to graduate from high school.²
- Kids whose parents divorce are substantially more likely to be incarcerated for committing a crime as a juvenile.³
- Because the custodial parent's income drops substantially after a divorce, children in divorced homes are almost five times more likely to live in poverty than are children with married parents.⁴
- Teens from divorced homes are much more likely to engage in drug and alcohol use, as well as sexual intercourse than are those from intact families.⁵

Before you say, "Not my kid," remember that the children and teens represented in these statistics are normal kids, probably not much different from yours. Their parents didn't think they would get involved in these things either. Again, these are increased risks.

A few more statistics to consider:

- Children from divorced homes experience illness more frequently and recover from sickness more slowly.⁶
- They are also more likely to suffer child abuse.⁷
- Children of divorced parents suffer more frequently from symptoms of psychological distress.⁸
- The emotional scars of divorce last into adulthood.⁹

The scope of this last finding — children suffer emotionally from their parents' divorce — have been largely underestimated. Obviously, not every child of divorce commits crime or drops out of school. Some do well in school and even become high achievers. However, even these children experience deep and lasting emotional trauma. For all children, their parents' divorce colours their view of the world and relationships for the rest of their lives.

¹ Interview with Steven Earll, M.A., M.S., L.P.C., C.A.C. III, August 2001.

² Nan Marie Astone and Sara S. McLanahan, "Family Structure, Parental Practices and High School Completion," *American Sociological Review* 56 (1991): 309-320.

³ Cynthia Harper and Sara McLanahan, "Father Absence and Youth Incarceration," Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Working Paper #99-03.

⁴ Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent; What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 82.

⁵ Robert L. Flewelling and Karl E. Bauman, "Family Structure as a Predictor of Initial Substance Use and Sexual Intercourse in Early Adolescence," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52 (1990): 171-181.

⁶ Jane Mauldon, "The Effects of Marital Disruption on Children's Health," *Demography* 27 (1990): 431-46, and Olle Lundberg, "The Impact of Childhood Living Conditions on Illness and Mortality in Adulthood," *Social Science and Medicine* 36 (1993): 1047-52, both as cited in Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

⁷ Catherine Malkin and Michael Lamb, "Child Maltreatment: A Test of Sociobiological Theory," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 25 (1994): 121-133; Leslie Margolin, "Child Abuse and Mother's Boyfriends: Why the Overrepresentation?" *Child Abuse and Neglect* 16 (1992): 541-551.

⁸ P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, Andrew J. Cherlin and Kathleen E. Kiernan, "The Long-term Effects of Parental Divorce on the Mental Health of Young Adults: A Developmental Perspective," *Child Development* 66 (1995): 1614-1634.

⁹ Wallerstein, et al., 2000, pp. xxvii-xxix; Catherine E. Ross and John Mirowsky. "Parental Divorce, Life-Course Disruption, and Adult Depression," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (1999): 1034-1035.

Conclusion

Knowing that the church refuses divorce, having friends who live in divorced family situation, how do you feel you should treat them?

We should make sure that we are not judgmental; we should love them the same way if not better than any other friends, make sure we are a good support to them if they need us. Those friends could be going through a lot of struggle psychologically,

financially or even spiritually. The role we can play in a friend's life could be the difference between them coping and progressing forwards or struggling and losing hope in life.

A very important life lesson we should always consider is not to take lightly the responsibility of choosing a partner for life. We should pray and take time to get to know the other person in a pure, respectful and honest relationship (engagement period) and proceed to marriage only if you are absolutely sure of your, and your fiancé's good intentions and suitability for each other to live together for the rest of your life. Accept advice from your parents within the wisdom of the God's word and of your confession father regarding how to choose a husband/wife.

Learn from other people's experience, do not choose a partner because they are wealthy or good looking or have good sense of humour. Although these criteria might be important to you, you have to make sure the other person is pure, committed to God and you, responsible and would make a good parent.

If problems, arguments and misunderstanding start to disturb your marriage, do not jump to the easy way out, consider the effect on your family, your children, you are responsible for their well being, safety and stability. If you work harder problems can get solved, always involve the Lord, listen to his advice, to the church advice and give yourself time to resolve anger and heal pain, to give another chance and look for forgiveness in your heart.

The Coptic Church's opinion regarding divorce is taken from the Holy Bible, is based on Christ's teachings, is for the benefit of our lives and for our children, long before people conduct research and come up with conclusions.

We may not see the wisdom of the church's opinion under the effect of anger and pain of being cheated and deceived but if we watch closely how other people and children suffer, we will take a step back and never rush in making such a decision.

Stories from life experience, names changed

Melissa, a 35 y.o. woman said "I did not talk to my mum for years, our relationship has been strained since my dad left home, she was depressed, angry and I always blamed her for not trying hard enough to keep dad at home. Now I know it was not her fault but our relationship is already damaged".

Kerry, 28 y.o. woman, I was surprised when she told me she lives in a caravan in someone's driveway for the last 6 months, she will stay there until they ask her to leave then she will move to a different area as she did for the last 10 years. When I enquired about the reasons, she went straight to her parent's problems. Her dad left when she was 13, she hated her mum because they were always arguing, left home when she was 14. She said I was abused, then she corrected "I allowed myself to be abused by the choice of relationships I chose, I left school, have never been back home, could not keep a job for longer than a year. I regret the past and now paying

the price for it, I started calling my mum but it is difficult to change the past. I am unemployed, have not husband or children, have been on drugs and abused alcohol. I am pretty messed up”.

Michael, 19 y.o. Uni student, he came suffering from depression and low self esteem. He first felt anxious and extremely stressed when his parents were constantly fighting at (he was 10 y.o.) later on they got divorced, he became depressed and isolated, did not have friends at school, got bullied and always felt that if his stayed things would have been better. He did not feel close to his mum, both of them had a lot to deal with. He feels betrayed and lonely.