



Dating After Divorce Rediscover Yourself

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The unexamined life is not worth living – Socrates

Divorce is hard – we know this dating back to 1967.

In 1967, doctors Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe developed the Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory¹. While this is an older inventory, it has been updated, validated, and used in a multitude of studies in understanding how people respond to different stressful life events. Marital separation and divorce are the most stressful life events that people can experience after the death of a spouse, and *even more stressful than incarceration!*

Riding out your first year of separation can be a roller coaster, although how stressful this time is can depend on your stage and level of grief at the time of your separation. We know that people go through these stages, not necessarily in order, and partners are often at a different stage depending on whether they chose to leave the marriage or not. These stages include shock and denial; pain and guilt; anger and bargaining; mourning; dependency; acceptance and letting go; building a new identity and moving on. Throughout this process, people can feel like they are on a roller coaster. This is why you often get the advice to wait a year until you start dating. But, like many others before you, you're probably not interested in waiting this long, especially if you decided to leave the partnership, and are further along in your grief process. Once you are ready to build a new identity, you're ready to move on.

But the first-year post-separation, and the years beyond, are ripe for self-reflection. Having compassion towards yourself and others (namely your ex), is vitally important for good self-growth, forgiveness, and to make sure you don't bring your previous relationship baggage into your next relationship.

¹ Holmes, T, Rahe, R. (1967). The Social Readjustment Rating Scale. Journal of Psychosomatic Research. Vol. 11, Issue 2, August, 13-218.



Studies show us, and most people would acknowledge, that reflection is valuable. This is why there is an industry that thrives on self-help, journaling, health coaching, personal growth, and the like. Despite this, reflection is often not valued enough for people to actually pause before doing something. Sometimes you need to slow down, but often you just need to think about things from a different perspective. Reflection can help us work our way out of self-flagellation, anger, resentment, and guilt.

Even if you aren't ready to dive into a relationship, reflecting on your family history, what contributed to your own mistakes in the relationship, and what dynamics played out between you and your ex are vital for your health. Maybe you were married to a narcissist or someone with a high level of emotional reactivity. Blaming them, or yourself, for all of the problems in the relationship will not help you understand your own history and what led you to find this person.

In order to move on in a healthy manner, you must be willing to accept responsibility for your part of the relationship that went wrong. We tend to ruminate on mistakes and problems because we are wired to do this for self-protection. We have to actively work to be reflective and thoughtful versus stuck on an automatic rumination loop. But, as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) teaches us, thoughts are just thoughts².

Now is the time to be courageous and look at yourself rather than just your partner. As said by John Wayne, **“Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway.”**

² Hayes, S., Strosahl, K., & Wilson, K. (1999). *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: An experiential approach to behavior change*. New York, NY: Guilford.



Simply put, look at where you come from. The most common problems that lead to divorce include arguments related to differences in conflict resolution styles, money, in-laws, sex, untreated mental health problems, substance use, domestic violence, and absenteeism. Consider your role in these areas by asking some questions:

1. What did you learn from your family about how to talk about these difficult issues?
2. What did you learn from your family about how to deal with conflict, winning and losing, and how to make decisions when there is a disagreement?
3. What did you learn about how you should treat others and how you should let others treat you?
4. What did you learn about what relationships 'should' look like? Are they quiet, loud, angry, is there an absent partner?

In addition to these questions, consider John Gottman's predictors of what leads to divorce, which can help you develop an understanding of yourself and your partner in the relationship³:

1. **Harsh startup** – When a conversation begins with a criticism or sarcasm.
2. **Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse** (described below)
3. **Flooding and accompanying body language**– Being overwhelmed by your partner's negative emotions.
4. **Failed repair attempts** – Not accepting an apology or delivering an apology poorly.
5. **Bad memories** – Focusing on what hasn't worked versus what has worked in the relationship.

³ Gottman, J. & Silver, N. (1999). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. New York: Three Rivers Press.



The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Do you see any of these dynamics in your relationship history? Looking specifically at the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse can also lead to insights about where the relationship went wrong.

1. **Contempt** – This is the number one factor leading to divorce, according to Gottman. When we communicate in this state, we are truly mean. We treat others with disrespect, mock them with sarcasm, ridicule, call them names, and mimic or use body language such as eye-rolling or scoffing. The target of contempt is made to feel despised and worthless.
2. **Criticism** - Criticizing your partner is different than offering a critique or voicing a complaint. The latter two are about specific issues, whereas the former is an attack on your partner at the core of their character. In effect, you are dismantling their whole being when you criticize.
3. **Defensiveness** – This form of communication is typically a response to criticism. We've all been defensive, particularly in a relationship that is on the rocks. When we feel unjustly accused, we come up with excuses and play the innocent victim so that our partner will back off.
4. **Stonewalling** – This is usually a response to contempt. Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction, shuts down, and simply stops responding to their partner. Rather than confronting the issues with their partner, people who stonewall tune out, turn away, act busy, or engage in obsessive or distracting behaviors.

On the whole, in this relationship were you:

1. Conflict avoidant?
2. Aggressive when fighting rather than letting things go?
3. Dominant or submissive?
4. A rescuer or martyr?
5. What did you tend to fight about, and is there anything that you can do about it in your next relationship?
6. Do you have personal issues with money, sex, untreated mental health problems, substance use, or domestic violence?
7. How much did your partner manage to bring out the worst in you? What have you done to make sure this doesn't happen again? Are you stuck in that cycle of rumination, or are you ready to move on?

You know you're stuck when you are complaining instead of doing something different. This toxicity takes up our excess physical and emotional energy, leads to toxicity in our bodies, and leads us to think the worst about ourselves and others. Another sign that you may be stuck includes the suppression of emotions. When you pretend that you're over it, but you really are still feeling like you can explode for no reason, or you're judging yourself and others negatively, you may be holding back versus really processing your emotions to move on. This is equally bad for our bodies as it releases excess cortisol and places strain on our brains and bodies. It's important to recognize physical triggers for different emotions in order to move towards self-awareness and self-compassion.

We need to pay attention to our emotions and receive social input, so we don't jump to conclusions and base decision on assumptions about ourselves and others that aren't necessarily correct. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT – developed by Marsha Linehan, Ph.D.) and ACT suggest that the beginning steps are recognizing your emotions (physically and emotionally), labeling them correctly, not judging your emotions, and then moving on to recognizing your behavior patterns. Once you are able to do this, you can connect these patterns to your own history, and learn to be curious about your actions, as well as the actions of others, rather than shoving down your feelings, ignoring or avoiding. This helps us move towards action.



What does any of this have to do with dating after divorce? Plenty.

You need to be able to recognize your history and tune into your own body, emotions, and behaviors to understand what you want from your next relationship. Are you really ready to move on, or are you using the pursuit of a relationship to regain your loss of intimacy, get help financially, or find a new parent for your kids?

Set daily goals for yourself that are simple to help move you towards the courageous action of self-reflection. Simple activities can include:

1. Journaling⁴
2. Walking meditation or other movement like yoga
3. Sitting meditation (if that works for you...so hard)
4. Music and art as forms of expression, either appreciation or participation
5. Talking with friends
6. Being in nature
7. Therapy (yes, this really can be simple)

It's also important to recognize what events can lead someone who has healed and moved on to have a setback. Men often remarry faster (within a year) than women. This can be triggering for the woman, the children, and make things more complicated, especially if there are stepchildren. Alimony changes can also be triggering if they are expected. When these bigger changes occur, that sense of compassion towards yourself and your partner can wane. This can be a good time to reevaluate your values.

⁴ I personally like the *Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck Journal* by Mark Manson, 2022.



The Valued Living Questionnaire looks at how you rate the following values by area of importance: family; marriage and intimate relationships; parenting; friendships and interpersonal relationships; professional life; academic life; leisure and recreation; spirituality; citizenship; and self-care⁵. Values can be assessed broadly as:

1. *Personal Values that define who we are, what we want, and why we think the way we do.*
2. *Social Values that govern our social connections and interpersonal bond with others.*
3. *Universal Values that influence spiritual thought, cultural standards, and overall acceptance of life experiences.*

More specifically:

1. *Self-directional values define our goals and ambitions in life.*
2. *Stimulative values provide the energy and vigor to move ahead for accomplishing the aspirations.*
3. *Hedonistic values on the pleasure principle and instant need gratification.*
4. *Achievement values define personal success and competence.*
5. *Power values come with societal norms, control, and personal resources.*
6. *Security values include personal safety, harmony, interpersonal relationships, and self-control.*
7. *Conformity values operate through agreeableness to societal norms and standards.*
8. *Traditional values involve respect, community support, commitment, and acceptance of customs and culture.*
9. *Benevolent values are tied in with preservation and enhancement of the welfare of self and others close to us.*
10. *Universal values encompass appreciation, tolerance, and general acceptance of the nature of things around us.*

⁵ Wilson, K. & Murrell, A. (2004). Values work in acceptance and commitment therapy. In S. C. Hayes, V. M. Follette, & M. M. Linehan (Eds.), *Mindfulness and acceptance: Expanding the cognitive-behavioral tradition* (pp. 120-151). New York, NY: Guilford Press



Being able to recognize what is, and is not, important to you can help you define who you are, and who you want to be within your next relationship. Dating can be exhilarating and stressful. Just remember, there is no rush, even if you are divorced later in life, there is exactly enough time for the important things in your life, including self-rediscovery.

Disclaimer – While this is written about marriage, it applies to long-term committed relationships, whether legally married or not. There are some differences noted in the literature about how those in same-sex relationships respond to conflict and emotional expressiveness, including some qualities of strengths, that are not included here⁶.

⁶ Garanzini, S., Yee, A., Gottman, J., Gottman, J., Cole, C. Jasculca, C. (2017). Results of Gottman Method Couples Therapy with Gay and Lesbian Couples. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*. Vol. 43, Issue 4, October. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12276>

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