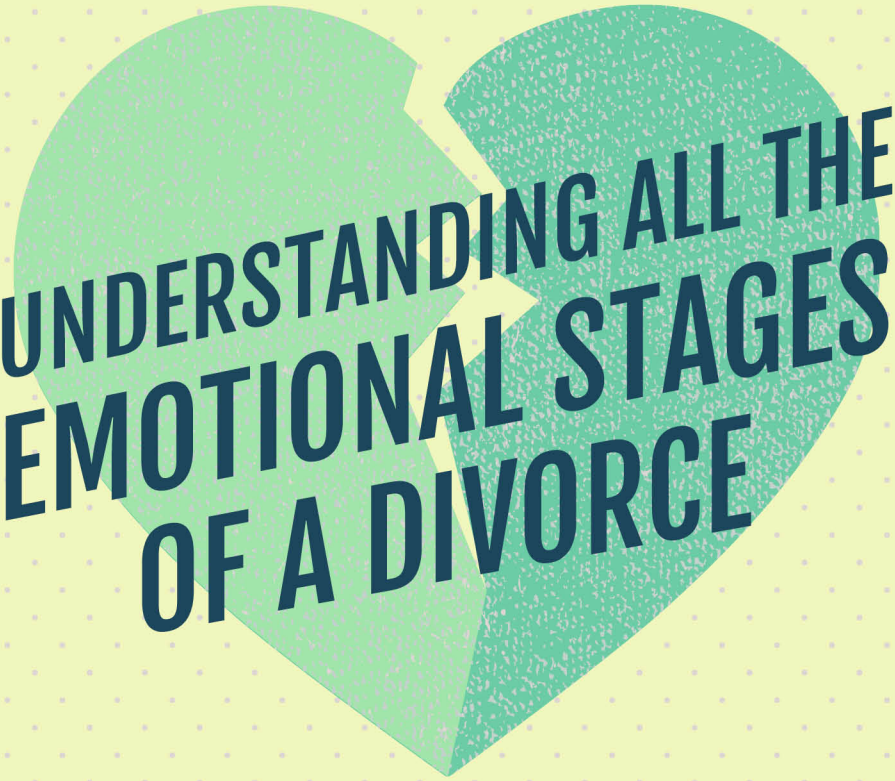
THE AUTHORITATIVE HANDBOOK WITH EXPERT TIPS



UNDERSTANDING ALL THE EMOTIONAL STAGES OF A DIVORCE

HELPING YOU NAVIGATE SUCCESSFULLY THROUGH ALL THE STAGES OF SEPARATION

STEVEN UNRUH, MDIV, LMFT

UNDERSTANDING ALL THE EMOTIONAL STAGES OF A DIVORCE

TRYING TO UNDERSTANDING THE EMOTIONAL STAGES ONE GOES THROUGH IN A DIVORCE?

Maybe you're at the very beginning of your separation, or perhaps you're in the eye of the storm, trying to make heads and tails from the emotional and administrative turbulence you're going through now.

> ***Wherever you're at right now, it's painful, it's uncertain, and you desperately want some sense of comfort.***

You want to know that you, and your family, will get through this. Not only do you need to see that light at the end of the tunnel, but you also need some kind of heads-up on what's to come to make it more bearable to navigate the waves.

I get it, not only as a Licensed Psychotherapist working in divorce mediation but also as someone who has lived through a divorce. Over the years, my work with separating and divorcing couples has shown five distinct emotional stages.

It's tough, but knowing what emotional phases you and your spouse will go through can help you keep your head above water in those emotional waves. It can also help you make better choices, and it can help you ask for the help your family needs - rather than trying to figure this out solo.

In this eBook, I'm going to share the 5 phases I've seen in many of the couples I work with. I hope it will help you make sense of those turbulent emotions you're experiencing and I also hope it'll give you an easier way to navigate your separation process - along with all the important choices you need to make while you're in this uncertain time in your life.

WITH COURAGE AND GRACE, STEVEN D. UNRUH, MDIV, LMFT

HOW LONG WILL EACH PHASE LAST

Before we jump into the five distinct emotional stages that comprise the divorce transition, I think it's important to work through the bigger picture.

All five stages generally take an average of three years, but this just a very generalise average. For some people the period is shorter, while for others, it's much longer and usually spouses aren't in sync at all.

The stages may occur in a specific order, though they may also blend and overlap. Occasionally, someone will also just skips a stage. You have your own time and so does your spouse.

It's important to differentiate between the person who wants the divorce, this person is called the "initiator" spouse, and the person who didn't request a divorce or doesn't want one, the "non-initiator" spouse, because it affects how you work through these phases.

The initiator may experience that first stage of divorce while still living with his or her spouse. Typically, this is not true for the non-initiator spouse.

This individual begins the first stage after hearing of the divorce or after the couple has physically separated.

This difference from the beginning of the transition may cause a big difference in the length of time it takes each person to complete the five stages.

This difference is a significant reason why spouses are usually each at different stages as they progress through the divorce process.

STAGE ONE: BLAMING EACH OTHER

If you're in this phase it's common that you zoom in on your spouse. You'll find that either you or your spouse blame each other for all of the past, present and future problems in your or your spouse's life.

It's pretty much the same for men and women. Although you some partners do carry the responsibility of their actions, you or your spouse will find yourself obsessively preoccupied with your past marital relationship, reliving scenes from earlier years.

During Stage One, it's easy to develop a negative self-image and to be increasingly sensitive and prone to being hurt. You or your spouse may also appear to be depressed or sad much for a significant part of the phase, experiencing a low energy level. Friends and relatives describe may describe you or your spouse as "very upset, because of the divorce" not realising how the possible end of your marriage affects our self-image and future plans.

The characteristics of a person in Stage One will differ depending on whether s/he is the initiator or the non-initiator. The initiator is seeking relief from a very stressful situation. This search for relief, is usually always goes hand-in-hand with the feeling of guilt on making the decision to divorce.

Additional feelings of blame, fear, anger and depression exist but are often masked as s/he tries to act as if nothing were wrong. The non-initiator often describes the initiator as "stubborn" or "going through a stage."

> ***It's important to recognise that sometimes the initiator isn't the individual who's the true "initiator: wanting the divorce. Sometimes a partner can initiate a divorce pre-emptively without being the one to suggest it.***

Here's an example: Tom knew that if he continued his affair with Susan, his wife Barbara would end their marriage. However, he still continued to see Susan, and his wife finally demanded a divorce. Though she is described as the initiator, she is not the one who wanted the divorce.

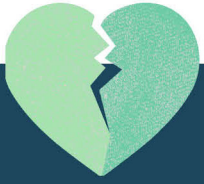
Stage One is often the first time the non-initiator hears that the relationship is over. This is a pretty disorientating period where the individual will experience disbelief, accompanied with a denial of the reality of separation or divorce. This person may also become “divorce opposed,” spending all of their energy trying to stop or block the divorce.

The non-initiator will feel like they have no control concerning over the divorce, making it a really disorientating experience. You can feel helpless and experience an extreme lack of control over big changes in your life.

This might make you, or whoever didn’t truly initiate the divorce, react in one of two extreme ways: either by letting the initiator make all of the decisions in the separation and divorce, or by taking control and attempting to make all of the decisions.

This stage is really one of the most difficult of the emotional stages of divorce simply because it’s the start of such profound changes and significant loss and it’s totally normal to have a overwhelming fear of the unknown. This is your shell period.

It’s important to know, that this is also often a period of diminishing parenting. Both men and women, equally, have the tendency to be too deeply immersed in their own feelings to attend well to the needs of their children.



HOW DIVORCE MEDIATION CAN HELP IN STAGE 1

Mediation allows both parties to take some degree of control over their lives amidst the entire divorce process. The process also helps you with those short-term decisions you have to make right now concerning the physical separation.

MEDIATION CAN HELP YOU WITH:

1. A sense of control
2. Taking away that overwhelming fear of the separation process and the future
3. Structuring the ways you can work through all the admin and info gathering
4. Working out physical separation details
5. Organizing your basic living expenses, living separately to your spouse
6. Bettering your parenting skills during this time
7. To make sense of the emotional chaos: those ambivalent and upsetting feelings

STAGE TWO: MOURNING THE LOSS

This stage can be compared to the general theme of Kubler-Ross's stages of death and dying. The primary focus is acknowledging the end of your relationship. Anyone who has witnessed someone in this stage is struck by their profound grief.

> ***When a person explains, "I just sat and cried for weeks," this is not an exaggeration. The grief feels overwhelming. There is an exaggerated "poor me" attitude. The future looms ahead, hopeless and meaningless.***

Each of us builds our identity through the roles in our life. We each have several roles in our life, which bear varying degrees of importance to us. The various roles of a divorcing woman, for example, may be those of computer programmer, mother, and wife. The importance of a role depends on how much the role was part of your identity.

A client of mine described how she felt as she looked at her mail, addressed to Mrs. Frank Rossi - “that’s not me anymore.”

While in Stage Two, people tend to be overly sensitive to any comments; it’s easy to interprets ambiguous comments as criticism. A second characteristic is an intense preoccupation with your own feelings. You or your spouse may need emotional support, but you may be completely ambivalent on the kind of support you want.

During this time, people have difficulty concentrating on tasks and people may feel totally lost in a world of feelings. Usually parenting still diminishes in this stage, because parents need all of their energy for themselves. It’s also prevalent that parents hold onto a child in an attempt to recapture the separated spouse. Other times parents may behave in a rejecting manner to their child because of perceived similarities between the child and their spouse.

It will be somewhat easier for clients to be in mediation during Stage Two, as both spouses are letting go of the relationship, but in this stage it’s still difficult to make big, long-term decisions.

HOW DIVORCE MEDIATION CAN HELP IN STAGE 2

1. It helps you finish off short-term tasks amidst the storm,
2. It pushed you to overcome your “poor me” attitude
3. It helps you to let go step-by-step, little-by-little
4. It allows you to acknowledge your grief so you don’t jump to into an overwhelming period of anger.
5. It brings the reality of divorce into focus and offers you hope
6. It helps you to structure the ways you can work through all the admin and info gathering

During Stage Two, the positive feelings toward your spouse may surface. This is pretty great, because it serves as a necessary foundation for people to work out what’s best for each of them.

The mediation process allows feelings to be constructively channelled into a framework that is working toward a fair settlement for both you and your spouse.

STAGE THREE: ANGER

"The rage comes from a feeling of being betrayed - by your spouse - by life itself."

Though anger is present at just about every stage of the divorce transition, in this stage it's the dominant trait.

The rage you or your spouse may have is not only upsetting to you, but especially to friends and relatives. Usually anger is most often directed toward the spouse, but it may also be aimed at "all women" or "all men."

There is a sense of righteousness to the anger - that your spouse is wrong and deserves to suffer. A common fantasy during this stage is that the judge will proclaim the spouse the "bad" individual and declare the other as the "wronged" spouse.

If you're a parents this can really be tough on your kids; upsetting them by reacting with sudden and unexpected rage at the mention of your spouse. However, behind the anger there are so many fears. "How will I live alone?" "Will I have enough money to support myself?", "Will I find someone else?"

On the positive side, at this point parenting skills slowly return, because it's easier for both parties to also attend to the needs of their children, where formerly energy was limited.

Also, as your energy level rise much higher, compared to the earlier stages, your self-esteem will also become better. Anger and energy are part of the same cycle, and anger means movement.

This is a good point to be in mediation, because you have the energy to be actively engaged.

HOW DIVORCE MEDIATION CAN HELP IN STAGE 3

1. It helps you and your spouse defuse your anger
2. It helps you direct your energy into specific, needed tasks
3. It enhances your decision-making abilities
4. It provides management to a variety of your tasks
5. It helps you focus on your long-term goals
6. It helps you put reality in perspective

This is also a very dangerous for you or your spouse to be taking part in the adversarial system, because the legal divorce system will leverage you or your spouses anger to get the most out for their clients.

If you hear of a bitter, hotly contested divorce trial, you can be certain that at least one of the spouses is in the "Anger Stage."

Mediation plays a significant role during this stage by defusing the anger. Rather than fuel the fires, it redirects energy by focusing on concrete and specific aspects of the agreements to make sure both parties get solutions that work for them long-term.

STAGE FOUR: BEING SINGLE

> ***This is the stage that the media glamorizes as "second adolescence."***

This is when people start trying out new experiences, frequently. Contrary to popular belief, these experiences are not exclusively sexual.

Often the spouse will be upset to learn that the new activity is something the individual wanted their spouse to share in. For many people, this is the first time in their adult lives that they have been single.

Being single, however, has more to do with making your own decisions than with marital status.

> ***One of the most significant changes in this stage is the growing sense of being a whole person - of not needing the spouse to make him or her complete.***

This is often the phase where people start to trust themselves again, to make their own decisions. In this phase your self-image may really improved much more significantly than compare to the earlier stages.

In this phase, involved parenting also tends to re-establish itself. However, if you're a parent to an adolescent, it may be really challenging. This age group tends to be harshly judgemental of any behavior they see as "immoral" in a parent.

Individuals in this stage are able to make decisions more easily than in the previous stages. The energy level is high in comparison to the earlier stages. This is the ideal time to use mediation, for clients are in a good place to actively take part in negotiations.

HOW DIVORCE MEDIATION CAN HELP IN STAGE 4

1. To better communication between you and your spouse
2. To facilitate co-parenting cooperation
3. To open up the opportunity for a better relationship or better interactions with your spouse
4. To help you in your long-term planning

Stage Four is an ideal time for mediation; primarily due to the positive attitude one has toward change and oneself.

Since the individual is in a relatively good emotional phase, mediation is more efficient and less painful.

Stage Four is an ideal time for mediation; primarily due to the positive attitude one has toward change and oneself. Since the individual is in a relatively good emotional phase, mediation is more efficient and less painful.

STAGE FIVE: RE-ENTRY

Re-entry is the fifth and last stage of the divorce process. This stage of the divorce process is a time of settling down.

> ***If there is a predominant theme during Stage Five, it is the feeling of being okay and settled into a new lifestyle with new possibilities and new challenges.***

At this stage people are involved in a new life. Consequently mediation is quite smooth.

Even when one spouse might still have strong feelings towards his or her spouse - and even though these feelings affect his or her life - there's a level of acceptance that its the end of the marriage.

In this phase, life continues on with a new, or a changed life.

HOW DIVORCE MEDIATION CAN HELP IN STAGE 5

1. To make communication more efficient between spouses
2. To offer more closure
3. To add more emphasis on the future
4. To facilitate painless mediation on any outstanding issues or administration

HAVE ANY QUESTIONS ON DIVORCE'S PHASES OR MEDIATION?

You can email me directly at **stevenunruhmft@gmail.com.**

Or give me a call at **818-523-5723**.

Looking forward to connecting,

Steven D Unruh, MDiv., MFT