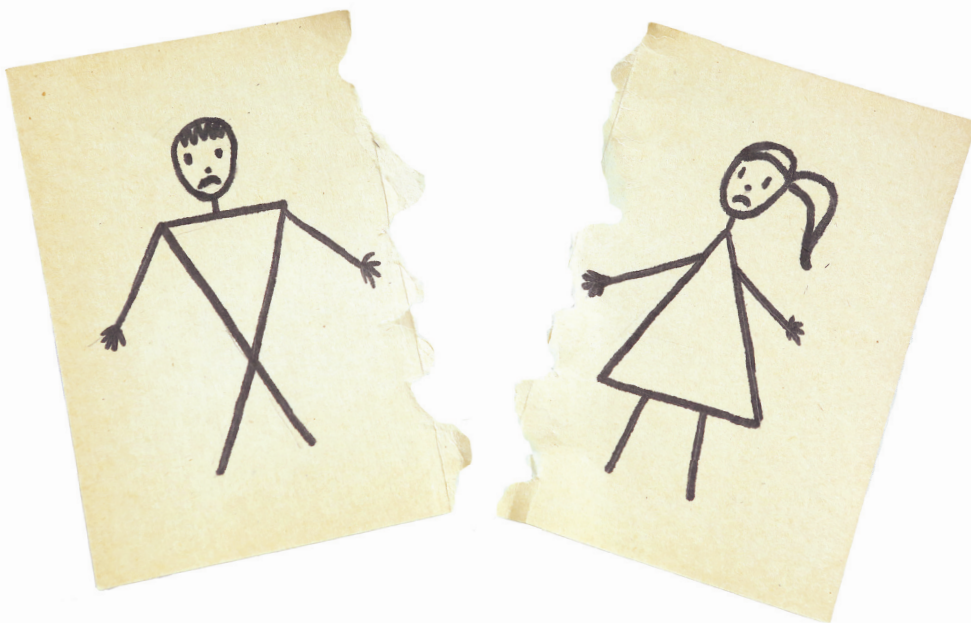


Divorced & Single

Embracing a new beginning



BY MICHELLE KELLEY

Twelve years ago I was divorced. I want to share what I have learned from my own experience and what countless women have shared with me. My hope is that we can start to talk about divorce (or separation) and being single without shame or guilt, but rather with strength, clarity, and courage.

Here's what I know:

- ... In general, women feel very responsible for keeping relationships and families together.
- ... Some women can tolerate a lot of dysfunction, emotional pain, and abuse in a relationship.
- ... Some women make a lot of excuses for bad behavior. Some examples of bad behavior include excessive drinking, abuse (physical, verbal, and emotional), or pornography involvement. Women struggle with feelings of shame and guilt, especially when it comes to their marriage ending.

... Some women lack healthy boundaries in relationships and often struggle with where to draw the line in their marriage. They will accept a thousand excuses, wanting to believe “this time it will be different.”

Whether it is you or your spouse that has chosen to end your marriage, divorce is often shocking, painful and life-changing. However, this does not have to be an ending for you, but the beginning of your new story.

The Challenge

It's time to get real about relationships, about marriage, and about divorce or separation. They're complicated! Unfortunately marriage does not come with a handbook (though perhaps it should). Instead the focus is on the wedding, the honeymoon, or the “happily ever after.”

Why do we pretend marriage problems don't exist? Why do we talk about marriage issues or our marriages ending in a hush-hush sort of way? Is

it because there is a stigma attached to being divorced or being single? Is it because women are supposed to be able to fix dysfunctional people and broken marriages? Is it because we care too much about what others will think (as was my problem)?

Furthermore, why aren't we talking to our children about how challenging all relationships can be? Why aren't we giving our children the tools they need to stand strong in all of their relationships, including marriage?

These tools include knowing what constitutes “inappropriate behavior” and where to draw the line when it occurs, knowing how to speak up and communicate clearly, and knowing how to ask for help and change without guilt.

Bottom line is that many marriages end. I have heard countless women express to me that their marriage “failed.” It pains me to hear this. I will always ask a woman if she learned something about herself, her spouse, or her relationships. If she says “yes,” then I ask how her marriage ending could be viewed as a failure. Failure implies guilt and shame. Women are especially susceptible to these emotions — which are toxic to our health.

You may need to redefine the meaning of failure for yourself. Marriages end for a



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million different reasons, contrary to what you might hear stated in a courtroom (irreconcilable differences, abandonment, infidelity).

The First Stages

If your marriage has ended or is ending, I want you to know that the pain, anger and confusion you may be feeling is normal. The five stages of grief as identified by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) also apply to a divorce, which is a type of death; an ending, a loss. These stages can be experienced in any order and at any time in your life. Viewing divorce as a process (not just a decision) will help you to get on and stay on your healing path.

For many, the ending of a relationship occurs long before a divorce is final or even before a separation takes place. This can create the illusion that you did not grieve the ending or maybe you never loved. It would be nice if people we encounter did not jump to conclusions.

After the Divorce or Separation

Life goes on. You will still get up in the morning and brush your teeth. The sun still rises in the east. The dog will need to go out. The cat needs to come in. The kids need to eat. Beyond that, how will you handle the ending of your marriage (i.e. the beginning of your new life)?

A. You can curl up into a ball and stop living.

B. You can blame the other person and be consumed with anger.

C. You can blame yourself and live with endless amounts of guilt and shame.

D. You can accept the change, get personal and professional support, and decide how you want to grow from the experience.

The answer is D, although answers A, B and C are okay on a temporary basis.

Why is it so important to learn and grow from divorce? First, we want to be a positive role model for our children and others, showing that we can successfully deal with relationships ending. Second, we do not want to keep making the same mistakes in future relationships.

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This is where the healing part comes in. You will need to take time to honor and understand your feelings, to reflect on your part in the marriage and in its ending, and to prepare for change and a new future. In other words, it's up to you to learn and grow from your divorce. What I learned is that I am more capable than I thought. I learned to use my voice. I learned to set boundaries. I learned how to ask for change. I already knew how to compromise (maybe to a fault).

Judgment Free Zone

Why do so many women jump into a new relationship soon after divorcing? Possibilities include:

... It's too painful to be alone.

... They don't know how to be on their own.

... They can't make it financially (I get this).

... They are love-dependent (in other words, they cannot exist outside of a romantic relationship).

If you fall into one of the above categories, it is because you are human and your particular life experiences have made it difficult for you to be on

your own. I want you to accept reality, embrace change, seek support, and welcome personal growth.

More women, like myself, are choosing to be single and fighting the stigma attached to it. It is possible to live a full and rewarding life as a single person. I have never felt as if I was half a person looking for my other half. I have been divorced and currently I am enjoying being single, being a business owner and a mother. I don't know what my future holds and I don't need to know. I am happy with my life!

It's interesting how the pressure to be in a relationship starts as early as elementary school and maybe never ends. It's fine to be in a relationship and it's fine *not* be in a relationship. I don't like how judgmental many can be when it comes to divorce, being single, or remarriage. My wish is that people would stop making assumptions that everyone who is single wants to be in a relationship.

Advice For Divorced Women

Focus on your own mental health.

Take care of yourself; it is not selfish, it is necessary. Be present with your children. Listen to their feelings; they are hurting too. Learn to have age-appropriate conversations with your kids about divorce, endings, and embracing change. Find your voice! Know it's OKAY to be single! Share your story and accept support.

Try something new in your life.

Be brave. I believe that marriage is the outer form of a relationship. I prefer to focus on the inner form — the person or persons involved. My work focuses on helping women heal and grow from all life experiences, especially divorce. Long after a divorce has been finalized, healing, growth and change will still occur in a person and in a relationship.

If you find yourself single, take a breath and know that you will survive. You may even THRIVE. ❖