

Gray divorces and the family: Divorce hurts children of all ages, even when they're grown

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Are you contemplating divorce after being married 20 years or more? You aren't alone. In fact, you are part of what some call the gray divorce revolution.

When Al and Tipper Gore announced their divorce, after what appeared to be a long and loving marriage, it shook our beliefs about the sanctity of marriage. If it could happen to them, it could happen to us!



Al and Tipper Gore on their wedding day in 1970. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

While divorce rates in general have been leveling out since 1980, seekers of divorce after long-term marriages of 20 years or more have been increasing. Among people aged 50 and older, the divorce rate has doubled over the past two decades.

One reason for the increased rates: we live much longer than we used to. In previous generations some of these longer-term marriages that end in divorce would have ended in death.

When my friend Dorothy, told me she was getting a divorce after 45 years of marriage, I asked her “why now?” at age 70, she had come to that decision. Her answer: “I woke up on my 70th birthday and thought, ‘I may have another 20 years or more to live, and I don’t want to live it in this cold and empty marriage.’”

About two-thirds of all divorces are initiated by women and this holds true for mid and later life divorces. An AARP survey on mid and older life divorces found that one in four of those who divorced cited infidelity as one of their top three reasons for seeking a divorce, also the same estimate in the general population.

I commonly hear from mid and later life divorcing couples “We wanted to wait until the until the children are grown.” How old do the children have to be before they are considered grown? A common joke in the legal community goes like this: A couple in their 90s appeared before a judge requesting a divorce after 70 years of marriage. When the judge asked the couple, “why now? They answered, “We wanted to wait until the children were dead.”

Kidding aside, parents often believe if they wait until the children are grown, their divorce will not damage them. There are no custody or child support issues, nor do the children have to transition back and forth between parents. Although this is true, it does not mean that adult children—and grandchildren—aren’t impacted by divorce in the older generation.

Unlike divorce in earlier life stages when considerable thought and planning go in to how parents will continue to parent, in a gray divorce the adult children are almost invisible in the process.

We know when parents embroil their children in their conflicts, this distresses younger children. But it is just as important that parents in mid and later life consider the effect on grown children.

With adult children, divorcing parents are even more likely to embroil the children in their conflicts by turning to them for advice and sharing issues about the breakdown of the marriage or the intricacies of their divorce settlement. Adult children are often expected to take sides or take care of a parent that is not coping well with the divorce.

Long held family rituals may become impacted. If we always spent Christmas together as a family, will we continue to do so after a divorce? What about that annual family vacation? If Jane is in college, will she stay with her mother or her father during school break? How will she decide without favoring one parent over the other? When a grandchild is having a birthday celebration, will both grandparents be invited?

Adult children do experience distress when their parents' long-term marriage comes to an end. The adult children I speak to often express that they haven't been heard. They don't know why their parents are divorcing. They are angry about their parents disrupting their lives. One 30-year old woman tearfully told me about her parents' divorce, "I always thought they had a good marriage and now I find out they didn't. I always thought my childhood was happy, but was it, really?"

Collaborative divorce can go a long way toward addressing these concerns with gray divorces. In collaborative divorce, a couple works with a team, which is comprised of lawyers, mental health professionals, and often a financial specialist, who help them navigate their divorce in a respectful and healthy manner. It is common for each spouse to have his/her own divorce coach, and for minor children to be assigned a child specialist coach.

When adult children are involved, both coaches and/or a family specialist may meet with whole family to help them determine how their family will continue after the divorce.

Divorcing parents at this stage still have the responsibility to establish some rules for how the family will preserve its bonds with the least amount of distress for all. Rather than leave it to the kids to decide which parent will attend what, or which holidays will be spent with which parent, the parents need to decide if they are able to share these treasured times. If not, they need to decide a fair way to divide their family participation and let the kids know.

A gray divorce can disturb the foundation of the extended family. Every member feels the fall-out. It is important to acknowledge the impact on all generations and work with the family as a whole to minimize the negative impact across the generations.

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