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Family Focus

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"Your Ex is not your child's Ex ... and they love your ex just as much as they did before." - DK Simoneau

More often than not, there is hurt and anger, and sometimes rage, when couples are divorcing. Instead of being a peaceful, mutually agreeable decision, divorce is typically alienating. Usually one or both partners experience rejection, and sometimes there is another party involved.

Here are two scenarios from my therapy practice, with names and identifying information changed:

Donna, age 54, married for 29 years with three adult children, is fed up with her very controlling, unaffectionate husband. She has suffered from depression and low self-esteem throughout the marriage. Her husband refused to go to couples counseling. Donna meets someone online who lives several states away, and they engage in an emotional affair. Several months later, they meet up and begin a physical affair. Donna and her lover decide they want to live together, and Donna enters therapy to deal with all the collateral damage after she has told her husband and children. Her husband is enraged, has banned Donna

from the house and changed the locks and security system, and has transferred all of their financial accounts. Her children are siding with their father and won't speak to Donna.

Matt, age 44, married for 18 years with two children, ages 10 and 13, has an affair with a co-worker. He's not ready to commit to her, but the affair and how he feels make him realize he wants to move out and live alone for a while. He's confused about how he feels about his wife and his marriage. Matt's wife, Becky, is terribly wounded and they come in for couples therapy. The more Becky rages at Matt, the more withdrawn he becomes, certain he is making the right decision. And Becky is not restrained in letting friends and family, including their children, know, how deceptive and manipulative Matt has been.

Each of these couples is in crisis. And each husband and wife is understandably distraught as their relationship becomes unraveled.

Do's:

1) If you are the person who is disrupting your family, whether or not your children are grown, and whether or not you have huge justification for leaving the marriage, it is important to apologize to your children. You don't need to take full responsibility, but it is important to let them know that you are sorry you and your spouse couldn't make your relationship work. Let them know you tried hard, without providing details. It is a good idea to show remorse repeatedly over a period of time.

Even though Donna struggled a lot in her marriage and tried very hard to address the issues with her husband that upset her, she was the perpetrator in dissolving the marriage. Her children didn't know the marriage was in trouble because Donna and her husband had always presented a united facade to them and to their community. So the adult children only had the surface situation to consider. They concluded that their father was deeply hurt and was being abandoned, and that their mother was selfishly pursuing her own interests.

After many months with Donna expressing regret and remorse, two of her three children were willing to resume limited contact with her. It was a start, and Donna hoped the relationships would continue to heal over time and that her third child would eventually also allow her to be a part of his life.

2) Listen. Let your children know that it won't upset you to talk about the divorce, and that it actually helps you. Encourage your children to express their feelings, most of which will probably be negative ones. Don't become defensive when they do. Just listen, don't talk much, and show empathy and compassion.

3) Be sure there are other adults your children can confide in since they may be unwilling to talk to you or your ex. See if there is a family member or another close adult they could talk to and trust with their feelings. If not, find a licensed therapist who works with similarly aged children.

4) Try as hard as you can to maintain a civil relationship with your children's other parent. Think of your children first while trying to set aside your own anger, hurt, disappointment, and other difficult feelings. Not only will your children benefit from a harmonious relationship between you and your ex, but they will respect you both for providing this for them. Children become hurt, confused, and often completely turned off by parents' behavior towards each other. If you know you have conducted yourself well, your children will have a much better chance of escaping damaging effects from a parental divorce.

5) Avoid disparaging your ex to your children. Avoid providing them with details about your marriage and divorce. In her rage, Becky was causing harm to her children by disclosing private, negative information about their father to them.

6) Make changes as gradually as possible, and let your children know what to expect. Sudden change without warning heightens anxiety in children. If you need to move out of the family home, try to relocate in the same community to maintain stability for them in this way. Let them know when they will be with each parent and where.

7) If at all possible, consider "nesting," where after a divorce the kids continue to stay in the family home while the parents take turns moving in and out. Some exes share an apartment close by, taking turns being there and being in the family home with the children. If they can afford it, some parents get their own separate housing and then take turns in the family home.

The next Family Focus column will suggest some "don'ts" for the divorce process.

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