

Is There Any Such Thing as a 'Good Divorce'?

If you ever want to get an interesting—sometimes shocking—glimpse of today's culture, try reading the advice columns that populate many of the nation's newspapers. A [letter to Slate's "Dear Prudence" column](#) caught my eye today.

The letter writer explained that a friend ("Chrissy") in her late 30s was still dealing with the effects of her parents' divorce, roughly 25 years after it had happened. Chrissy's "heart was irrevocably broken, and she lost all trust in relationships," which, of course, made the idea of a long-term commitment difficult for her to navigate.

The writer of this letter, also a child of divorce, expressed her disgust at Chrissy for not moving on emotionally. She said that Chrissy's home had been a loving one and that the divorce had been amicable, while her own home had been abusive and the divorce had been messy. Prudence responded that it is indeed time for Chrissy to get over her parents' divorce, and furthermore, that continuing a friendship with Chrissy would be toxic for the writer.

It's likely true that Chrissy needs some help processing and accepting her parents' divorce, but those who callously dismiss her "stuckness" are just ignoring the lifelong trauma that divorce can bring to a child's life. I can't help but wonder: how many of the problems that we see in society today—hookups, single parenthood, children and teens with psychological problems, anger and rage, etc.—have their roots in the divorce mindset (and practice) that permeates our society?

I can almost hear in response the usual talking points about how amicable divorces aren't harmful to children, or how

children who are in rough homes are better off when their parents divorce. But I wonder if that is really true.

According to Leila Miller, children of divorce—even so-called good divorces—have many untold stories. She tells these stories in her book [*Primal Loss: The Now-Adult Children of Divorce Speak*](#). In talking to these people, [Miller found](#) that many are besieged by unsettling feelings, feelings that they often hide from their parents, who have enough of their own baggage to deal with. Parents may eventually move on from their first marriage, but children have a much more difficult time, as the divorce erases part of their own history and sense of place, particularly as many children of divorce live like vagabonds, traveling back and forth from one home to another.

Fear of abandonment and difficulty navigating future relationships is another problem that children of divorce encounter. As one middle-aged woman [told Miller](#):

I believe [the divorce] instilled a fear of abandonment in me with regard to all of my relationships. I developed problems trusting people to be there for me, believing that when the going got rough, people would leave me. I never learned any skills for solving conflict in relationships. As much as I desperately craved intimacy and love, the closer someone came to me, the more terrified I was of getting hurt, or worse—abandoned. I unconsciously sabotaged relationships, as I didn't know how to receive and accept real love ...

Perhaps the struggles of Chrissy, in the “Dear Prudence” letter, are more legitimate than her irritated friend was able to see.

Unfortunately, Miller’s findings aren’t outliers. Elizabeth Marquardt, herself a child of divorce, presents similar views in her book [*Between Two Worlds*](#). She tries to bust the myth of a “good divorce” such as Chrissy’s parents had. “Advocates of

the ‘good divorce,’” she writes, “refuse to recognize that our childhoods were dominated by frequent sad departures.” Endure that for any amount of time as a child, and you might soon become calloused and removed from the world. That or just an emotional wreck.

The work of Miller and Marquardt might seem strange. After all, divorce is nothing new. We’ve lived with it for ages, and family breakups are a dime a dozen—over [630,000 divorces were reported](#) by the CDC in 2020 alone.

But that’s exactly why we need to talk about it. We’ve become far too comfortable with divorce, and we don’t speak out against it for fear of stepping on toes. But we shouldn’t be silent, because the fallout of divorce affects all of us, even those who come from intact families. Because divorce is so prevalent, everyone has multiple friends and contacts who are children of divorce, and thus everyone encounters the associated difficulties: the fear, the abandonment, the displacement, the inability to deal with feelings that have followed these poor children into adulthood.

Years ago, some relatives of mine went through a divorce that threw their children into the displacement and confusion that come with parental separation. In recent years, the effects of that divorce have been playing out in those children as they try to navigate their adult lives. Seeing this turmoil, their mother sadly said, “If I had known what my divorce would do to my children, I never would have done it.”

Would that we could all have the same epiphany.

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