

Divorce As a Process Over Time

by [Joseph Shaub](#)

A wide number of authorities have noted that the decision to divorce is usually unilateral in nature. While the parties might come to the conclusion that the decision is mutual, most often it is one spouse who will withdraw emotionally from the marriage before the other. Bruce Fisher, in his excellent volume on divorce recovery entitled *Rebuilding*, Impact Publishing (1992), refers to the roles as “dumper” and “dumpee.” As Fisher notes,

“Dumpers end the love relationship, while dumpees have it ended for them. The adjustment process differs since dumpers feel more guilt and dumpees feel more rejection. Dumpers start their adjustment while still in the love relationship, but dumpees start adjusting later.”

Karen Somary and Robert Emery have noted that the grief experienced by the dumpee over the end of a marriage is similar to that experienced when a loved one dies suddenly. The grief of the dumper is similar to that experienced when a loved one dies after a prolonged illness. (“Emotional Anger and Grief in Divorce Mediation”, 8 *Med. Q.* 185 (1991).

In Fisher’s divorce recovery classes, about half stated they were dumpees, a third state they were dumpers and the remaining sixth claimed that the decision was mutual. As Fisher notes, “Theoretically, there would be an equal number of dumpers and dumpees in society. However, in some situations, one person feels like a dumpee and the other person feels it was a mutual decision.”

Fisher continues,

“The divorce process is different in many ways for dumpers and dumpees. My research with the *Fisher Divorce Adjustment Scale* indicates that dumpees experience more emotional pain at the point of separation, especially in the areas of letting go and anger. However, if dumpers’ pain could be measured while they were still in the love relationship, I am certain they would show more emotional pain than the dumpees. The dumpers began to let go before they left the relationship, so they have been able to back off from being lovers to being friends with the dumpees. The dumpee, however, is usually still deeply in love with the dumper when the relationship ends.”

Whichever role one relates to, in the words of Abigail Trafford in *Crazy Time*, Harper Perennial (1992), divorce “is a savage emotional journey.” Her “crazy time” is described as follows:

“It starts when you separate and usually lasts about two years. It’s a time when your emotions take on a life of their own and you swing back and forth between wild euphoria and violent anger, ambivalence and deep depression, extreme timidity and rash actions. You are not yourself. Who are you? At times you don’t want to know. You think about going on a sex binge and fucking anything that moves. Or you lie very still in bed, your muscles tense, your breathing shallow, your imaginings as dark and lonely as the night.

Then at the height of Crazy Time, you may get a reprieve. You fall in love - a *coup de foudre* - and the block of lead in your chest miraculously melts; you can’t believe it, you laugh, you dance. You know it’s too soon, too much like jumping into a lifeboat that you know leaks and has no oars. but you smile, feeling so good after feeling so bad for so long. Therapists call this the search for the romantic solution. But it’s usually not a solution. You crash... Now you’re really scared.

There seems to be no end to this wild swinging back and forth. You can't believe how bad your life is, how terrible you feel, how overwhelming daily tasks become, how frightened you are; about money, your health, your sanity. You can't believe that life is worse now than when you broke up. You thought you were at the end of your rope then.

In all the feel-good rhetoric about divorce being a growth opportunity for the new super you, nobody tells you about Crazy Time. Yet this is usually the very painful transition period you have to go through before you can establish a new life for yourself. It's equivalent to the mourning period after death and catastrophe."

Trafford estimates that this period, lasting two years or more is at its most intense for about six months, right after physical separation. Constance Ahrons and Roy Rodgers, concurred, making the following observations in their study, *Divorced Families - Meeting the Challenges of Divorce and Remarriage*, Norton (1987):

"This early stage of separation plunges the individual into an intense state of emotional and social *anomie* - literally, normlessness. Old roles have disappeared, but new ones have not yet developed. Anomie comes in several forms. There may be no definition of a particular situation available. "How am I supposed to act or feel about this?" Or there may be competing or conflicting definitions of the situation which require the individual to make a choice. "Should I do (or feel) this or should I do (or feel) that?" Finally, the definition of the situation may be unclear. "What is happening? What is this all about?"

There are no clear-cut rules for the separating. Who moves out? How often should the partners continue to see each other? When should you tell family and friends? Should you tell your child's teacher? Who should attend the school conference scheduled for next week? What about the season's tickets for the concert series? These types of questions, seemingly trivial in our everyday life, plague the newly separated.

Most frequently the situation poses itself before the individuals have had the opportunity to figure out their individual or collaborative answers. A mother may decide unilaterally to attend the school conference meeting alone; father may not even find out about the meeting until several days later. He may feel left out of his child's life and react with anger at his wife for excluding him. This sequence of events could begin a long angry battle between spouses, as each tries to assert parental rights; or more positively, it could open a discussion in which the parents could make some mutual decisions about how they will handle this type of event in the future.

In addition to the lack of rules for behaving, this period is also characterized by highly ambivalent feelings. Much of the emotional distress found in the early phases of separation is caused by the continuing bonds of attachment between former spouses....The fact that one may choose to leave one's mate does not negate the longing for the comfort of the other's presence or their daily interactions. This comes as quite a surprise to many who fantasize only relief and positive feelings when their mate was finally gone. They are confused and upset when their feelings vacillate between love and hate, anger and sadness, euphoria and depression. In spite of strong negative emotions, the old habitual attachment persists. Absent spouses are "missed." Partners feel "lonely."..."

A point raised by Ahrons and Rodgers, and repeated by other authorities, is the felt need to overcome this ambivalence and attachment by pushing the other spouse away, for fear that any positive

interaction will soften their resolve to terminate the marriage. This is entirely predictable during the early separation phase.

As we can see, the separation crisis will bring on a whole range of conduct which might be easily interpreted by the other spouse as evidencing hostility and aggressiveness - a desire to harm and to diminish. What is actually being expressed in many cases is confusion, fear, grief and the deepest anxiety. Again, Ahrons and Rodgers provide valuable insight to the impact, for better or worse, of attorneys' conduct.

A note needs to be made here about the impact of the legal system on the separation process. The separating spouses may interact with the legal system any time from pre-separation through late separation. But when they do, it can alter the separation process considerably. Much will depend, however, on which attorney and which method of dispute resolution the separating spouses choose. Although nearly all states now have no-fault legislation, the process of reaching an agreement on financial and custody issues is still usually resolved in an adversarial process. When the adversarial process interacts with the other processes of separating, it can increase the distress by adding an additional stressor to an already burdened system. It can cause the separating partners to cease communicating with each other and to continue their negotiations through their lawyers. In high conflict relationships this may be beneficial and even speed up the separation process. In other cases it can be detrimental, creating even more anger and conflict than was already present in the system."

Noted divorce mediator and professor of conflict resolution, John Haynes, Ph.D. in his book, *Divorce Mediation - A Practical Guide for Therapists and Counselors*, Springer Publishing (1981) views the transition period in a somewhat similar fashion, moving through **four phases**:

The **Deliberation Phase**; The **Litigation Phase**; The **Transition Phase** and the **Redirection Phase** - the latter two phases are worth noting for their specific procedural clues to when the post separation transition has culminated.

TRANSITION (Occurs in the 6 month - 2 year period after separation)

This period includes a time of "nuttness".

This period is rarely developmentally stable.

The therapist/mediator needs to repeat ideas frequently.

The transition period follows the physical separation.

The therapist's goals during this period should be to assist the parties in developing an emotional divorce.

A primary transition is from attachment to detachment.

You know *detachment* is taking place when:

1. Clients can admit publicly that they are divorced.
2. There is a clear physical separation from the ex-partner.
3. There is absolutely no sex with the ex-partner.

4. The couple can discard joint belongings.
5. The parties can develop new romantic interests.
6. The couple can form a new social network.
7. The couple are changing their roles with the ex-partner.
8. The couple can complete unfinished business of issues in the marriage that angered, hurt, or disappointed them, but which they were never able to express to the other person.

1. **REDIRECTION**

This period is marked by different choices being made independently.

Signs of Redirection include:

1. People begin by gaining mastery over things they historically disliked doing and always left to the marriage partner.
2. The client no longer fantasizes about sex with the ex-partner on a regular basis.
3. The client can accept the former partner's remarriage with a workable sense of being able to live with it.
4. The client can define him/herself as not only financially okay but also financially secure.
5. The client is no longer bitter toward all of the opposite sex.
6. The client reestablishes a normal sexual pattern.
7. The client no longer overreacts to "trigger" items of the immediate post-divorce period.

The above discussion provides a general description of the *process* of divorce recovery that practitioners may anticipate for their clients. We will now turn to more specific observations from Wallerstein and Hetherington, among others, regarding the experiences of the divorcing parties, themselves.