

Midlife divorce: Blame it on your parents?

Your parents' divorce might be setting the stage for your own.

By: Deborah Moskovitch



Shannon*, a 48 year old client of mine, recently explained her “aha” moment when discussing the issues behind her impending divorce. She married her husband because he “completed” her – masking low self-esteem and feelings of not being worthy of love.

It wasn't until after therapy and introspection that she realized she had fallen into a relationship trap: Trying to fill a void of lost love left by her parents' divorce, and the loss of a relationship with her mother, when she was just 5.

Seeking a rescue, not a relationship

Shannon considered her husband a real catch. She thought her knight in shining armor cared about her every move. He guided her through life, managed the finances and left all aspects of parenting to her.

In fact, this perfect partner repeated the patterns and disillusionments experienced in childhood. Shannon experienced controlling and emotionally abusive behavior, jealousy and an uninvolved husband. She felt this was ok: She'd grown up fearing abandonment and deflecting anger from her stepmother.

You see, when Shannon's parents divorced, her mother left, with what seemed like no concern for her (the truth revealed many years later in adulthood when she regained a relationship with her mother); her father remarried, but this union did not provide her with the love and nurturing she so desperately needed. What happened in childhood then, has a significant impact on how romantic relationships are handled now, as an adult.

Although many children are resilient, and grow up thinking of themselves as just regular kids, not children of divorce, there are some children who are impacted emotionally in the long term. When a parent abandons a child, that child often believes that there was something wrong with him- or herself – and carries this belief into adulthood.

While the lack of a relationship with a parent can have a significant impact on romantic relationships for a child later in life, there is a debate amongst researchers on this topic. Some say, these individuals are affected for life. Others

feel that with work, an individual can learn to come to terms with it, heal and develop rich and successful romantic partnerships.

According to Dr. Michelle Mitcham (<http://www.michellemitcham.com/>), a professor of counselling and a divorce expert, an individual's self esteem is affected because they feel rejected. The loss of the parental relationship due to divorce results in a lack of trust.

“People have different cognitions [beliefs], and this leaves certain behaviors. If your cognition is on some level, I'm a bad person, or I'm not worthy, or at some level there is something that you think you did to deserve it, the lines get blurred. What messages are you giving yourself, even if they are subliminal?”

Dr. Mitcham helps her patients regain their self-esteem and trust, so that they are able to develop a positive outlook, and healthy romantic relationships. She helps her patients cope with the loss of a parent or a fragmented relationship with the parent, and to heal by working on these 5 significant messages.

1. Look to your family of origin for answers.

It is important to resolve any issues that could be playing out in your relationship and are undermining it. For instance, people get into a relationship looking for things that they were missing growing up. If the relationship looks attractive, individuals may leap into it hoping for nurturing and love for themselves without taking the time to really get to know the other person. Slow down and get to know prospective partners.

2. Stop repeating the same relationship mistakes.

People often marry, or get into a relationship for all the wrong reasons. They are looking to feel complete, because they haven't resolved things in the past. Many times, they don't feel that they are worthy. Then they find themselves in an unfulfilling relationship, not really sure why they are giving into that relationship. Figure out what you are looking for, and love yourself – you are worthy of love and respect, and worthy of a healthy relationship.

3. You don't have to be less of who you are to be in a good relationship.

Write out the ideal relationship: What you need in someone that you are compatible with. You'll know that you are leaning towards a good relationship when you don't have to be less of who you are in that relationship. You have to feel complete and feel like you have to stand on your own two feet before you can be happy in that relationship. The other person doesn't complete you because they are not the answer to your unresolved issues.

4. Normalize your feelings.

Uncover your issues and find out what you didn't receive growing up. Then you can fix it and move forward, because you understand the why, and how this changes your reactions. Remember you're not alone: Other people feel this way too..

5. Develop introspection and understanding.

You might want to work with a therapist or do some journaling to help you think through the issues, and what you need to do to fix them. Bottom line is you need to know that you are worthy of love and worthy of a nurturing relationship, and figure out what exactly that looks like to you.

If you rush into a relationship without understanding where you were, then you won't know where you are going. Take time to understand what you have been through and why. There is hard work that needs to be done. While you may have lost a close loving relationship with a parent, you need to come to terms with that, and develop a loving relationship with yourself.

When you move in a positive direction from what you are used to, you very likely will feel some anxiety. Embrace it. It may sound clichéd but it's true: You have to truly love yourself, before you can really love someone else.

* the name has been changed.

Divorce can be emotionally and psychologically challenging. But once it's done, consider these [5 steps to post-divorce happiness](http://www.more.ca/relationships/single-life/5-steps-to-post-divorce-happiness/a/1638) (<http://www.more.ca/relationships/single-life/5-steps-to-post-divorce-happiness/a/1638>). Know that you're not alone. Divorce consultant Deborah Moskovitch talks about five lessons she learned while battling her own divorce in [After divorce: Happier, stronger you](http://www.more.ca/relationships/single-life/after-divorce-happier-stronger-you/a/21185/2) (<http://www.more.ca/relationships/single-life/after-divorce-happier-stronger-you/a/21185/2>).

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