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DIVORCE AND BEYOND

Greteman, Haverkamp and Radtke

Divorce and Beyond
*A Workbook
for Recovery and Healing*

**James Greteman
Leon Haverkamp**

Revised by
Elsie P. Radtke



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Divorce and Beyond
A Workbook for Recovery and Healing

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Edited by Todd J. Behme and Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Cover design by Tom A. Wright
Typesetting by Desktop Edit Shop, Inc.
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Creative Divorce by M. Krantzler (New American Library, 1973)
Divorce and After by P. Bohannon (Doubleday, 1971)
Growing through Divorce by J. Smoke (Harvest House Publishers, 1976)
Help It All Makes Sense, Lord! by E. Witt (Concordia Publishing
House, 1972)
How to Get Angry without Feeling Guilty by A. Bry (Signet Books, 1976)
Mom's House, Dad's House by I. Ricci (McMillan Publishing Co., 1980)
The Pain of Being Human by E. Kennedy (Image Books, 1972)
Psycho-Cybernetics by M. Maltz (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969)
Rebel, O Jews! by M. Fisher (Reconstructionist Press, 1973)
The Social Readjustment Rating Scale by T. Holmes and R. Rahe
(Journal of Psychosomatic Research, Vol. II, 1967)
Traits of a Healthy Spirituality by M. Svoboda (Twenty-Third
Publications, 1996)

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Previously published ACTA Publications, 1983, 2004

9109

ISBN: 978-1-64121-073-7

Printed in the United States of America

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Foreword

For a tree there is always hope.
Chop it down and it still has a chance—
Its roots can put out fresh sprouts.
Even if its roots are old and gnarled,
Its stump long dormant,
At the first whiff of water it comes to life,
Buds and grows like a sapling.

Job 14:7-9

One of the greatest mysteries of life is that both suffering and joy often come completely unforeseen. For those of us who marry, for example, we seldom do so with the expectation that one day our marriage will end. We are confident we will be able to work out whatever differences and conflicts may arise. Too often we are sadly disillusioned. I can recall myself in the first years of marriage thinking: “What’s wrong with those people who are getting divorced? Why don’t they just work it out? They loved each other enough to commit to one another, yet now they are divorcing.” Yet after eighteen years of marriage and four children, I found that my own marriage was ending. I was one of “them.”

Divorce does not happen in a courtroom. It begins long before two people decide they can’t work it out or one of the partners decides to leave. And the process, or the uncoupling, usually continues long after the judge issues the decree. This is why I use the term “divorcing”—to emphasize the process. A legal decree does not automatically bring emotional and psychological divorce. We are truly divorced only when we finally let go of our marriage, mourn our loss, and adjust ourselves to our new life. At the end of this process, it is not unusual for people to feel stronger and happier than ever before. What started out as the worst experience in the world transforms into a blessing of life. But this occurs only when we do the work that needs to be done.

Perhaps the best teachers of what is involved in this work are other people who have gone or are going through a divorce. Participants in divorce recovery programs such as *Divorce and Beyond* commonly ex-

perience hope and healing simply by listening and sharing experiences and insights with others who are able to avoid giving advice and pronouncing judgments. Even if you are seeing a therapist one-on-one, a group setting can help you by showing you that others are experiencing similar feelings. You are not alone in this experience. This program is an opportunity to build a network of friends who accept where you are at this point in your life.

Many of us divorced people often feel guilt and shame at not being able to keep our marriage intact. We may feel a sense of failure in not living out our wedding vows, and for many of us it is painful to see other families together in church, to the point where we avoid going to church ourselves. But divorce does not mean we are not holy or worthy of God's love. We are still a part of our own family and the family that is the Church, even if we are living alone or with our young children. As you continue through this program, take advantage of the sacraments frequently, and spend time in prayer. Ponder Christ's life. He knows what it means to be human. Your strength will come from him.

I have spent sixteen years working with divorced and divorcing people, leading many groups through this book. I am confident that this revised version of *Divorce and Beyond* will be a helpful guide for you, allowing you to apply to your own life the graces earned by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and helping you view the end of your marriage as God's calling to discover the person he created you to be.

Irene Varley

Executive Director

North American Conference of Separated and Divorced Catholics

Introduction

Divorce *is* painful, often shatteringly so. I know because I have been through it myself. Though the trauma is intense, divorce need not be the end of our productive and fulfilling life. It becomes an unmitigated tragedy only if we fail to learn something from it about ourselves and about relationships.

Even as we grow from our divorce, however, it still causes much grief. Here are some general truths about grief to consider, adapted from *The New Day Journal* by Sr. Maureen O'Brien:

- Grief is a normal and natural reaction to any significant loss.
- Few of us are prepared for the long journey of grief.
- No two people grieve the same way.
- In order to move beyond your grief you must work at it; there is no alternative.
- It is not selfish to be self-caring.
- Grief work takes much longer than most people expect.
- The best therapy for grief is to find people who will listen to your “grief story” over and over.

All of us grow by recognizing and responding to the call of God that comes to us in the events of our everyday lives—things as mundane as washing the dishes, as exhilarating as becoming a parent, and as painful as divorcing. But because divorce changes so many aspects of our life, including our spiritual life, many of us find that we need the special comfort and insight that can be found only in a group of people who are experiencing similar pain and suffering.

That is what *Divorce and Beyond* is really all about and why I am honored to have been asked to revise this wonderful program, originally written by Leon Haverkamp and my friend Brother James Greteman.



Divorce and Beyond is for people who are already divorced or have filed for divorce. It examines what happens to most husbands and

wives going through the breakup of their marriage. It helps participants understand what they are going through and that others have gone through the same things. Finally, it suggests activities for making divorce a growth experience.

The program asks that you commit yourself to all the sessions. You and the other participants will share insights you gain from reflecting on your experiences and the reading material and exercises. The readings and exercises do not by any means attempt to cover all the important information about each topic; they are intended to start you thinking and to help you organize your thoughts. Similarly, the sessions will not attempt to summarize or analyze; therefore, you are again encouraged to take an active role by writing down the things you want to remember.

This book was originally written for Catholics, and this revision has not altered that intent. In my many years of Catholic divorce ministry, however, I know that people of many faiths have benefit from attending the small groups of *Divorce and Beyond*. So please feel free to adapt this book to suit your situation. Divorce is painful for all of us, and how God works through each of us is how we heal. Don't let the rubrics of religion deny you the benefit of shared growth.



A final note of encouragement: Although Jesus called his disciples to follow him to perfection, he never ceased to love them in their imperfect humanity. He called them to strive for wholeness, but he did not turn his back on them when they failed or were afraid. He understood that performance seldom measures up to its promise.

So it is with those of us who are divorced.

Elsie P. Radtke
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Session One

The Process of Divorce

Before We Begin

Respond to the three questions below in writing. A sentence or two for each is sufficient.

What do you want your life to be like in a year?

What do you hope to get out of this *Divorce and Beyond* program?

What does the ending of your marriage represent to you at this time?

After you write your answers, put your paper into an envelope, seal it and put your name on the envelope and hand it to the facilitator. It will be kept safe and confidential until later in the program, and no one else will ever see your responses.

Reflection

Divorce is a process, not simply a legal decree. This process has often been compared to a journey across a bridge. On one side of the bridge is the broken relationship, with all the feelings of failure and hopelessness that result. On the other side is a balanced life, where people have accepted the past and eagerly await the future. The bridge itself, however, is a rickety contrivance of ropes and irregularly spaced boards. As travelers gingerly grope their way across, they feel the fragmentation, fear and confusion that attend any journey past unknown risks toward an unknown destination. Understanding the three basic stages of divorce will help you go through the process with the hope of finally being able to say, “The past is dead, and I’m ready for a new and better life.”

Stage 1: The Death of the Relationship

Divorce happens in two ways. In about ten percent of the cases it is a “sudden death”—for example, one spouse comes home and announces out of the blue that he or she is leaving. However, in most

cases divorce is a lingering death that extends over many months or even years. Usually the relationship has died long before the couple or one of the partners files for divorce.

Marriages end up in divorce courts for widely varying reasons, but one common theme is couples' difficulty in communicating to each other what they expected the marriage relationship to provide for themselves and their partners. It is impossible to sum up the complex relationship between two people who live intimately with each other, but there are some basic needs that all spouses expect their marriage to fulfill.

The most basic need in every marriage is pure survival. Both partners need food, shelter and clothing. Because this is obvious, couples seldom have problems communicating this need to each other. (What they do about it is another matter, however.) Less understood, and often very difficult to communicate, is the degree to which spouses expect their partners to recognize and fulfill the following needs:

- **Physical.** To be physically close, to touch, to hug and be hugged, and to be sexually involved with their partner.
- **Emotional.** To feel special and important, and to feel freedom to express their love to their partner.
- **Intellectual.** To communicate their own ideas and opinions; to solve problems, make plans and set goals together.
- **Spiritual.** To recognize and accept the faith experiences and dimensions of the other, and to share common values.

As you review the story of your marriage and remember critical episodes, you may find that one or more of these needs were not being met for you or your partner. You also may realize that by expecting marriage to meet all your needs all the time, you or your partner may have placed an impossible burden on your relationship.

Many couples reflecting on their courtship and early married life remember how easily they related physically and emotionally. This often is enough to keep couples happy and satisfied in the beginning. However, when the glow and excitement that are part of early marriage begin to diminish, partners begin to feel the need to relate on deeper intellectual and spiritual levels. If this happens for both partners at the same time, chances are that they will grow together in love, respect and trust. If they agree on the fundamentals of how they will live—intellectually and spiritually—their union will be stable. This assumes, of course, that they are flexible enough to allow themselves and their partners the freedom to share these vital areas of their lives with others too.

Trouble often comes when one spouse expects the other to become deeply involved in things in which the latter finds it difficult or impossible to participate—such as hobbies, church activities, or even raising the children. When one partner is not able or willing to share and communicate to the degree that the other expects, both may begin building barriers of hurt and misunderstanding. Their warm, positive feelings for each other slowly transform into negative ones, and they begin moving apart. With the loss of closeness, real sexual intimacy becomes increasingly difficult, and their sexual relations may deteriorate into a routine, an obligation, or a weapon. Finally one or both of the partners begin to withdraw, and the relationship has begun to die. This dying process may go on for years before a couple recognizes it and files for divorce.

Stage 2: The Mourning Period

Whatever the reasons for it or however long it took in coming, a divorce results in feelings of pain, anger, failure, rejection and even helplessness. Some of us initially feel euphoric about our divorce—happy to be free from a bad situation and out of a dysfunctional relationship. But such positive feelings seldom last long, and sooner or later they are replaced by negative ones. This holds true no matter who initiated the divorce.

Two behavior patterns, denial and bargaining, characterize the “mourning period” of divorce. At first many of us deny that our marriage is really over. We feel numb and shocked. We find it hard to admit to ourselves that our spouse will not return, and harder yet to admit this to others. Pretending and fantasizing become a habit, and we are tempted to deny any responsibility for the death of the relationship.

The second pattern is bargaining. Sometimes we even offer to do or become anything our ex-partner might want just to make things go back to the way they were. We offer to change our ways, and we begin the old “I wonder what would happen if I ...” game. The loneliness and unhappiness we are experiencing seem too high a price to pay for freedom from a bad relationship.

It takes most of us a long time, perhaps nine to twelve months, to go through the mourning period of divorce. This is a very important time, however, for during this period we deal with feelings that we must acknowledge and accept. What we are mourning is the death of a very important relationship—the loss of our companion, lover, friend, home, financial security, familiar role and most of all our future, which we once considered settled and secure. With these losses come the painful emotions that are an integral part of grief. Some of

these emotions—such as anger, guilt, anxiety, tension and loneliness—will be dealt with later in this program.

Mourning is a difficult stage of divorce. There is no escaping it, no shortcuts, no easy answers. In fact, the greater your past commitment to the marriage was, the more difficult the mourning phase will be. The end will come only when you accept your former marriage as a part of the past that cannot be changed; when you view your former partner as someone who cannot and should not control you or be controlled by you any longer; and, finally, when you recognize that you must build a new life as a newly single person.

A very important part of this “letting go” is understanding that only the *relationship* has failed. You and your former spouse are not failures. You are still alive and functioning, and you both have the potential to make other relationships work.

Stage 3: Regaining Balance

Sometimes it takes us years to regain our balance after the divorce. We have to decide who we are if we can no longer identify ourselves as one half of “Mr. and Mrs. Right.” We must decide where we want to go and what we want to do with the rest of our lives. We need to acquire a new understanding and acceptance of ourselves in order to feel comfortable in our new role as a single person and perhaps a single parent. We might need to learn new practical skills. This is a difficult but exciting challenge. It will include finding new and better ways of relating to people on all levels. It will mean opening doors to new experiences and new people.

The stages of death, mourning and regaining balance in our lives will overlap. For example, some of us who are well into a comfortable pattern as a single person will suddenly find ourselves calling our former husband or wife for superficial reasons. This two-steps-forward-one-step-back behavior is to be expected. No process is as linear as it appears on paper, but overall we can move forward. The journey across the bridge of divorce does not have an end in the same way it began. Patience and gentleness is required for those of us who want to cross this bridge successfully.



Exercise One

Write your responses in the back of your notebook.

1. When you first realized your marriage was over, what were some of your feelings? (To help get you started, here are some possible words to use: angry, fearful, rejected, abandoned, free, guilty, sad, isolated, diminished, relieved, anxious, victimized, challenged.)
2. How have your feelings changed since your marriage ended?

Exercise Two

Read the following and discuss with the group where you are in the divorce process and what things are causing you the greatest difficulty.

In *Divorce and After: An Analysis of the Emotional and Social Problems of Divorce*, Paul Bohannon described six divorce experiences that affect peoples' daily lives. These experiences, which may come at different times or overlap, carry varying degrees of pain and frustration:

1. **Emotional Divorce:** Begins when the decision is made to divorce.
2. **Economic Divorce:** Begins when the partners set up separate residences.
3. **Legal Divorce:** Begins when a judge issues the final decree.
4. **Co-parental Divorce:** Involves assuming different parenting roles.
5. **Community Divorce:** Involves loosening ties with some old friends and acquaintances and starting new friendships.
6. **Psychic Divorce:** Involves establishing individual autonomy.



Before the Next Session

Begin to write down the story, or account, of what happened in your divorce. True, your perception of your history will change as time passes. And because this program is based on the experience of the participants, you will be telling much of your story during the sessions. Nevertheless, you will discover a great value in writing it out for yourself. Whether your version at this time is factually accurate or not, whether it is made up of insights or excuses, you will find that developing your story as you see it now is a vital tool for coping with self-doubt and guilt.

Before the group meets next time, begin to write your story. As this

program progresses, look back on your story every so often and rewrite the parts you view with a different perspective. Repeat this exercise periodically until you can finally read your story, accept it, live with it, and close the door on the past.

A simple way to organize your story is to divide part of your notebook into five manageable time segments or chapters. In your notebook label the chapters with these titles:

- 1. Courtship**
- 2. Years of Marriage**
- 3. Breakup of Marriage**
- 4. Mourning Period**
- 5. Regaining Balance**

After each chapter title write the time frame of the period, such as “three years” or “1995-98.” You may have nothing to write in the fifth period, Regaining Balance, but that is to be expected at this time. Leave a number of blank pages after each title page.

Each chapter should include the things you consider significant in that period (e.g., children’s births, places you lived, jobs, significant illnesses). Pay particular attention to how you felt during these times (happy, sad, depressed, at peace). Each week of this program, you will add to your story as part of your Reflection Exercise.

Coping Tips in the Divorce Process

While the mourning period will take time and work, there are things you can do to make it easier. Below are some helpful suggestions and observations. Read them over and reread them periodically. Many of these will be emphasized during the rest of the program.

- Admit your loss.
- Say out loud that you are hurting.
- Do not fantasize; allow reality to happen.
- You will experience highs and lows, like a roller-coaster ride.
- You do have a future.
- Proceed gently.
- Keep major decisions to a minimum.
- It is OK to ask for comfort.
- Look for support from a friend, a relative, the church, etc.
- Be around living things—plants and pets.
- Keep your values in focus.
- Keep in control of the days that are especially difficult (like birthdays and anniversaries) by scheduling or organizing events for yourself.
- Bad feelings do pass.
- Allow yourself to feel the hurt.
- Praying helps.
- Use a list to help structure your day.
- Feelings are neither good nor bad; it is what you do with them that counts.
- Eat in a healthy way.
- Proceed slowly.
- Take thoughtful, careful risks.
- Go easy in your use of things that may become addicting.
- Take care of yourself.
- Writing your thoughts down may help.
- Heal at your own rate.
- Exercise daily.

A PROVEN PROGRAM FOR THOSE EXPERIENCING DIVORCE



When a marriage ends it is more than a separation of two people. It is a death of an important part of their lives. The grieving process of a **divorce** is unique to each individual, but *Divorce and Beyond*—now completely updated and revised—offers a ten-session program to guide people through that process. A divorce signifies the failure of a relationship, *not* that the individuals themselves are failures. This book will help men and women through the journey of initial stress, anger and guilt, to ultimate forgiveness, happiness and growth.

“We are truly divorced only when we finally let go of our marriage, mourn our loss, and adjust ourselves to our new life.”

From the Foreword by Irene Varley
Executive Director, North American Conference
of Separated and Divorced Catholics

This classic resource is designed for those who are recently divorced or have already filed for it. It covers the experiences and emotions that divorcing people go through in the early stages of divorce and suggests activities for making their divorce a growing experience. Originally intended for a Catholic audience, *Divorce and Beyond* is easily adapted to an interdenominational or interfaith group.

James Greteman, CSC, is a Holy Cross Brother and the author of several books on divorce. **Leon Haverkamp** is a family therapist specializing in divorce issues. **Elsie P. Radtke** is associate director of the Family Ministries Office of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Catholicism/Divorce



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Winona, Minnesota
www.smp.org

ISBN 978-1-64121-073-7



9 781641 210737