

Getting Unstuck from Your Divorce, be F.R.E.E.

D. Keith Denton

Kyle, a boy about 8 was asked his opinion by his teacher about what he thought about love. He said, he thought you probably got shot by an arrow but then figured the rest of it was not supposed to be as painful. When he grows up he might discover that sometimes it is and sometimes the wounds never heal. If he is like his parents he will have about a 50/50 chance of getting a divorce. But in life it is not so much that happens to you as what you do with it. Both men and women can get stuck in the pain, sadness, anger and frustration of a divorce or separation. Ex-couples spend so much time blaming and assigning fault that they forget the collateral damage that can occur to their kids. Divorce is first and foremost about your kids or at least it should be about the kids. Handled correctly and the kids do just fine. Handled poorly and the kids have a lifetime of suffering. If you look at the statistics you can see it's been handled pretty poorly by a lot of ex-couples.

M.A.D. (Moms Against Dads)

Mike, a child of 10 gave his thoughts to his teacher about dating. He figured on the first date, that a boy and girl just tell each other lies because that usually gets them interested enough to go for a second date." Then, he reasoned that one dates probably leads to another lie and then they eventually get married.

After enough lies, a divorce soon follows, and then you start all over, right? Then the real battle begins. It is not the divorce that destroys lives both small and large but how it is handled. Sanford Braver reported in the American Journal of Orthopsychiatry that a whopping 40 percent of mothers reported that they had interfered with the father's visitation as a way to punish their ex-spouse. (1) Talk about bitter. Their own kids are being used as a weapon against their kid's biological dad. Think about for a moment. Forty percent is not just a small insignificant number. Clearly, this is not just a few

irritated mothers but rather 4 out of every 10 mothers that are interfering, so what is going on?

One of the things that might be going on is what role these ex-wives see for their ex-husbands. Joan Berlin Kelly writes in *Surviving the Breakup* that half, that's one out of every two mothers see **no value** in their children's dad having contact with their children. Must be a lot of deadbeat dads, right? Well, not if you believe the statistics about divorced dads.

A study by the U.S. General Accounting Office Report noted that the fallacy of deadbeat dads. The study shows that 79.1 percent of fathers with visitation privileges pay the support due. That's almost 8 out of every 10 dads. Clearly interfering with visitation is cutting your nose to spite your face. The same study though showed that nearly half or 44.5 percent of fathers with no visitation still pay the support due. So what about the other half that didn't pay? Two-thirds of all support not paid by non-custodial fathers is due to their inability to pay. In fact it is mostly the poorly educated men with very low or no incomes who never married the mother of their children that are the deadbeat dads.

The big picture is most all dads are meeting their financial duties. In fact, several studies show that three fourths of divorced fathers are fully meeting their financial obligations to their children. That is four million fathers are paying 12 billion dollars a year in child support. In truth those divorced men with the highest incomes are usually paying for most, if not all, of their children's expenses. This is especially true when the mother did not work full time outside the home throughout their marriage.

So What Does Ex Hubby Bring to The Table?

Kids usually talk to their moms more about their social lives but it is the dads, part-time or long distance, who they turn to help them solve problems and to get advice on education and jobs. But they also turn to their dad the most to get encouragement for self-reliance. Sometimes those facts of life fall on deaf ears. With half of all mothers not seeing any value in their children's father contact with their kids, either ex-wives are misinformed or they are just mad.

Divorced or separated dads are extremely important to your kid's well-being. Both parents are important to the health of your kids. Children who maintain a close relationship with their father tend to be more socially mature and to have fewer problems related to dating and sexuality. That's especially true if the divorced mother does not remarry. A number of studies involving teenagers and young adults who have close relationships with their fathers shows those kids are less likely to become clinically depressed, to develop eating disorders, and to develop anxiety disorders. Research also shows that kids who remain close to both parents are less stressed by divorce and dads who are connected to their kids are more likely to keep up with their obligations, financial and otherwise. Other studies show that children who are able to keep a close relationship with their father also tended to be more socially mature and to have fewer problems related to dating and sexuality.

Dads, regardless of their faults have roles that best can be done by them. Think about a married dad's role and you see a role that needs to be filled. In married couples it is usually the Dad who is primarily responsible for setting limits, emphasizing self-control and who is primarily responsible for discipline his children. Is that really what any mother wants to be responsible for doing? Someone got to be bad cop or at least one that can provide some balance. That role was critical when you were married why on earth you would expect your job to change.

Sure the divorce has changed relationships but not the basic nature of our species. Even smart mothers can use some help from the village, especially if the village includes their kid's dad. More than a dozen studies have shown that even well-educated mothers with ample money after the divorce often provide too little supervision, discipline and household order. Moms are often been shown to be too submissive to their own children. It is a tough job but somebody got to do it and that someone who needs to shoulder that responsibility is usually the dad-single or otherwise. Logic dictates that both are needed but sometimes we think with our emotions and not are mind.

Pushing Buttons

In marriage, couples learn how to push each other's buttons. Do you think your buttons disappear when you get divorced? In fact, once divorced many buttons become glowing neon, flashing "press here". When you have unfinished business with your ex, you still push buttons and allow your own buttons to be pushed.

After a divorce you can count on your ex trying to push your buttons. It is as certain as the sun rising. It is a certainty. The key to getting unstuck in this destructive game is knowing when it's happening and not playing. How do you know your buttons are being pushed? It is easy to tell. When the ex does something and you get hurt, frustrated or angry your buttons are getting pushed. Your best defense is to be aware of your feelings and don't let them drive your behavior. But some people when their buttons get pushed just can't shut their mouths about it – even if they are with their kids. Those negative feelings and thoughts just keep pouring out. Worse still your kids get stuck in the middle. It is not the divorce that damages you and your kids, it how you handle the divorce. Kids don't need to hear you vent. Go vent to a friend, a therapist or your dog not your kids.

When your buttons are pushed and you react they win, you are hooked. It is essential to "divorce" yourself from the moment. To start with here are some ideas. Take a deep breath and focus on the here and now. "I'm divorced. I'm here with my kids. I love my kids more than I hate my ex". Exercising is also a good outlet to get rid of pent up feelings. When exercising be mindful that when you are exercising you are trying to not focus on the negative things your ex is doing. Focus on all the positives in your life instead. Also remember, this too will change. It is pretty typical that men and women remarry. It may be hard to believe but men remarry about three or four years after a divorce and women just a little bit longer. So divorce for most is a temporary thing. Men remarry than sooner than women but not that not the whole story.

Life After Divorce

So who do you think is happier once the divorce is over? The percentage of men who say they are happier after their divorce or separation is around 58 percent. Women who say they are happier are more in the neighborhood of 85 percent. But between now

and then the facts are, if you're not happy you can't be a good parent. Unfinished business like mom interfering with their kid's visitation or thinking their kid's dad does not matter only harms your kid. It can lead to some destructive games with your kids as the pawns.

"I spy" is a game that can be played by either or both parents. It is where the kids are to act as a spy for a parent. I spy would start when one of the parents says "What were they doing" or some similar prying question. It's so much not destructive for the mom or dad, but rather for the kids. Bad mouthing a kid's mom or dad only hurts the kid. Holding on to anger only destroys your kid. Divorce in its essence is nothing more than change and like any change it all depends on how it is handled.

Men and women often cope differently with divorce. Women often draw their children around them closer. They rely on friends and family to get through. Men reaction could not be more different. When dads can't cope with the divorce they can tend to disengage, move away, work too much and even remarry. Then put all their energies and focuses on something else. Often this is because of a feeling that they just don't matter anymore or because it's too difficult to always be in a fight with the ex. It can also be because of feelings of guilt, anger and sadness at not being able to real a dad.

The problem is when dads disengage it is the kids that are the real losers. Any time dads disengage or moms resist the dad keeping involved it is their kids that feel unwanted, abandoned and mad. Divorce is simply change it is how it is handled that determines if it was a successful change. The evidence clearly shows that dads are important but sadly most fathers see very little of their children after divorce. Only about eight percent of divorced fathers get to live with their children for as much as a third of a year. For most it is far less.

Unfortunately many councilors and psychologist ignore the divorced dad. Some even act as if the children only have one parent, which is their mother. It might come as a surprise to learn that it is dads, not the moms who are more likely to become depressed, commit suicide, or develop a stress-related illness after their divorce. But

then you realize it is usually the dad that becomes childless. The carefree "swinging bachelor" is a myth and has little connection to reality. When both parents work full time you will find both dads and moms generally doing similar amounts of housework and childcare. Studies show, it is teenagers of divorced parents say it was their dad who gave them the best advice, who taught them the most, and who pushes to do their best.

Getting Unstuck

A recently divorced dad went to court on Monday to file a protective order against his ex-wife-to-be, even though they were already separated. He had also already agreed to a protective order on Friday, which she had filed against him. But now he comes wants to file his own protective order against her because she had shown up at the boys' soccer game. Clearly this action wasn't about how this would affect the kids, he was just pissed. Getting unstuck and moving on is good for both your kids and you. Divorce is temporary with most divorced couples will remarry in about four years. But even after years you can have people stuck and clawing at old wounds. If you are wondering if you are stuck, go to the website dkeithdenton.com and take the free survey. Use the parenting tab and click on the "Are You Stuck Questionnaire" and see where you rank.

This just for you, no one will know but you, there is no one to impress. It's not important to be in a certain percentile. The value of the questionnaire depends on your honesty. If you're being truthful you will get honest answers. Some questions deal with unresolved emotions and others deal with parenting style so see where you rank.

The instructions for filling it out include the following. Answer the twenty questions honestly by either checking either yes or no. Then total your score at the bottom. Of course the main purpose is for you to reflect on where you are at in this change process. If you're a newly minted divorced or separated person, it would be expected that you are still going through the five stages of grief. However if it has been months and months or worse more than a year and your score indicated your stuck it will take your effort to get unstuck.

There are self-help books, courses and councilors who can help you get focused on what to do to get F.R.E.E. (Forget Revenge, Enjoy Everyday) but mostly it will be in your hands. It is a big deal to get yourself FREE of your divorce or separation. There are literally people who never recover from their divorce and cycle through and through it. There are those who never remarry because of it. There are those who ruined the lives of their kids' lives because they just stayed stuck.

F.R.E.E. (Forget Revenge, Enjoy Everyday)

Carolyn, age 8 told her teacher that her mother says to look for a man who is kind. That's what I'll do. I'll find somebody who's kinda tall and handsome." Kirsten, age 10 also gave her insights about marriage, "No person really decides before they grow up who they're going to marry. God decides it all way before, and you get to find out later who you're stuck with." Emotions rarely solve problems. Besides often in life you have to experience some pain before you can grow. Studies some that as most people get older they actually get better. Get better, not bitter.

To get unstuck recognize what you can and cannot control. You can't control other people or their reaction but you can control how you react. You can remind yourself to not waste time on what you cannot change or control. Take a moment and look at what you are complaining about. Do you have any control over what you are complaining about? Stop complaining about what you don't have control over. Stop thinking about what you can't do anything about so you can put your energies into what you can control. You have control over you, your thoughts, and your actions and that's it. Fill out the questionnaire now and do it again in a few months and see if you're starting to get some traction and moving on down the road.

The key to being F.R.E.E. is to focus on just you and not what your ex is doing or not doing or should or should not be doing. Surprising some people like being stuck because it lets them do things out of revenge because the S.O.B. deserved it. But vengeful or negative thinking will do far more damage to your kids that to your ex.

Getting unstuck does not occur overnight but time helps. Six months from now you should feel better. If you find someone else and the odds are over 80 percent that

you will remarry that helps. If you take care of yourself by making good lifestyle decisions that helps. Finding a new passion also helps. Working full time can also be of value. But mostly it takes you recognizing the positives can come out of any change. In life it is never what happens to you but how you react that will determine your ultimate happiness.

References

- (1) Braver, S.L., Wolchik, S.A., Sandler, I.N., Foger, B.S. and Zuetina, D. (1991). Frequency of visitation by divorced fathers: Differences in reports by fathers and mothers. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 61, 448-454