

Keep looking forward

Thinking your life is now going to feel like an empty, painful, desolate void is like thinking that the bliss of your wedding day and honeymoon would be repeated every day thereafter.

Weddings, funerals, births, divorces – they're all usually black and white, threshold-of-life experiences, whereas everyday life tends to be shades of grey, rich and textured. And that's a good thing. It's about balance, people.

This horrible phase you're in right now? It's just that – a phase. More things will come your way. Life has plenty more moments in store for you. Some will be good, some not so good. Most will be boringly mundane.

We can't see into the future but we can promise you a few things. You will have an amazing night out with friends. You will eat a great meal. You will go a day without thinking about your ex. You will laugh so hard that your face and abs will ache. You will have days where you feel like you're winning at life.

Life has all this richness in store for you and then some. Of course, the opposite is also true but follow your heart – along with our advice – and chances are that the world will end up being a far happier place for you.

Ask the expert:

Renee Mill, clinical psychologist

As a qualified psychologist with over 30 years of clinical experience, Renee Mill has counselled her fair share of recently single Sydney-siders. Here, she shares her five common traps to avoid when surviving this dance we call divorce:

Avoid holding on to the past.

A common mistake people make when going through a divorce is to hold on to their perception of the relationship in some form well after it is officially over. Holding on to the past means there is no space for a new relationship to bloom. It also perpetuates a cycle of negativity that prevents you from feeling calm, happy or hopeful.

It's not easy to let go of a broken marriage for several reasons...

- When a couple decide to separate, it usually comes after months (if not years) of conflict and pain. Rarely is it an overnight decision. After divorcing there may be lingering ambivalence, anger, questioning and regret, with no resolution of feelings. Lack of closure perpetuates stress and unhappiness.
- The marital bond is a powerful tie. When couples commit to each other, a bond is created that has meaning and trust attached to it. It is a special commitment, a special feeling. It takes a lot of work to undo that powerful bond.
- You may fear that you will never find that special bond again. You therefore hang on to it in fantasy, even though it is no longer real. Every new relationship is compared to the old one, frequently falling short to your perception of how happy you were.
- Even after a divorce, one partner may feel jealous of the other. They may also be obsessed about what the other person is doing, comparing it to their past behaviours. This is an unconscious attempt to validate that what they had together was indeed special. It may also be coming from a selfish demand that "If I can't have him, no-one else can."
- Marriage vows are weighty commitments that carry within them hope, dreams and fantasies of a 'happily ever after'. They are a public promise to stay true to one another and therefore come laden with expectations. To give up on these hopes and dreams is extremely tough because you are not just giving up on a person and a relationship, you are saying goodbye to a promised future.

If you are still hanging on – it is time to move on. Whatever your reason for staying stuck in the past and in your pain, you need to make a conscious decision to move forward with optimism.

Open your mind to a new beginning. Think of making a fresh start. Speak to others who have re-partnered and you will discover that many have come before you down this road and they have been able to re-partner successfully within a few years.

See your divorce as an opportunity to re-invent yourself and say hello to a new future, perhaps one that you never imagined. There is no guarantee your future will be bleak. In fact, there is a huge possibility it will be a whole lot better.

Don't believe the divorce is causing current unhappiness

Another huge mistake that divorcees make is to believe that their divorce is the cause of their unhappiness. This is an unfortunate belief because it implies that you have no choice but to stay unhappy, because a bitter event happened to you in your life.

This is a common assumption people make. They say things like: "Anybody would be miserable if they got divorced/lost their job/had to cancel a holiday/have a difficult child/live with an argumentative spouse"... the list is endless.

This is what is called a victim mentality. It is an attitude that asserts that people, places or things can alter your mental state.

Psychological research has proven that no event leads to depression or sadness; it is how you see or perceive the event that leads to a negative or positive feeling. This is an empowering way of thinking because it can change your life. It means that you are free emotionally and no person or event has any power over your ability to be happy. It also implies that you are unhappy not because of the divorce per se, but because of the story you are telling yourself about the divorce.

Letting go of sadness and anger is a must if you want to move forward and find happiness. Practically, the way to do it is to look at your divorce with positivity instead of negative, bitter eyes.

Some suggestions are:

- Find meaning in what happened. You may be able to see that if you had not married that specific person, you would not have had those kids, or found that career, or discovered a new lifestyle.
- Find personal meaning. You may come to a realisation such as, "I was arrogant before, but now that I have been through this I realise I am the same as everybody else and that's a good feeling. My relationships with my family are so much better now."
- See it as a learning experience. Many people realise that being on their own has forced them to become more decisive or independent.
- Develop resilience. Try to use your divorce as an opportunity to develop

resilience and psychological skills, like realising that happiness is in your power and no-one can give it to you or take it from you.

You may need professional help to change your perspective, especially if your old ways of thinking are entrenched. Ultimately, this too can be something that you gained from your divorce – learning to ask for help and seeing the benefits of psychotherapy.

Stop blaming the other person for the break up:

A common mistake people make when their relationship breaks down is to blame the other person for the divorce or break up. It's comforting to believe that you did everything right and this other person, this ungrateful creep, went and destroyed it.

Again, this is a victim mentality, which may help you to feel self-righteous in the moment. But long term, it will keep you immobilised and powerless.

What can you learn from what happened if it was all the other person's fault? How can you feel safe in a world where there are cruel people who randomly, yet consistently let you down? What if you fall victim to the next prowler? Maybe it's best to just stay single and victimised.

By now you may be furious with me, with a few choice words prepared to defend yourself. "He had an affair!" you want to tell me. Or, "She put on 40 kilograms and didn't want to have sex anymore!" Or perhaps, "He was unemployed, stayed home all day and did not help with chores. Obviously he was a lazy good-for-nothing and I deserve better!"

I'm not disputing that these things happened and that they are extremely difficult to live with. But please hear me out, because what I am going to say next may help you to move forward: Let go of your victim thinking, your anger and your pain and *start a new life*.

When you believe that you could have had it all, but your partner went and messed it up, you will be furious, vindictive and unforgiving.

When you view your relationship as a system that needs all parts to work in sync to be an effective system, a different picture emerges. When you look at your divorce differently you can choose happiness instead of pain.

Put another way, I believe that it is far better to understand that a relationship needs both partners to be willing and able, to qualify as a 'working relationship'.

As soon as one partner is not willing to stay in the relationship, it is no longer a good relationship. Even if your partner had an affair and was not faithful and you were loyal, the affair proves that your relationship was no longer working.

Similarly, when one partner stops contributing financially or physically to the relationship, or is not emotionally present, or stops being intimate, the system is not working. The relationship is no longer reciprocal.

This is my interpretation of 'it takes two to tango'. Not that two people cheated or two people caused the conflict. Rather, for a tango to look good and work, both people must be in sync and move seamlessly together. They must be in step. If one person is out of step, it is no longer a tango or a decent tango. When your partner is no longer in step, it is time to stop the dance and look for another tango partner.

The reasons why your partner no longer wants to be in step are complex. Do not waste your therapy hours and money trying to work it out or attributing blame. Rather, devote your time to learning how to accept that sometimes things simply don't work out, despite our best efforts. Focus on understanding your strengths and looking for a partner who will be as fully in the relationship as you want to be.

At the risk of labouring this point, let me give a work illustration. Imagine you take a job as a salesperson in a fashion store. You are hardworking, reliable and helpful to the shoppers. You are convinced you are doing a good job. However, the new manager is trying to attract a young, trendy market and for reasons unbeknown to you, the manager does not see you that way – and fires you.

Undeniably, this decision is stressful, financially taxing and unfair. But you have options in how you choose to process it.

You can choose to spend months complaining about what a terrible manager you had and how you were wronged; many people choose this option and they wallow in their pain.

Or you can realise that from the manager's point of view, you did not fit in. The system was not working. You may have wanted to be there, but the manager didn't want you. The best use of your time and energy now is to

move on by learning from this, by identifying your strengths and finding a job where the manager will value your attributes.

Try not to rush into the next relationship:

The fourth mistake divorcees make is rush straight into the next relationship. I understand that at the time it feels good to find a new person. It helps you feel valued and gives you a much-needed boost to your self-esteem.

However, statistics show that the relationship straight after a break up has an 80% chance of failing. It is a stop-gap solution, but usually not the next long-term relationship.

The problem with rushing to find a new partner means there is no space for reflection, resolution, grieving and growth. The new relationship fills the void, which could potentially be your biggest blessing, if you use it well.

So my advice is not to rush. Allow yourself to feel the void by spending time being single. Don't be afraid of your raw feelings. Face them. Learn to live with them and even conquer them. That will be your greatest guarantee that you will not go into another long-term relationship for the wrong reasons.

Remember that help is always available:

After a break-up is an ideal time to seek psychological counselling. Your raw, vulnerable feelings make it possible for huge emotional leaps to be made. Your shock and puzzlement at what has transpired creates a need to understand yourself and the world better, and psychotherapy is the best place to reflect and find answers. Your potential for rebirth and evolution will be released in the safe, reflective space that counselling provides.

It goes without saying that you need to seek help from a qualified, experienced psychologist who belongs to a professional association and subscribes to a code of ethics. There is an abundance of wannabes who may want to help, but who can inflict psychological damage because of lack of expertise and your vulnerable state. So, buyer beware!

Psychotherapy can help you in many ways:

- By giving you support. There is no shame in needing someone to listen to your woes and to be your ally. After a while, your friends and family will eventually have 'friendship fatigue' and will not want to hear about your problems any more. A therapist will listen for as long as you need.
- By tapping into subconscious thoughts. Therapy is the space where you can express your most hidden thoughts and destructive emotions, without fear. Being able to vocalise these feelings brings relief. It can be inappropriate and unfair to share your rage with family members, as they have a relationship with your ex-partner. If you wish your ex were dead, you should never tell your children that – but you could certainly express it to your therapist.
- By observing. A therapist is a dispassionate observer who can help you climb out of your hole. Family members are too close to the problem to make objective judgements or see totally new perspectives.
- By helping you grow. A crisis such as a divorce is a prime time to understand you better and to grow emotionally. When you have a crisis you are vulnerable and open in ways you are not during regular times. Grab the opportunity to utilise your vulnerability.

Try to use your divorce as a learning experience about yourself. After all, you chose to marry this person who later let you down. Why did you choose him or her? Are you re-enacting something from your past? Have you chosen similar partners in every long-term relationship? Delve into your unconscious motives so that you do not repeat this destructive pattern.

If you stayed too long in an abusive situation: Why did you stay? Why did you not leave earlier? What did you keep telling yourself?

If you kept trying to please your partner: Why are you a people pleaser? Are you like this with everyone? Should you change that about yourself?

If you have a temper: Maybe it is time to learn anger management techniques?

You may not have chosen this divorce, but you can absolutely choose how you want to respond to it. Choose to grow from your divorce, and focus on doing better next time.

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A divorce is much like a 10-car pile-up. It affects not just two drivers, but a whole slew of vehicles that get caught in the chaos. Not even innocent bystanders come out unscathed.

– Tez Brooks

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