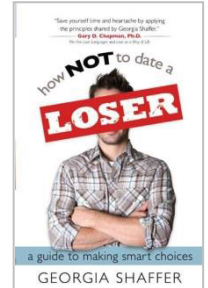




GEORGIA SHAFFER
COACH . AUTHOR . SPEAKER



What I Wish I'd Known Before I Got Divorced



One morning during a casual breakfast with five friends, our conversation turned to focus on a mutual friend named Cindy. Her marriage was on shaky ground, and she was convinced divorce was the answer to all her problems. "I wish Cindy would at least listen to us," I said.

"She made it clear she doesn't want to hear *anything* from us divorcees," my friend Betsy responded. " She's made up her mind, and she's not changing it."

That morning, in utter frustration, my friends and I compiled a list called, "What we wish we had known before we got divorced." Our wishes stood for the big issues we wanted Cindy to know *before* she made her final decision. Each of us had experienced the upheaval of divorce and watched 12 of our close friends' *second* marriages end. We'd seen the lives of our children changed forever. Years later, we continue to live with the ongoing pain and complications of a destroyed marriage.

As a licensed psychologist, I've listened to many people during counseling sessions consider the possibility of ending their marriage. They look at divorce as a way of solving their marital woes. Ultimately, however, it only creates *different* problems.

For example, in a recent study by the Institute for American Values, researchers asked "Does divorce make people happy?" They found that those who were unhappily married and later divorced weren't any happier than those who were unhappy and remained married. In fact, two-thirds of those who *stayed married* reported that their marriages were happy five years later.

Ending a marriage rarely has the magic effect of causing happiness that people expect. It just produces a new set of problems. For instance, here's a look at the issues we compiled for my friend, Cindy:

1. Your life will change more than you realize.

"I thought I would enjoy being alone," said Lori, who had no children and never remarried. "But I'm lonely. Whenever any of my friends complain about how needy their husbands or children are I say, 'Just try living without that.'"

Add children into the equation, and the result is even stickier. Instead of two people parenting your children (if you have custody), you're left to do it all alone. You become the sole

breadwinner, spiritual adviser, disciplinarian, and housekeeper. The stress levels of that responsibility can be staggering.

In addition, there are the scheduling dilemmas. Recently, my friend and I were discussing how complicated it can be to see our sons during a short college break. Although we both cooperate with our ex-husbands, we still ache as we watch our sons carefully dole out their time among the families in an effort not to alienate either parent. "Even though we have it as good as it gets," I said, "It's horrible for our children."

And, I'm not talking about broken families that bitterly battle each other, such as parents who pit their children against their ex or children who try to put a wedge in their parents' new relationships. Most of my divorced friends appear well-adjusted. They have worked hard to rebuild their lives, and they strive to cooperate with their ex-spouses for the sake of the children.

Another unforeseen challenge of divorce includes handling special occasions. Every birthday, holiday, wedding, or funeral is a potential nightmare. "At my future daughter-in-law's wedding," says Allison, "she is planning to walk down the aisle by herself, because she has multiple fathers and feels torn between her allegiances." These problems don't end when the children grow up and marry. The hassles can continue with the grandchildren.

2. Your life won't be more carefree.

As a self-confident, independent woman with a fast-moving career and no children, Stephanie couldn't wait to be free of the pain of her dying marriage. "I would no longer have to put with up *his* problems," she said. "With my new freedom, I thought I could do what I wanted when I wanted to do it. But after the divorce, it was my career and my home that began to hold me hostage. I was imprisoned by all of the things in life that I thought made me look good."

Stephanie realized that divorce couldn't bring the carefree lifestyle she had expected. When she stopped and looked in the mirror, she realized the lies she had bought and how the patterns of the world had shaped her character. Because she didn't like what she saw, she began the hard work of changing who she had become.

According to the Institute for American Values, researchers found that those who ended their marriage simply because they weren't happy *did not* improve their emotional state. Their lives were not happier or better. "The decision to divorce," they suggest, "sets in motion a large number of processes and events over which an individual has little control" and ultimately negatively affects the well-being of the one who divorced.

For example, there are those *seemingly hidden* emotional wounds that can pop open when we least expect or on special anniversaries. For instance, Jan, who is normally bubbly and bright, says, "Every Christmas, I become depressed. After 20 years it still hits me suddenly, without warning. I was married in December, my childhood sweetheart left me for another woman 15 Decembers later, and my dreams were ruined. Every year I have a weepy week."

Jan's second husband understands and gives her the space "to grieve again for the loss of that ideal family I spent my life imagining. There are times when it hits him too. You are never free from the effects of that broken first marriage."

3. You trade one set of problems for another.

Even the most amiable of break-ups can produce deep wounds. Divorce isn't a consequence-free process. "What I didn't anticipate," said Brad, "was the way my friends perceive me. All of

a sudden I became damaged goods. One couple, who had been my close friends for twenty years, became very cool to me after the divorce.”

There’s a ripple effect. Your divorce doesn’t just affect you and your spouse. It affects everyone around you. Friends often feel as if they must pick sides, so they keep their distance. Relationships with those who do remain loyal change abruptly. Church friends may stay away, feeling uncomfortable. Plus, family members who’ve grown to love and care for the ex may feel forced to “divorce” as well.

Financial ramifications are also possible. Dividing assets is rarely an equitable process. For instance, Vern was left with only 31 percent of his retirement account even though his ex-wife worked and they had no children. At the age of 49, this was a blow to Vern’s retirement plans.

Financial complications can be minor compared to blending children from previous marriages. Many problems arise, such as emotional chaos to stoic tolerance. A recently remarried friend said, “My life is more complicated than ever. I’ve put all this effort into a new marriage, but we’re struggling. My new step-son ignores me. His attitude is ‘I’m here to be with my dad and that’s it.’ I feel horrible—like a second class citizen in my own home.”

4. Short-term pleasure can lead to long-term pain.

When my son was six years old, he’d complain about being disciplined for disobeying what he called “my stupid rules.” Over and over I’d repeat, “Kyle, I’m being short-term mean, but long-term nice.” Like little children, we sometimes allow our desire for momentary pleasure to pull us away from God’s best for our marriage. Rather than doing the hard work it takes to invest daily in our marital relationship, we make seemingly innocent decisions thinking they will do no harm.

“She was stunningly beautiful, the kind of beauty that stops traffic,” Michael said. “She sat next to me at a regional meeting, and during the day she leaned close and softly asked one question after another. Immediately my ego was boosted, because she found me worthy of attention.”

Michael loved his wife and kids, and divorce wasn’t on his mind when he felt attracted to a coworker. But, when she called him a week later and asked why he hadn’t called her, their playful conversation led to many more. Two months later at an out-of-town training session, they began a four-week affair.

Today, five years later, Michael will tell you that seemingly innocent flirtations quickly led to destruction. “I lost my loving wife, family, and everything that was important to me – just for a few weeks of craziness,” he said. “The pain of realizing what I’ve done is unbearable.”

Carolyn Kehr, a marriage and family counselor, says, “At least 75 percent of the divorced couples I’ve counseled over the last 10 years were related to affairs.” Most people don’t start out to have an affair. But, giving in to the short-term pleasure of another person’s attentions, other than your spouse, can cause you to lose everything you *really* wanted.

5. Feelings can be deceiving.

Kathy was in her twenties and newly married, but learned that following her feelings can have tragic consequences. “My husband was away a lot and most evenings I was home alone. I felt so lonely and empty. Many nights I cried myself to sleep and wondered why I ever got married.” Later, I met a man who made me feel alive and passionate about life. So, I concluded that these feelings of excitement confirmed that I was no longer in love with my husband. “Rather than

praying and giving my concerns to God, I took the situation in my own hands and moved out. I was convinced I had made a mistake in getting married."

Still single today, Kathy wishes some wise woman would have come alongside her, prayed with her, and gently reminded her that love is a choice and a commitment, not just an emotion.

Leslie Vernick, author and counselor, warns, "Feelings come and go and change rapidly. Although it is important to know and to understand what we feel, it is very dangerous to base life-long decisions on emotions."

Unfortunately, my friend Cindy never listened to my friend's advice. Instead, she opted for divorce, and now she's saddled with many of the problems described earlier. Others can avoid her fate. All it takes is a willingness to uncover the lost treasures that drew spouses together in the first place. And, with God's help, pain and discontentment can be transformed into long-term joy and abundant blessings.

"What I Wish I Would Have Done to Save My Marriage"

Worked harder on my marriage: "I wish I'd gone to a reliable Christian counselor and committed to working through the problems. I gave up." --Jeff

Made God first in my marriage: "Christ should have been the center of our relationship. I made a god of my husband, and he began to act like one." --Margaret

Kept communication lines open: "I blamed my wife for every problem that arose. I needed to do my own soul searching. I expected my spouse to make me happy." --John

Never entertained thoughts of an affair: "My affair started with one lustful thought that grew and grew until it was out of control. I used to think when I read that the wages of sin are death that it meant physical death. I now know it means emotional and spiritual death. Years later I can tell you the pain doesn't go away." --Michael

Focused on the positive attributes of my spouse: "Both of us brought uplifting qualities to our marriage. But before long I was only focusing on his weaknesses, not his gifts." --Betsy

Guarded my words and respected my spouse: "How I wish I had followed the example of my parents who had the utmost respect for each other. There was no sarcasm or negative words. My father always said, 'Your mother will be my bride until the day I die.' She was." --Nancy



Georgia Shaffer is a licensed psychologist, life coach, and the author of *How Not to Date a Loser: A Guide to Making Smart Choices*. She writes and speaks frequently on the subjects of relationships, dating, grief, and rebuilding after loss. Georgia has over 15 years experience helping people identify: "What needs to grow? What needs to go?" For more information, visit: www.GeorgiaShaffer.com

