



**ADDICTION OUR FAMILIES, OURSELVES**

## **How Resentment Can Wreck Divorce**

**By John Bradshaw**



### **ADDICTION TO THOSE OLD HURTS RUINS ALL HOPE FOR A NEW LIFE**

With one out of two marriages in America ending in divorce these days, it's appropriate to take a close look at this legal process of parting that so many of us now go through. Is it possible to achieve a good divorce? This is a question that counselors often find themselves discussing because we see so many very bad divorces. In a bad divorce the couple will part company but continue to fight for years, sometimes for a decade or longer, about the issues that divided

them in the first place. They won't let go of their anger at each other; they'll go on fantasizing about each other. For years after their marriage is legally defunct, one or both partners will live in a kind of chronic, sometimes addictive resentment.

For many people the delicious emotion of resentment is indeed an addiction that has at least two payoffs: One is that the resentment becomes a way of keeping the marriage alive in the mind when it is dead in fact; another is that the resentment can prevent the people harboring it from having to face the challenge of making new lives for themselves. So resentment after divorce is a good technique for remaining stuck—holding against growth and change, holding against new feeling.

In a good divorce, two people truly say goodbye to each other. They truly separate and move on to develop their lives independent of each other. For this to happen, each party needs to let go and do the grieving that is required even when the marriage was not happy. In the past 40 years the work of Erich Lindemann and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has helped us to understand that grief is a process we have to go through in all kinds of partings, a process that involves fairly definable stages.

I myself have observed that the first stage is a sense of shock, with a faint belief that the parting isn't really happening, that somehow things will work out. That's almost always followed by a kind of bargaining, a minimizing. This manifests as staying involved in some way with the partner one is divorcing. Going to the lawyer, for



example, then having dinner afterward and talking about the future—or celebrating the holidays together as you always did. Many divorcing couples do this; it's a way to buffer the pain.

After the bargaining comes a period of sadness, a low-grade depression that's very important to experience. Partners often jump frantically into new relationships at this time rather than allowing themselves to go through pain and sadness. This is a very dangerous thing to do, because the new relationship formed in depression isn't pure; it's reactive, and it's one in which the new partner is being used like a narcotic. Frequently such relationships are intensely sexual, which enhances their analgesic quality. My advice to people in a divorce situation is to stay out of new relationships until they have done a substantial part of the grief work.

The next stage in the process is anger. It seems that the old order has betrayed the promises of marriage. We are furious at the loss of joy that should have been.

In reality a lot of these should-have-beens are our own fantasies, our own imaginings of how it was supposed to be. We have to grieve over these fallen dreams and then return to the real world. But for many people who are divorcing, reality is not attractive. Hurt, anger, and resentment can set in and stay, obsessively, addictively, as a means of keeping reality at bay. If we can go on feeling the resentment, we don't have to feel anything else.

For those who continue the grieving process, the stage of anger is followed by remorse. "If only I had tried harder. If only I had put aside my own selfish needs. If only we had gone to counseling sooner."

After remorse comes loneliness and a kind of emptiness when we really experience our separation for the first time. As painful as it may be, the loneliness is a mark that we are divorcing well, because out of living with aloneness comes acceptance. And in that acceptance, we accept ourselves as capable of a new life.

This is the point resentment addicts can never reach, fear to reach. For them, resentment is like a blood clot that keeps them in bondage to the former partner. If one is divorced and has been for a while and still holds on to resentment, the most important question to ask oneself is: What am I getting out of this? Am I hooked on my hatred? And in what way does resentment keep me from looking at myself?

I have worked with many clients whose resentments toward a former mate kept them from risking any new relationships. Their absorption in an ex-spouse's sins gives them a feeling of not having to risk being intimate with someone else. People with such resentments need to realize that the reason for giving them up has nothing to do with mollifying or appeasing the spouse. They need to give them up in order to free themselves.