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The Divorce Penalty

by Ashlyn Kingsley

“Your mom and I have something to tell you.” Every child of divorce hears some variation of this phrase sometime in their lives, and everyone responds in a similar way: “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” “Why didn’t I see this coming?” “Why is this happening?” Young adults, however, face an additional challenge when forced to ask these questions while entering a new stage of freedom. They are forced to deal with the effects of their parents’ divorce while simultaneously navigating the challenges adulthood brings. For this reason, it is important to understand how any level of conflict in a divorce causes a difference in a young adult’s ability to form intimate relationships, develop communication skills, and manage mental health issues.

Although some people acknowledge the pain men, women, and children go through, not many realize how young adults are affected emotionally, socially, and physically by the divorce. I conducted a recent interview with Elisheva Funk, a licensed social worker with a certificate in family therapy at Kennesaw State University, who provides an effective explanation for how divorce uniquely impacts young adults. Funk, also a child of divorce, states that young adults face the particular difficulty of processing a divorce away from home. The liberties awarded to young adults during adolescence change the family dynamic. This newfound independence allows them to ask for what they want, sometimes changing their relationship with their parents. Young adults’ ability to advocate comes from their comfort with communication. Funk notes, “If the parents model good communication skills, then the children learn that.” Therefore, it is important to share information about the divorce that is appropriate for young adults, so that disclosures do not

worsen their mental health. If young adults view honest communication negatively, the stress will affect their interactions with family members and their honesty in disclosures. It is imperative to recognize that because of high divorce rates, more young adults than ever before struggle with divorce's effects on their life skills.

The burden of this prevalent crisis gives cause to believe that there will be certain long-term effects on the young adult's developmental process, one of them being their ability to form meaningful and long-lasting relationships. For a while now, America has placed an emphasis on the importance of family, reminding young people that their home is their safe place. For example, a hearing during 1983 in Washington D.C. shares a similar idea with the newly formed Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families. The hearing assessed the importance and role of family structure. It emphasized the idea that strong families make a strong society. However, if strong families make a strong society, then the division of families brings the division of society. As a result of divorce, families are weakened and do not provide "the bulwark of support" they once did. ("Children, Youth, and Families" 15). If the rate of divorce was concerning in 1983, it should be even more concerning now because the breakdown of such a significant unit in young adults' lives can lead to a dramatic change in their ideologies regarding relationships.

People often derive their perception of the effectiveness of romantic relationships from their familial situations. An unforeseen disruption in their family structure is bound to affect this perception. Allison Kirk, a doctoral student in psychological studies, details these effects, noting that adolescents develop a fear of trust and intimacy in their romantic relationships as a result of witnessing marital conflicts. However, when these romantic and parental relationships

yield negative environments, young adults are more likely to find solace in friendships (Kirk 76).

Friendships become the support system that families once were for adolescents, teaching them to trust, overcome, and confide in their relationships. Of course, the level of conflict in a separation determines divorce's effect on a young adult's self-worth, intimacy levels, and trust issues.

Regardless of the state of conflict in adolescents' parental divorces, the fear that their relationships will mirror the end of their parents' relationship remains (Kirk 85-86). This explains why young adults have a greater reliance on friendships for intimacy. Friendships allow young adults to practice the same skills required for romantic relationships with less internal expectations or pressures. However, Jessica L. Bulduc, Sandra L. Caron, and Mary Ellin Logue found that "even if [the young adults] had been involved in a loving and harmonious relationship with their partner for a number of years," they still harbored similar fears and reserves for marriage (86). This shows that even without the internal pressures from a romantic relationship, adolescents still struggle to lose the mentality that no marriage means no divorce. This way of thinking validates why adolescents affected by divorce gravitate more towards platonic relationships than familial or romantic relationships.

In this pivotal time in their lives, young adults are required to communicate their opinions, feelings, and perceptions daily. This need for communication is only heightened for children of divorce. Jenna R. Shimkowski and Andrew M. Ledbetter remark that honest communication as a family can be beneficial but can also be detrimental to one's emotional health. The authors state, "Negative disclosures about the divorce may include revelations that are derogatory, emotionally charged, pessimistic, or demeaning ... [and] such disclosures could wreak havoc on a child's emotions, as well as feelings of mental health and stability" (188). If family members criticize other family members for sharing honest thoughts, it can contribute to the already hostile

family environment caused by the divorce.

However, D. Oren and E. Hadomi, social welfare experts, explore how honest communication equals healthier children (154). The authors go into depth talking about how the pain and the process of divorce tends to go unaddressed. Divorce often leaves young adults feeling lonely and unheard. The best option to heal familial relationships is to discuss how the individual family members perceive and feel the divorce. The authors support this claim by developing a study that allows participants to play a game that strengthens relationships through honest feedback from family members affected by divorce (164). The study's results prove the effectiveness of this approach. In some respects, both studies share similar views. Oren and Hadomi nod to Shimkowski and Ledbetter by acknowledging the difficulty in effectively communicating when there are feelings of resentment in conversations. However, Oren and Hadomi encourage honest feedback whether negative or positive (154). Both sides are reasonable to note, but as Funk explains in our interview, honest communication is important, but first and foremost, disclosures should be shared with the young adult's interests at heart. Unfiltered conversation is not the same as honest communication.

In the past decade, the mental health crisis has worsened, bringing additional problems to a young adult's developmental process. The *National Institute of Mental Health* provides statistics showing that young adults aged 18-25 face more mental illnesses compared to adults aged 26-49 and aged 50 and older. 18-25 year-olds made up 34% of adult mental illnesses in 2021. These mental health issues include battles with depression, anxiety, mood swings, substance use, and personality disorders ("Mental Illness"). These existing mental health issues are heightened for 18-25 year-olds during a divorce crisis. This is because "divorce means more than a legal dissolution.

It means heartache, change, negative thoughts and feelings, and even insecurities” (Harvey and Fine 59). While it is initially thought of as a solution for mental crises, divorce can lead to an added amount of health problems and relational problems. Maureen Culkin Rhyne, a director of behavioral sciences, notes that young adults are faced with more baggage, seeing that “the situational crisis of parental divorce is superimposed on the developmental crisis of the young adult transition” (4).

The added stress of the divorce exacerbates the existing mental health issues residing in young adults. The dissolution of this important structure in young adults’ lives negatively affects their mental health. One thing that can be done to reduce the negative impact of divorce is to look at divorce through a grief lens. Because of this relational death, young adults often harbor feelings of distrust and fear, mainly in romantic relationships. This loss also contributes to the mental health crisis in young adults; however good communication skills can negate negative effects. Overall, divorce plays a major role in the developmental process of young adults; therefore, it warrants additional discussion and examination.

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