Counseling the Divorced LDS Woman

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COUNSELING THE DIVORCED LDS WOMAN
By Becky Morris, Ed. D.*

Research confirms that women who undergo the trauma of the breakup of their marriage react in certain identifiable ways and go through similar stages before they succeed in adjusting to a new role. It is well for Church counselors to examine these stages and their resultant behaviors so as to foresee and perhaps forestall activity which might curtail LDS divorcees in their growth and development as daughters of God.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is an organization which values highly the family concept. Great emphasis is placed on the necessity and desirability of temple marriage and sealings, the priesthood holder as the recognized head of the family unit, the very real responsibility of teaching children the precepts of the Gospel, and the sanctity of the family unit which continues throughout eternity. With such emphasis on the family relationship, it is conceivable that, to an LDS woman, marriage failure may be even more shattering than it would be to one not so wedded to these concepts. Although most women in the Church are aware that experiencing trouble and pain is part of their reason for having come to earth, the actual facing of marital dissolution is often extremely difficult, especially if there has been a temple marriage.

Paul of Tarsus said, "The woman is not without the man in the Lord," and this statement is taken literally by LDS people. Such a belief so firmly entrenched in the minds of LDS women, almost negates the probability of severing the marriage relationship, so that when it does happen, the shock to her must be acute, and she will be in need of immediate help is she is to escape the pitfalls that generally accompany such an experience. True, some LDS women have been able, through their faith, to survive the shock, pick up the pieces of their shattered lives, and go on living productively without outside help. But there are many who cannot. Counselors and others who want to help should recognize the probable results of such trauma and attempt to give immediate and long-range assistance to these women.

There are stages of reaction which divorced women in general go through and counselors in the Church should know them. Then they can prepare for the kind of counseling necessary to avert these usual reactions.

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The first stage of reaction following divorce or separation is one of disbelief. There may be, at first, a feeling of relief if the tension in the relationship has been pronounced, but at the same time, there is an element of unreality and disbelief, especially if the marriage has lasted ten or more years. No matter what problems have existed, no matter the severity of the arguments, the actuality of being left alone to fend for oneself emotionally, if not economically, is at first not real. This stage may last days, weeks, or even months, but sooner or later, the individual must face the unpleasant facts. When she does, the most usual reaction is anger. This emotion may not be overtly expressed, but it most certainly is there. That she should have been put into this particular situation, which she feels she does not deserve and which means she must make some sweeping changes in her lifestyle, invokes rebellion. No one really enjoys forced change, for change means venturing into the unknown. The divorcee's anger may not be directed upon the real situation, for often it is displaced, projected upon other people or things: children or the lack of them; the Church; his or her parents, individuals or friends; his or her job. Any of these may become the focus of her anger. During this time then she needs to have someone to whom she can pour out her anger, someone she can trust not to misunderstand and condemn her, especially if this anger is toward the Church or some of its members. Later, she will recognize that this was just a stage she had to go through, but if her anger has been vented publicly, she will find it difficult to return to the Church or again accept the friendship of those to whom she has directed her anger initially. If the counselor to whom she has talked understands her reaction symptoms, she can be helped to control and overcome her anger.

Anger soon dissipates or at least diminishes, especially if she has had the advantage of counseling during this period. The next stage is usually characterized by self-doubt and recrimination. If she is conscientious, she may examine the past minutely to see what action she might have taken to avert the immediate events. She may blame herself for not having "done something" to prevent the breakup in her marriage. She may rehearse over and over in her mind little memories of things done or undone which might have changed the course of events. She may needlessly
punish herself for her "failure" as a wife, love partner, companion, or mother. Now is the time for the counselor to help her resolve these doubts in a positive fashion by allowing her to work out the real areas of failure and do something about them, if something can be done, or at least to realize that, given another chance for marriage, she will not repeat undesirable behavior and/or thoughts. In some cases she may come to realize that there was nothing at all she could have done to "save" her husband from having taken the road he is now following. Ultimately, each individual is responsible for his own actions, and another can help only if allowed to do so. But, of course, during this stage, the woman is not rational, and she will need help to understand the real cause of her breakup.

From this self-punishing stage, the woman who is not able to make the transition to her new role successfully at this point, whether she has been counseled or not, often takes one of several final resolutions of her problem, none of which are healthy spiritually or emotionally. If the previously stated steps have not been given or if they have not been successful in making her understand herself and the relationship she has had in the past, then we can expect one of the following to occur:

1. The woman withdraws almost completely from social contacts, most especially from those which involve meeting and mingling with men who might be potential marital candidates. This woman gives herself and her energies entirely to her family, her job, and/or her church work. This may be a conscious or an unconscious desire to punish herself or men in general because one has failed her.

2. The woman focuses on the necessity of proving her desirability. Such a woman’s experiences both during her marriage and as a result of its breakup have diminished her self-concept entirely. Her overt action may be to change her appearance by wearing a different kind of apparel, changing the color and/or style of her hair, using more and more expertly applied make-up, or, conversely, making no attempt at all to be attractive physically, to see if she can attract members of the opposite sex. Other overt action may even extend itself into physical sexual experiences with one or more male partners. Various studies have shown that this kind of behavior in a divorced woman is not at all unique.

3. The woman may resort to using her sex-appeal to tempt or tease the male, only to reject his advances with a "How can you be so dirty-minded!" kind of attitude when she is taken up on her implied invitations. Such experiences serve to reinforce her unrealistic concept that "all men are beasts," and damages her ability to make the changes in thinking necessary for her to resume a normal, satisfying way of life.

4. Another less prevalent behavior is that of fantasy. In this action the woman creates a phantom lover, embodying all the virtues the woman wants to find in man, and this image is projected in her imagination until he becomes so real that to her he actually exists. This woman can become so skillful in creating her lover that she convinces not only herself but her friends of his existence. She may send herself flowers from her non-existent suitor and describe him in detail to her friends along with her pleasurable activities with him. The reason he is never able to come to any social events or church functions or meetings with her is that he travels a good deal of the time. She will disclose accounts of phone calls from exotic, far away places from which he has called to declare his devotion and exciting future plans. Admittedly, this type of bizarre behavior is not common, but it does occur.

5. The woman too quickly finds another man to take her husband’s place. She remarries in haste to prove to herself and to her friends that she is desirable. Often the newly acquired husband has not been considered worthy of love, but rather has been regarded solely as an ego bolsterer. Such a marriage is rarely successful.

6. The woman finds herself faced with her husband’s renewed attentions. He cannot leave her alone, but he does not want to accept the responsibility of being her husband. This often leads to renewed sexual activity between them, more exciting perhaps than for a long long time, but, of course, frustrating and anxiety producing. Even if they do remarry, which is unlikely, a resolution of the real problems in the marriage has not occurred; indeed, they may be intensified and the final break even more devastating than the original one.

It is easy to see that none of these behavior patterns is a satisfactory solution to the woman’s emotional problems. Some are obviously wrong, for they involve sexual indiscretions contrary to Gospel teachings and to her happiness and in opposition to her growth as a responsible individual. Others, less easily recognized, are equally destructive to spiritual and emotional growth.

Latter Day Saint women have a unique problem. They recognize themselves as beginningless, hence everlasting. They realize that they are co-eternal with God and that there is no escape from life no matter how much that might seem desirable at the time, for to be alive means to have always existed. Further, they have been taught that physical birth into mortality is not totally at the initiative of God the Father. It is, at least in part, an individual decision made in the pre-mortal existence to allow them to pursue exaltation in the eternal worlds to come. Truman Madsen, in his book, *Eternal Man*, says:
Glasser feels that it does no good to look for what went client to become involved in learning new ways of irresponsibility is the keynote for the deviant behavior, the client is led to develop the strength to take the needs, at any time in their lives when they are unrealistically. By accepting the idea that unsuccessful in doing so they are behaving since all individuals are constantly trying to fulfill their personality occurs as a consequence of meeting conflicts and impasses head on and reconciling them. For the LDS divorcee this is particularly important.

Since individual responsibility then for one’s own life and actions is the keynote of Mormon faith, it might be well for the LDS counselor to reacquaint himself/herself with the ideas of some psychological theories whose ideas are compatible with LDS thought. Glasser’s reality oriented approach to counseling would be especially helpful in counseling the woman who indulges in teasing, withdrawal, or fantasy. The following points describe Glasser’s view:

1. Working in the present and toward the future, we do not get involved with the patient’s history because we neither can change what happened to him nor accept the fact that he is limited by his past.

2. We do not look for unconscious conflicts or the reason for them. A patient cannot become involved with us by excusing his behavior on the basis of unconscious motivations.

3. We emphasize the morality of behavior. We face the issue of right and wrong which we believe solidifies the involvement.

4. We teach the patients better ways to fulfill their needs.

Glasser believes that answers to problems lie not in any outside agency, but rather within the individual. Since all individuals are constantly trying to fulfill their needs, at any time in their lives when they are unsuccessful in doing so they are behaving unrealistically. By accepting the idea that irresponsibility is the keynote for the deviant behavior, the client is led to develop the strength to take the responsibility to fulfill her needs in a more satisfactory manner. Glasser stresses that there is a difference in being “cured of an illness” and helping oneself. As long as the woman views herself as “ill” rather than irresponsible, she cannot be helped. Without denying that the client has had an unsatisfactory experience, Glasser feels that it does no good to look for what went wrong before, but rather the therapist must help the client to become involved in learning new ways of behavior. The therapist must insist that the woman face her present behavior and acknowledge that it does not fulfill her needs, that morality is important, even necessary. The woman is confronted with her total behavior and asked to judge its quality. Unless she does judge it, she will not change. The person who can help her to face the cause of her behavior, do something about it, and resume her adult responsibility towards her family and her own life can make a real contribution to that person’s life and development. Asking the divorcée, “Are you taking the responsible course? are you doing right or wrong?” is not out of line, for when a person knows that someone really cares but that there are standards of behavior which she must follow, she can be helped. To do otherwise would only allow her to become more comfortable with her irresponsibility but would in time curtail her ultimate growth.

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Sidney Jourard is another theorist whose ideas are typical of LDS standards. Jourard believes that it is healthy to (a) want affection, (b) be able to accept it without anxiety when it is genuinely offered, (c) be able to behave toward others in a way which will elicit affection, (d) be able to give affection, and (e) be able to choose rationally between affection and other values. His views would be particularly effective with the woman who indulges in sexual promiscuity or who is returning to sexual experiences with her former husband. It is necessary for her to learn that all adults are dependent upon others for many vital satisfactions and they need the help and responsiveness of others in order to cope with life’s problems and maintain a sense of security, self-esteem, and identity. She must also learn that armoring herself with self-defeating, rigid interpersonal behavior patterns serves only to hide her real self from the gaze of others and from herself. The inability to enter into and sustain personal relationships with others contributes to emotional illness. The solution to the problem is first to

Your conscious and purpose existence is guaranteed forever. Through stages of either growth or degeneration, selfhood remains. Both utter extinction and permanent regression to a prior state are impossibilities. (8:p. 15)

Necessarily then everyone is enmeshed in a never­ending series of personal and interpersonal relationships daily so it is important that competence, knowledge, and skills in forming meaningful and personally satisfying relationships be perfected. Growth in personality occurs as a consequence of meeting conflicts and impasses head on and reconciling them. For the LDS divorcee this is particularly important.

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come to know one's own self, then to go beyond her own problems to help others. Her concern for the happiness of another person will be good insurance for her own happiness. She will also learn that in a healthy relationship each partner must respect the other's right to be autonomous. This will involve pain, for to respect and value another's individuality means that one actually sees and acknowledges the other's unique qualities, good or bad as he may consider them. To allow another to be what he is does not necessarily mean that one must like all that the other is and does, but it does mean that he respects the other person as an individual with rights and privileges of his or her own. When a counselor listens, reflects, and interprets the counselee to herself and rewards healthy behavior (sometimes by simply not being judgmental when the counselee does not exhibit it), the counselee is encouraged to say whatever she spontaneously wishes to say, knowing that she will not be censured. When this respect is given and when she is encouraged and permitted free emotional expression, self-understanding is also promoted. Another tactic is interpreting the behavior the counselee is exhibiting at various stages of treatment. As the client is treated in this manner, she can at least begin to hope that she is a worthy person and thus respect others as such. Such concepts are those of Sidney Jourard as explained in his two very thought provoking books (6 & 7).

Frankl's Logotherapy sees destiny as the "ultimate testing ground for human freedom." (2:p. 94). Frankl says that the way handicaps and barriers are meaningfully incorporated into a person's life determines what he ultimately becomes:

The destiny a person suffers is to be shaped where possible and to be endured where necessary. Responsibility to life is assumed by responding to the situations which it presents.

(1:p. 134)

Frankl believes a person cannot be allowed to blame environmental influences for determining his destiny, for such a practice is a way to avoid responsibility. "Destiny, like death, is a part of life," he says. "If a person quarrels with destiny, he is overlooking its meaning." (1:p. 74). For Frankl the spiritual aspect is a separate dimension of man. Frankl subordinates the self-enhancement or self-actualization goal of other schools of therapy to that of achievement of meaning. The center of Frankl's approach is concern with values and goals, freedom and responsibility. He believes only neurotics fear the tensions of unhappy, unrequited love, and that such persons must be re-educated to be ready and receptive, to wait for the single, happy love which may follow nine unhappy ones. He believes that sometimes it is necessary for growth and maturation of an individual that he be made capable of suffering, for there are situations where men and women can fulfill themselves only in genuine suffering. Such an idea is completely compatible with Joseph Smith's explanation of the place of evil and suffering in life.

In this world, often through pain, we are awakened in our spirit to the Christ who really was and is. The warm and overwhelming miracle is this: the more we approach Him and His likeness, the more we come to love as he loves and the less we suffer needlessly. (8:p. 60).

The Existential idea that a human being is not a static entity, but rather is in a constant state of transition, emerging, becoming, evolving, is definitely Mormon theology. The Church teaches that man works out his own destiny by interacting with others in the world of things and events and that what he does determines in great measure what he is. Truman Madsen states in his book, Eternal Man, that "physical losses and tribulations, if endured in His name, have their limits and are refining; . . . The awful tragedy of this life is not suffering but suffering in vain." All losses will be made up in the resurrection provided one continues faithful. Freedom is possible only when we ask ourselves what we want to be. God the Father and God the Son cannot break their eternal covenants. This is not because they are not free to do so, but because they have chosen directions which allow mortals the privilege of total freedom to choose which way they wish to go. Since the destiny of LDS people is not union with the Divine but in re-union with them, their search for meaning in life is facilitated by knowledge gained through the teachings of the Church and personal revelation. Anyone who represses his natural impulse to reach toward and embrace Light and Truth eventually falls victim to psychosomatic illnesses and misery (8:pp. 72-74). Such a philosophy as this cannot help but have a salutary effect upon the LDS divorcee when it is made known to her along with true concern, empathy and interest in her well-being.

Although one hopes that the Gospel and its teachings in-and-of themselves will curtail break-ups in LDS homes, the fact remains that a certain percentage of LDS women will suffer such an experience. The theorists presented in this paper have evolved ways of understanding and helping such distressed women which are compatible with the teachings of the Church. It is hoped that those who attempt to counsel them will find the ideas and suggestions in this paper helpful.
REFERENCES


