



## Families ... generations of strength

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Campbell Hall  
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# Adult Children of Divorce

Sharon Lewis, Extension Agent, Family & Consumer Sciences, Portage/Summit Counties

The divorce of one's parents is generally one of the most painful events in life. Researchers have found that children experience many fairly predictable stages as they learn to accept the finality of the divorce and begin to build sometimes changed relationships with each of the parents. Most of the current studies concerning the effects of divorce discuss younger children and their responses to this stressful family situation.

However, several researchers have explored the impact parental divorce has on adult children. The results indicate that the disruption through divorce of the parent/child relationship as late as early adulthood may still produce some negative effects. Perhaps not surprisingly, older adolescents and adult children experience much of the same trauma as younger children of divorcing parents. They also need to find ways to accept the changes in their family relationships (Hines, 1997).

Obviously, arrangements concerning custody, child support, and visitation are no longer issues, but parent/child contact and emotional support are often greatly affected. Traditionally, young adults are still dependent on their parents to assist them in making the transition to independence. Divorce often creates such a powerful sense of loss of a parent that the young adult may not feel like the parent is still available to them. Because the adult child is in a period of major transition in his or her own life, it is difficult for him/her to readily accept the changes that the parent(s) are, of necessity, experiencing. (Aquilino, 1994).

The adult child can reasonably expect to go through a grieving process when his or her parents divorce. This will probably include periods of anger at one or both parents. There may be a strong feeling that their family is irretrievably fragmented. Feelings of confusion concerning how to relate positively to the parents are normal. Adult children will likely question how holidays and other family traditions can ever be meaningful again.

### Tips for Coping

- The young adult should firmly, but lovingly, refuse to be drawn into the middle of the conflict. There may be pressure to choose sides, but he or she needs to remain as loving as possible with both parents. If one parent seems to be more "at fault" or "to blame" than the other, the adult child will likely be angry at that parent. However, that issue should be resolved between the parent and the child with professional assistance, if needed.

The parents have to work out their own divorce and financial agreements. This is not an appropriate role for their child.

- The adult child may need to seek out a support group to allow a "safe" place to let out feelings and to share with others who are experiencing similar concerns.

- The grieving process is normal! People don't really explode from anger — it only feels like it. There will be times to cry, times to yell, and times to feel sad. It's OK.

- Although it's often difficult, it's important to try to forgive parental weaknesses and faults. Everyone heals easier and sooner with a little understanding and reasonable expectations.

- Family rituals are still important. However, some of them may need to be adjusted to meet the changed family situation. Be flexible.

- Create new traditions and family activities. This helps the healing process and strengthens the family members.

- Spend positive time together in the new family groupings. Find fun things to do to help deal with stress and to begin rebuilding.

Accepting parents' divorce when one is just beginning to get used to his or her own new independence can be very

stressful. It helps to remember that life will get back to normal in time, even if normal looks different from what was expected. The newly arranged family can still be strong, loving, and supportive of its members.

## References

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