

Growing  
Through  
DIVORCE

JIM SMOKE



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ONE

## *Is This Really Happening to Me?*

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*“Divorce is not an event. It is a process.  
You grow through that process a minute,  
an hour, a day, a week at a time.”*

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Shocked! Angry! Dazed! Bitter! Empty! Cheated! Rejected! These, along with an assortment of other feelings, probably describe how many people feel when they separate from a marriage that began with optimism, happiness, and hope. A terrible thing that somehow always happened to other people has happened to you. In many instances, there is little preparation for the chaos that you are thrown into both emotionally and physically. Many things that were once taken in stride now become major hazards in daily life. You are in “divorce country”! You never planned to be here but you are. It’s a strange place with different rules, regulations, and road signs. You want it all to change and go away. But it won’t!

### **Shock—Stage One**

The first emotional state that many people go through in a divorce is shock. Shock is a reaction to the impact that this is really happening to me—not some statistic out there in society, but me.

In a state of shock, people react in many different ways. Some retreat within themselves, trying to block out all thoughts of what is happening. They deny the divorce mentally and refuse to talk about it with anyone. They withdraw from friends and social contacts. They may move or change jobs. Retreating sometimes turns into running.

Inward feelings may run the gamut from personal feelings of guilt and failure to the transference of those feelings totally to the other person.

People who go inward in a divorce tend to reject positive help and acceptance from others. Growth in a divorce begins with the admission that this is really happening to me. The first step in dealing with any situation is admitting the situation exists. Denying the divorce will not make it go away. Hiding it from family and friends will not resolve it.

Many people experiencing divorce have shared that enough people have isolated them without them having to impose an inward isolation upon themselves. There is a time, however, to evaluate, think through, and reflect upon what is happening to you. This constructive retreat generally happens after the shock state has passed.

In the shock state, other people tend to go outside themselves. This is prompted by the need to tell all and to tell everyone. Acceptance of the situation is fended off by the constant replay of all the details, feelings, and facts of the divorce. Any ear that will listen becomes a target for the talker.

For the outward person, a frantic social pace often keeps the reality of the situation at arm's length. Coming, going, and doing become all-important. If you are too busy to think, you cannot be hurt by your thoughts. But realities have a way of catching up with you, and facing them today will set tomorrow free.

In the shock stage, both the inward and the outward person slowly come to an acceptance of the fact that a relationship that once was vital, important, and real has died.

### **What About Hope?**

Some people prolong the shock stage by desperately clinging to hope. They live on the hope that they can get back together again and that things will work out to a happy ending. They come to professional counselors with hope in their hearts. They look to God and ministers for miracles. They talk to friends and relatives and ask for help and hope. They often talk to the departed mate about reunion. Many refuse to let hope die and enter into a holding pattern that often lasts for years.

Without hope and optimism, life in general would be as dry as dust. But hope has to be coupled with realism. Realism looks at a situation as it exists, not as you would like it to exist. Realism evaluates a situation honestly based on past and present experience. Here are several questions that will help you sort out hope and reality.

#### *1. Do both parties really want the marriage?*

If a marriage is in trouble and both parties really want the marriage to succeed, there is a high degree of realistic hope providing they will accept professional help. If one party does not really want the marriage, it will not matter how strongly the other party wants it. Many people have no choice in the matter. If the other person has made the decision and leaves, you are reduced to the decision of waiting and hoping for their return or filing for a divorce.

It is always difficult to live out a bad decision that is made by someone else. I believe that you do all that you possibly can to save a marriage before you accept the decision to divorce.

Just remember, it takes two people working at reconciliation if a marriage is to be saved.

2. *Will both parties accept professional help in reconciliation for as long as is necessary?*

One of the questions I frequently ask divorced persons is whether or not they went for help when their marriage was deteriorating. Frequently they reply that they wanted and went for help but the other party felt they did not need it or it was not their problem to resolve. Counselors do not work one-party miracles in marriage very often. It takes two people working on the problem. The battle is already lost if only one person assumes responsibility. Many couples start counseling together with good intentions only to have one of them quit after a couple of sessions or take a dislike to the counselor at being probed and questioned. Too many people expect a session or two to solve what many years might have created. If one person refuses help, your chances are minimal that you will get your marriage back together.

3. *Has a third party become involved with either mate?*

The breakup of a marriage may be caused by internal strife within the marriage or by a third-party relationship being formed outside of the marriage. Since we do not have time to argue cause and effect here, we simply submit from experience that a third-party involvement usually brings the marriage to its end. Some partners will wait, forgive, endure, and try to forget. But the law of averages is pretty high that the third-party involvement will end the marriage.

About 75 percent of all divorces are caused by affairs. The remaining 25 percent happen when a person decides they can no longer live with things like alcoholism, drugs, addictions,

and dysfunctional behaviors—and when in spite of their efforts, the person with the problem refuses all help.

4. *What have I learned from my past experiences that will shed light on my present situation?*

Experience is, for all of us, a good teacher. We learn by living and by experiencing. We can all look into our well of experience and draw from it. Hopefully, you will not have to marry many times in order to learn from experience. Many marriages contain elements that were out of control long before the marriage was a reality. But many people would rather face hope than reality, and they gamble that things will be different this time. Learn from your past!

Few people make dramatic changes in their life and lifestyle without some kind of outside help, whether from God or a professional. Just hoping a marriage will come back together by itself is like wishing on a chicken bone. Each person must evaluate whether the relationship has died or whether there is enough life to hold out some hope.

### **Adjustment—Stage Two**

As the shock stage of a divorce begins to wear away, a process of adjustment—stage two—begins to take place. Adjustment means you begin to deal with the reality that this has really happened to you. Shock is accepting the facts of divorce; adjustment is doing something about it.

There is a period of time in most divorces that is similar to that experienced at the loss of a mate through death. It is a time of grief, mourning, or sorrow over a relationship that is lost. Just as people accept shock in different ways, people also accept mourning in different ways. They can go inward or outward.



## **Positive Mourning**

Positive mourning is the experience of remembering the good, happy, fun-filled memories of your marriage and forgetting the bad memories. It's being glad you had the good times and wishing you still had them. It's being sorry that they are gone now and knowing that there is still much happiness left for you in life. Happiness is not born in marriage and killed in divorce. Positive mourning says I have the human right to feel loss, grief, and sorrow. It says I hurt and for now there is an empty space in my life. I can cry because they are positive tears.

## **Negative Mourning**

Negative mourning is the experience of swimming in a sea of self-pity. It usually starts with the assumption that the marriage dissolution was all my fault or all his or her fault. Once this idea is projected, the person locks himself into a mental room and throws the key away. He defies others to break down the door and release him from his self-imposed misery. Life has dealt him a bad hand and his relief comes from telling everyone his miseries. Feeling sorry for yourself should be limited to a five-second experience about once a week. It is self-defeating and often leads into deep mental depression. If you obtained all the pity that you wanted from other people, what would you have? A warehouse full of "I'm so sorrys"!

## **Assembling the Pieces**

Jigsaw puzzle fans go about their hobby in an interesting way. They dump all the pieces of the puzzle on a table, turn them all right side up, then slowly begin putting them together.

Sometimes they leave the puzzle for a time and return to work on it later. The project methodically goes on until the last piece is in place. The picture is completed—success is attained.

Life is a daily process of putting the pieces of a puzzle together. We do a little each day, and slowly the picture takes shape. In a divorce, the pieces to the puzzle get tossed all over the house, and some are even lost for a while. Some get in the wrong place and don't fit too well. Persistence, perseverance, and patience help us keep working on the puzzle. Slowly the pieces come together. In the adjustment stage, pieces to the puzzle are being identified, turned right side up, and slowly put into place. Each chapter in this book will help you put some of the pieces of the divorce puzzle together. Adjustment sometimes means we can't have things exactly as we want them. We adjust to the situation as it is, knowing that it will change.

Adjustment is also a time of transition. It is passing from one lifestyle (married) to another lifestyle (single). Patterns of living that were firmly established in marriage have now been disrupted and the new pattern has not yet been fully developed. Adjustment is often marked by restlessness, disorganization, and extreme highs and lows in feelings. Loneliness creeps in and out. And the burden of being a single parent can settle like an unyielding yoke upon your shoulders.

Adjustment sometimes means that you have to make very important decisions for yourself, family, and future while you are at your emotional worst. The temptation is often to throw all the pieces of your puzzle into the air and hope that they will fall together when they land.

Take the time to sort the pieces out, place them right side up, and see if they fit together. Getting away from the puzzle

for a while often helps you get the pieces into better perspective when you return.

The period of adjustment may take many months. Time is a healer and cannot be hurried. Many people in post-divorce adjustment want to hurry the hurts away and experience instant new health. Divorce recovery takes time.

After many years of working in the divorce-recovery field, I have discovered that it takes most men and women from two to three years to recover from a divorce.

### **Growth—Stage Three**

When was the last time you checked to see if the grass outside your house was still growing? That's silly. No one checks their grass. You just wait a week, it grows, you cut it, wait another week, and it's time to cut it again. The point is that your grass grows even though you can't see it growing. Growth in human lives works the same way. You grow a little each day even if you can't see it or feel it. Good growth happens when conditions are right, both in lawns and in lives. Good growth begins when a person says, "I want to grow and learn from my experiences."

In a recent conversation, I asked a person how they were doing. The response was "Not too good," followed by, "I'm going through a divorce."

The response was typical of most people. We are all going through different things each day. The difference is that you have a choice whether you will simply go through divorce or grow through it.

Growing through a divorce means you say, "I will learn all I can learn from this experience, and I will be a stronger and better person because of this learning experience."

If anyone had come to you prior to your divorce and asked what you knew about divorce, you probably would have

replied, “Not very much.” You possibly could have added that you had known people who had divorced, but you had little personal experience with the problem until now.

Growing is learning all you can about a given situation or thing. Divorce can be either a negative, self-defeating experience in your life or a positive, growth-producing experience. It depends on what you are willing to learn from it and how you put what you have learned into practice.

Let me share nine “growing through divorce” steps with you.

1. Realize that time is a healer and you must walk through that process one day at a time. No one can walk through it for you. No one else will have your exact feelings and experiences. Some days the growth time will be an hour or maybe even half of a day. But you will grow only as you walk through the process.

2. Come to grips with yourself. You can't deny your existence no matter how frustrated, lonely, guilty, angry, or desperate you may feel.

3. Set aside time for reflection, meditation, reading, thinking, and personal growth. There are many situations around you that you will be powerless to change. But you can always work on changing yourself. Allow yourself some time to do this.

4. Get with healthy people who are struggling but growing. There is only minimal comfort in hearing other people's divorce stories while you are going through yours. At first it may be a help, but it soon becomes a bore. Healthy people are those who let the past die and who live and grow in the present.

Many churches and community colleges today offer weekly divorce support groups. Make a few phone calls and see if there is one near you.

5. Seek professional counseling or therapy if you feel you need it. Asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Many counseling centers offer divorce-recovery workshops that can be invaluable in helping you gain insight into your situation.

6. Accept the fact that you are divorced (or divorcing) and now single. Many divorced people still feel married. A lady summed up her feelings one day by saying that she was not single but merely between marriages. If you are divorced, you are single.

7. Watch out for relational rescue attempts. When we are in pain, we are emotionally vulnerable to anyone with an outstretched hand and kind word. Some people prey on hurting people. Be on your guard.

8. Put the past in the past and live in the present.

9. Commit your new way to God, begin new things, and seek the help and relationships you need to begin again.

None of these growth-producing steps are easy. You have to begin where you are, even if you feel you are fresh out of new beginnings.

Society has a way of looking at divorce and spelling it F-A-I-L-U-R-E. Even though it is widely accepted as a way of life in our world, it still carries its brand on people's lives. We somehow will give people the right to fail in business, in school, in careers, but not in marriage. The contemporary church, in particular, has looked upon divorce as the unforgivable sin while preaching that man is not perfect, must live with his humanity, and has the freedom to fail. A divorced person has enough of a struggle living with his own weight of judgment without having that weight added to by others. Someone asked me recently who suffered the most in a divorce: a man, a woman, or the children. My response was "People!"

## Four Goals for Good Growth

Some wise person once said, “Shoot at nothing, and that is what you will hit.” It is hard to set goals and work at them when you are in the chaos of divorce. But without those goals, you will never hit the target of growth. Here are four simple ones that you can work on each week.

1. Look at your divorce-recovery process as a healing experience. You are recovering from the surgery of loss. All healing takes time. Your goal is to give yourself time to heal. Remember, two to three years!

2. Begin to develop a new support system that will give you a sense of belonging and identity for your time of transition. One of the painful things in divorce is that you often lose most of your married friends. Your goal is to slowly build a new support system for your life.

3. Give yourself time for emotional drainage. We do one of two things with our emotions. We express them or repress them. Only by expressing them do we find a sense of relief and healing. There will always be a few people who will let you turn on your emotional tap and spill its contents. Putting on a happy face when you have a sad heart only denies your feelings. Remember, the Bible says there is a season for everything.

4. Be willing to integrate your divorce experience with that of other people in the form of caring, sharing, contrasting, and supporting. Even when you are at the bottom of the well humanly, you can find something to give to another hurting person. They in turn will give to you.

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*Always remember, in a divorce you get  
custody of yourself!*

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