

Should Unhappy Couples Stay Together “For Their Children”?

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Abstract

Great marital conflict exists in many households around the world where many unhappy couples believe that staying together is more beneficial for their children. In this paper, I argue that divorce may be a more effective conflict buffer than remaining in an unhappy, broken marriage because doing so may have drastic consequences on both the mental and physical health of the parents and children. These consequences include low self-esteem, low life-satisfaction, depression, weaker immune systems, and anxiety disorders. I also consider alternative views, such as children of divorced parents are themselves more likely to get divorced, and that children would develop behavioral issues if the parents get a divorce. I conclude this paper by suggesting that couples either get divorced, try cohabitation, or seek couple's therapy to promote a healthy environment for their children.

Keywords: marital conflict, divorce, unhappy marriages, marital discord model

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In this paper, I argue that parents in a broken marriage should not remain together. I define a broken marriage as one in which both partners are unhappy and unsatisfied with their relationship, they are unable to communicate without arguing, they believe their relationship has eroded and cannot be amended, and they perceive their partner as a burden they must tolerate. According to Shapiro (2012), only 17% of married couples consider themselves to be happy and their marriage a success. The other 83% are either divorced or unhappy in their marriage. Considering these numbers, it is important to look at the consequences caused by staying in an unhappy and broken marriage on both the parents and children.

I support my position with the following three arguments. First, I argue that children suffer from emotional insecurity, low self-esteem, and internalized conflict when parents stay in a broken marriage (Lange & Franck, 2007; Pınar Ulu & Fıfılođlu, 2002). Second, I argue that remaining in a broken marriage lowers parents' self-esteem and overall life satisfaction (Hawkins & Booth, 2005; Whisman et al., 2006). Third, I argue that staying in a broken marriage may result in mental illnesses such as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Priest, 2013; Whisman, 2007), and depression in the parents (Hollist et al., 2007; Kouros et al., 2008).

I also consider alternative positions readers may have. First, I consider the argument that parents' staying together lessens the child's future chances of divorce. I refute this argument by explaining that children from high conflict households with divorced parents were less prone to experience marital dissolution than the ones whose parents stayed together (Gager et al., 2016). Second, I consider the argument that parents staying together can lessen the development of behavioral issues in children. I counter this argument by demonstrating how marital conflict is linked to a greater increase in children's behavioral issues in marriages that do not end in divorce compared to those that do (Morrison & Coiro, 1999). Third, I consider the argument that staying in a broken marriage enables children to perform better

academically. I counter this argument by explaining that marital conflict is a risk factor for poor academic performance in children (Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010).

This paper is important because high marital strife exists in many households around the world and many unhappy couples believe that staying together is more beneficial for their children. However, staying in a broken marriage may have drastic consequences on both the mental and physical health of the parents and children. Additionally, it can negatively influence children's academic performance and stimulate the development of behavioral issues in children. Thus, it is critical to address the long-term effects of staying in a broken marriage on both the children and the parents.

The Psychological Implications of Staying Together

Unhappiness and dissatisfaction are well-known triggers to many psychological problems. Couples who decide to stay in a broken and unhappy marriage expose themselves and their children to an array of psychological problems such as psychiatric disorders and behavioral issues. These psychological implications may also affect other facets of the parents' and the children's lives.

Psychological Effects on the Parents

The overall quality of a marriage is affected when couples decide to stay in an unhappy marriage, as they risk the development of certain anxiety disorders. Individuals with anxiety disorders worry and stress excessively over the circumstances of their lives and have recurring intrusive thoughts, which make it difficult for them to function on a daily basis. According to Whisman (2007), there is a correlation between marital discontent and a variety of mental diseases, with the strongest link being between marital dissatisfaction and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). Similarly, Priest (2013) found that relationship quality with relatives and partners links to generalized anxiety disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for people who are unhappy in their marriages. When spouses argue incessantly, lack intimacy, surround themselves with negative energy, and find their marriage

in discord, their anxiety levels rise. This increase can lead to a diagnosed mental illness such as GAD or PTSD. For this reason, couples in low quality, unhappy marriages are at a greater risk of anxiety disorders.

In addition to anxiety disorders, unhappy marriages negatively affect the parents' self-esteem and, consequently, their life satisfaction. Self-esteem is the positive conviction in one's own worthiness or capabilities (American Psychological Association, n.d). Low self-esteem may impair a person's quality of life in a myriad of ways. For instance, people with low self-esteem can make self-destructive and self-depreciative decisions such as accepting maltreatment or injuring themselves and others. These decisions may be taken as an attempt to earn affection or to numb the agony of their own worthlessness. Furthermore, reduced self-esteem is often associated with unhappy marriages. For example, Whisman et al. (2006) investigated the impact of marital disagreement on a variety of well-being indicators such as self-esteem and life satisfaction, in older couples. Their findings demonstrate a link between marital discord and reduced life satisfaction and self-esteem.

These findings are in line with previous research conducted on younger couples by Hawkins and Booth (2005). The authors followed up with unhappy marriages over a twelve-year period and assessed marital happiness on a variety of factors to examine the effects of an unhappy marriage on well-being. Their findings suggest that staying in a low-quality marriage leads to a reduction in overall life satisfaction and self-esteem. Based on the findings of these studies, unhappy couples do not gain the rewards of marriage in terms of general happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and well-being. Those who are unhappily married do not have access to the social and emotional support that marriage provides. Therefore, reduced self-esteem, which reduces life satisfaction, is a consequence of remaining in unhappy marriages.

An equally important consequence of staying in an unhappy marriage is the development of depression. According to the American Psychological Association (n.d),

depression is not merely a feeling of sorrow rather it is characterized by a disinterest in daily activities, considerable weight loss, or increase, fatigue, inability to focus, and feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt. Depression may infiltrate an unhappily married couple's lives and cause a variety of problems, ranging from excessive sleeping and inability to complete daily tasks to suicidal thoughts. The marital discord model of depression (Beach et al., 1990) demonstrates how an unhappy marriage may lead to the development of depression. This model of depression suggests that marital problems are significant predictors of future depression symptoms. According to this theory, marital adjustment issues are related to spouses' aggressive and unsupportive dispute resolution, which leads to increased depression symptoms. Indeed, the loss of beneficial marital connection aspects such as couple harmony, closeness, and emotional acceptance is likely to lead to more severe depression symptoms.

Several studies have shown empirical support for the marital discord model (e.g., Beach et al., 2003; Dehle & Weiss, 1998; Whisman & Bruce, 1999). Additionally, an ample amount of more recent studies from various cultures has found that unhappy marriages may lead to depression. For example, Kouros et al. (2008) found that changes in marriage satisfaction predicted depressive symptoms, with lower marital satisfaction predicting higher levels of depressive symptoms over time in European Americans. Similarly, based on a longitudinal study of Brazilian women, Hollist et al. (2007) claim that marital happiness is a major predictor of depression after two years of marriage. Another study by Atkins et al. (2011) confirms the substantial and pervasive link between marital disagreement and depression among German and Austrian couples. Strife, lack of communication, emotional alienation, avoidance, disengagement, power imbalance, or uncontrolled venting of resentment and anger can all contribute to depression in marriage. Thus, depression may develop in couples who remain unhappily married, which can act as a catalyst for them to find alternative solutions to remaining in such a marriage.

Psychological Effects on the Children

Children in high-marital conflict households may be emotionally insecure. According to the American Psychological Association (n.d), emotional security is a sense of safety and trust, coupled with an absence from fear. The emotional security theory (EST) suggests that children's understanding of family connections, especially parental relations, is linked to their perception of protection, safety, and security (Davies & Cummings, 1994). When children are exposed to high-marital conflict, they tend to either internalize and embody or externalize and project their problems. Anxiety and depressed feelings, social disengagement, and medical ailments are all indicators of internalizing problems. On the other hand, violent, oppositional, and delinquent behavior, are examples of externalizing problems (Achenbach, 1966).

Children's emotional responses reflect how they interpret domestic relationships. As per EST, children analyze their parents' interaction and use that to establish a foundation for their emotional responses. According to a study of young adolescents by Pınar Ulu and Fıfılođlu (2002), frequent and substantial marital conflict may produce problems in children by instilling feelings of insecurity, self-blame, and inadequate coping mechanisms. In addition, by studying 416 families, Buehler et al. (2007) found that internalizing problems in adolescents was connected to marital conflict through five distinct reaction mechanisms, including self-blame, lower levels of constructive perceptions about family connections, internalizing discomfort, avoidance, and emotional dysregulation. When children perceive their familial connections as unstable, their emotional responses will also be unstable and insecure. Therefore, marital discord may cause children to experience emotional insecurity.

In addition to being emotionally insecure, children may attribute their parent's problems to themselves and engage in self-blame. Part of the ascription of self-blame in children is a sense of responsibility for the parents' problems, which may lead to emotions of guilt and shame. These poor self-evaluations may jeopardize self-esteem and induce stress

and depression. As seen in Amato's (1986) findings, there is a strong negative association between marital conflict and self-esteem among primary school children. Amato reported that the greater the marital conflict, the lower the child's self-esteem. Similarly, Cooper et al. (1983) found that children who perceive conflict between their parents reported having lower self-esteem. Thus, marital conflict and the self-blame that ensues may cause lower levels of self-esteem among children, which negatively affects their mental health.

Other Implications That Staying Together Has on Children

Children are highly sensitive to conflict between their parents. This foreboding has many effects on children including hindrance of family and social relationships, as well as overall poorer health.

Effects on Social Relationships

Children from high-conflict households find it difficult to communicate with peers. The influence of marital conflict on children's views of themselves and their social surroundings may cause them trouble in social relationships. Children from high-conflict households are more likely to have unfavorable perceptions of themselves and their social situations, as well as poor internal representations of family connections. These negative self-views are reflected onto their relationships with others. According to Schudlich et al. (2004), children's perceptions of peer conflict-resolution techniques were strongly associated to marital conflict strategies. In the virtual conflict settings, children's tendencies toward more negative conflict-resolution tactics with peers and aggressive conduct were linked to more direct and indirect conflict behaviors by mothers and fathers, as well as more overt conflict behaviors by fathers.

Correspondingly, in a cohort of children aged one to four years old, Finger et al. (2010) observed a relationship between inter-parental dispute and young children's capacity to get along with their classmates in kindergarten. The researchers discovered that marital animosity had strong negative influences on children's peer competence and that marital

hostility is longitudinally predictive of children's peer and social proficiency. These findings may provide evidence for the social learning theory, which argues that children learn how to interact by observing others (Bandura & Walter, 1977). When children witness their parents arguing and observe the violence that ensues, they are more likely to act in the same manner with others. For this reason, marital conflict hinders children's ability to communicate effectively with peers.

Effects on Physical Health

In addition to hindering children's social abilities, marital conflict can affect children's health. Indeed, children's frequent exposure to marital aggression may cause them severe health problems. El-Sheikh et al. (2001) found that marital conflict is linked to a greater number of general health problems (both acute and chronic), digestive issues, fatigue, and a weaker resistance to illnesses. In addition, marital conflict may reduce or slow down children's growth. According to Montgomery et al. (1997), even after adjusting for the possible confounding variables, conflict before the age of seven years exhibited a robust and statistically significant connection with stunted growth until the age of seven years. Furthermore, children in high conflict households also have somatic complaints. For instance, Stiles (2002) demonstrates that psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches and stomachaches may develop in school-aged children, as a result of marital disputes. Thus, marital conflict and choosing to stay in an unhappy marriage may pose a health risk for children on various levels.

Is Divorce Really a Better Option?

Some people may argue that parents can work through their differences and that remaining together is better than getting a divorce. Many critics believe that parents remaining together will have positive long-term impacts on both the children and the parents, such as fewer chances of children getting a divorce themselves in the future and performing better academically, as well as lessening the development of behavioral issues in children.

It is often believed that parents should try to salvage their relationship for their children since it may lessen their chances of future divorce. While this viewpoint has merit, there is little data to support it, and it fails to account for the unprecedented health challenges that the parents would endure. Furthermore, multiple studies show that staying in an unhappy marriage increases the likelihood of a future divorce for the children. For example, in a longitudinal study of 297 parents and their married children, Amato and Booth (2001) discovered that parents' reports of marital discord predicted offspring's reports of marital discord and marital coexistence. Building on Amato and Booth's findings, Gager et al. (2016) reported that children from high-conflict homes who had their parents stay together had much greater rates of relationship disintegration compared to children whose parents had divorced. The authors' data support the premise that when parents get a divorce, the long-term negative impacts of family conflict are reduced. This reduction occurs because children's daily conflict exposure is lessened once a union dissolves, which limits children's opportunity to mimic their parents' discord. Therefore, staying in an unhappy marriage does not necessarily reduce the child's future chance of divorce.

In opposition to divorce, some may argue that staying together will allow children to perform better academically. That is, when both parents are present, the child may exhibit better cognitive and intellectual abilities. However, conflict between parents is linked to weaker cognitive abilities and children's poorer academic performances, mostly because of youth self-blame (Ghazarian & Buehler, 2010). This weakening happens for two reasons, sleep disturbances, and negative attributional processes.

Sleep disturbances tend to affect children who are witnessing marital conflict. This disturbance may hinder their attention and concentration. After controlling for a variety of background risk variables, El-Sheikh et al. (2007) found that sleep disturbances explained the effect of parental conflict on elementary school children's academic performance. The researchers ascertained that children from high conflict households attained lower grades on

math, language, and verbal and nonverbal school ability scales. Their findings emphasize the importance of the parental relationship in affecting children's sleep.

Meanwhile, poor academic achievement has been linked to negative perceptual and attributional processes created in children. These attributional processes occur because of antagonistic and hostile parental interactions. The way children perceive and interpret parental conflict is important to their educational performance since it may explain children's attention deficits (Davies et al., 2008). Similarly, Harold et al. (2007) found that children who ascribe self-blaming attributions for their parents' conflicts are more likely to have lower educational achievements, as measured by standardized performance scores in English, math, and science. Therefore, the self-blaming and sleep disruptions that children experience because of marital conflict may pose a threat to their academic success.

Others may argue that children's behavioral issues will increase if parents decide to get a divorce. That is, children may "act out" in refusal or reaction to the parents' separation. Although this stance is valid, during the last decade, a body of research has arisen that suggests the opposite. For instance, Morrison and Coiro (1999) examined the effect of parents' separation on children's behaviors over a three-year period and discovered that the negative impact of frequent marital conflicts surpasses the negative impact of divorce. Additionally, the children whose parents remained unhappily married showed the greatest increase in behavioral issues. The authors demonstrated how marital conflict is associated to a greater increase in children's behavioral issues in marriages that do not end in divorce than those that do. Likewise, Peterson and Zill (1986) found that parental conflict lead to an increase in antisocial, impulsive, and hyperactive behaviors in children. The authors also found that these negative behaviors developed in parallel with depression and social withdrawal. Furthermore, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory posits that, "in the social learning system, new patterns of behavior can be acquired through direct experience or by observing the behavior of others" (p. 3). Namely, children learn how to behave by observing

their parents' behavior. If parents are aggressive and display hostility, so will the children. However, if parents decide to separate, the children will no longer be exposed to conflict that can be mimicked, which consequently lessens their chances of developing behavioral issues.

Conclusion

Marriage is difficult. Couples will argue and disagree about a myriad of subjects. Disagreements can be resolved quickly and civilly in certain circumstances, but in others, they can grow into massive blowouts. When tension intensifies and the couple feels estranged from one another and the relationship is hostile, it is advisable to contemplate divorce rather than staying together "for the children." In this paper, I argued that, while divorce may not always be the best option, staying in an unhappy marriage can be harmful because it can lower parents' and children's self-esteem, stimulate the development of behavioral issues in children, and prompt the development of psychiatric disorders in parents.

Staying in a broken marriage can have drastic consequences on the mental health of parents. First, their self-worth, and self-perception will be greatly reduced, along with their sense of fulfillment. Second, they could develop life-impairing anxiety disorders. Third, they may develop severe depression and lead a dismal and bleak life.

Remaining in an unhappy marriage has numerous psychological and physical consequences for the children. First, emotional instability in children may drive them to internalize and embody or externalize and project their problems. Second, because of their emotional instability, children place the blame on themselves for their parents' issues. This self-attribution can lead to emotions of shame, melancholy, and guilt, which can lead to low self-esteem and self-doubt in children. Third, children may exhibit maladaptive behaviors that make communicating with others challenging. This difficulty of communication may negatively affect their current and future relationships. Finally, children's overall health may be impaired, including long-term health problems, exhaustion, weakened immune systems, stunted growth, and psychosomatic symptoms.

Some individuals feel that divorce may not be the greatest choice and that parents should strive to salvage their deteriorating marriages for their children's sake. They believe that divorce will prompt behavioral issues in children and pave the way for divorce in their future. Some also believe that parents staying together can allow children to perform better academically. Nonetheless, studies have found that when parents choose to stay together, their children's potential divorce and behavioral troubles increase, while their academic performance decreases.

Staying in an unhappy marriage may be detrimental to both the parents and children. Fortunately, modern society offers an array of solutions to the problem of marital discord. Distressed couples may seek a therapist, who typically uses a number of therapeutic methods to assist couples in gaining insight into their relationships, resolving conflict, and increasing relationship satisfaction. Parents can also choose to leave their marriage amicably, get a divorce, and be completely separated from one another, or try cohabitation. That is, the parents are divorced or separated but still reside together. This choice may be taken for the children or for financial reasons. In any case, the parents and children may be able to experience the happiness and stability they deserve.

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