

Advice To Divorcees: Go Easy On Yourself

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Divorce is tough, for just about everyone. But some people move through a breakup without overwhelming distress, even if they're sad or worried about money, while others get stuck in the bad feelings and can't seem to climb out. What accounts for the difference?

Self-compassion, says an upcoming study in *Psychological Science*, a journal published by the Association for Psychological Science. Self-compassion—a combination of kindness toward oneself, recognition of common humanity, and the ability to let painful emotions pass—“can promote resilience and positive outcomes in the face of divorce,” says psychologist David A. Sbarra, who conducted the study with University of Arizona colleagues Hillary L. Smith and Matthias R. Mehl. Independent of other personality traits, that one capacity predicts better adjustment shortly after divorce and up to nine months later.

The findings have implications for helping people learn to weather breakups in better health and better spirits.

“We’re not interested in the basic statement, ‘People who are coping better today do better nine months from now.’ That doesn’t help anybody,” says Sbarra. “The surprising part here is that when we look at a bunch of positive characteristics”—such as self-esteem, resistance to depression, optimism, or ease with relationships—“this one characteristic—self-compassion— uniquely predicts good outcomes.”

The study involved 105 people, 38 men and 67 women, whose mean age was about 40; they’d been married over 13 years and divorced an average of three to four months. On the first visit, participants were asked to think about their former partner for 30 seconds, then talk for four minutes about their feelings and thoughts related to the separation.

Four trained coders listened to the audio files and rated the participants’ levels of self-compassion, using a standard measure of the construct. The participants also were assessed for other psychological traits, such as depression and their “relationship style.” At the initial visit, three months later, and then after either six or nine months participants reported on their adjustment to the divorce, including the frequency with which they experienced intrusive thoughts and emotions about the separation and their ex-partner.

As expected, the people with high levels of self-compassion at the start both recovered faster and were doing better after a period of months.

How can these data help people going through divorce? Sbarra’s friends, knowing what he studies, often ask for such advice.

“It’s not easy to say, ‘Be less anxious.’ You can’t change your personality so easily. We also know

that women do better than men. But you can't change your sex. What you can change is your stance with respect to your experience." Understanding your loss as part of bigger human experience helps assuage feelings of isolation, he says. Mindfulness—noting jealousy or anger without judgment or rumination—lets you turn your mind to life in the present without getting stuck in the past.

Can all this be taught? The researchers are unsure but optimistic. Says Sbarra: "This study opens a window for how we can potentially cultivate self-compassion among recently separated adults" and help smooth the journey through one of life's most difficult experiences.