

# CREATING A Satisfying Life



Contrary to what you might believe, personal happiness does not depend on life dealing you a good hand. How you respond to what comes your way will largely determine whether your life is fulfilling or not; here's how to move from dissatisfaction to real satisfaction.

The breakdown of a marriage is one of the most traumatic things that can happen in your life. Divorce can cause profound feelings of loss, failure, regret, abandonment, emptiness, fear of the future, and/or powerlessness — especially if you didn't initiate the split.

There's no quick fix to your anger and grief, but there is a journey toward a more satisfying and fulfilling life that you can start right now. The transition from despair to satisfaction starts with your determination not to be a victim of your circumstances; happiness doesn't depend so much on what happens to you, but on how you deal with what happens to you. Change your way of thinking: decide that you're not going to let divorce take control of your life, and you'll be taking the first step towards recovery. If you are determined to wallow in defeat and sorrow, then the divorce has already won.

## Feel the Pain, Then Let it Go

Divorce is a loss, so allow yourself to grieve. "You have to allow the hurt to run its course," says relationship expert,

workshop leader, and best-selling author Bill Ferguson. "The more you allow yourself to feel the pain, the more it comes and the more it goes."

Divorce recovery is a process, and it takes time. How long you will take to heal depends on many factors, including the length of your marriage, whether you were abused, and the support you receive from family and friends. "You must take the process of recovery seriously," urges Micki McWade, who has developed a 12-step divorce-recovery program in her book *Getting Up, Getting Over, Getting On*. "People have high expectations of themselves; they think they should be getting over it quickly and immediately. But for every five years married, it takes about one year to get over it. Don't suppress your feelings or act as if it never happened, but give the process respect. If you bypass the process, it sets you up for a fall."

## Erase Revenge, Blame, and Guilt

Even when the divorce is over, anger, blame, and/or guilt may dominate your

thoughts. If you want to feel better, you'll have to work through and release these feelings. It's unlikely that either you or your spouse is 100% responsible for the end of your marriage; perhaps both of you should have put more effort into it, or perhaps you were simply not a compatible couple. Whatever your situation, you have nothing to gain — and a lot to lose — by lashing out at yourself or your ex-spouse.

Most definitely do not resort to revenge. It's a dish best not served at all, even if your ex has hurt you without shame. Vengeance doesn't make the hurt go away; it sets a horrible example of social behavior for your children, and it stalls you from moving on. Revenge never fulfills its intended purpose: it doesn't "teach a lesson" to the person who hurt you, but rather provokes that person to get back at you in turn, starting a cycle of tit-for-tat vengeance that causes unnecessary anguish on both sides. Revenge is extremely harmful at its worst and a waste of time at its best.

After all you've gone through, it may be tempting to see yourself as the eternal

victim of your former spouse. But adopting this role prevents you from embracing responsibility for your own actions, whether or not you really have been a victim. On the other hand, it's no more constructive to blame yourself for everything. Immersing yourself in guilt, or playing the "if only" game, will keep you stuck in the past and afraid to make a decision in case it's the wrong one. "You need to let go of the non-empowering emotions," advises Mike Lipkin, a Toronto-based motivational speaker and the author of *Your Personal Best*. "Anytime you stay angry at someone, you are letting them live rent-free inside your head."

## Look for the Hidden Gift

"Problems are just opportunities in their work clothes," said the late Henry J. Kaiser. If you change your way of thinking to consciously look for the positive effects in any negative event, you may experience a radical change in your emotions and your outlook on life.

The "gift" that comes out of suffering isn't always immediately apparent. This is where you need to develop the ability to "turn lemons into lemonade," as the old saying goes. It takes courage, character, imagination, and perspective to accept the inevitable, and even use it as the basis to create something positive. Sometimes, the most beneficial thing to come out of bad times is what you've learned from them, and you should acknowledge that to yourself. You need to look at the situation and say, "What's the lesson here? What have I learned from this experience?" The benefits of doing this include a sense of empowerment from having used your experience to grow wiser, and using your new-found wisdom to avoid the same pitfall if it comes up again. Experience is a hard way to learn how to get through life, but it's a very effective teacher.

## The Power of Choice

Now that you've grieved, let go of your hurt, and looked for positive aspects of your situation, it's time to start exploring your options as to where life

can take you next, or, rather, where you will take it. If fulfillment is your aim, you have to proactively make choices about where to go instead of waiting for things to happen to you. "In divorce, it's important to heal your hurt, and it's also important to get on with your life," Ferguson points out. "The main thing is to be active. Life is like being in water: as long as you're swimming, you stay above water, but if you stop moving, you sink. During divorce, some people get caught in upset and then withdraw from life, eventually sinking into depression. You need to move forward and start creating dreams. Find things that you love to do."

Weigh the pros and cons, then take action. If you're dissatisfied with your job or your financial situation, take the initiative to update your resume and look for something more fulfilling, or at least to work toward promotion to a higher position or ask for a raise. If you're feeling courageous, you might even switch career paths completely and start over, although you have to balance this desire with the need to put food on the table and maintain a roof over your head. If you want to improve your education or technical skills, or if you just have an unsatisfied hunger for learning, go back to school in the evenings.

"Between anything happening to us and our response is the power to choose our response," says Stephen R. Covey, renowned motivational expert and author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Through the power of choice, Covey has helped numerous people overcome setbacks in their lives and go on to make valuable contributions to their communities. "Use the power of choice to bring yourself new meaning and new relationships. It will transcend a difficult past and help you learn from it. The only real failure is a mistake not learned from," he says.

The power to learn from your past and choose where to go next is the opposite of seeing yourself as a victim with no control over your life. Covey points out the four "basic human endowments" that go into the power of choice:

1. **Self-awareness.** We can observe our own past and see how it has developed our own strengths and weaknesses;
2. **Imagination.** We can picture ourselves in a new way and reinvent ourselves. "Our memory is limited and self-limiting," says Covey, "but our imagination is unlimited and expansive, and it feeds on optimism and hope."
3. **Conscience.** Our inner sense tells us what is right and wrong; and
4. **Willpower.** The power of navigating your own life can awaken powers within you that you may have forgotten you had or of which you were unaware. It will at least revitalize your confidence and control, and this has to come from within. If your partner defined much of your self-image, you need to take a fresh look at yourself and decide who you are now, as well as who you want to be in the future.

## Improve Your Outlook

Although it may take a while to completely recover from your divorce, there are many little things you could do to boost your spirits in the meantime. For example:

- Have a guys'/girls' night out with your friends.
- Do a good deed without expecting a reward.
- Join a club, sports team, arts group, support group, or any other special-interest organization.
- Play with a puppy or kitten.
- Take a night class in some subject you've always wanted to learn about.
- Surprise an old friend you haven't spoken to in months or years with a phone call or e-mail.
- Volunteer at a charity or cause.
- Buy yourself a treat. Stay within your budget, however, or this one will rebound on you. ■

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