

Divorce Ideation & Discernment Counseling

Twitter: @steveharris65



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Driven to DiscoverSM

We all want happy and healthy marriages, but.....

Nearly 50% of first marriages & 65% of second marriages will end in divorce

We know a lot about the causes of divorce, and the impact of divorce, but we know very little about what goes on for people who are considering divorce



What We Didn't Know

- How many married people have had recent thoughts about divorce or thoughts in the past?
- How often and how long have they been having those thoughts?
- How intense are those thoughts?
- Who do they talk to about their thoughts and feelings? [Do they talk to anyone?]
- What marital problems are they facing and what do they do to try to address their problems?
- What does it really mean when someone is thinking about divorce? Does it mean that divorce is imminent?
- Are they willing to keep working on the marriage or are they looking for a way out?



Methods

- National survey of 3,000 individuals in the United States (n=745 or 25% were thinkers in last 6 mo.)
- Closely represents married people, ages 25-50, who have been married at least 1 year
- The survey asked questions about “divorce ideation”: What people think about and do when having thoughts about divorce
- In addition we conducted in-depth interviews with a small sub-sample (n=30)



National Survey Results

- 1 in 4 people surveyed had thoughts about divorce in the last 6 months
 - Most only thought about divorce a few times, rather than a lot
- Half of them reported thinking about divorce for more than a year
- 66% said they did not want a divorce
 - 43% said they were willing to work hard on the marriage
 - 23% said they were willing to work on the marriage if their spouse got serious about making important changes.
- Only 5% said they were done with the marriage
- Those recently, but infrequently thinking about divorce were hopeful that their relationship had what it takes to overcome challenges



Hard vs. Soft Marital Problems

Hard*

- Affairs (Infidelity)
- Abuse
- Addiction

*Without a willingness or good faith effort to change

Soft

- Growing apart
- Losing connection
- Losing romantic feelings
- Falling “out of love”
- Not paying enough attention to each other
- Financial disagreements
- “We’re different people”



A tale of two cities...

soft vs. hard problems

“I think ultimately we grew apart, we didn’t realize we had to [put] this much work into our relationship over the last 20 years as we did when we were dating. ...So...we got to this point where we hardly knew who the other person is because we have both changed so much. ...I think it’s just because people tend to grow apart unless you put the work into staying together, which I didn’t realize until we had grown apart.”

– “Mattie,” married 22 years

“[A few] years ago it seems that my wife...became discontent with married life and family life and it felt almost as if she...she’s like, ‘I’m gonna go back to school,’ you know, without conferring with most of the family and I think the stress of that brought out some mental illness. ...And there [was] some infidelity at that time, as well. So that’s kind of why I’m at where I am at right now.”

– “Mike,” married 11 years



2 Types of Thinkers

Soft Thinkers

- Lower levels of reported marital problems
- More hopeful about their marriage
- 3 times more likely to say they did not want a divorce & willing to work hard to save the marriage
- 90% said they thought about divorce only a few times
- Not trivial or fleeting, they can often be confused, discouraged, and hurting

Serious Thinkers

- Thinking about divorce frequently
- Higher levels of both “soft” and “hard” problems
- Less hopeful about the future of their relationship
- Much more likely to say they were done with the marriage or say they had mixed feelings about divorce.



The Winds of Change...

Latent Class Analyses revealed **three distinct groups** among those thinking about divorce at Time 1: **soft thinkers (49%), long-term-serious thinkers (45%), and conflicted thinkers (6%).**

Divorce ideation was not static; 31% of Time 1 thinkers were not thinking about it 1 year later (and 36% of non-thinkers at Time 1 were thinking about it 1 year later).

Latent Transition Analyses revealed 49% of Time 1 long-term-serious thinkers, 56% of soft thinkers, and 51% of conflicted thinkers had shifted groups at Time 2, mostly in the direction of less and softer thinking about divorce. Overall, divorce ideation is common but dynamic, and it is not necessarily an indication of imminent marital dissolution.



Divorce Ideation

When asked if they had talked to their spouse in the last 6 months about their thoughts about divorce:

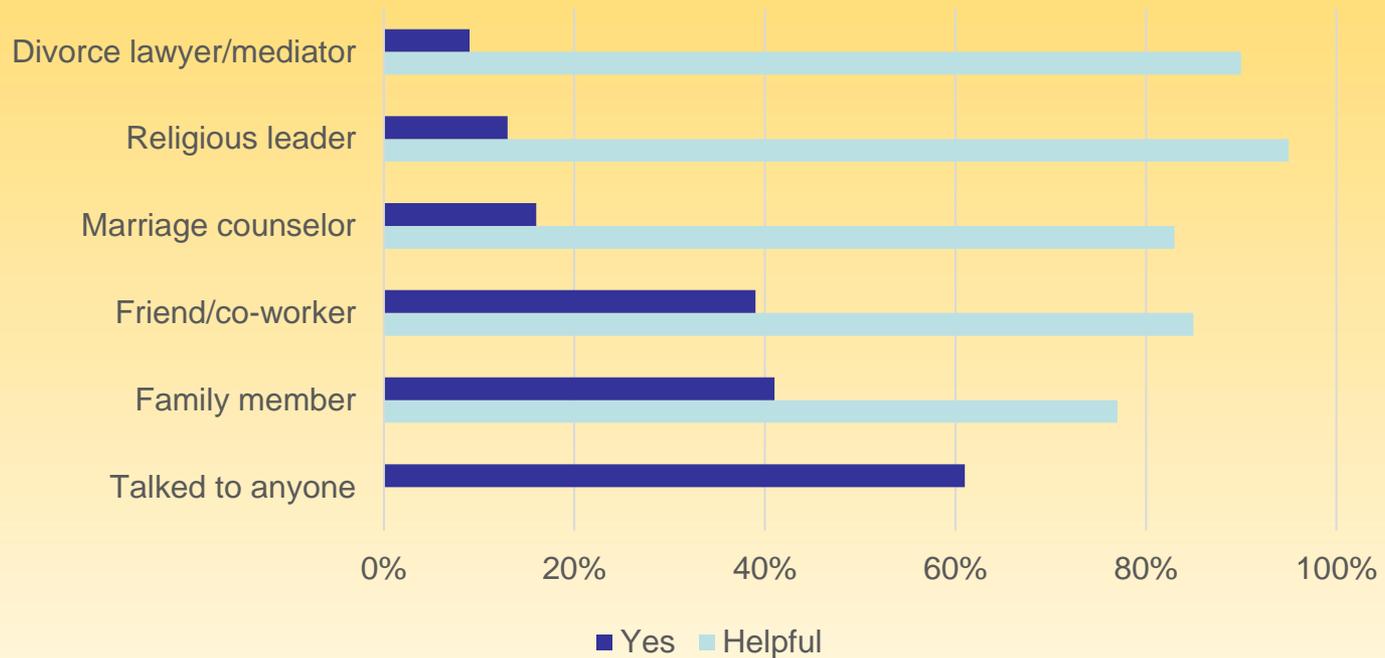
- 40% said they had
- 40% said they had not
- 20% said, “Maybe, we sort of talked about it.”

Almost half the time divorce ideation is a private problem and not an overt couple concern.



Talking Helps

Talked to others about divorce ideation



How frequent are thoughts of divorce?

- For 70% of those who had recent thoughts about divorce, those thoughts were infrequent.
- For most, divorce ideation is closer to a chronic, rather than an acute phenomenon.
 - 37% report they had been thinking about divorce for 2 years or more
 - 16% report they had been thinking about divorce for 1-2 years
 - 32% report they had been thinking about it 6 months or less



What does it mean to have thoughts about divorce?

When asked what statement best described their personal attitude about getting divorced:

- 5% checked “I’m done with this marriage; it’s too late even if my spouse were to make major changes.”
- 43% checked “I don’t really want a divorce; I’m willing to work hard to keep us together.”
 - Almost 90% who chose this option had been thinking about divorce only a few times in the last six months.
- 23% checked “I would consider working on my marriage and not divorcing if my spouse got serious about making some major changes.”



“Deciding to divorce...is like jumping off a cliff...into the unknown. It’s the not knowing what’s on the other side.”

-“Linda,” married 15 years

“I would feel like a failure if my marriage were to end”

- 55% agreed (25% agreed strongly)
- 20% were in the middle between agree and disagree
- 25% disagreed with this statement

The decision to divorce seems to be connected to identity and may contribute to how people see themselves.



“Deciding to stay married is like...running a marathon. It’s grueling, it’s long, we’ve got a long race, and I’m not near the finish line. And sometimes it takes everything I have to keep running.”

- “Lester,” married 20 years, 2nd marriage



Some Possible Takeaways

- Divorce is scary to think about, so there is an assumption that if one is thinking about divorce, that there must be serious problems.
- In a culture with high divorce rates, perhaps it is actually difficult to *not* have thoughts about divorce.
- Perhaps thoughts about divorce can spur action to repair or strengthen a relationship, rather than be a sign of impending doom.
- Having someone to talk to about divorce ideation is very helpful.



Overall, we find that most individuals who are thinking about divorce don't seem to have one foot out of the marital door. Quite the opposite; for most, their thoughts about divorce were infrequent, they did not want a divorce and wanted to work on the relationship, and they were relatively hopeful about the prospects for the marriage long-term.



In-depth Interviews (n=30)

The decision to divorce or continue working on your marriage is complex. People going through this process report a lack of clarity in arriving at a final decision. Often times they struggle with the fear of making the wrong decision because so much seems to be riding on the decision to end a marriage. Based on our interviews, it seems as though most individuals at this place see their relationship has gone from a loving and lively thing to a relationship where the love and happiness has faded over the years – largely through inattention and neglect.



Factors in the Decision-Making Process

- **Time:** People consider where they are in their life, the time they have already invested in their marriage, the timing of the divorce, and how much longer they can see staying in the marriage.
- **Internal Processes:** Ruminating about divorce can be an endless and repetitive process comparing unknown future states with current reality.



Factors in the Decision-Making Process

- **External Processes:** Some share thoughts of divorce with others. Most often feel supported in their reaching out.
- **Balancing:** Finding the tipping point between the positive vs. the negative aspects of marriage.
- **Personal values and identity:** Just like getting married says something about you, so does getting a divorce.



Factors in the Decision-Making Process

- The Big Four
 - Love
 - Happiness
 - Impact on Children
 - Financial Status
- Metaphors
 - Living in a snow globe, balancing scales



Deciding to divorce or to continue to work on a marriage is full of many complex pushes and pulls in competing directions that are often hard to navigate and make sense of with any degree of clarity or confidence. Often a commitment to “sticking things out” prolongs the decision-making process indefinitely. This makes things difficult, but also suggests that most people do not easily or quickly jump to divorce and are often hopeful that something might change.



So What?

- Couple therapy with people who are considering divorce can be challenging
- Mixed agenda couples
 - About 30% of all couples who present for tx
 - Many therapists not equipped to handle
 - How to support both people in what they want?
 - You do not have two “therapy” clients



Discernment Counseling

- A protocol for working with mixed agenda couples (leaning in and leaning out) that may prevent unnecessary divorce or premature divorce decisions.
- Goal of DC: To help couples achieve greater clarity and confidence in their decision making about the future of their marriage based on a more complex understanding of what got them to the brink of divorce and each partner's role in it.



Outline

- Brief counseling modality
 - 1-5 sessions (2 hour and 1.5 hours long)
 - Not mandatory to do all 5 sessions
 - Structured time with the couple and with each individual with carefully crafted “take away” messages delivered by each member of the couple to their partner.
 - Therapeutic conversation is framed by 3 paths:
 - Path 1: Status quo
 - Path 2: Divorce/Separation
 - Path 3: Reconciliation (6 month all out effort to restore health to the relationship)



Pivotal Tasks

- Leaning-in Partner
 - Differentiation work. What would I need to change regardless of my spouse's decision to pursue divorce or not.
 - You can't divorce yourself
 - The Divorce Remedy (Wiener Davis) (heavy lifting)
 - Anxiety Reduction – give partner some space – quietly go about your business of making changes.
 - Really hear the concerns of his/her spouse and reflect that back in a meaningful way.



Pivotal Tasks

- Leaning-out Partner
 - Seeking clarity and confidence
 - How have they contributed to the marital dance?
 - Hard vs. Soft problems?
 - What if they were able to make different choices in the relationship?
 - Are they open to seeing if their partner can make changes?
And then are they open to making changes?



What are we learning?

- A lot of movement in how people are thinking about divorce. No one we see is typically 100% sure of the decision to divorce.
- Despite the fact that 100% of our MN Couples on the Brink couples are heading for divorce we see about 47% that are interested in path 3.
- Those who choose path 2 report being glad that they went through this process and have begun to make changes in their life to prevent future relationship problems and enhance their co-parenting.



Updated Outcomes

Raw numbers

	COB	DRI	Total
Path 1	45	136	181
Path 2	52	233	285
Path 3	102	384	486
Total	199	753	952

Percentages

	COB	DRI	Total
Path 1	22.6%	18.1%	19.0%
Path 2	26.1%	30.9%	29.9%
Path 3	51.3%	51.0%	51.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%



Resources

- JMFT article on the first 100 cases of DC in press
- Journal of Divorce and Remarriage “Seeking Clarity and Confidence in Divorce Decision Making”
- Other articles pending on process and outcomes of DC.
- www.mncouplesonthebrink.org
- <http://dohertyrelationshipinstitute.com>



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HELPING COUPLES on the BRINK of DIVORCE

Discernment Counseling for Troubled Relationships

Helping Couples on the Brink of Divorce

Discernment Counseling for Troubled Relationships

William J. Doherty and Steven M. Harris

Therapists and counselors can find themselves at an impasse when working with “mixed-agenda” couples—where one partner is considering divorce, while the other wants to preserve the marriage and start therapy. Such couples are a common and difficult challenge in clinical practice.

To help confirm each partner’s agenda before taking decisive steps toward either reconciliation or divorce, this book presents a five-session protocol for helping couples understand what has happened to their relationship and each person’s contributions to the problems. The goal is to gain clarity and confidence about a direction for their marriage.

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Contact me

Steven M. Harris, Ph.D., LMFT

Professor - Couple and Family Therapy Program,
Department of Family Social Science

smharris@umn.edu

612-625-3735



@steveharris65

