

LIVING

Tatler Experts' Corner: I have been unhappy in my marriage for some time. How can I approach the New Year and make a positive change?

A Tatler expert weighs in

By Annabelle Spranklen

3 December 2020

As part of the *Tatler* SOS Experts' Corner, we delve into the subject of divorce, one that often sees a spike in January. In fact, the first working Monday back after the Christmas break is often dubbed 'Divorce Day' by lawyers who typically see a surge in couples considering legal separation. Here [Samantha Woodham from *The Divorce Surgery*](#) shares her advice on embracing a new start with the right mindset

First of all, bravo on looking to approach divorce in a positive way. It is so important for us all to recognise that divorce is a normal life change which can be navigated well, provided you have the right support and the right mindset.

As a divorce barrister, I meet a lot of divorcing spouses, and at *The Divorce Surgery*, I have the privilege of meeting both spouses, individually and together, which gives me a unique perspective. When I am working with clients I like to draw not only on my own expertise but also what I have learned from other professionals, and thinkers, in this area.

I thought it might be interesting to tell you about a bestselling book by Glennon Doyle called *Untamed*, in which she writes about her own divorce. She describes her divorce as being a change in the shape of her family, not the end of her family: 'I decided to let my family's form become an

evolving ecosystem'. She refuses to allow the stigma surrounding divorce to deprive her and her family of being truly happy: 'I quit buying the idea that a successful marriage is one that lasts till death, even if one or both spouses are dying inside it... I burned the memo insisting that the way a family avoids brokenness is to keep its structure by any means necessary. I noticed families clinging to their original structures that were very broken, indeed. I noticed other families whose structures had shifted and were healthy and vibrant.'

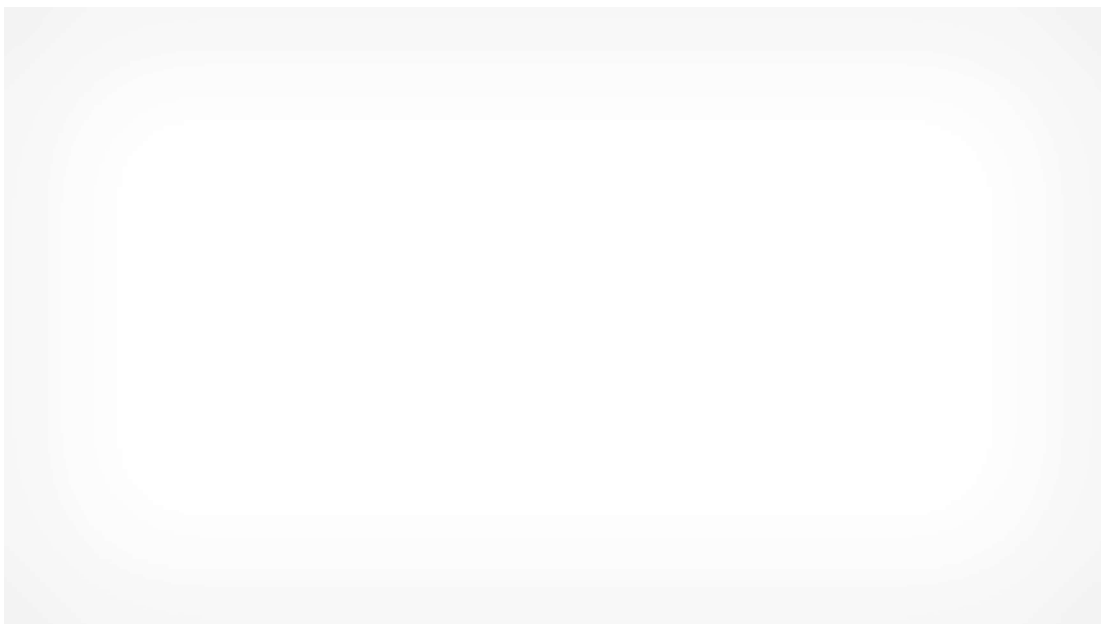
Divorce is NOT a failure

This puts so beautifully what I want you and every separating couple to know: divorce is NOT a failure. Marriage was a construct which originated when humans had a short lifespan. We now live many, many decades longer. During that time we will evolve, change, and become completely different people to the ones we were in our twenties.

If you told someone you expected them to live in the same house for 60 years, or stay in the same job, or wear the same style of clothes, you'd sound ridiculous. And yet as a society we still view the 'gold standard' as staying in a marriage for your entire life. If you meet someone in your 20s and you evolve in the same way through your 30s, 40s, 50s and beyond then brilliant.

That really is wonderful. But if during that time you grow apart, that really is OK too. Divorce is a life change. It's an acceptance that your marriage is no longer making you both happy, or fulfilling you both in the way you want it to. But it does not mean that the marriage was a mistake. Far from it. Unless you are extremely unlucky, you will have forged many happy memories over the years. Don't let the ending contaminate everything which went before. Treat the divorce as a shared problem to navigate and overcome. As Glennon so beautifully puts it, let your ecosystem evolve.

ADVERTISING



The problem isn't Divorce, it's Bad Divorce which causes harm

And please rid yourself of the stereotypes. If you have children, know that divorce in itself isn't harmful to children; it's high-conflict divorce which causes harm. Your friendship group does not need to be fractured. You can keep in touch with the in-laws. The school gates do not need to become a Cold Front. If you, together with your spouse, refuse to make a drama out of it, you'll suck the oxygen out of anyone else who tries. I started The Divorce Surgery with a fellow barrister Harry Gates to give separating couples access to joint, impartial advice from one lawyer they both share. But as the business has grown and evolved, we realise that we do more than that. We give separating couples permission to be decent to each other, and we give them a narrative to tell their family, friends and the parents at the school gates: 'We're actually sharing a lawyer- it really is no drama- we're working this out together.'

Glennon also shares very intimate details of how she broke the news to her husband, and her children, that the marriage was over. To her husband she said: 'Our marriage has been a great success. And now it's done. I'm in love with Abby. As soon as I knew, I needed you to know, too.' His response was that he wanted her to be happy. There was a lot of water under the bridge, on both sides. Glennon is honest enough to acknowledge that the next few months were a rollercoaster. In my experience working with separating couples, it is always a rocky road. It is harder to work together than to work against each other. But if you can collaborate you are much more likely to emerge in a better place, emotionally and financially, than if you descend into battle.

Divorce is a Fresh Start

I once saw a family lawyer I greatly admire describe divorce as entering into a deep dark forest. It's an analogy I understand, but would never use. For me, divorce is a fresh start. It's emerging from the forest, into a sunnier upland. And that's the image I want you to visualise. Because there are going to be big bumps in the road. This is disentangling yourself from a long-term, intimate relationship. It's not going to be a smooth ride. But when you hit that first bump, if you've been told to expect a forest, you'll think, 'Oh here I am in the forest. Horrid, dark and no clear way through. Just as I feared.' But if you're expecting to emerge from a forest your mind will help you. You'll think 'Yup forest, I see you, but the sunny uplands are out there and I'm going to keep on this path until I get there.'

Glennon's description of telling her children is very raw, and I can't do it justice in a short summary. Importantly, she and her husband tell them together, and her husband gives the children permission to love her new partner Abby. He says 'It's going to be okay. Abby is a good woman. [The two had already met by this stage] We are going to be a new kind of family, but we are still going to be a beautiful family.' Glennon describes this permission her husband gives their children to love her new partner as 'possibly the greatest gift anyone has ever given me'.

Embrace Support

You will need legal advice, but please also be open to accessing emotional support, and also professional co-parenting support. When it comes to good divorce, you do need guidance at the right time. Whereas your parenting instincts may have been A1 until now, divorce can set you off kilter. Don't be harsh on yourself. A big life change, like a divorce, is not a time for your 'best self' to come out- don't expect it to. You will be dealing with many conflicting emotions, and you will go through the grief cycle. Just be open to the idea that it may be helpful to get some professional input on the therapeutic and co-parenting side. Harry and I feel so strongly that when it comes to co-parenting, legal advice is never enough. It's the soft skills that will help you the most, and we regularly refer clients to co-parenting experts to lay the bed rocks you will need as you reshape your family unit.

Glennon and her husband Craig do work together through their divorce, and attend mediation. Glennon describes the end of the process: 'After the divorce mediation, Craig and I stood side by side in an elevator, watching the floor numbers light up one at a time while we descended. I looked over at Craig, and for the first time in years, I felt true empathy, tenderness, and warmth toward him. Once again, I could see him as a good man with whom I'd like to be friends. I felt real forgiveness. That was because for the first time in years, I felt safe. I'd restored my own boundaries. I'd begun to trust myself, because I'd become a woman who refuses to abandon herself to keen false peace.'

See this as a way to improve your relationship, rather than destroy it

In my experience, divorce can be a way to reconnect. I know that sounds ludicrous, but I see it with many of the couples who come to us. It is unbelievably all-consuming to be anxious about money. For most, there is no headspace to navigate your emotions because you are frantic about the financial consequences. Where will we live? Can we afford this? Do we both need to go back to work? What about childcare? Are school fees affordable? Do we have enough pension? It's impossible to think rationally or talk about your feelings with those sorts of major financial anxieties weighing down on you. Often, working out the answers on the finances, together, constructively, can then unburden a couple so that they can talk about the emotional side, their co-parenting aims, their reflections on the legacy of their marriage. I meet couples at the start, and end, of our process, and it always strikes me that often, at that last meeting, they are working together. They acknowledge the compromises which are needed to make the financial reality of two households work. They are chivalrous to each other, ceding the floor, 'no, you go first'. It's such a privilege to see.

Kinder divorce is possible

Far, far too few public figures share their experiences of divorce, let alone good divorce. But we need celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow and Glennon Doyle to show how it can be done. To begin

the task of changing the narrative, the War of the Roses media portrayal, and showing that a kinder divorce is possible, and will be better for you both.

From the way you have phrased your question, you are already on track to navigate this successfully. I'm often asked what is my definition of a good divorce? In my mind, it's divorcing how we'd want to if we had none of society's expectations and stigmas weighing down on our shoulders. It's working together, provided that is safe and appropriate for both of you, to reach a solution which is fair to you both. Not the best outcome for one of you, but the right outcome for your reshaped family unit. It's retaining the good memories, shedding the bad ones, and allowing each other to have new adventures apart.

I wish you all the best for 2021. It could well be your best year yet.

For more gold-standard guidance on family law visit the [Tatler High Net Worth Address Book](#)

The information contained in this article does not represent formal legal advice. Please contact your solicitor if you would like to explore the topics covered in this article.

Topics **Tatler Experts**
