

Separate or Divorce the Way
You Got Together:
Happy!

Freddy A. Paniagua, PhD

University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston

Copyright © 2017 by Freddy A. Paniagua. All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the United States Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without permission in writing from Freddy A. Paniagua.

Published by Virtualbookworm, Inc., P.O. Box 9949, College Station, TX 77842. www.virtualbookworm.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Separate or Divorce The Way You Got Together: Happy!/, Freddy A. Paniagua, University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index

ISBN 978-1-62137-930-0 (Softcover); ISBN 978-1-62137-931-7 (Hardcover); 978-1-62137-938-6 (eBook) 1. Separation, marital conflicts. 2. Divorce, marital conflicts. 3. Divorce, and mental disorders. I. Paniagua, Freddy A. II. Title.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016920133.

First Edition

Table of Contents

PART I.....	1
Why I Wrote This Book	
PART II	9
When Things Go Really, Really Wrong	
PART III	35
How I Stayed Happy- Advice From My Own Experience with Separations and Two Divorces	
PART IV	55
Yes, Splitting Up Can Drive You Crazy	
PART V	91
Practical Advice For Dealing With the Stress of Divorce	
Part VI.....	105
Closing Remarks And Resources	
REFERENCES	111
SUBJECT INDEX.....	117
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	123

PART I

Why I Wrote This Book

AS WE ALL KNOW, the terms “separation” and “divorce” are too stressful for some people to handle without engaging in what is generally known as “emotional conflict.” These conflicts are generally most severe when the decision to end the relationship is not mutual but is initiated by one of the partners. The American Psychiatric Association¹ observes, in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM–5), that emotional conflicts resulting from either a separation or a divorce sometime lead to “nonaccidental” acts of physical force that result, or have reasonable potential to result, in physical harm to an intimate partner or that evoke significant fear in the partner.”¹, p. 720 Examples include “shoving, slapping, hair-pulling, pinching, restraining, shaking, throwing, biting, kicking, hitting with the fist or an object, burning, poisoning, applying force to the throat, cutting off the air supply, holding the head under water, and using a weapon.”¹, p. 720

This type of violent reaction to emotional stress can even occur in people who are not normally prone to violence. Under the emotional pressure of the dissolving relationship, the brain “tricks” people into engaging in violence instead of searching for positive solutions to this stress.

Emotional conflicts can also result in “chronic sadness, apathy, and/or anger towards the other partner.”¹, p. 716 In more

severe cases, symptoms pointing to mental disorders are also reported, symptoms even to the degree of clinical depression with suicidal ideation and suicide attempt. When symptoms of depression become severe, the risk of suicide rises, as the affected person feels unable to deal with the relationship stress and emotional conflict and elects to kill himself as his only way of escape. Sometimes, this individual kills his partner and other family members, as well—including innocent children. Sadly, people who kill themselves, and sometimes others, to escape this trauma, will never be able to understand that the world they leave behind will continue without them. Their ex-partners will live on to have relationships and possibly marry again.

When someone fails to handle emotional conflicts in a positive way, this has an indirect, negative effect on other members of the family, particularly children. For example, the *DSM-5*¹ specifically points out that parental-relationship distress can negatively affect the emotional states of children who are constantly exposed to their parents' emotional conflicts. This point has been documented in many scholarly books and articles in scientific journals.^{2, 3, 4, 5, 6} Dr. Russell A. Barkley,² considered the leading world expert in the assessment and treatment of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), observed that parenting stress is among the key predictors in the development of symptoms associated with ADHD—which is among the most common mental disorders reported among children in both outpatient and inpatient psychiatric settings.²

When conflict between parents escalates to the point where the police and Child Protective Service agencies become involved, children are often moved out of their homes and placed in foster homes or with adoptive parents. When children are displaced in this manner, they often develop symptoms of mental disorders including oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), adjustment disorders, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder

(ADHD), conduct disorder (CD), major depressive disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, and separation anxiety disorder.¹

Such emotional conflicts can also “blind” people from seeing that their behavior (their use of violence or physical force) can have severe negative consequences for the rest of their lives. This “blindness” can be seen in cases where someone decides that the best way to escape relationship conflicts is by killing their partner or enlisting the help of another person to carry out the murder.

During over 20 years at the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, I personally provided mental health services to children and adolescents who met *DSM-5* diagnostic criteria for mental disorders. During these clinical encounters, I also provided services to parents who were planning either to separate or to divorce. I generally learned about parents’ plans to separate or divorce either during the initial clinical interview or over the course of individual or family therapy. Therefore, in addition to individual psychotherapy and family therapy, I also provided marital therapy when issues of separation or divorce were involved. As noted earlier, the development of severe emotional conflicts between parents can result in severe negative consequences affecting not only parental relationships but also the emotional states of other members of the family, particularly children and adolescents.

Therefore, my general approach during marital therapy sessions was to help parents find positive ways to handle their emotional conflicts with emphasis on the core message: You better find a way to separate or divorce the way you both got together—*happy!*

To my surprise, all parents I counseled regarding their intent to separate or divorce took this message seriously. I used the same approach when providing counseling to clients involved in a boyfriend–girlfriend relationship, during which, I emphasized

the need for them to separate without experiencing severe emotional problems and helped them recognize (with help from several counseling sessions) that breaking up from a romantic relationship is a natural and expected situation in our society.

A positive consequence that I have experienced from being a psychologist is that when people learn my profession, they often start talking about their emotional conflicts, particularly regarding relationship problems and marital difficulties. These conversations, which many of my colleagues in the mental health field and I have experienced, occur informally, outside of clinical practice—such as when a practitioner attends a birthday party, is at the airport waiting for a flight, or is sitting in the plane at about 30,000 feet, and the passenger in the next seat starts talking about relationship issues.

No matter where you are, when someone asks what you do for a living and you answer that you are a psychologist (or a licensed professional counselor, social worker, pastoral counselor, or psychiatrist), what follows is often a conversation involving informal (outside of the clinic) revelations of emotional conflicts and “secret” personal information, and more questions from that individual.

If those questions involve a separation or divorce, I always convey this message: “Well, if you plan to separate or divorce, you better be sure that you do that exactly the same way you both got together in the first place . . . Very happy!”

I was traveling from Dallas–Fort Worth to La Guardia Airport, New York, on my way to attend the annual American Psychological Association conference in Toronto, Canada. This was a very long flight, so I was happy to discover that the woman in the seat next to me was from Colombia. As soon as the plane moved from the gate, we started speaking in Spanish. (I am from the Dominican Republic.) Initially, our conversation centered on general issues such as our shared Texas residency and our

countries of origin. Soon after finding out I was a psychologist, the woman began talking about her marital troubles (her husband was also from Colombia) and her intention to divorce.

“I’m like in a prison,” she said, explaining why she was considering divorce. “He does not allow me to do anything without his permission. I even don’t have access to our bank accounts. My husband only likes sex. When he returns from work, this is what he wants to do.”

They had been married for over 30 years and owned several properties together in Colombia and the United States. The woman said that she was very afraid to tell her husband about her plan to divorce him and that she was thinking of finding a lawyer.

Then, she asked the question I had been waiting for: “¿Qué tú crees sobre mi problema?” (“What do you think about my problem?”). My answer was probably quicker than she expected.

“Okay, it would be a good idea to have a lawyer to help you with your plan to divorce your husband,” I said. “But, if you want to avoid additional emotional problems in your life, during and after the divorce, you should keep in your mind that the best thing you should do is to divorce the way you got married. . . .” I paused here for about five seconds before adding: “*Very, very happy.*”

As we talked during the rest of the flight, I gave her advice about how to do this (including the examples of my own separations and divorce). She asked if I could see her and her husband to explain to him what I told her. I was not able to do this but suggested that she search online at the Texas State Board of Examiners of Psychologists website for a list of licensed psychologists in Texas. I wrote the website address on the American Airlines napkin and provided a general explanation about the function of that board. “Find your city in Texas and then look for a psychologist in that list with a Hispanic name,” I

told her. “Then, contact that psychologist and say that I referred you for services.”

This encounter was very good for both of us: we were both able to kill those boring hours inside a packed plane from Dallas to New York; she had the fantastic opportunity to talk informally with a psychologist about her emotional conflicts and her wish to divorce; and I had the opportunity to help her explore healthy solutions and plan to end her marriage in a positive way.

I have passed this message on to my clients many times over the years, and they have encouraged me to write a book showing the general public how to separate or divorce in a healthy way. Informal encounters, such as with the woman from Colombia, where I have given the same advice, have also motivated me to put my thoughts on paper. I decided to write this book because I want to help spouses, boyfriends, and girlfriends seek more positive solutions to their emotional conflicts when ending relationships.

The main message in this book is if you want to separate or divorce, you should do it the way you began your marriage—happy! The same attitude applies when an unmarried couple seeks to break up their relationship.

In addition to my clinical experience of helping people separate or divorce in a healthy way, I also decided to write this book because I applied this positive process with my own separations and divorces. I share my own experiences of going through the difficult process of ending a relationship. I personally know that this is a healthy approach to follow when one is under stress resulting from a separation or divorce from a loved one.

In the following sections of this book, I explore these topics more deeply.

- **In Part II**, I provide ten examples of criminal cases where a relationship ended badly and negative emotions escalated to the point of violence and bloodshed. I offer a psychological

perspective on each case, with practical advice on how one might manage the stress of a breakup.

- **In Part III**, I offer examples from my own life, detailing how I handled separation and divorce in a positive manner.

- **In Part IV**, I discuss the many types of mental disorders that can arise during the stress of separation or divorce.

- **In Part V**, I explore several common stressors more deeply—contested divorce, resistance from family and friends, and divorce when children are involved.

- **In Part VI**, I offer a summary of key points and list resources and references.