

Title: Divorce and Sex**Author:** Maxine Cohen, M.F.T.**Date:** Unknown

When I was first asked to write on the topic of sexuality during divorce, I declined. I'm not in favor of that so why would I write about it? But then I got to thinking, "Why not?" since, as we all know, sex has always been a fact of life and is here to stay. So I thought it might be helpful of me to offer my own two cents worth of common sense and professional expertise on this loaded subject.

The bottom line is, while you're divorcing (unless it drags on for years and years) and especially newly divorcing, it is my opinion that it's best if sex is left out of the relationship.

Why is that?

That's because divorce is such a devastating life passage that people's hearts are gravely wounded and they have too little equilibrium and self-support to be in another complicated relationship at the same time. Just as you would naturally protect a serious sore on your body from further harm, so, too, your heart. A wounded heart takes care of itself by refusing to let anyone close and being unable to trust. So there's great emotional and psychological distance in relationships that form too soon after the marital separation. It may not feel like lots of distance; typically the divorcing person literally falls into the lover for life support and sustenance. But the new union is frequently off again, on again, and both people are unable to commit in any real and lasting way.

Quite often, people leaving a marriage yearn for someone to love them wholly and unconditionally. Their heart has been ripped wide open from the deprivation of long years of living with a spouse who they feel criticized rather than loved them, from the pain of leaving the marriage or being the one who got left, and they are dying to find a person who will love them unconditionally and fill the gaping void inside. They're alone and lonely, psychologically if not in reality. And they are falling apart emotionally. Jumping into a new love relationship can be a way of self-medication, of easing the pain of marital loss, just as if they were taking a drug that calmed anxiety.

It can all get very mixed up. For some people, sex is an analgesic. It's numbing and soothing. For some, it's a catch-all; all emotional needs get bundled together and labeled "sex." The need to feel good about yourself, to feel desirable, to feel lovable and loved, to be comforted and close, to be stroked and touched and held, all get lumped together and satisfied by "having sex." This is true for both sexes but it is far more prevalent with men. As a result of their socialization, men have traditionally had difficulty allowing themselves to feel and express the softer emotions. It's manly and macho and definitely okay to want to have sex. It's less okay, and downright not okay for some men still, to be so "weak": as to want to be held, comforted, soothed, or petted. Having sex may work in the moment but it will not have any lasting effect on bolstering up your self-esteem or calming your anxiety. In fact, it ups the ante in the relationship, especially for the woman, and complicates greatly both people's ability to learn to trust again in a new relationship.

According to the 1996 Census, half of America's adult population is single. That's 77 million people and it's bound to get higher when the 2000 Census is completed. The fastest growing segment of the single population is people who have divorced.

There is a wonderful book by Tina Tassina, PhD, titled *The Unofficial Guide to Dating Again*, which gives intelligent and detailed information on not only how to negotiate the single world but on how to create and maintain healthy relationships. I wholly recommend it.

Dr. Tassina suggests several ways to meet people without hanging out in bars. One good way is to go to a group that has a focus. It's easier to talk to people when there is a reason that you've come together. Talk about the theme or particular activity. Go to events that you are truly interested in so that you can lead your own life while at the same time hoping to meet people who share your interests.

Pay attention to what the other person is about and what you think of him/her instead of being wholly wrapped up in trying to make a good impression yourself. Watch to see if he/she is interested in learning about you rather than talking constantly about him/herself.

It is important early on to set the tone of the relationship. Hopefully the two of you will be able to support talking about who you are together and what that means rather than silently guessing, wishing, or making assumptions. The Talmud teaches wisely, "We do not see things as they are. We see them as we are." The things that occur between us can have very different meaning depending on how you see the world and what you want. So try to minimize misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and unmet hopes and expectations by having what Tina calls "state of the union" meetings. "How do you feel about the way we get along? this is what I want. What do you want?" Include such topics as how often should we see each other, how many phone calls are too many, do we date exclusively and if so exactly what does that mean?

This leads to what Dr. Tassina calls the "it means what?" discussions. For instance, what does having sex mean? Will we be monogamous? Will we date only each other? Are we committed?

Be willing to discuss the hard stuff, especially sex. Don't just let sex happen because you had too much to drink or you didn't see it coming. A good rule of thumb is that if you can't talk about beforehand, don't do it. Especially in regard to sex, feelings get more tender afterward, so it'll be even harder to talk then. And if you're going to have sex, use your head and use protection. A latex rubber condom is your best protection against HIV and it'll prevent pregnancy as well. Yes, he/she told you he/she has been celibate for months. Yes, you believe him/her. Still, use protection unless the safe period has been at least 6 months and then get an HIV blood test. Yup, you read it right! It takes 6 months from the date of exposure for the antibodies to HIV to form.

So be cautious. Be safe. Be respectful of yourself and your partner. Treat yourself the way you want others to treat you and treat others the way you want to be treated. This is the surest way to build a new relationship for yourself, post-divorce, that is nourishing, loving, and works.

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