

# Counseling The Discouraged Single Parent

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If you are old enough, you can recall a time when people married young, raised children, and stayed together all their lives. Although the romantic notion of "living happily after" still prevails, the reality of our present situation indicates that times have changed. Today, one in three marriages will terminate in divorce, and the average duration for first marriages is 7 years. Consequently, many American children are being reared in single-parent homes, and many single parents appear to be ill-equipped for dealing with the demands of this nontraditional family unit.

A single parent in today's society is most often female.\* In 1974, 9 million children under the age of 18 were reared in one-parent families. Of these, approximately 90 percent were mother-headed households (Burden, Houston, Kripke, Simpson & Stultz, 1976). Because most families in the United States consist of two parents and their children, there is a danger of viewing the single-parent home as less than normal. This attitude is particularly destructive when incorporated by adults who head one-parent families.

In this paper, the authors will focus on approaches to counseling the discouraged single parent from an Adlerian framework within a feminist orientation. We will focus specifically on the single parent who is separated and/or divorced, although several approaches and techniques recommended would work with widowed and/or never married single individuals. We will stress the importance of an individual's desire to protect his or her self-esteem as a point of departure in counseling.

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\*Since the majority of single parents are female, the pronominal form "she" will be used throughout this paper.

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In an attempt to look at why some marriages survive and why others fail, Miriam and Wilmer Pew (1975) have outlined the following seven life tasks which act as weather vanes for assessing the strength of a marriage: occupation, love and marriage, friendship, getting along with self, finding meaning in life, leisure and recreation, and parenting. It is interesting that parenting has traditionally been the major task whereby women could make significant contributions to the marriage. Consequently, a woman's ability to directly find meaning in life and to get along with herself may be severely limited in a traditional marriage. In the past, a woman indirectly gained standing in the community by marrying the "right kind of man." Moreover, she made friends through her husband's business associates and their wives; leisure time activities were structured around Dad's work schedule and desires. The masculine image portrayed in recreational advertisements quickly bring this situation into focus: Men still do the fun things, women do the wash.

Over 30 years ago, Dreikurs (1946) noted that divorce is especially perceived as a sign of personal failure for women. This attitude was due to the woman's limited opportunity for gaining feelings of significance outside the marriage. Since men were more likely to have their self-esteem woven into vocational pursuits, they rarely regarded divorce as a sign of personal failure. The women's liberation movement has begun to change that attitude, for men as well as women. In a recent analysis of his perceptive journey through divorce, Joseph Epstein (1974) notes that traditionally men were not allowed to derive fulfillment from marriage and, if they did, it was considered to be unmanly or even effeminate.

Many women assume that the only way to redeem themselves from a sense of failure following divorce is to accept perceived cultural dictates which allocate to them special qualifications for child rearing. The cult of "Momism" runs rampant in our society. Thus, the woman who does not choose to live by this norm will experience immense social pressure. The intensity of this pressure asserts that she is now a failure as a woman, is only interested in "making it" with every wife's husband, and that she is sick and needs to be treated. With this type of attitude prevalent, it is not surprising that many women opt for custody of their children as a way of coping with social dictates. Yet, in an age of self-regard, parental duty and responsibility are often overshadowed by the pursuit of individual happiness. Consequently, the single parent is very ambivalent. She wants to do right by her kids and also do things for herself—at times, these needs may be mutually exclusive. Keeping individual and parental desires in balance requires a great deal of patience, flexibility, and good humor.

We believe that courage is the antecedent condition for such positive behaviors (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956; Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 1963). Therefore, the presence or absence of courage can be used as the beginning point in counseling single individuals who are stumbling along the rocky road of child rearing. The discouraged single parent frequently views her divorce as

a sign of failure and believes that future failure should be avoided at all cost. This discouraged attitude fosters a constricted perception of the world wherein the individual seeks to maintain her self-image. If one's public image is damaged, the individual redoubles efforts to regain it. The result is extreme egocentricism which can manifest itself in a cycle of nonproductive parental behaviors.

The amount of discouragement may be difficult to ascertain prior to a divorce, however, low levels of courage often surface after the divorce through a variety of behaviors: depression, vengeance, hostility, appeasement, etc. Although a divorce is not the sole cause for feelings of discouragement, such feelings are usually intensified through the experience.

After a divorce, many discouraged adults experience a rainbow of feelings which are held together by a sense of personal failure. These feelings mobilize the discouraged parent toward a sense of adequacy. For example, a discouraged single parent who feels hurt and abused might use a variety of tactics to get even with the alienated parent and vice versa. There are many weapons in the arsenal revenge. One common ploy is to constantly remind the child how awful and/or unfair the alienated parent has been. The child is bombarded with a litany of "your daddy this, your daddy that . . ." A variation on the same theme is to have the child spy on his father and report back to the mother after visits. Usually, minimal information is sufficient to reinforce the mother's negative perceptions of her exspouse.

In other cases, the adult may feel out of control and embarrassed (Brown, 1976) and privately hold an assumption that, "If others are to see me in control of myself and my family, I must keep reminding my children to behave properly." She then becomes overly concerned with discipline—carping, bitching, nagging behavior results. When the single parent feels rejected (Brown, 1976) by the alienated parent, she may become overly concerned with winning the child's affection and approval. Here, the adult tries to become the child's best friend, indulges the child with gifts, and becomes overly permissive. If the parent feels rejected, she can assume, "At least my child loves me." All of the above feelings stimulate behavior which is oriented toward raising one's public image. It is vital to realize that the discouraged single parent's feelings can energize behavior (Dreikurs, 1971) toward false perceptions of personal adequacy. The perceptions or assumptions are mistaken since they suggest that a sense of worth is obtained from an external locus of evaluation.

### **Mistaken Assumptions and the Stage Theory Orientation to Counseling**

Many authorities working in the area of divorce counseling observe that it takes anywhere from 6 months to 2 years for the emotional stress and strain of the experience to be worked through. Shelia Kessler (1975) notes

working long hours as an archeologist, he hoped to excel in his field. Following the divorce the professor proclaimed the emergence of a new personality. He announced that his children had been neglected for too long. After a lengthy custody battle, he obtained guardianship and set out to put their lives in order. Although he read widely on parent education, he became increasingly frustrated when the children did not respond to his efforts. His energies were channeled exclusively toward becoming the best parent. A common misconception of discouraged single parents is that, by redirecting energies from one life task to another, personality change will result. Although this particular parent shifted his emphasis from professoring to parenting, his discouraged attitude remained constant. His long hours of effort were directed toward accomplishment at the highest level and achievement (Mosak, 1972) was equated with a sense of worthiness. A formula worked in his laboratory. However, his children were sensitive to Dad's desire for success and frequently used it to defeat him.

It should be noted that stages of divorce are descriptive and formulated on nomothetic data. Therefore, their implications for understanding unique styles of living must be handled with some caution. Developmental theorists and divorce counselors are quick to note this by emphasizing that not all people go through all stages nor do they go through the stages at the same rate. Although the stage orientation is useful to counselors as added data, the authors believe that a focus on purposefulness of emotions within a lifestyle framework is a more useful therapeutic approach in counseling single parents. The latter helps the individual remain control of her behavior at any point in the process.

Counselors must be aware of their attitude toward the single parent situation. A sympathetic bias can lead to detrimental consequences for the counseling process. Those who perceive others as feeling sorry for them frequently respond by feeling sorry for themselves. This attitude leads to further discouragement. The counseling relationship must be based on equality—pity indicates a superior-inferior relationship. The encouragement process implies an acceptance of others. In other words, it is necessary for the counselor to help the client feel good enough about herself as she is and eliminate concerns about how others evaluate her. Wilmer Pew (1974) points out that we all suffer from the same chronic illness, "human imperfection."

We have indicated that counselors can assist discouraged single parents by disclosing how the parenting problem is often used to protect one's self-esteem. Such recognition produces irritation within the client, and this irritation stimulates the desire to change one's misconceived ideas about obtaining a sense of adequacy.

With a change of motivation, the authors have noticed discouraged single parents receiving encouragement by providing various contributions: becoming involved with parent education groups, entering new careers,

joining women's study groups, setting up day-care facilities for working mothers, returning to school, and pursuing new leisure time activities. Intensified discouragement does not have to be a sequel to divorce as long as the single parent retains the courage to be imperfect (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964).

Levels of discouragement are frequently noted during follow-up sessions at parent education centers. On occasion, the single parent's mistaken assumptions have stood in the way of her implementing specific recommendations. This should act as a sign that counseling rather than education is required.

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