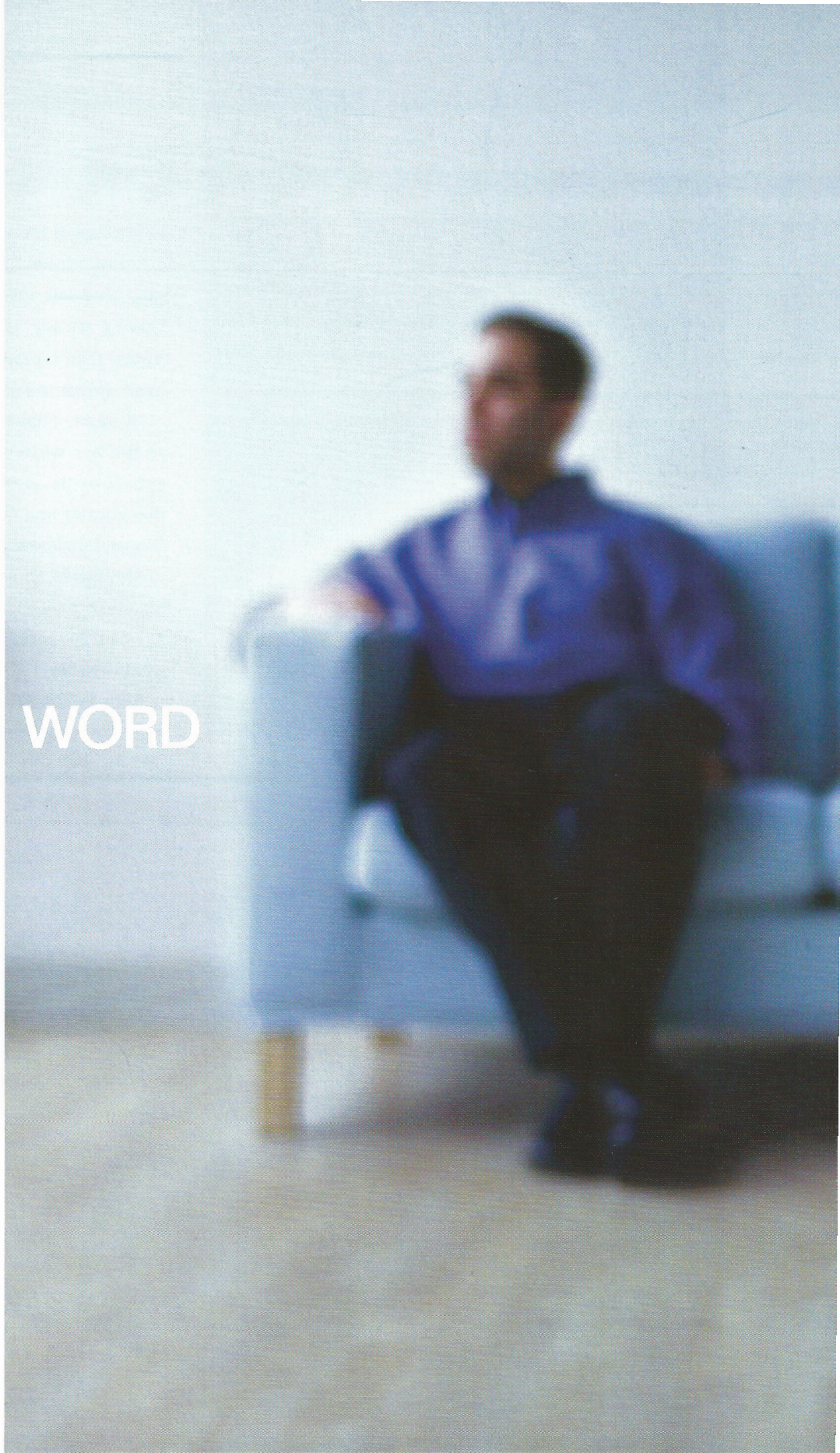


“D”
THE WORD





Divorce in the Suburbs

written by Lynn Prowitt-Smith / photography by Peter Baker

I HATE TO ADMIT IT, but I am a 40-year-old divorce statistic. I was married for seven years (the median duration of divorced women's first marriages is 7.9 years). I have a five-year-old (of women whose marriages last up to 10 years, 78 percent have a child). I come from divorced parents (children of divorce are 50 percent more likely to divorce). The good thing about being a statistic is, well, you're not alone.

Between the summers of 2004 and 2005, just over 1,300 divorce cases were filed in the Bridgeport court (which handles divorces from Fairfield and other parts of Fairfield County). While no one tracks divorces by town, if you extrapolate from Connecticut's 2004 divorce rate of 3.1 per thousand, about 179 divorces take place annually in Fairfield. In 2004, 334 marriage licenses were filed at Fairfield Town Hall. Although it's making a very shaky statistical leap, we could say, based on these data, that about 54 percent of Fairfield marriages end in divorce.

On average in this country, first marriages have a 20 percent chance of ending within five years and a 30 percent chance of ending within 10 years, according to research released in 2002 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Second marriages have a slightly higher failure rate: 23 percent after five years and 39 percent after 10.

Contrary to what many would guess, states in the Northeast have some of the lowest divorce rates in the country. As of April 2005, the divorce rate for the United States was 3.8 per thousand people, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Connecticut's rate in 2004 was 3.1 per thousand people, and back in 1994 this state had the second lowest divorce rate in the country, with 2.8 divorces per thousand people

What makes marriages last longer? Research reveals some factors that seem to help: a woman's age at the time she marries (older is better), if a woman was raised in an "intact" family, if religion plays an important role in the woman's life, and if she comes from a higher income family or higher income community with low male unemployment and low poverty. This list of factors comes from a 2002 CDC report based on findings from a study of nearly 11,000 women.

Add to that list a college education. Recent research conducted by Steven Martin, Ph.D., assistant professor of sociology

at the University of Maryland in College Park, shows that, since about 1980, divorce rates have been dropping steeply among women with college degrees. Of those married between 1990 and 1994, women without degrees had about a 35 percent risk of getting separated or divorced in the first 10 years of marriage, but women with college degrees had just a 16 percent risk.

You may wonder, like I did, why all these studies have been conducted on women, not men. The answer is too apropos to leave out. "It's considered that women's data is more reliable

than men's," Martin says. "Women are generally better at reporting demographic data." That is,

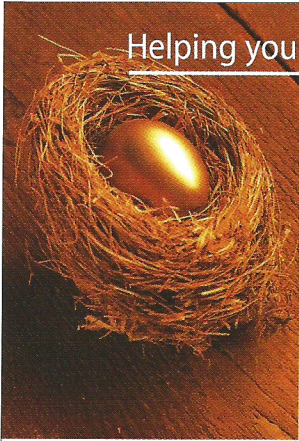
Contrary to what many would guess, states in the Northeast have some of the lowest divorce rates in the country.

women tend to remember more accurately dates, ages, sequences of events and other demographic minutiae. Ask any woman who's in charge of managing the minutiae in her household—family birthday cards, for example—and she's bound to laugh.

Since getting married at a later age and having a college degree are both associated with lower divorce rates, it would be logical to assume that the lower rates in Northeastern states are due to a greater proportion of women going for higher education and marrying later. However, even when age and education are taken into account, the Northeast still has lower divorce rates than the Midwest, South or West. So, as Martin says, "There is something special about Connecticut and the Northeast region beyond simple demographics." Maybe it's the climate or maybe it's our pilgrim ancestors. Regardless of where one lives, however, one thing is true: No one walks down the aisle with the intention of getting divorced.


HOW DOES "I DO" TURN INTO "ADIEU"?

Divorced people have trouble pinpointing why their marriages didn't work out. Valerie*, a 37-year-old mother of two who was married for 13 years, says her marriage failed because she and her husband lacked common ground. "You can grow in different directions and you can have different interests, but you have to have something to come back to—respect and a friendship," she says. "Without it, I think your dysfunction can become your function. You just go through your day-to-day and the next thing you know eight years have gone by and you're really unhappy." Valerie gave up her career to support her husband's



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Thirteen Golden Rules

FOR CO-PARENTING IN DIVORCE

written by Mark Gang

1. **TELL** the children about the divorce together, if possible.
2. **ANSWER** children's questions honestly, avoiding unnecessary details.
3. **REASSURE** children they are not to blame for the divorce.
4. **TELL** children they are loved and will be taken care of.
5. **INCLUDE** the other parent in school and other activities.
6. **BE CONSISTENT** and on time to pick up and return children.
7. **DEVELOP** a workable parenting plan that gives children access to both parents.
8. **GUARD** against canceling plans with children.
9. **GIVE** children permission to have a loving, satisfying relationship with the other parent.
10. **AVOID** putting children in the middle and in the position of having to take sides.
11. **AVOID** pumping children for information about the other parent.
12. **AVOID** arguing and discussing child support issues in front of children.
13. **AVOID** speaking negatively about the other parent or using the child as a pawn to hurt the other parent.

because they both wanted her to be a stay-at-home mom once they had kids. She was also hit with a string of stresses, including the death of a parent, two difficult pregnancies and a major house renovation. He worked from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. As she puts it, "things were okay for a while, but then life got in the way."

So, with a two-year-old and a six-year-old and a beautiful, renovated house on an idyllic Fairfield street, Valerie's husband decided to pull the plug on their marriage. Though she tried to convince him to stay and work things out, she says, "His thought was, 'Why waste another year of my life? I know I'm never going to feel differently, it's never going to change.'"

Mary*, a 39-year-old professional who was married for four years, has a somewhat similar tale. Her husband decided to end their marriage when their child was not yet a year old. "There are many stress factors and triggering events, and I think for us it was just starting a family and buying a house and, for whatever reason, we just weren't ready for all of that," she says. "Every relationship has its hurdles and initially we went for counseling and thought we could work through it." Though in hindsight she says her husband made the right decision, at the time Mary was devastated—far away from her family, without a network of support, and a brand new mother. "We celebrated our baby's first birthday together, but by that time the marriage was pretty much over."

Although neither Valerie nor Mary mention anything about fights over diaper changes or "Ferberizing," both had very small children when their marriages crashed and burned. It's widely

DIFFERENT
QUESTIONS

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*Having children
may be a contributing
factor when marriages
fail, yet it is also
what makes a divorce
most difficult and
painful.*

accepted that married life changes when babies are born. The addition of a tiny, helpless bundle throws a big dose of joy into the marriage mix, but it also inevitably adds stress—compounded by sleep deprivation and major role changes.

The net effect on a marriage can be damaging. This idea is supported by findings from the General Social Survey, which has been conducted regularly since 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center. When married women are asked how happy they are in their marriage, those with children have lower “happiness” scores than those without children, across all age ranges. Between the ages of 30 and 39, 72 percent of wives with no children report being “very happy” in their marriages, while 59 percent of those with children say they are “very happy.” The difference is less in the 40- to 49-year-old range, but there are still significantly more wives without children in the “very happy” category. It is, of course, crucial to view these averages as just that. Millions of women struggling with infertility would quickly beg to differ with the idea of childlessness bringing happiness.

However, Martin says, other research that examines at the three major adult life transitions, shows that starting a career and getting married are generally associated with increases in life satisfaction and mental well-being, while the third—having a child—tends to be associated with reduced life satisfaction and mental well-being.

While you would be hard pressed to find someone who would say their marriage fell apart because they had kids, the stress and changes that come with being a parent clearly take a toll.

TAKING CARE OF THE KIDS

Having children may be a contributing factor when marriages fail, yet it is also what makes a divorce most difficult and painful. In the highly-educated, über-parenting world of Fairfield County, people go to great lengths to provide the very best of everything for their children. Breaking up their home life and forcing them to navigate a new way of living and new concept

PAINFUL



of family is exponentially harder when the standards around us are so high. And then there's the simple pain of being separated from your children, which is commonplace these days, as shared custody has become the norm.

Says Valerie, of the first time her ex came to pick up her kids: "It was summer, and all my neighbors were out having beers on their stoops. I'd bought the kids little Scooby-Doo backpack airline luggage, and I watched as they wheeled them down our lawn. They were excited to be going with their dad, but they got to the car door and started yelling, 'I don't want to go, I don't want to go' as the neighbors watched. I remember shutting the door and leaning against it and crying."

"The first weekends they were gone, the silence was deafening. We all say you'd kill to have time alone in your home...but it was just heartbreaking to watch them go and then again to watch them say good-bye to him when he dropped them off. After the first four weekends, I stopped crying and I realized that this is my 'me' time, and this is the way it's going to be. But it was horribly empty. I would always sleep with one of their stuffed animals."

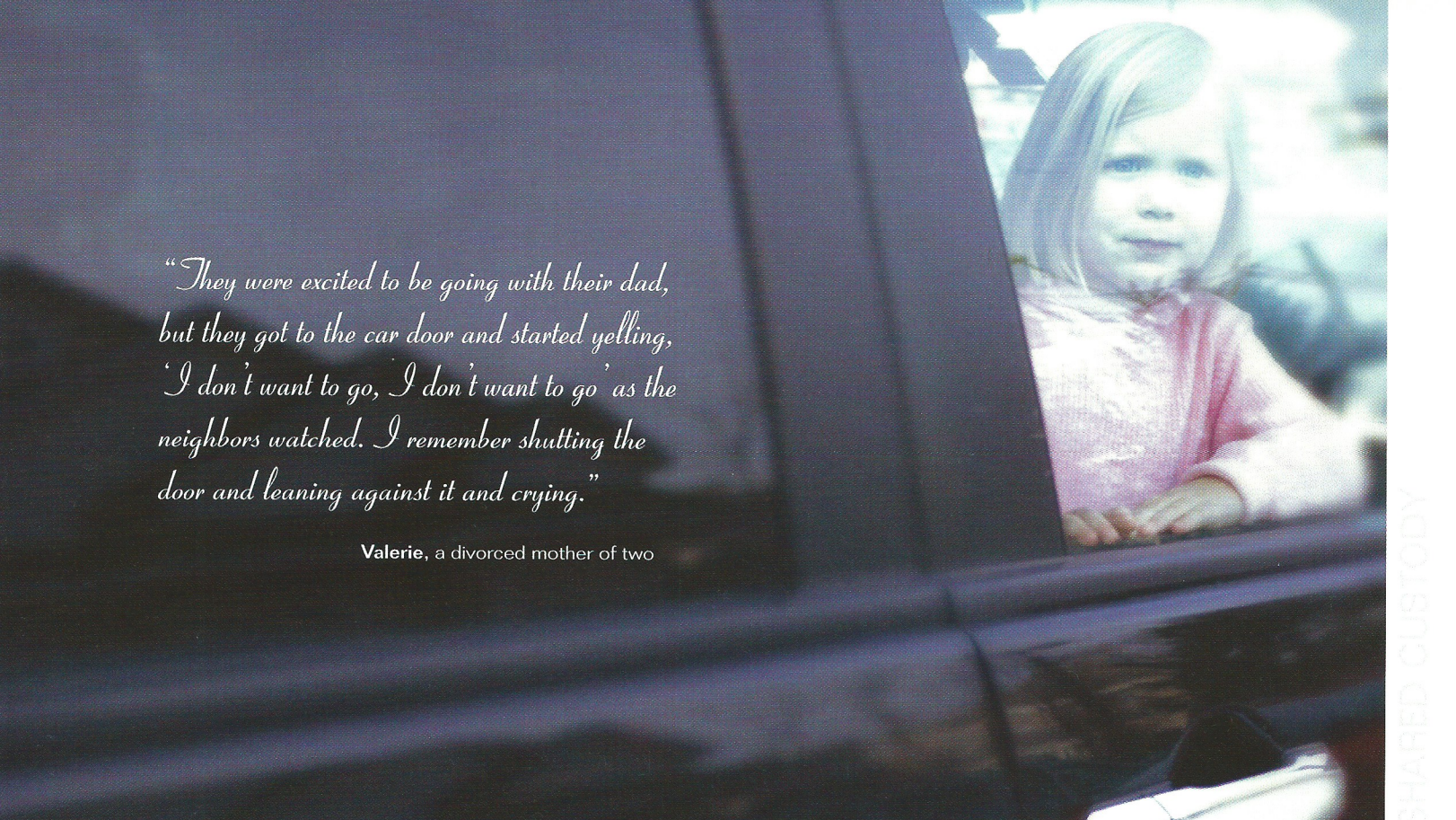
Recently, a conservative movement has emerged, promoting a new study and the view that divorce is more damaging to children than was previously thought. When I took the state of Connecticut's mandated class for divorcing parents, the facilitator told our group of this "new research." As it turns out, it simply depends on which studies you look at and how you look at them. Indeed, the issue is impossible to study scientifically. No one can say whether a child would have done better if his or her parents did

Why Is BRUCE GORDON My Family Lawyer?

When I decided I needed a divorce there was one last decision I needed to make. Attorney Bruce Gordon became my family lawyer. His biggest concern was for me and my family. When I had a choice to make, he clearly explained the options and helped me make my own decisions. This allowed me to focus on the most important thing... getting on with my new life.



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"They were excited to be going with their dad, but they got to the car door and started yelling, 'I don't want to go, I don't want to go' as the neighbors watched. I remember shutting the door and leaning against it and crying."

Valerie, a divorced mother of two

not divorce, and there's no good way to compare children whose parents have marital problems (yet stay together) with children whose parents divorce.

Reverend Alida Ward, minister of Greenfield Hill Congregational Church, co-runs a group called New Beginnings, which meets once a month to discuss topics surrounding divorce. Ward is encouraging on the subject of kids and divorce: "I frankly don't believe [the new research]. I've seen enough people do this with integrity and kindness, and I know from my youth group where I've worked with kids of all kinds, every family—divorced or not divorced—is capable of raising kids lovingly or not. The last thing I would want to say to a divorcing mom or dad is 'now you've doomed your kids to a lifetime of misery.' If you do it with care and kindness, they can emerge from this as grounded, sane, loving people."

Care and kindness, however, are not generally the first terms that come out of people's mouths when discussing their divorces. Divorce is never pretty, and it's every divorcing parent's challenge to protect the little ones from the ugliness. How? Mark Gang, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist who specializes in divorce issues and sees both parents and children in his office on Black Rock Turnpike, says that the most important things are not letting the child get caught in the middle and "making sure the

child doesn't have to ever choose a parent." Gang is trained in the collaborative process, a new trend in divorce resolution that employs a team of people—lawyers, coaches and a child specialist—that make the child the centerpiece of the divorce process.

Gang says it's also important that children are not exposed to the acrimony and tension that usually exists between ex-spouses. "If the child tells you something about the other parent that you're uneasy with, it's important that you're able to communicate with your ex outside of the realm of the child, and not have these discussions in front of him or her," he says. Also, if there are things you want to know, go to the source, don't ask the child to report on the other parent. "Remember, we react as parents, so when we ask a child a question and we get an answer that we don't want to hear or are shocked by, the child can sense that. They can read your body language, they can also feel the energy in the room, so to speak."

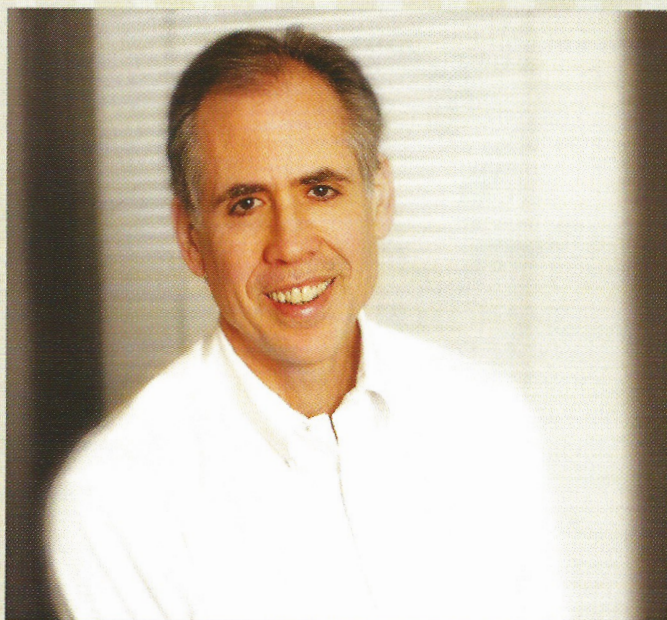
Mary's situation is a model in co-parenting. She and her ex-husband work together to do what's best for their son. "He was so young he doesn't even remember having the two of us together," she says, "so I think we both look at this as, it is what it is, but going forward create the best family environment that you can for him." Mary is also fortunate to have remarried a man who does a great job in the role of stepfather. "There's mutual respect

among all three of us...There really is no stepping on toes. My son's father and my husband are very much on the same page with regard to discipline issues and how they handle things. I think it just works. I'm very thankful for what I have and do feel that we have been blessed. There are times when we disagree but the unwritten understanding is it's not about us. The only reason we're interacting is because of our son, and I think because we both tend to be on the same page with that, we work things out."

THE BITTER PILL

What makes it hard to be our best selves and our child's best parents during a divorce is that the process brings on a torrent of emotions, some expected and some completely surprising. In the New Beginnings monthly meetings, which are composed mostly of women, Ward says, "I'm struck by how often we keep coming back to the issue of anger. A number of these women point to the fact that they've never thought of themselves as angry people and suddenly they're experiencing tremendous anger, and that's frightening...They start to wonder, 'Am I becoming a different person? Am I going to come out of this as a bitter person?' Retaining a sense of self that you're happy with is a big issue."

Valerie is a case in point. She knew her marriage was failing and she thinks she'll probably thank her husband one day for making the decision he did, but she still battles a lot of resentment, a year and a half later. "I keep going back to the anger stage," she says. "I really use that as a benchmark because I don't want to be that woman...you know, the ones who



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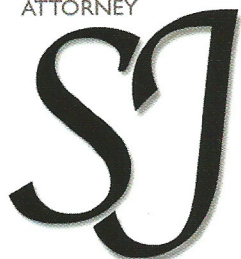
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Resources

FOR THOSE GOING THROUGH DIVORCE

Fairfielders have a wealth of services available to help them navigate through the rough road of divorce. Here is a listing of a variety of sources of information, support and even fun.

BLOOM

A woman's resource for programs, events, ideas and inspiration
Barbara Scala, life coach for women in transition

Email: info@bloomonline.com

www.bloomonline.com; 292-3790

DIVORCE RECOVERY PROGRAM

Seven-session workshop, led by a Christian counselor or pastor (also offers Confident Kids, a program for children experiencing divorce)

Black Rock Congregational Church

Contact Dan McCandless or Bonnie Beck: 255-3401

DIVORCE RESOLUTION RESOURCES

Divorce mediation and education services

www.ctmediate.com

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are 60, divorced for 20 years and they still hate their ex-husband and they're still bitter. I don't want to be that person."

Ward says anger is an issue even for women who make the decision themselves to end a marriage. "I certainly think the perception out there would be that if you were left, you're angry, and if you're the one who did the leaving, then you're probably not as upset," she says, "and I don't actually see that happening. Perhaps they feel their spouse didn't recognize how bad things had gotten and they were driven to a point of having to do something about it. The levels of frustration and unhappiness can be just as strong, they just come out at different points in the process or are expressed differently. Either way, you're going through a great disappointment and a profound grief."

THE SCARLET LETTER "D"

Another hurdle for divorced people in a place like Fairfield is the feeling that all around you are happy, J. Crew-catalog families, barbecuing on the beach and walking their golden retriever on sunny Sundays. Especially for women who have had to go back to work to support themselves after a divorce, it can seem like

DIVORCEMAGAZINE.COM: HELP FOR GENERATION "EX"

www.divorcemagazine.com

FAIRFIELD COUNTY SOCIAL CLUB

A private organization of 30- to 40-year-old single professionals who get together for fun, sports, and libations

www.fairfieldcountysocialclub.com

NEW BEGINNINGS

Monthly meetings with speakers on divorce topics

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

Contact Rev. Alida Ward: 259-5596

WOMEN@WORK NETWORK

A job network for current and returning professional women seeking work-life balance and flexibility

www.womenatworknetwork.com

OURFAMILYWIZARD.COM

Web site service for divorced families with calendars, message boards, expense logs, etc.

www.ourfamilywizard.com

BOOKS

📖 *Crazy Time: Surviving Divorce and Building a New Life*

(Harper Paperbacks, 1992)

by Abigail Trafford.

📖 *Friendly Divorce Guidebook for Connecticut:*

Planning, Negotiating and Filing Your Divorce

(LawFirst Publishing,

Connecticut Bar Association)

by Barbara Kahn Stark.

📖 *From Ex-Wife to Exceptional Life: A Woman's Journey*

Through Divorce

(Purple Lotus Press, 2005)

by Donna F. Ferber.

📖 *Transformational Divorce: Discover Yourself, Reclaim Your Dream & Embrace Life's Unlimited Possibilities*

(New Harbinger Publications, 2003)

by Karen Kahn Wilson.

you're the only one who's not home baking cookies and volunteering for the arts fair at school.

Valerie found a job a year after her husband moved out, and half of her salary goes to a full-time babysitter. "One day, my sitter called me at work and said she had something terrible to tell

me. For three seconds, I thought one of my kids had been hit by a car. It turned out she'd lost her cell phone. But after that, I sat with my head in my hands for 15 minutes and I really contemplated begging my ex to take me back so I could be home again with my kids. But then I thought, you know, the kids could be hit

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NEW BEGINNINGS

by a car on my watch, too. It was all the pretend part of that Stepford wife thing. Having a lot of good, traditional marriages around us was really good at the beginning, but now it's 'Oh, that would be you with the scarlet 'D' on your sweater.' I'm different. I have a whole different life now."

Mary agrees with the scarlet letter analogy. "Initially, I definitely felt out of place. Do I still feel that way? A little bit. Even though I'm remarried. I don't know if stigma is the right word. I still feel a little different, out of place. I think it's more my perception, rightly or wrongly, of people in Fairfield."


A FRESH START

For all the expected and unexpected pain that comes with ending a marriage, it does deliver a unique chance to start anew. Mary was devastated when her husband ended their marriage, and struggled in "survival mode" for a long time, she says. But today, she's happily remarried, has a good career and a successful co-parenting relationship with her ex-husband.

Barbara Scala, co-founder with Ward of New Beginnings, is also a life coach for women in transition and the founder of Bloom, a Fairfield-based online resource service for women. Bloom grew out of Barbara's divorce experience, and she's now

dedicated herself to providing help and support to other women going through the transition. She's soon to launch a workshop called "Divorce Ain't So Bad After All." Her take on life after divorce is uplifting: "Your whole life is an empty canvas now. You can really have it bloom and grow. What are your passions? What are your gifts? Do you want to do something in your life you haven't done or have always wanted to do?"

Says Ward: "I do think it's a God-awful transition, but you can emerge from it as somebody who's freed up from some bad stuff. Because whether or not you saw the divorce coming, there was something not right. Once you see that and believe that you're capable of more and deserving of more, it really can be a transforming experience."

Valerie says the best advice she got was from a friend, who said: "You know what you've been given? A mulligan. It's a golf term, it's a gimme, and you rarely get them, so I don't want to hear you complaining. You got a mulligan on the ninth hole, not the eighteenth so you get to do it over. So good for you." "And that has stuck with me," she says, "at 36, I was given a do-over." 

* Mary and Valerie's real names have been changed for the purposes of this article.