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ABSTRACT

Throughout continuing higher education there has been a surge of concern for the returning student (housewife), but the returning student (divorcee) is usually left without needed supportive services to nurture her return to the mainstream. The newly-single female is a crisis-strengthened and weakened mutation, unable to return to her former self and needing help in shaping her new identity. Many see college education as the process through which to gain renewal. To counsel creatively it is necessary to recognize that the divorcee is in a unique position to barter past limitations for new goals. (Author)

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SUMMARY

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To counsel creatively it is necessary to recognize that the divorcee is in a unique position to barter past limitations for new goals.

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Summary of discussion at the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators and Counselors 59th Anniversary Conference in Philadelphia from April 2 - 5, 1975.

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COUNSELING THE NO-LONGER MARRIED WOMAN

I just noticed a sign of the times in the January FINANCIAL AID NEWS. The number of single-parent students has increased to the point where the Parents' Confidential Statement is to be revised to take into account that there aren't always two parents!

Without fanfare a new breed has arrived on the college campus in increasing proportion. The press has made much of the returning housewife and ignored the divorcee, yet the no-longer-married woman may be more motivated -- struggling against the greatest odds. She often arrives on campus while still in shock, still mourning or hostile and bitter. She has suffered what seemed to be the ultimate putdown, often losing what shreds of identity that remained after the legal struggle. Each woman's story is unique and her reaction singular to the new singleness - whether she left or was left - whether there were other persons involved - whether or not there are children or involvement of family, all make for different stresses.

Campus counselors are not often prepared to deal with the complicated re-entry -- not only of mature females, but with this crisis-strengthened and weakened mutation -- a new breed of student needing a chance to heal and grow. We need to understand as counselors the many facets of of change to be faced by the newly single woman. She can't go back to her former identity, but must forge a new person. As Willard Waller wrote 45 years ago, the divorced person must learn to utilize experience in a positive fashion and sell the past to buy the future. The experience must be accepted and the emotion dissipated to achieve a stable rearrangement of fundamental impulses needed by the new conditions.

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Paul Bohannon lists six stations of divorce which need to be coped with:

Emotional	loss of trust
Legal	untangle and establish grounds
Economic	often irrational or retaliatory
Co-parental	where there are children - custody - whose responsibility
Psychic	becoming autonomous individual again - life is with people

14% of U.S. families who have children are now headed by single women.

6.2 million women are head of household - which indicates the direction in which the country is rapidly moving. Though divorce is more generally acceptable, choosing divorce still takes a great deal of courage, conviction and character, and facing the reality that often there is no justice.

Acceptance of reality requires in some cases being able to let go of the past with a no more than "so what" attitude - then starting all over with new and really one's own goals and with positive plans to get rid of the sense of failure. The shake-up provides the divorcee a good chance to drop old habits, even start over by repeating adolescence and begin to find out who one really is.

The newly-single woman goes thru the various phases of adjustment: disillusionment, erosion, detachment, physical separation, guilt, loneliness, anxiety about the unknown, identity crisis, mourning, anger, depression to the point where adolescence is repeated and one again looks ahead.

The feelings of relief and freedom may be followed by overreaction before counseling can begin to be really effective in helping with exploration of new goals. The past is never really exorcised but it becomes the base for a better future. Counselors take on the temporary

role of the friends who often withdraw. This provides a neutral sounding-board upon which to clarify real feelings and a place to expose and diffuse anger, gain a new self-awareness, and shed the shell of pain.

The counselor can provide strong encouragement for new activities and involvement. William Goode's case studies showed how important this is -- even to the point of over-scheduling. Often for the first time in her life, the divorcee is able to set her own goals -- not parents' -- not husband's -- but her own. Here she should become involved with other women and men seeking new directions.

The career woman is generally less traumatized by divorce than the woman at home as she often has a more stable self-image and the economic shock is usually more manageable. She also has more lines into social areas as a person in her own right - not associated with her husband - than does the at-home wife. She has a shorter distance to travel back to autonomy.

We have used single-parent workshops where a panel is made up of a psychiatrist who discusses loneliness; a child therapist who deals with practical problems such as coping with extravagant gifts from the spouse to the children, or competition for affection between divorced parents; a tax lawyer who offers practical advice covering property, insurance, etc.; and a career counselor who can aid in setting new goals. The group participates in a question and answer period and then begins to socialize. This type of group function is often carried on by "Parents Without Partners" groups or mental health clinics, but could be just as effective on campus.

But many new singles are not parents and their problems of loneliness may be even greater than those with children who provide many family and social ties. It is usually very difficult for the non-parent divorcee to become a part of a counseling group that contains parents - whether divorced or married - although they share many problems. As Sheila Kessler says in THE AMERICAN WAY OF DIVORCE, "It is urgent that we bring about reforms such as no-fault divorce and acceptance of alternate lifestyles.

Meanwhile, counselors can do a great deal to ease the painful re-entry process by understanding the creative aspects of divorce and making them work for the newly-single woman.

Remarks by Margaret Taylor Anderson, Director of the Rockland County Guidance Center for Women, an agency of Rockland Community College, Suffern, N. Y. 10901

NOTES:

Meg Gianfagna, who counsels newly-single women in Human Potential Seminars at the Rockland County Guidance Center for Women, spoke of how she felt the divorce in her immediate family had been a positive and enriching experience for her. She expressed concern that divorce is always viewed so negatively.

Lee Sennish, who was at home until she divorced at 40, and who is now the director of the Womens Center at Ramapo College, reported on her work in organizing "Women In Transition" groups.

Mary Grace Ecroyd, a recently divorced student, spoke of the problems she encountered in returning to school and work full-time to support her three children, all of whom were under 8 years of age.

The panel discussion was followed by a lively interchange between speakers and audience.

Presented at the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators and Counselors 59th Anniversary Conference in Philadelphia from April 2 - 5, 1975.