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# Psychology and Family Law

## Divorcing Preconceptions

By Mark Baer, Esq.



certain guys.

I admit that I enjoy reading the Washington Post's advice column by Carolyn Hax. Although I'm frequently intrigued by the problems people describe, and Hax's answers, last month I came across a problem that struck close to my professional wheelhouse. It was titled *Divorce yourself from your preconception of*

In the column, she responded to the following inquiry: *I am wary of dating guys whose parents are divorced. My parents and most of my friends' parents are happily married. I think people whose parents are divorced may have a different sense of marriage, i.e., that it doesn't have to be for a lifetime. I think it does. I basically have no idea how to deal with someone whose parents are divorced because it's foreign to me. So, how do I?*

Here is Hax's response:

*You deal with people whose parents are divorced by treating them as you would any other human being (or should, if you didn't nod off in decency class): by getting to know them and their values before you judge them as wanting. The strongest marriages are rooted in grace, compassion and open-minded acceptance. And, no matter who your parents are, you've got a long way to go.*

I couldn't agree more with Hax's advice, because it's my experience that people will often take an unexamined, "conventional wisdom" concept and apply it to relational decisions. The result can be a kind of unwarranted prejudice.

It's true that people whose parents divorced are statistically more likely themselves to divorce. But, that information alone is misleading. For example, the research shows that the risk of divorce decreases by fourteen percent if your parents are *happily married*. However, some credible research suggests that only approximately *seventeen percent* of married people are happy. So that means that 83% of married couples may be unhappy. Thus, the fact of an individual's parents simply being married does not predict they will stay married themselves. I've found that things are often not as they appear.

To take it a step further, is it more risky to marry someone whose parents are unhappily married than it is to marry someone whose parents divorced? How about if the person's parents are "happily married," but secretly their

marriage is far less "traditional" than you believe? Couldn't that subtly impact their children's perception of marriage?

Actually, some segments of the population whose parents divorced are more likely to divorce than others. For example, children whose parents' divorce came as a complete surprise to them have a particularly high rate of divorce because of trust issues. Furthermore, when both spouses' parents divorced, the couple is four times more likely to divorce than if only one spouse's parents divorced. Another interesting statistic suggests that *daughters* whose parents divorced are almost twice as likely to divorce than sons.

I could be mistaken, but I wonder if individuals believing the prejudice against dating offspring of divorced parents would be equally, if not more, wary of dating people whose parents are in a happy and healthy intact *non-marital* relationship.

Most importantly, from what I've gathered, the top four risk factors for divorce don't involve whether or not a person's parents divorced. Those risks are as follows: (1) quality of the interaction between them; (2) marrying before age 26; (3) lack of a college education; and (4) the manner in which a person reacts to problems and disappointments. Without being aware of those risk factors, isn't it possible that the person who is "wary of dating guys whose parents are divorced" could pose the greater risk themselves?

The less information considered, the more impaired the critical thinking, which is why empathy is so incredibly important. In fact, the following is a quote from an article aptly titled *Empathy + Critical Thinking = Compassionate Action* that was published by Education Week in 2015: *Critical thinking, especially critical thinking that leads to compassionate action, requires a wellspring of empathy. The connection between critical thinking and empathy might not be obvious; it might even seem contradictory. However, if critical thinking involves seeking, analyzing, and evaluating multiple perspectives on a complex question or issue, then being able to 'see' through someone else's eyes is essential.*

This is a summation of why I think empathy is so incredibly important, and why it's a common theme throughout much of my published work. As social science researcher Brene' Brown says, "Empathy, the core of which is perspective-taking, is incompatible with shame and judgment." In other words, you can't even take a credible perspective when you're too busy judging—or prejudging—people.

*Mark Baer, Esq., can be reached at [Mark@MarkBaerEsq.com](mailto:Mark@MarkBaerEsq.com).*