

Navigating Divorce Ambivalence with Integrity

APFM|ADFP|MCFM Conference ♦ November 8, 2019
Rachel Zamore, LMFT, Certified Discernment Counselor & Trainer

Key Findings

- ♦ About 1 in 4 individual divorcing parents indicated some belief marriage could still be saved with hard work; in about 1 of 9 matched couples, both spouses indicated some belief marriage could still be saved (Doherty et al, 2011)
- ♦ In about 1 in 3 of couples, one is interested in reconciliation services and the other not; in about 1 in 10 divorcing couples, both spouses independently indicated interest (Doherty et al, 2011)
- ♦ Among divorcing spouses who initiated process, 11.6% indicated ambivalence (51.6% for those whose spouses initiated and 44.9% where both initiated). (Doherty et al, 2016)

Divorce Ambivalence Protocol Outline

1. Provide intake form including ambivalence screening questionnaire.
2. During initial meeting:
 - a. Goals for meeting?
 - b. Reflect on intake form responses. (*"Thanks for filling out the intake form. I see that you checked [that you have mixed feelings about the divorce, etc.] Could you tell me more about why you checked that response?"*)
 - c. Reasons for considering divorce?
 - d. What have they tried? How did it go?
 - e. If appropriate, share information about discernment counseling.

Discernment Counseling Basics

- ♦ **Goal: Clarity and confidence** for a couple in their decision-making -- for couples where one or both have doubts or concerns with moving forward with divorce
- ♦ **Not Couples Therapy:** No intention to facilitate repair or reconciliation during discernment counseling; appropriate for mixed-agenda couples; focus on next steps
- ♦ **One-on-One Focus:** Couple time at start and end, but focus and majority of time is for individual meetings with discernment counselor, which is where the deeper conversations take place and where each person's agenda can be effectively addressed



- ◆ **Brief & Low Commitment:** Standard format is 1-5 sessions; couple schedules one session and decides each time whether to schedule again, up to maximum of 5 (higher-end private retreat/intensive format also available with sessions pre-scheduled)
- ◆ **Mixed-Agenda Couples Welcome:** Especially designed for couples where one is leaning strongly for divorce but isn't 100% sure, and where one wants to work on the marriage
- ◆ **Helps couples come to a clearer place about where to go with the divorce process**

Resources & References

Research & Publications

Hawkins, A. J., Willoughby, B. J., & Doherty, W. J. (2012). Reasons for divorce and openness to marital reconciliation. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 53, 453–463.

William J. Doherty, Harris, S. M. & Didericksen, K. W. (2016). A Typology of Attitudes Toward Proceeding with Divorce Among Parents in the Divorce Process, *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 57:1, 1-11.

William J. Doherty, Willoughby, B. J., & Peterson, B. (2011). Interest in reconciliation among divorcing parents. *Family Court Review*, 49, 313-321. Non-technical summary and update published in *Family Law Forum*, 19, 48-52.

Websites

www.discernmentcounseling.com/lawyers/

Free online 3-hour divorce ambivalence training for lawyers & mediators, with demo videos

moderncommitment.com/all-discernment-counselors/

National directory of trained discernment counselors. Website also contains readings for clients.

innovation.umn.edu/mncouplesonthebrink/

Couples on the Brink project where discernment counseling and the divorce ambivalence protocol were developed (led by William Doherty, PhD)

www.relationshipcrossroads.com

Private discernment retreats and daylong mini-intensives with discernment counseling trainer, Rachel Zamore. Consultation and resources for marriage & divorce professionals. Resources for couples on the brink of divorce.



How Are You Thinking About Your Divorce?

1. People have different attitudes towards their divorce. Check which of these statements most closely fits your own attitude right now. Please read all of them and then pick just one statement.

- I'm done with this marriage; it's too late now even if my spouse were to make major changes.
- I have mixed feelings about the divorce; sometimes I think it's a good idea and sometimes I'm not sure.
- I would consider reconciling if my spouse got serious about making major changes.
- I don't want this divorce, and I would work hard to get us back together.

2. When couples are in the divorce process, sometimes they are leaning in different directions about the future of their marriage. Please circle the number below that is closest to your own "leaning" at this moment.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Definitely preserve the relationship				Not sure			Definitely end the relationship		

3. If a service were recommended to help you consider your options about divorcing or trying to solve the problems in your marriage, how interested would you be in following up on that recommendation?

- Yes: definitely interested
- Maybe: I'd consider it
- No: not interested

Resource developed by Dr. Bill Doherty et al. Shared with permission by Rachel Zamore



Divorce Ambivalence Protocol for Mediators

[Administer the assessment tool before the interview.]

1. "What do you want to get out of seeing me today?"
2. At an appropriate opening, refer to the intake/assessment form:
 - ◆ "I see that you checked the box indicating you are done with the marriage... have mixed feelings, etc. Could you tell me more about that?"
 - ◆ For couples, reflect back whether they are in the same or different stances: "It seems like you are (in the same place... in different places) on wanting the divorce." Follow up: "Is that a surprise to either of you?"
 - ◆ Paraphrase back what you are hearing from each person.
3. Ask about the reasons for considering divorce
 - ◆ "Could you give me a brief snapshot of what has led you to the point of considering divorce?"
 - ◆ Show empathy for what they are saying.
4. Ask about what they've tried:
 - ◆ "Could you tell me about what you've tried to do to solve your problems so that you would not be faced with divorce? That might include counseling or other kinds of help."
 - ◆ *[If the clients say they've tried marriage counseling.]* "Could you tell me how the counseling went?" *[Listen for number of sessions and their sense of the counselor's competence.]*
5. If either partner expresses ambivalence about the divorce or hope for the marriage, bring up discernment counseling as a resource.
 - ◆ Discernment counseling is for couples where one or both parties have some doubts or concerns about moving forward with the divorce.
 - ◆ It's not marriage counseling intended to solve your marriage problems.
 - ◆ Instead it helps you look at your relationship and come to a decision with clarity and confidence about whether to move ahead with the divorce or to make a final effort, with help, to restore your marriage to good health.
 - ◆ It's especially designed for couples where one party wants to keep trying to work on the marriage, and the other person is leaning strongly towards divorce, but is not 100% sure.
 - ◆ It's brief -- from 1 to 5 sessions (you decide each time whether to go back).
 - ◆ Basically, it helps couples come to a clearer place about where to go with the divorce process.
 - ◆ If you are interested, I can give you information on where you can learn more about discernment counseling. *[Provide discernment counseling handout and/or refer them to moderncommitment.com or relationshipcrossroads.com.]*

Resource developed by Dr. Bill Doherty et al. Adapted and shared with permission by Rachel Zamore

www.RELATIONSHIPCROSSROADS.COM

