

The evolution of the high divorce rate

The Canadian divorce rate has risen over 1,000 per cent over the last 50 years. Find out why.

By: Deborah Moskovitch



Have you ever stopped to ponder why the divorce rate has risen so dramatically over the past 50 years? When my parents married in the 1950s the divorce rate was minimal. According to Statistics Canada, in 1951 there were only 5,270 divorces in all of Canada. The number rose dramatically to a staggering 70,226 divorces in 2008 – a whopping 1,232% increase in total divorces over 50 years. This compares with an increase in the total population of only 139%. Divorce was a rare event previous to the first world war with a rate of less than one per 1,000 of the yearly number of marriages, says Stats Can.

There has been significant progress in divorce reform making it easier and fairer to obtain. Researchers would most likely agree that not only has divorce become more socially acceptable, but divorce laws have also changed to provide a more equitable resolution for many since the late 1960s. The amendment to the Divorce Act to permit the reason for divorce as no-fault (in other words, no-blame divorce) has radically altered the factors influencing the decision to divorce.

In other words divorce has become less of a stigma, you don't have to prove fault, and there is more fairness in addressing financial concerns for the disadvantaged spouse. In addition, there has been extensive research

on the impact of divorce upon the family, children, social outcomes and so much more. This learning has enabled the development of more effective resources to help the divorcing individual. No longer does one feel forced to stay in a marriage when there is a serious breach of trust, or any kind of abuse. These are very positive outcomes of divorce reform.

The grass isn't always greener, so why the high divorce rate?

But, knowing what we do -- that the grass isn't always greener on the other side, that divorce can be hard on children, lifestyle is often diminished, and the divorce rate rises with each subsequent marriage -- why is the divorce rate still so high? Has the traditional wedding vow promising to love and cherish each other in sickness and in health until death do us part lost its meaning? Or, have expectations about marriage and what we want out of a partner changed over the years, resulting in this dramatic rise in divorce.

Choosing to divorce is certainly not an easy decision. For most, the decision to divorce is a result of a great deal of soul searching and questioning. While the legal system for divorce is far from perfect, it is significantly better than it was in the 1950s. But, upon closer examination, it appears that changing attitudes towards relationships and marriage have impacted the divorce rate over the last 50 years. I spoke with one of the foremost sociologists and researchers in North America, Dr. Paul Amato, who has conducted extensive research on marital quality and stability.

The 1950s and "companionate marriage"

I learned that to better understand divorce, you need to understand marriage and the attitudes towards each have changed and impacted these momentous decisions. Dr. Amato states that marriage in the 50s and 60s was called the "companionate" marriage. The feature of a companionate marriage was the idea of successful teamwork. That is, husbands and wives got married because they wanted to work as a team to accomplish a lot of important life goals -- like running a home, being economically secure, raising a family and so on. Those marriages weren't perfect; they weren't egalitarian because the husband was the head of the household. Nevertheless the assumption was that each partner was expected to sacrifice something of their own for the success of the team, and that marriage was more important than the individual.

The reason people get married today

If you look at marriage today versus what was in the 50s and 60s, Amato's

research uncovers a monumental change. "Since then, marriage has become more individualistic. The idea is that the marriage exists to allow each individual, husband and wife, to grow as a person and to become a better person -- to be the best person they can be," he says.

"If you ask people why they married today, as opposed to fifty years ago, they almost never say to have kids or buy a home together or be economically secure. What people tend to say now is, I got married because I'm in love and I've found my soul mate, someone who is going to help me grow as a person and achieve a deep level of meaning in my life," says Amato.

The purpose of marriage has become much more psychological and less pragmatic. Amato says at the same time, expectations from marriage have increased. Back in the 50s and 60s, people were not necessarily fulfilled from the marriage. For instance, a wife might have thought the husband was a good provider, he was good with the kids and they had a nice home to live in, and that was okay, he says. "People were happy enough with that."

Why we divorce

"If people [today] don't feel deeply fulfilled by the relationship, then they are much more likely to think that the marriage is bad, or problematic, or in trouble. As you see now, a lot of divorces occur not for serious relationship problems, but for existential reasons."

As you can see, the reasons behind saying "I do" to your partner have changed dramatically, thereby influencing the reasons for "I don't." If there is any sense that one of the couple feels like they are growing apart, and don't feel in sync any longer, an individual is more likely to leave the relationship. According to Amato, people are more likely to say, "This relationship is holding me back, I feel like life is passing me by. It would be a better thing to end this relationship and find truer happiness with another partner."

Today, people want someone to share a deep love, have great communication, and not only grow together but as individuals. However when things start to go wrong, it is inevitable that people will begin to question whether or not their partner really is their soul mate.

Before you commit or jump ship, consider a few things:

1. Do I really know myself and my partner to understand what I want out

of life?

2. What are my expectations of my partner, and does he/she know it?
3. Do I need my partner to help me fulfill my life goals and do we share the same values?
4. Do I need my partner to help me achieve my sense of completeness? And, if I do need help, and my partner can't provide what I need, is divorce really the answer? Or, can I achieve growth on my own and bring this new learning into the relationship for a deeper, stronger bond?
5. Are my own personal issues and emotional baggage affecting how I feel? And, if your answer is yes, perhaps it's your own soul searching and resolutions that might solve the problem, and not your soul mate.

As you can see, expectations and needs have changed, thereby influencing the decision to both marry and divorce. Fifty years ago the reason to marry was teamwork. And divorce was usually caused by very serious problems like abuse, domestic violence, alcoholism, infidelity, or some other difficult problem. Today what influences our decisions in a relationship are often more individualistic, and the problems in many instances have become more philosophical.

Perhaps today there needs to be greater communication before decisions are made both to jump in and jump out. Rather than simply saying you truly love each other and will work these things out when they happen, try to talk about your needs and wants before you get married or commit to a significant relationship.

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