

Micki McWade is author of *Getting Up, Getting Over, Getting on : A Twelve Step Guide to Divorce Recovery*.

**The Emotions of Ending a Relationship: 12 Steps to Healing.
by Micki McWade**

It's no revelation that divorce is a traumatic event, experienced emotionally, psychologically and financially. What is not often understood is the amount of time and effort necessary to recover emotionally. Well-intentioned people who haven't been divorced ask "What's taking so long?" and proclaim "You have to get on with your life-go out and meet other people!" Meanwhile, all we want to do is pull the covers over our heads at the thought of becoming vulnerable again in a relationship.

Abigail Trafford, in her book, *Crazy Time*, says "There is nothing easy about divorce. It's a savage emotional journey. You don't know where it ends for a long time."

Those of us who have been there, or are divorcing or separating now, know this to be true. Taking time to recover from emotional trauma is often thought unnecessary. We might think "I'm divorced now. Why don't I feel better?"

What does recovery mean? It means taking the time to understand what happened and why and our 50 percent of what went wrong in the relationship.

Why bother? To avoid going through the misery again.

Trafford quotes Jungian analyst Lawrence Staples, who says "Divorce is always experienced as a failure...but it is out of failure that a person often finds the inner strength to attain major achievements in life." He continues, saying "A crisis forces change." It is within our power to learn and grow from the crisis or allow it destroy us. Will we be proactive or reactive?

Ignorance is not bliss. We may be tempted to blame our spouse entirely for the relationship's demise or to act like an ostrich, keeping our heads in the sand when we feel afraid, but while these reactions are understandable, they don't work to our advantage.

The Twelve Step recovery model has been used for 65 years to help people cope with change. The rewards of using the Steps to recover from divorce are self-knowledge, peace and character strength. Melody Beattie, a well-known writer on co-dependency, says "We each have our own key, our own magic. We each have the power and the ability to discover that magic and tap into our own healing process, regardless of our present circumstances. The way to do that is by working the Twelve Steps."

The following description is a brief overview of how the Steps apply to separation and divorce. More information is available in the book *Getting Up, Getting Over, Getting On: A Twelve Step Guide to Divorce Recovery* also by Micki McWade. The Steps were originally written to help people recover from alcoholism and the bracketed words were the original words of the Steps for that purpose. We have modified the Steps slightly so that they pertain to relationship.

Step One: We admitted we were powerless over others [alcohol] and our lives had become unmanageable. When we recognize that we cannot control another person, no matter how smart, articulate, convincing we may be, we might decide to put more time into our own lives-where it belongs and can do the most good. We can only control ourselves, our actions and reactions. We may be able to influence by example, but we cannot force a person to do what we want them to do. By spending our precious time and energy trying to control, manipulate and seek revenge, our own lives become unmanageable because we aren't taking care of ourselves and developing our own potential.

Step Two: Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to wholeness [sanity]. Some of us grow in spirituality during crisis and think of the power greater than ourselves as God. Some of us will go to a therapist, some will read helpful material, and some will join a support group. The main idea is to be open to outside resources to help you get through the crisis. Studies have shown that those who have peer support recover faster and more fully than those who are isolated. Joining a divorce support group speeds the recovery process because we gain support and learn from each other-and don't wear out our friends and family members.

Step Three: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God. The Twelve Step program is a spiritual one. We learn by practicing the Steps to connect in a real way with our Higher Power. While the program is spiritual, it does not espouse any particular religion. It isn't necessary to be spiritual or religious to find help in the program. An open mind is enough. We do the best we can and then turn the outcome over to the care of God, asking for wisdom, courage and guidance in making the many important decisions that are necessary during the divorce process.

Step Four: Made a searching and moral inventory of ourselves . It is important that we assess our strengths and weaknesses after a marriage or long-term relationship ends. We are not the same now as we were when we entered the relationship. We need to understand where that leaves us in the present and decide which characteristics to eliminate and which to nurture. Awareness is the first step.

Step Five: Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our failings [wrongs]. When we admit to God, we are forgiven, when we admit to ourselves and take ownership of our failings, we begin to see that change is possible. When we admit to another human being, we realize that we are human-no more, no

less. No one is perfect and everyone makes mistakes. By admitting them, we take the second step in making significant change. Be sure to choose a supportive person to talk to.

Step Six: Were entirely ready to remove these defects of character. This Step sounds deceptively simple. To become ready.... This may involve backing out of a long-held stance. We may have to stop a destructive habit. Look at a behavior or characteristic you want to give up and decide what the opposite might be. Rather than beating yourself up for having the characteristic, it's more advantageous to focus on what you want instead. You may want to replace impatience with patience, for example.

Step Seven: Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings. When we e recognized our shortcomings, talked about them and decided that we don't want to repeat them in the future, we have done a lot of good work. What we may not anticipate is how difficult it is to break old habits, so this is where Step Seven is helpful. We don't have to do this alone! When we ask our Higher Power for help, we get it. We will be supported in making the personal changes that will lead us into a better life.

Step Eight: Made a list of all persons we have harmed and became willing to make amends to them all. We might put ourselves at the top of the list! Have we neglected our health, are we using alcohol or drugs to get through this? Are we allowing ourselves to become exhausted by constant running or malnourished by eating junk food instead of a healthy meal?

Our children suffer during the divorce process. Are we doing our best to see that their suffering is minimized? Are we using them as weapons against our (ex)spouse? Do we burden them with our problems, rather than talking to a friend or therapist?

Step Nine: Made direct amends to such people, except when to do so would injure them or others. Many times an apology is all that's necessary. Other times, we need to change our behavior or break a bad habit. Before taking action we need to evaluate whether we are doing this step from genuine remorse or in an attempt to manipulate a situation. Sincerity is a key factor. Making amends won't be worth much if we continue to do the same thing.

Step Ten: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it. Apology, like humility, is vastly underrated. Some think that to apologize is to admit weakness, but the opposite is actually true. To apologize promptly creates freedom because we don't have to spend time thinking about excuses and justifying why we did something. As long as we're alive, we'll continue to make mistakes but it's easier to trust a person who can admit when he or she is wrong, than someone who always needs to be right.

Step Eleven: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out. Prayer is asking and meditation is listening for the answer. Both of these practices are so helpful during divorce. This is something we can do for ourselves and is within our power. We might pray for strength, wisdom and guidance on a particular problem, and the courage to make the necessary changes, rather than holding on to the past. We all have our list of issues we need help with.

Step Twelve: Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we try to carry this message to others and practice these principles in all our affairs. If you practice these steps as you go through divorce, people will ask you how you managed to get through it without becoming stuck and bitter. It's at that point you explain the tools that you used. It's also enormously helpful to study the Steps with a group who are experiencing the same kind of difficulty. Being with others really helps.

There is no doubt that the ending of a significant relationship is very difficult and painful, but recovery is not only possible, it leads to potential we never knew we had. No matter where we are today, or what our circumstances may be, every one of us has enormous potential for creating a better life. Taking the time to recover, and discover the you-of-today, will pay big dividends as we move forward. As we say in the Twelve Step movement, "It works if you work it, so work it-you're worth it!"