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Happily divorced ever after

By Maureen Salamon



(LifeWire) -- After her divorce three years ago, Lori Hilliard was filled with rage, pain and sadness --until a few simple words from Mister Rogers put things into perspective.

Some ex-spouses forge new relationships that look more like friendship and aim to bury the rancor of the past.

The mother of four came across a book that featured a quote from the gentle host of TV's "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood": "So in all that you do, in all of your life, I wish you the strength and the grace to make the choices which will allow you and your neighbor to become the best of whoever you are."

"When I read that quote, something in my heart just shifted and I knew what my divorce was going to be," says Hilliard, 44, an occupational therapist for children with disabilities.

Today, she and her former husband, Timothy, 43, co-parent their children in a relationship they both say works better than their marriage ever did.

"It has been so powerful for my kids to see a functional relationship out of this. We're making the most of it," she says.

Timothy Hilliard, who lives near Lori in Lehigh, Utah, and communicates constantly with her to juggle the care of their children, including a son with Down syndrome, agrees.

"Our relationship basically runs just the way it did when we were married, except without the sex and the arguing. I can tell you, I don't miss the arguing," the marketing executive says.

For many parents, divorce is an arduous, exhausting ordeal. But it doesn't have to be. Some forge brand-new relationships that look more like friendship and aim to bury the rancor of the past.

Allies or animosity?

New York City matrimonial lawyer Nancy Chemtob says about 80 percent of divorcing couples her firm represents are parents, to whom she stresses the benefits of remaining allies even if they cannot remain married.

"It's really in everyone's best interests," says Chemtob, a founding partner of the firm Chemtob Moss Forman and Talbert. "As much animosity as there is, when they realize their common interest... it's going to make everyone's lives easier."

Of course, "happily divorced ever after" is simply not possible for everyone. Chemtob notes that one spouse's fury over the other's marriage-busting infidelity can prevent harmony from ever taking root. And sometimes a divorcing couple just can't break the discord that has simmered over years or decades.

Bonnie Russell and her ex-husband, Mark Barber, tried to stay friends after their 1990 split, but agree that their efforts failed.

"Initially it was an OK divorce," says Russell, a freelance publicist in her 50s from Del Mar, California, who was married to Barber for about four years. "But when I went for more custody, it turned into a horrible divorce."

"We tried to visit; we tried to be civil," says Barber, a 56-year-old lawyer in San Diego who ended up with full custody of the couple's only child, a daughter, who is now 20. "But this is not a success story."

Trial and error

When custody isn't an issue, ex-spouses often try to maintain a relationship focused on one of the few things they may still agree on: their offspring. Russell Wild, 52, of Allentown, Pennsylvania, says he and his former wife, Susan, 51, never lost sight of their commitment to their two children, ages 15 and 12.

The Wilds, married for 22 years, divorced in 2003 and two years later co-wrote "The Unofficial Guide to Getting a Divorce."

"We had seen many attempts at amicable divorce fail among family and friends," says Russell Wild, 52, a financial planner. "We knew it wasn't going to be easy. Married people fight, divorced people fight . . . you just can't let it take control of you and destroy you."

When it comes to raising their children, Wild and his ex-wife strive for consistency. "(We) are a single government, and the kids know that," says Wild. "We always back each other up."

If Travis Hill's career choice is any indication, such Herculean efforts by divorcing parents can pay off. Hill, 32, believes he became a psychotherapist because of how well his mother and father handled their split 14 years ago.

"They were very good at distinguishing the problems in their relationship from their concerns about us kids," says Hill, of Germantown, Tennessee, who now has a wife and young daughter. After the divorce, Hill's father continued to share Christmas Day with his family, as well as some weekends and other holidays. "Now that grandkids are in the picture, because my parents were able to stay on friendly terms, it's much easier."

Striving for the 'good divorce'

The pros of such an arrangement are numerous, according to Hill: from nurturing children's mental health and emotional resilience to smoothing extended family ties.

But "ultimately, it's still a divorce," he says. "Divorce is not a happy thing ... and you still have to go through the pain of what a divorce is."

Attorney Chemtob offers these tips for exes to help make a "good divorce" possible:

- Put your kids first: "The most important thing to children is that they still have a relationship with both of their parents," she says.
- Don't be petty: Make sure every discussion isn't a rehash of why you got divorced. "It's not about winning a fight anymore."
- Be inclusive: "If you'd include a friend who has nowhere to go on Thanksgiving or birthdays, why not include your ex-spouse?"