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The Path of Inner Separation



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If, after endless hurtful disputes, after numerous unsuccessful attempts at conciliation, a couple comes to the conclusion that only a separation can offer a way out of their conflict, the way to court appears to be the hope that the longed-for inner peace is finally attainable and that the years of tension, despair, and disappointment will come to an end. Experience, however, shows that, as a general rule, this is not the case. In most cases, a divorce or separation does not resolve the negative entanglement and conflict dynamics in which both partners are trapped. Criticism, violence, feelings of hatred, and quarrels often survive the separation date and prevent a person to let go of the former partner, which is the prerequisite for a successful separation.

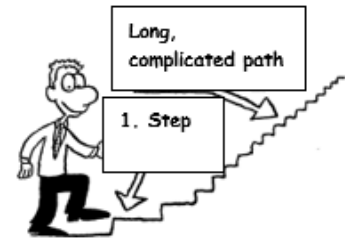


The inner divorce means the process of emotional disentanglement from the partner. To this end, the spirals of mutual injury, accusation and demonization must be interrupted and dissolved. The aim is to divide the common bond, which was woven in the time together, into two individual threads, without it being torn. In the end, there should be two individuals, marked by the common experiences, yet again independent. If the couple has children, the role and obligations of joint parenthood remain of course. It is precisely for this task that the clarification of the relationship is essential, so that the unresolved conflicts and old outstanding accounts are not carried out on the children's back.



This inner path of separation takes time. Some spouses go through this process inwardly before drawing a final line under the relationship. Others rush to court hastily in the heat of an argument before both partners have dealt with the emotional implications of a separation. The many fine but invisible threads of the relationship, spun over years together, are suddenly and abruptly cut off: a complete disentanglement is not achieved, an amicable separation is not possible.

The following five steps belong to the separation work, which a couple in separation needs to go through systematically and with all honesty. An experienced couple therapist or separation counsellor can assist a couple or partner in this process:



1. End of all criticism of the other

The couple that takes the path of inner separation must learn to avoid and/or to stop destructive dynamics. There is no point in repeating the same old accusations, controlling the partner you want to separate from, catching mistakes and holding her/his injuries against her/him. Years after the divorce, some people still talk about how impossible the ex-partner behaves today, as if they still need justification for their separation.



It is helpful not to ignore the accumulated feelings of anger, hate, disappointment, fear, and guilt, but to find ways of expressing them: A feeling diary, a support by good, neutral friends or acquaintances, the visit of a suitable counselling center, all can help to overcome this time. Be warned, however, of interlocutors, who incite the partners rather against each other and continue to foment the controversy.



Figure 1 Anger, fear, love, desires

Additionally, and particularly for the well-being of the children and for the fulfilment of the common obligations as parents, a controlled, more "neutral" interaction is necessary. With the termination of the open argument, an adequate functioning of the family system becomes possible since it leads to the relief of the inner-family atmosphere and permits the parents to concentrate on necessary arrangements and practical solutions.

2. Dealing with own mistakes and asking for forgiveness

This essential step requires each partner to stop looking only for the mistakes of the other, but to take stock openly and honestly and to critically review one's own conduct: Where did I act unfairly, where was I dishonest or closed, what did I withhold from

my partner, where did I withhold my love? How often have I waited for a gesture from my partner without taking a step on him? On what

points was I stubborn, unintelligent, inflexible? How did I abuse my partner for my purposes? When was the last time I said a sweet word, made a gesture from the heart, expressed a tender affection, whispered a supportive compliment ...?



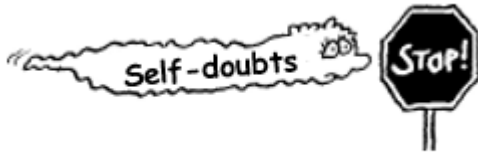
Only this introspection makes it possible to detach oneself from one's partner and to take responsibility for one's own share of the failure of the relationship: when two people get into a dispute, it is never only one's fault. The willingness to take this step shows whether someone is at all prepared to an amicable separation or whether he abuses his partner to avoid admitting his own inadequacies and mistakes.

Stopping at hatred, criticism, and anger prevents one from encountering one's own feelings such as sadness, loneliness, disappointment, shame, etc., and a process of mourning and thus disentanglement can consequently not start.



But some people also get stuck in feelings of guilt, experiences of failure, and self-pity: Their thoughts constantly revolve around what they have done wrong, they feel like losers or excluded people who obviously do not deserve to be happy. Those who persist in such

self-destructive feelings prevent the emotional farewell of their partner. Despite spatial distance, she/he remains stuck in the relationship and does not make a new start without the ex-partner.



For this reason, in addition to the personal confrontation with the failure of the relationship, the discussion with the partner as well as the request for forgiveness of one's own mistakes becomes so necessary. Even if the partner is not (yet) prepared to listen to the other person or to forgive her/him wholeheartedly, he/she can accept and appreciate his/her partner's sincere request and thus contribute to mutual relief.

3 What have I learned from the other?

Living in relationship means learning. Even in a bad or hurtful relationship important experiences can be made: What could I learn through you about me, about my way of being a partner, and about how I deal with conflicts? To what insights has our love, but also its failure contributed? Which inner growth processes could be stimulated by the confrontation with you?



To accept the learning experiences means to integrate them into one's life and personality, but also to learn and grow through the positive and negative sides for the future.

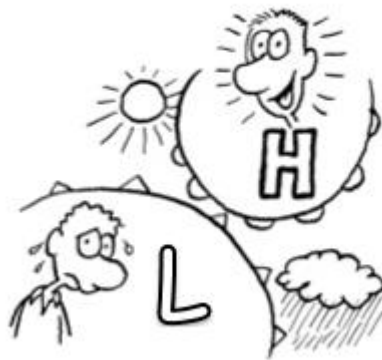
Whoever ignores this aspect of the relationship in the long run will remain stuck on the relationship's failure alone. She/he sticks to what could not be lived and experienced together. What remains are feelings of emptiness and senselessness, which hinder the overcoming of mourning.

4. Thanks for the time together

No relationship has only negative sides. Despite all injuries, disappointments and injustices, every partnership has had times of intense exchange, emotional attachment, complementarity and support. For this we have to thank: what the partner has done well, where her/his arms have provided protection, comfort, security, when her/his presence and interest have given recognition, affection, and understanding.



This step distracts from the one-sided emphasis on the negative aspects of the relationship and opens the view for the whole. Even though living together towards the end of the relationship turned out



to be unbearable, couples were not fundamentally mistaken in their choice of partner: love was possible over long distances but it could not be maintained over all the cliffs and impasses of everyday life. One must be thanked for and the other mourned.

5. Negotiate future perspectives and practical arrangements

After the emotional ties of criticism, dependencies, feelings of guilt and gratitude have been dissolved, the objective, concrete aspects of the separation can come to the fore and be negotiated much more smoothly. The "best" solution for all participants can be sought without being hindered by feelings of revenge, jealousy, resentment, or hypersensitivity.



Addendum: The path of inner separation does not necessarily need to lead to court. In a serious relationship crisis, it can be a possible way out of a seemingly inextricable situation. It can allow couples to continue to live together as a family under one roof because of their children or because of professional or economic obligations, but to live more independently as a couple. Sometimes a new attraction emerges from the greater distance, which has been lost over the years through the many arguments.

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The Separation

Inner Separation

Ways out of the entanglement

Fresh start
Learning a new way of dealing with each other

Make peace with ex-partner

Peace work
Cultivating positive memories

Integration work
Accepting positive and negative experiences

Asking for forgiveness

Error analysis
Admit mistakes and omissions

Working with feelings
Express feelings
Seek assistance

5) Reconciliation

Venture new ways of dealing with each other

Staying at a distance from each other

4) Finding inner peace

Thanks for the time together

Repressing memories of the common past

3) Personal development

What have I learned from the other?

Stopping at the feeling of failure

2) Assume responsibility

Dealing with own mistakes

- Halting in hate or anger
- Staying entangled in feelings of guilt

1) Maintaining neutral contact

End of all criticism of the other

- Endless repetition of attempts at relationship clarification
- Getting stuck in the trap of justification

Partner crises

Separation or Divorce

Failed attempts at solutions

Dispute escalations

Stages on the way
What helps
What hinders