

HEALTH

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Who Says There's No Ex In Friendship?



EX-COUPLE NO.1: Tomiken von Kendra, left, and his ex, Cassa, celebrate daughter Kristin's graduation. He lent his wedding tux to Cassa's new hubby.

EX-COUPLE NO.2: Susan Fishman Orlins, left, and Steve Orlins, right, still vacation with their kids.

EX-COUPLE NO.3: Aimee Friedman and Martin Friedman share regular phone calls, advice and birthday dinners.

Defying Divorce Stereotypes, Some Former Spouses Have Paired Up Again as Pals

By STACY WEINER
Special to The Washington Post

Sometimes when he looks at their wedding picture, he can't believe he married someone that beautiful. Often they call each other at work, maybe for advice or for something as simple as the spelling of a word. She admires his professional acumen, thinks about his happiness. He likes her friends, enjoys treating her to a birthday dinner. And they've been happily divorced for more than two years.

Sure, Martin Friedman, a 58-year-old Silver Spring advertising executive, and his ex, Aimee Robbins Friedman, 53, have had their uglier moments, but

for the most part they defy the "War of the Roses" image of flying vases and dripping vitriol. In fact, they are among what researchers say is a significant number of couples who have found that it's possible to emerge from the crucible of divorce as good friends.

Some 20 percent of all American adults have been divorced, according to 2001 Census data, and demographers estimate that between 40 and 50 percent of current marriages will end in divorce. If a quarter of breakups are high-conflict, as one study of 1,124 California parents indicated, that means millions of potentially miserable people are walking the streets of America. But

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ILLUSTRATION BY RANDY MAY'S FOR THE WASHINGTON POST; PHOTO ON RIGHT BY BILL O'LEARY—THE WASHINGTON POST; FAMILY PHOTOS

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Some Former Spouses Ask,

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there is a sunnier side: Sociologist Constance Ahrons, author of "The Good Divorce," (HarperPerennial, 1998) says that around 10 percent of couples manage to transform an unworkable marriage into a meaningful friendship.

One wonders: Do these amicable former mates possess some rare, Solomonic wisdom?

Experts say that post-divorce friendship flows from a complex mix of factors, including a willingness to look at one's own role in the marital drama. Chances of friendship also are better if the marriage was relatively loving, if the decision to separate was largely mutual and if there was no major betrayal.

"There are lots of reasons people don't want to be married anymore. Maybe their lives or their values have changed, but they still may like each other," says Ahrons, a University of Southern California professor emerita who studied a group of 98 divorced couples over 20 years. Of course, friendship also is likelier among more-forgiving types. In fact, notes Ahrons, researchers found that exes who severed relations with their former spouses were more likely than others to have also cut ties with other family members, friends and lovers.

Aimee Friedman knew she didn't want a nasty break with her husband. A divorce attorney, she vowed to escape the bitterness that she's seen consume too many of her clients. "You have to learn to forgive so that you can quit wasting your energy on hatred," she advises. "Anger will eat you up. You've got to learn to let go for your own health and well-being."

Improving the Odds

Some experts and couples say that post-divorce friendship can be easier when kids are involved — there's a strong incentive to promote peace. But others note that custody and child-support clashes can make it tougher, too. In addition, exes may battle over visitation schedules, child-rearing methods and accusations that one parent is manipulating the child against the other. Certainly a "bad" divorce is worse for children than a "good" one, yielding more stress and alienation from parents, says University of Texas sociology pro-

fessor Norval Glenn, co-author of a 2005 study that reported that even an amicable divorce can seriously harm kids.

Tomiken Von Kendra and his ex, Cassa, say that protecting the children definitely was a factor in building their friendship after they split up. She remembers well the family's first Thanksgiving after the breakup: "We were sitting around the table and everybody was saying what they were grateful for. My son Derrick, who was around 11 or 12, said, 'I want to give thanks that even though we got a divorce, my parents are still friends.'"

But like many other amicable exes, they were motivated by much more than parenthood.

"We obviously had something pretty spectacular" during their 18-year marriage, says Cassa, who is 53. "It would be dishonoring of that relationship not to take the high road." That high road included Cassa's helping her ex keep the Fairfax home and grounds he adores, explains Tomiken, 58. Today, the two are fast friends, as are Tomiken and Ron Edins, Cassa's new husband: When Edins was in need of a tux, he wound up borrowing the one Tomiken wore when he and Cassa said their I-do's years ago.

How has the pair achieved such unwedded bliss? It helped that they had agreed early in their marriage never to fight dirty. It also helped that they drifted, rather than wrenched, apart. Their connection began to unravel in 1986 after their 18-month-old child died in an accident while the child was in day care. After that, Cassa set off on a spiritual path that Tomiken says he simply could not follow.

They had another advantage experts point to in maintaining amity: They managed to avoid the nasty, grinding maw of divorce court. Couples who ended their marriages through mediation rather than litigation reported less conflict even 12 years later, according to a study by Robert Emery, a University of Virginia psychology professor and author of "The Truth About Children and Divorce."

John Spiegel, a Rockville divorce mediator, says he tries to reduce conflict by promoting emotional healing.

"When I see a lot of nasty, angry behavior, what goes through my mind is that underneath the anger

Even a post-divorce relationship brimming with milky kindness can have downsides. In one study, exes with less conflict suffered more doubts about their decision to divorce. A chummy relationship with an ex can also rattle new partners.

is a broken heart, and that's what I reach for in the mediation," he explains. "If I can reach that part and help the person express how hurt and confused they feel, then the anger begins to fade."

Spiegel keeps this emotional piece in mind even while negotiating such workaday issues as asset distribution. Often, he says, he reframes spouses' comments to yield the same substance without the mean-spiritedness that sometimes colors their language. And he encourages apologies. "Some of the hurts that lead to marriages ending, like extramarital affairs, no amount of money can set right," he notes. "But an effective apology can have a huge impact. It can transform the situation."

A Little Too Friendly?

Even a post-divorce relationship brimming with milky kindness can have downsides, therapists note. In Emery's study, for example, exes with less conflict after splitting up suffered more doubts about their decision to divorce. Without the anger that can burn emotional ties, Emery says, moving on can be harder.

A chummy relationship with an ex can also rattle new partners, as Tomiken Von Kendra knows. In the four major relationships he's had since his divorce, he says, his continuing connection with Cassa irritated — or threatened — each of his girlfriends.

The experience of Georgeie Reynolds, 54, of Alexandria, highlights another negative: She's found that her ex is much nicer than many of the guys she dates.

But if her ex is so great, why

Can't We Still Be Friends?

didn't she stay with him? It's a question those who stay friends after divorce hear with some frequency, says Emery.

In fact, Reynolds and Tim Smith, 57, tried to save their marriage during a year of counseling. The counseling was a success — it enabled them to stay friends — but the marriage ended. "There was a lot more understanding of what we each contributed to the problems, and a lot less blaming on either side. We both had our eyes opened."

Counseling also helped Susan Fishman Orlins, 60, and Steve Orlins, 56, though they were trying to save their divorce, not their marriage. Caught in a conflict over child custody and other legal issues, they started weekly counseling sessions soon after separating and continued for around two years. Their therapist worked much like a mediator, says Fishman Orlins, focusing less on analyzing deep-seated problems than on finding concrete solutions.

For example, it was tough for Fishman Orlins, a District writer who was then a stay-at-home mom, to cede control over her children. With the therapist's help, she says, she realized that "I was possessive about the kids, and I was wrong." Today, she and her ex get along so

well that they bicker mostly over who gets the master bedroom when they take their kids on shared summer vacations.

Fishman Orlins also attributes these upbeat relations to having mutual friends and to shared interests such as politics and stock-market maneuvers. Smith and Reynolds make a similar point. They visit often, reminiscing about their days as Arctic archeologists and sharing custody of their cat and dog.

Still, Reynolds says she's careful not to depend too much on her ex or to let boundaries slip. Mediator Spiegel encourages such cautiousness. "In a divorce, there's often a sense that you lost control of your life, especially when one partner didn't want the divorce as much. This wasn't a democratic process," he says. "Boundaries help restore that sense of control."

Spiegel also emphasizes that one ex may need to respect the other's desire to move more slowly into friendship. "That person may be ready to plunge into a new stage of life that includes close ties with his or her ex," he says. "They need to be patient. They need to remember that turning this relationship into a friendship is a long-term project."

Sometimes, the process can take years, says Ahrons. "As they grow

older, people may feel it's important to rebuild that old relationship a bit," she notes. "They don't want to leave this world with that kind of anger toward an ex with whom, they find upon reflection, they did share many good years."

Some former couples also credit various stress relievers with helping them move on and move closer.

Tomiken Von Kendra turned to New Beginnings, a support group for those divorcing. Cassa, his ex, says deep-breathing soothed her soul. Susan Fishman Orlins raves about swing dancing.

Carolyn Gichner, a 59-year-old District resident, says exercise was a lifesaver following her painful divorce. In fact, Gichner was able to gain enough calm and clarity that she not only befriended her ex but today is living with him again. These days, Gichner says she's learned to accept the man she calls her ex-husband and current flame. "I look for his strengths," she says. "He still has weaknesses, as does everybody. I just don't focus on them." ■

Stacy Weiner last wrote for Health about nonreligious parents who want their children to taste some of the benefits of religion. Comments: health@washpost.com.

Making Splitsville Friendlier: Some Tips

Bill Ferguson has been through two divorces, one riddled with hostility, the other softened by kindness, and "the difference is night and day," he says. The former divorce lawyer conducts programs on reducing conflict in breakups for courts, groups and individuals. "Every bit of the suffering is avoidable, but you have to know how," argues the author of "How to Heal a Painful Relationship and If Necessary, Part as Friends" (Return to the Heart, 1999). What's more, notes Ferguson, the steps he recommends help many of his clients avoid divorce altogether. Here are a few of his suggestions:

■ **Take responsibility.** Ferguson urges each person to examine

his or her own part in problems. "How I am toward you determines how you are going to be towards me," fueling — or dissipating — a cycle of conflict, Ferguson says. What's more, he says, "every time you blame the other person, you give that person all your power. You get power when you can see your role in the whole mess," he adds. "Once you can see your role . . . you can do something about it."

■ **Accept the other person.** Face it, your partner or ex is the way he is whether you accept that reality or not, says Ferguson. Frustration and upset aren't caused by the other person so much as by your resisting the truth of who that person is, he argues. If you accept the other person, you'll be able to see

your relationship much more clearly. Then you can decide if this is someone you can comfortably interact with — and act accordingly.

■ **Look for mutual solutions.** "If there's a dispute, usually I fight to have my side win. Everything I do then is calculated to have your side lose," he says. Instead, partners should shift their focus to working together toward mutually acceptable solutions. "If you do," he argues, "you'd be amazed at how fast you find them. If you don't, then the process can be very painful."

For Ferguson's ground rules for divorce and other advice, see his Web site, www.divorceasfriends.com.

— Stacy Weiner