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'Caring circles' make divorce a little gentler

Mark Hare

Sometimes, after she has helped a couple mediate a divorce agreement, BJ Mann says, they ask, "Is this it? Do we see you again?"

Bobbie Dillon, also a divorce mediator, has had the same experience. "They're asking, 'Isn't there just a little bit more we can do?'" That obvious hunger for a gentler parting led Mann, Dillon and two other experienced mediators — Gail Ferraioli and Beth Danehy — to a new venture they call Circles of Caring.

The circle is an ancient tool, common in many civilizations, for building community and strengthening relationships, the women say. A three-hour session opens and closes with a few words — a poem, for example. It may involve some exercises designed to stimulate thought and communication and everyone is allowed to speak without interruption. The circle's power, Ferraioli says, comes from an emphasis on respect, "and a deference to the wisdom of the group." It's not for everyone.

"We do not see the hard-core War of the Rose couples," Mann says. "And it is not therapy, or a support group. It is not ongoing. It is one defined experience."

There are three types of caring circles — for individuals, for couples and for families — each intended to help the participants deal honestly and productively with the end of a relationship.

The circle for individuals brings together 10 to 20 people who probably do not know each other, but each of them is looking for a way to share the experience of letting go.

In a couples circle, five to 10 couples (who also do not know each other) come together to help each other move on.

In a family circle, an individual or a couple invite family and close friends to join them in honoring their past relationship and planning for a new future.

Even when the parties to a divorce or break-up are amicable, a legal divorce in New York is an adversarial proceeding. And for a lot of people, that's not the way they want to move on.

"We've all worked with partners who are near the end of relationships," Dillon says, "people who want to normalize the experience of divorce." Most of us tend to see divorce as failure or as something to be ashamed of. But there are better ways to approach it, the mediators say.

It's important, they all agree, to honor and remember what was good in the relationship, and it helps to talk about that in a safe setting. Sometimes, the "circle keepers" (the facilitators) will bring in an object that was important in the marriage or relationship and ask people to recount a story about it — as a way to begin the process of honoring the relationship.

Sometimes the comments are more practical, says Danehy. In-laws may be uncertain about dealing with each other after their children have divorced, she says, but the caring circle can help them give voice to that concern. They will continue to be grandparents to the same children and the caring circle may help them build a new relationship that feels right.

In a caring circle, only one person speaks at a time. "Saying something out loud is different from saying, 'you know what I mean,'" Mann says. Caring circles are another tool to help people connect in a meaningful way and in a new way — when their relationships change.

Additional Facts

For more

To learn more about Circles of Caring, visit www.circlesofcaring.net]]>
