

PART ONE



**SO NOW YOU'RE
A SINGLE PARENT**



INTRODUCTION

“The greater danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.”

Michelangelo

If you’re reading this book, you may already be divorced or separated, or perhaps you’re thinking about it.

I know how much of a roller-coaster ride divorce can be from my own experience. I found my divorce process to be devastating, confusing, inspiring, challenging, liberating, and disorienting all at the same time. To help you understand where I’m coming from and how this book came to life as a result, I’d like to share some of my own story with you.

I appeared to “have it all”: an Ivy-league education, a successful career, a happy marriage to my high school sweetheart, and three healthy children. When I started my family more than fifteen years ago, I had dreams of living happily ever after. My children would grow up and start happy families of their own. My husband and I would grow old together, reminiscing in our rocking chairs about what a beautiful life’s journey we had shared. Did you have a fairy tale dream like this too?

One night, my husband and I went to a great romantic movie and had dinner together. Over appetizers, he told me he felt our marriage was in trouble. We didn’t have that passionate “zing” he wanted in a relationship. In that moment, I felt like time had stopped.

On a certain level, this was all news to me! My chest felt like it was caught in a vise. My palms went clammy, and I could hardly breathe. As I watched my tears fall into my soup at the restaurant, I felt all of my dreams and aspirations for my “happily ever after” fairy tale come crashing down.

Yet at another level, this conversation confirmed something that my gut had been telling me for quite a long time. We had become different people than we were twenty years earlier. We had grown apart; we took each other for granted. We weren't making our marriage a priority. In my heart of hearts, I wasn't sure I had what it would take to put Humpty Dumpty (our marriage) back together again. In retrospect, I appreciate the courage it took for my husband to tell me the truth.

In the months following that memorable dinner date, I was determined to leave no stone unturned in either repairing the relationship or ending it gracefully. I threw myself into every possible therapy, marriage counseling, relationship workshop, and self-help program to try to "figure it out." I could have opened a small independent bookstore with the mountain of books I devoured on divorce, parenting, psychology, personal development, and self-help. Yet after two years of trying to put the marriage back together again, I realized I wanted a divorce.

My Turning Point

A major turning point for me came one day in an interaction I had with my children. My son, who was about seven at the time, came out of his room one morning to ask me a question. In that moment, I snapped at him. I don't know what it was, but I bellowed at him and then doubled over and screamed in frustration and anger. Have you ever had a moment when you've totally lost it and dumped your toxic emotions onto your child?

After my emotional meltdown, I stood up and looked at my young son who was still standing in front of me. Something about the way he looked at me in that moment changed my life. In his eyes, I saw that something had broken inside of him, some piece of his little heart, and that I had done that. He handled it quite gracefully and said to me, "Oh boy, I think I better go back to my room now," and turned on his heel and went back to his room.

That was the kick in the pants I needed to take action and take responsibility for what I was creating in my life. I was responsible for whether I'd raise my three children in an atmosphere that was loving and harmonious, or toxic and embittered. So in that moment, I decided that I would do *whatever* it took to heal my own heart and wounds so I could give my children all the love, encouragement, and support they deserved. I realized I had a profound choice to make: I could either lick my wounds for another twenty years, or I could take my pain and use it to heal myself and others. At the time of my separation, my children were only nine, seven, and three.

A New Journey Begins

It is said that when the student is ready, the teacher appears. The week I decided to end our marriage in 2001, I stumbled across a very powerful book that changed my life. It is *Spiritual Divorce: Divorce as a Catalyst for an Extraordinary Life* by *New York Times* best-selling author Debbie Ford. I highly recommend that you read it. Ford outlines seven spiritual laws of divorce that can help anyone who's ever been wounded from a relationship to heal their heart. (For other resources, please see the "Recommended Resources" section at the end of this book.)

The message and tools in *Spiritual Divorce* were so illuminating for me that I decided in 2002 to train as an integrative coach with Debbie Ford's Institute for Integrative Coaching. Since then, I've taken every training program on coaching the Institute has offered, including specialized training in divorce coaching based on a curriculum from *Spiritual Divorce*. I left a successful career in fundraising to pursue my vision of being a coach and author. I have served as a staff coach for the institute, which is now a part of John F. Kennedy University in California, and is the first training program for coaching to become part of an accredited university. I'm honored to have helped train hundreds of people to become coaches. Over the past five years, I have had the privilege of working with individual clients and leading teleclasses with participants from all over the world.

What has been the impact of this work on my own family? I've seen true miracles take place in my relationship with my children. The light in my heart for my children outshines any of the accomplishments I've experienced in the professional arena. I feel blessed and inspired by my three children on a daily basis now, and I am able to be present with them. I learn so much by being their mom, and I think my children are my greatest teachers! I always had what I considered to be a great relationship with my kids. Now the relationship I have with my children is truly extraordinary—the love, connection, and support we have for each other is far deeper than I ever imagined it could be.

Seeing my children and me thrive after divorce filled me with such inspiration, joy, and passion that I decided to create Thrive After Divorce Inc. My company is dedicated to empowering separated and divorced individuals who can fearlessly create and express their highest potential. It offers a variety of educational resources (books, e-books, audio products, and e-courses) and live training (teleseminars and workshops). Through Thrive After Divorce, I hope to share the insights and tools I've discovered to support thousands of separated and divorced individuals and families around the globe. This book is the first step in that process.

You Are Not Alone

Divorce is widespread in today's society. If you're not divorced or separated, you most likely know someone who has experienced it, or you have experienced it yourself as a child of divorce. Divorce is a growing reality for more and more parents and children around the globe.

Here are some of the latest facts about divorce in North America:

- The Institute for Divorce Financial Analysts (IDFA) estimated in 2005 that more than 33 million people in North America were divorced and another 5 million were separated.¹
- Demographers estimate between 40–60 percent of all current marriages will end in divorce.²
- New divorces will involve more than one million children in the United States and more than 36,000 children in Canada annually.³
- The number of children living in a single parent family has doubled since 1970. Based on current trends, it is predicted that upwards of 70 percent of children born since 1980 will spend some time living in a single-parent home before their eighteenth birthday.⁴
- The IDFA estimates that approximately \$50 billion is spent annually in North America as a direct result of divorce, with one-third of that going toward legal fees.⁵

The Impact of Divorce on Children

Divorce is a major life transition. Its impact cuts across many significant areas of life: financial, social, emotional, economical, occupational, geographical, and spiritual. Children are inevitably affected when their family separates into two households. Separation and divorce are not legacies that need to be passed on from one generation to the next.

Researchers have done a multitude of longitudinal studies comparing children whose parents are divorced with children of married parents. According to researcher Dr. Joan Kelly, who gave a public presentation on children's adjustment to divorce based on her 30 years of research and work in the field, there is a higher risk of problems for divorced children, and children's degree of resiliency in adjusting to the changes and stresses caused by divorce is of paramount concern.⁶

External social problems, which were found consistently through numerous research studies, can include:

- Aggressive, impulsive, and anti-social behavior
- Relationship problems with peers, authority figures, and parents
- Academic and achievement problems, with children of divorce two to three times more likely to drop out of school
- Twice as many teenage births

Research also found internal emotional issues are triggered for children of divorce, such as anxiety, depression, and lower self-esteem. Dr. Kelly's research showed that 20% of the symptoms exhibited by divorced children could be accounted for by the pre-divorce situation and children growing up in a stressful, unhappily married family.

These are sobering facts, but need to be put in the context that research studies do find a large degree of overlap between children from divorced families and married families. The majority of divorced children function within an average range on standardized tests. Dr. Kelly noted that between 75-80% function well within normal psychological, behavioral, and social parameters. Competent and caring parenting is critical in determining the impact of divorce on children.

Get Yourself a Road Map

Assuming you are a parent who is divorced, separated, or headed in that direction, would you be interested in having a road map to guide you in your future?

Perhaps you have made a mistake in your life and then looked back on it and thought, "I wish someone had warned me about that ahead of time!"

Would you like to make sure that your children thrive after your divorce and blossom into emotionally well-adjusted, loving, and responsible individuals who can fearlessly create and express their highest potential?

If you answered YES to any of these questions, you're in the right place at the right time with the right tool in your hand. I believe divorce shouldn't be something you need to "survive" or "get through." Of course, divorced people face tough challenges, but they face great opportunities as well. If you intend to thrive and flourish after divorce, you will. This book will give you insights and tools to make that intention a reality.

Henry Ford once said, "Whether you think you can or you think you can't, you're right." What you experience as a result of your divorce will be affected significantly by your mind-set and intention as you embark on this journey.

It takes a lot of courage and faith to create a union and bring children into the world. It takes just as much courage and faith to end your relationship in such a way that you and your children are healthy, intact, and willing to create a future that excites you. Reading this book and acting upon it is a great first step.

Why Does the World Need Another Divorce Book?

Where I am today is a result of me becoming aware of the pitfalls described in this book and navigating my way through them. Believe me, I have made all of these mistakes myself! This is the book I wish had existed when I was starting out as a single parent.

I used to get frustrated with all the information out there and the process of sorting out what was relevant to me. I'd find a great strategy in chapter seven of one parenting book and then a useful insight in another divorce book. I had to connect the dots to make these random pieces of information useful, relevant, and practical to my job as a mom of three young children.

My frustration that the one comprehensive book I was seeking didn't exist led me to write this book. My hope is that this book will prevent other single parents from having to reinvent the wheel and will help them be better prepared as parents. Having a "user's guide" like this would have saved me countless hours of heartache, confusion, self-doubt, and conflict.

To write this book, I immersed myself in research. I interviewed experts on relationships, parenting, and divorce. I also interviewed and spoke with dozens of single parents, and I am very grateful for their sharing. In 2006, I led a number of teleseminars with single parents where I further "road tested" many of the concepts and solutions presented here. I thank the dozens of single parents from all over North America who provided their feedback and insights to my research as I developed this book. Throughout the book I have used real-life examples from my clients, students, and interviews. The anecdotes offered in the book are based on real people—only the names have been changed.

Yes, divorce leaves an indelible mark on your heart and your life. Unfortunately many people remain perpetual victims of their divorce. Their parenting skills are colored by those festering wounds as a result of that choice.

But divorce also brings with it possibilities that would never have been available otherwise. I set an intention to thrive after divorce and not to settle for simply surviving or "getting through" this life-altering experience.

I invite you to join me in choosing to thrive after divorce. You, too, can make the powerful choice that somehow, some way, you can let this profound experience be something that you can use for your own well-being. You can choose to not remain stuck and embittered because of your failed relationship. I invite you to choose to thrive after divorce, not only for your own sake, but for the sake of your children.

How to Use This Book

In this book, I've identified what I consider to be the seven most common pitfalls that single parents can experience and how to avoid them. Awareness is the first step to successfully navigating the waters of being a single parent. The purpose of this book is to show you that even though you are facing the challenges of raising children as a single parent, you can create a situation where you and your children don't merely "survive" a divorce. Instead, you and your children can come through divorce in a way that you all thrive!

The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, so acknowledge yourself right now for taking the time to find and obtain this book! After much research, observation, and my personal experience over the last six years of raising my three children as a single parent, I believe there are seven major categories of mistakes, or pitfalls. They are:

1. Not having the big picture
2. Getting hooked by your ex-spouse
3. Parenting from guilt
4. Going for the martyr medal
5. Not putting the kids first
6. Being responsible for your children's relationship with your ex
7. Living in chaos

If you find yourself the subject of any kind of physical abuse or violent behavior, or if you feel that you or your children are being threatened in any way, you should seek professional help immediately. The strategies and guidance for parenting here may not always be appropriate in cases where domestic violence or threats to physical safety exist. If you feel you are at risk of any danger, please contact the police, your physician, or another professional service provider.

Chapter Overview

A chapter is devoted to each pitfall. Each chapter includes:

- A definition of the pitfall, including signs you may be stuck
- The costs of being in the pitfall and the impact it may have on your parenting skills
- Strategies and perspectives to help you disengage from the pitfall
- Action steps listing questions and practical steps you can take today to break free of negative, single-parenting pitfalls and help your children thrive after divorce. These action steps are meant to get you moving in simple ways to incorporate the information into your life.



Accountability Check

At the end of each action step, you'll find an Accountability Check that looks like this:

✓ **Accountability Check**

I will complete this exercise by: _____

I completed this exercise on: _____

 *Remember to Celebrate!* 

Write down the date you plan to complete the exercise. A written commitment is far more powerful and binding than one you make to yourself in your head. After you've completed the exercise, write the completion date down as well.

As a single parent myself, I appreciate how busy and demanding your schedule is. I've designed this book to give you the best information available and deliver it in an effective and time-efficient way so you can incorporate these tools immediately into your parenting. Instead of only arming you with knowl-

edge, I want to help you put this information to work right away in your role as a parent. I encourage you to take the time to complete the action steps—after all, we learn by doing!

“Take Action!” Tracker

At the end of the book is the “Take Action!” Tracker, which allows you to see all of the exercises contained in the book in one place so you can easily check off the ones you’ve done. It’s a great way to get a sense of your progress and the actions you’ll take as a result of working with the material in this book. There will be a reminder at the end of each chapter to log your activity in the “Take Action!” Tracker.

If you want to work at a deeper and more comprehensive level, you can order the *The 7 Pitfalls of Single Parenting Workbook*. This workbook contains more exercises, specific worksheets, and checklists, and is designed to complement the information in this book. Visit www.7pitfalls.com for more information.

The Importance of Celebrating Your Success

You can use the Accountability Checks and the “Take Action!” Tracker to measure your progress and gain a sense of satisfaction that you are taking concrete action toward improving your parenting skills. When you complete each exercise, take a moment to celebrate your accomplishment. You can do a victory dance, give yourself a pat on the back, or do whatever it takes to mark your accomplishment in some kind of physical way. If it makes you feel silly, that’s great—do it!

Take a moment right now to tune into what the little voice in your head is telling you at the thought of you doing a victory dance after you finish an exercise in this book. What is it saying? “Oh come on, I’m a grown-up and I don’t need to do that stuff!” or “That is just plain silly! I’ll do the exercise, but I won’t pat myself on the back.”

If your inner voice is saying anything along those lines, you’ve just learned an important lesson about how you live your life. As one of my mentors, T. Harv Eker, says, “How you do anything is how you do everything.” If that kind of resistance or internal bargaining is showing up here, it is undoubtedly showing up in other places in your life. Do you stop and acknowledge yourself when you have a great moment with your children? Or are you so busy moving

on to the next item on your “to do” list that you don’t pause to “smell the roses?”

The important habit we all need to cultivate is to celebrate our successes. So if celebrating your success feels uncomfortable or awkward to you, that’s fine, but just try it anyway. To paraphrase Albert Einstein, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. You got this book to learn something new, and this is a big lesson right here!

If you’re still reluctant to celebrate your successes, just think of the example you want to set for your children. Do you want your children to create a life-long habit of ignoring or minimizing their accomplishments? My invitation to you is to simply try on a new behavior. If you don’t like it after you’ve finished working with the material in this book, you can go back to your old patterns again! I promise.