

COUNSELING SINGLE PARENTS AND BLENDED FAMILIES

The republic of the strangers

What You Will Learn

- ✓ Introduction
- ✓ Single parents
- ✓ Treatments goals for single parents
- ✓ Blended families
- ✓ Psychoeducation for blended families
- ✓ Counseling blended families
- ✓ Integrating new family culture while living the old culture
- ✓ Blending Personalities and subsystems into one system
- ✓ Stepparents remain outside, parents are inside.
- ✓ Conflicting parenting/stepparenting Style.
- ✓ Children grief their loss, struggle with loyalty and drastic change
- ✓ Marital intimacy after getting hurt may be challenging.
- ✓ Money management and expenses
- ✓ Disillusionment and disappointment
- ✓ Conflicts with parenting/step-parenting
- ✓ Dealing with exes, in laws and old friends
- ✓ Maintaining sexual boundaries among family members
- ✓ Identity issues & defining the new family.
- ✓ How to bounce back from the past.

Introduction

All families are not the same traditional configuration of father, mother and children. Some families have one parent and one or more children. A single parent is one individual raising a child or children without a partner. Some single parents become single parents by having children outside a committed relationship or out of wedlock. Some parents become single parent because of the death or abandonment of their spouse. Others become single parents as a result of divorce or separation. The journey from single family to stepfamily starts with one or two single parents getting married and merging their existing families into one family.

Single Parents.

COUNSELING SINGLE PARENTS AND BLENDED FAMILIES

There are three ways through which a person can become a single parent?

- Out of wedlock
- Divorce/Separation
- Death and Abandonment

Treatment goals for singles parents.

Single parents who become one through out-of-wedlock pregnancy or divorce experience negative emotions ranging from anger, shame, self-pity, low self-esteem, disappointment, and regrets. Counselors for this population should consider discussing topics like grief, forgiveness, self-esteem, rebuilding self-worth, anger management, spiritual direction, life skills, and healthy relationships boundaries.

Blending Families.

Blending two or more families is a complex process involving multiple personalities, family systems, family cultures, family lifestyles, conflicting loyalties and grief and loss. Adults and children struggle with their identity, and loyalty between their biological family members and the stepfamily. Some Spouse may opt to remain cordial with their ex, which may make the other spouse feel insecure. Coordinating parenting among the ex-family members, and the stepparents can be challenging especially when a court is involved in the child custody arrangement. Furthermore, children and adults are at different stages of grieving the loss of their previous relationships and families. In a blended family system, you may have a spouse who became a single parent because of divorce, and a partner who is a single parent because of death. The first spouse is angry, and resentful of the ex-spouse and does not wish to remember the ex. But for the second spouse the shame and guilt from the death of a spouse fuels the desire the keep and nurse memories of the deceased spouse and relationship. Sometimes the living spouse does not want to forget the deceased spouse while the ex-spouse cannot wait to forget the former spouse. Two single parents trying to blend two families. One hates the past, the other celebrates the past. This raises commitment and loyalty questions.

For example, a widow might want to keep the picture of the deceased husband for memory's sake while the new husband may consider it an act of disloyalty and lack of commitment to the current relationship.

COUNSELING SINGLE PARENTS AND BLENDED FAMILIES

Psychoeducation For Blended Families

Counselors should consider offering psychoeducation on subjects like communication, purpose, relationship boundaries, money management, conflict management, life skills, and how to set sexual boundaries and relationship boundaries. Concerns about how to handle sexual pressures among the stepsiblings should be given priority depending on the age of the children.

Counseling Blended Families.

Practitioners should assess the clients and determine the needs for individual, couples and the family to explore individual issues, couple's relationship issue and family issues like trauma, grief, and loss.

2. Types of stepfamilies

There are two kinds of stepfamilies. The simple and the complex stepfamily.

Simple Stepfamily

A simple family is established when one adult who has children marries (or cohabits) with another adult who does not have children. In this case there is one parent and one stepparent. In this case there is blending of families until the two adults have their own children. When the two adults have their own children, a new system is created within the existing systems of stepfamilies.

Complex Blended Family

The complex stepfamily is created when two parents decide to merge their families into one family whether through cohabitation or marriage. As you can see from the list of above there are many challenges that are unique to this families. Unfortunately, single parents are hardly aware of the challenges involved in building a stepfamily.

3. Integrating new family culture while living the old culture

Stepfamilies are not like your first families or single families. In a first family you have 2 individuals who had the opportunity to negotiate the rules of engagement of the family, the traditions, the culture, and belief system of the family either during

COUNSELING SINGLE PARENTS AND BLENDED FAMILIES

courtship or while married. By the time the children arrive the couple is pretty much established a system of communication and interaction.

On the other hand, in a stepfamily system both families have an existing system containing the rules of engagement, patterns of communication, work attitude, leisure time, financial goals and sense, traditions, culture, lifestyle, belief system etc. The children are already entrenched in the system before the marriage. Each family enters the stepfamily system operating their own system while adjusting to the new system. The members are often emotionally tasked by the circumstances that led to their situation whether its divorce, death, or abandonment.

4. Blending Personalities and subsystems into one system.

Blended family is blending of personalities, genders, families of origins, interests, family cultures, identities, loyalties, lifestyles etc. Some children may be loyal to their biological parents and ground parents, some adults may remain cordial with their ex while some may be involved in custody, legal or in fear of their life. Children and adults may be at various stages of grieving the loss of their previous relationships and families. A widow might still be grieving and attached to their husband and as such want to keep the picture of the deceased husband for memorial sake while the new husband may consider it to be disloyalty and lack of commitment to the current relationship.

5. Stepparents remain outside, Parents are inside

Another unique dynamic of the stepfamily system is that parents are stuck inside while stepparents are stuck outside the nuclear family system. Children may share stories and concerns with the parent and not the stepparent. Whenever the couples are together and any of the children enters the room, the stepparent becomes an outsider while the parent and child are inside. The child has an expected reaction from parents that may or may not be how stepparent react or respond. The result is the outsider feels left out, disrespected, uncared for and unappreciated. Stuck inside feels uncomfortable for the spouse who is inside but appreciated and recognized because of the connection to the children. It is possible that one nuclear family dominates the time and resources especially where one parent has more children or children who are more assertive, older, or better less boundaries with their parent.

COUNSELING SINGLE PARENTS AND BLENDED FAMILIES

6. Children grieve their loss, struggle with loyalty and adjusting to change

Stepfamily members have a history of pain, grief, and several unresolved issues. Children are grieving the loss of their first family, and sometimes the loss of a parent. Some children may have been exposed to domestic abuse and violence. The parents and stepparents may be grieving the loss of first marriage, loss of spouse, having a sense of guilt, resentment, anger, disappointment, trust issues and rejection.

7. Members Experience Disillusionment and Disappointment.

Stepfamilies are often a contraption of convenience or necessity. Love may be part of it, but it is hardly the main reason for marriage. As is said, young men marry for love, but old and wise men marry for lack. For instance, the need for a mother or father figure for children may tip the scale for a parent. The need for companion may be the primary motivation for an older person to get married. Other lacks may be a search for identity for a woman who had a child out of wedlock, the need to end the stigma and shame associated with being single in certain society may be a matured single lady's reason for entering into a stepfamily relationship. We have read how the prolonged lockdown is making some single adults consider getting marriage or cohabitation. Many single parents and individuals enter stepfamily relationships clearly aware of the challenges, hoping for the best without the necessary skills for dealing with the challenges.

As Ron L Deal, the author of *The Smart Stepfamily* wrote,

“Disillusionment is a nearly a universal experience for adults in stepfamilies, and it often occurs within the couple of years. Unlike the first marriage where couples marry each other solely because of love. Believing that remarriage will release them from the bondage of divorce, loss, loneliness, and the painful emotions, couples load up their children and possessions and launch into the wilderness toward the Promised Land of Marriage and family Life.”

For the vast majority of those seeking the promised land, stepfamilies prove to be wilderness experience instead of promised land experience as the messiah proves to be monsters in disguise. The stepfamily experience can be rewarded for those who endure the initial storm. It can offer family, companionship, security, love and care, shared values etc.

COUNSELING SINGLE PARENTS AND BLENDED FAMILIES

8. Marital Intimacy After Hurt May Be Challenging

Couples in their first marriage are driven by youthful exuberance, love, lack of inhibition. For most first marriages the couple are at their physical best, the man is in his prime physically, driven by loads of testosterone and idealism. He does not need packaging or Viagra to perform. The woman is at her best, her body at its prime, and celebrated by the man. Both partners may be exploring their sexual maturation together or one experienced partner may take an experienced partner under his/her wings as they both explore. Sex is usually an extension of simmering love.

This is not the same with blended couples. For many in blended couple situation the idea of being naked before someone other their ex-spouse or deceased spouse requires some adjustment. For some the prolonged abstinence and suppression of emotions means.

Another inhibition is lack of trust. For some who became single because of hurt and abuse, trusting and risking relieving the pain from the previous relationship cause some anxiety. Third, having a hard a long-time sexual partner makes you take certain things for granted. Your partner knows your sexual languages spoken and unspoken that a new partner does not know. This is frustrating enough to inhibit intimacy and sexual satisfaction. Some men experience fear of misfiring and underperforming sexually because of age, illness, and insecurities.

The key to achieving sexual intimacy is to talk about how you feel, talk about your fears, your insecurities, any health challenges. The second key is to be realistic about your expectations. If sex intercourse with is deal breaker for you talk about it and if necessary, sex counseling before marriage. People of faith face a challenge that many do not face in marriage because our fate forbids premarital sex which means that there is not way of test driving the car before buying as others do. Secondly, even if you are not abstaining because of your faith, some people develop anxiety after a prolonged abstinence. The key is to take things slowly and proceed only as far as you can handle at a time.

9. Conflicting Parenting/Stepparenting Style.

COUNSELING SINGLE PARENTS AND BLENDED FAMILIES

Children, even adult children present unique and varying obstacles to blending two families. They are not always aware of the adults' need for companionship and therefore may not be supportive of the relationship. Adult children are protective of their parents, while others, the younger ones, are afraid of the unknown and being abandoned again. They understand that their life is about to change again and without guarantees, especially of success. With this mindset comes rebellion, reluctance, accommodation, apathy, and outright rejection.

Secondly the children are used to the parenting style of the first family. In most cases the parenting style of parents complements each other, and the children have become used to both. Some have developed coping skills to manipulate the system by playing one parent against the other. When those children are exposed to a different style of parenting from a stepparent, they naturally resist the change and sometimes play the stepparent against each other too. If you are a stepparent in a stepfamily, expect to hear the "you not my mother or my father" statement thrown at you.

How Deal with Conflicts with parenting/step-parenting

- ✓ Discuss your expectations on parenting, establish rules and roles.
- ✓ Always present a united front before the children and validate each other even when you disagree.
- ✓ Stepparents should consult with parents when there is a new issue.
- ✓ Communicate your position and roles to the children.

Money management and expenses

Money and money related matters are marriage and relationship stressors for both first marriages and stepfamilies. For most stepfamilies, the saying that all fingers are usually not equal is true and practical. Couples starting blended family must discuss money and finance before starting their stepfamily.

Dealing with exes, in laws and old friends

Step couple must discuss and agree on how to relate with in laws of the ex-husband and family friends of the first marriage.

Maintaining sexual boundaries among family members

COUNSELING SINGLE PARENTS AND BLENDED FAMILIES

In first family system you have siblings who are born usually 2 years apart and who have grown to develop family bonds. This is not the case with stepfamilies where children who are not in any way related suddenly find themselves in the same house 24/7 and wondering where the boundary lines. Maintaining sexual boundary among the children should be done with care and caution.

Identities and establishing a new family.

Children of stepfamilies struggle with their identity and loyalty especially when outside parents are not involved with in the child's life. This problem is exacerbated when the mother changes her last name to the last name of her husband leaving the children feeling like outsiders in her life.

How to bounce back from the past.

Assess and accept your role in the situation.	Review the past and accept your role in the failure of your previous relationship
Affirm your love for your yourself and life	Affirm your love for yourself and life in general. Remember the good and fun memories. Separate the behavior from the person. You may have made a mistake, do not let your mistakes make you.
Release all involved in the situation.	Release everyone concerned. Forgiveness is the only way to stop hurting, start healing and living.
Learn the lessons from the experience	Review the past and identify the lessons from the experience to avoid repeating the same mistakes.
Rediscover yourself and resurrect lost and abandoned dreams.	Take steps rejoin your community of faith, support groups, restart fun activities and hobbies, reconnect with friends and family members, and begin to live again.