

LEAH MCLAREN

Four hard truths I've learned about divorce

[LEAH MCLAREN](#)

LONDON — Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Thursday, Jan. 09 2014, 5:00 PM EST
Last updated Thursday, Jan. 09 2014, 5:00 PM EST

T.S. Eliot knew a lot about misery, but he was wrong about April. By any objective standard, January is the cruellest month.

I'm not just talking about the wind chill or the post-holiday credit-card bills or even the extra set of hips that bulges out from over your jeans as if it were unpasteurized ricotta. I'm talking about something far more unsettling, at least in the short term – and that is divorce. Because January, as any family lawyer will tell you, is the month in which most couples decide to split.

Here in Britain, where people can file for divorce immediately upon marital breakdown, it is the month in which the largest number of couples commence the paperwork. But in Canada, where you cannot file for divorce until a year of separation has passed, it's the month in which more couples seek legal advice on how to dissolve an unhappy union. As Toronto-area family lawyer **Andrew Feldstein** recently told CTV News, January is so busy in his profession because "many people will put off commencing divorce or a separation until the new year because it's the holiday season and they want to have that one last time period to have the family together." This last stab at domestic unity, combined with the hope that a new year might bring a fresh start, leads many couples to put off formally splitting until the first few weeks of January. In England, the first day back at work after New Year's Day (i.e. this past Monday), has been unofficially dubbed Divorce Day for this very reason.

But divorces, just like men and women, are not made equal. I had a short-lived first marriage, and while the split was certainly painful, it was relatively uncomplicated since we didn't have kids or shared property. For couples who are more financially intertwined, it can be more tricky, but at least houses and cars and windsurfers can be bought, sold and divvied up as needed. Not so children. Children have a heartbreaking habit of staying physically whole even when their whole emotional world is ripped apart at the seams.

I should know. As a child of divorce who has been divorced and is now remarried with a child to a man with a child from a previous marriage (are you still with me?),

I've spent an unholy amount of time thinking about how divorce affects children. It has, if I'm completely honest, been the major emotional preoccupation of my life. (As Nora Ephron once said, "For a long time, the fact that I was divorced was the most important thing about me. And now it's not. Now the most important thing about me is that I'm old." I'm hoping, in time, the same thing will be true of me.)

And after years of research, reading, writing, hair-pulling, hand-wringing, sleepless nights and obsessive Googling, this is what I have learned:

1. One thing is certain: Divorce sucks for children. There is simply no way around it. Even an amicable divorce places parents and parental concerns at the centre of the domestic universe. Every child of divorce will be faced with an unsolvable, lifelong conundrum: In order to see one of the people they love most in the world, they must walk out on the other. The child of divorce is always saying goodbye. And that sucks. Anyone who tells you it doesn't is just being a self-serving optimist.

2. Much as we might like to believe the opposite, children are much more concerned with their own personal happiness than anyone else's. Parents contemplating divorce should remember their own emotional concerns are not naturally aligned with their child's. So when a divorcing parent argues, "How could my children be happy if I wasn't happy?" I always think, "Quite easily, in fact."

Research backs this up. Anne-Marie Ambert, a professor of sociology at York University has spent the past decade researching the effects of divorce on children. She found that unless there are "extremely high levels of conflict or physical abuse," most children are far better off if parents stay together. Even when both households are economically secure, the children of divorce are more likely to suffer from depression and anxiety and become substance abusers. They are less likely to go to university and more likely to be promiscuous. But perhaps most significantly, the children of divorce are far, far more likely to get divorced themselves. And this sucks for their children in turn.

3. This is not to say that leaving a bad marriage makes you a negligent parent. On the contrary, there is no law that says you must always put your kids' needs ahead of your own. As they tell you before the plane takes off: In an emergency situation, put your own oxygen mask on first, and then the baby's. Sometimes change is a matter of sheer emotional survival and offers the only logical way out of an impossible situation. Hopefully your kids will understand this some day.

4. If you do decide to split with your co-parent, try your very best to be civil, kind and decent about it. Why make a bad thing worse for your kids? Divorce, while sometimes necessary, is rarely "better for everybody" in the end – much as we might wish this were true in the cruellest, coldest, darkest days of January.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/relationships/four-hard-truths-ive-learned-about-divorce/article16252865/#dashboard/follows/>