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After divorce: Valuing 'what is' without missing 'what used to be'

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When they announced their divorce, Tiger Woods and Elin Nordegren asked for privacy for their children because "the weeks and months ahead will not be easy for them as we adjust to a new family situation."

As Elin already knows - and as she revealed for the first time this week, to People magazine - adjusting to a "new family situation" takes far more than time.

It takes going "through hell" and losing weight and sleep and your hair - and questioning just about everything you once believed in.

It takes therapy and a good, hard look at yourself and forgiveness.

It takes a forced-march forward - not a fast march, mind you, more like a painful slog through emotional muck.

And it takes years.

Ask any honest parent who has been divorced.

Elin will be all right. The kids will be all right.

But they will be a different "all right" than before.

My marriage ended three years ago after 18 years, and my daughters still "adjust" daily.

"The divorce took away my childhood optimism and innocence," my 22-year-old, Kate, said Wednesday, as we were discussing Elin and Tiger. "It gave me a negative attitude about marriage."

Kate thought divorce might be easier for small children - like Sam, 3, and Charlie Woods, 19 months - because they have fewer years of shared memories. "They have less to remember about how their family used to be."

Self-help books counsel divorced parents to create diversions - new rituals that might distract the kids from realizing, "Hey, Dad's Christmas stocking isn't up this year!"

But kids know when they're being played.

What they can't know - what takes maturity to know - is that all families lurch ahead haphazardly and imperfectly. New players come in and out. A whole new world of weirdness opens up when kids have to start thinking about "friending" Dad's girlfriend on Facebook or dealing with Mom's eHarmony dates.

Sometimes it's hard to value "what is" without missing "what used to be."

Counselor Connie Ingram compares the breakup of a family to moving to a new country - and having to learn a whole new language and culture.

"It's the language of the broken family rather than the intact family - moving from 'we' to 'I' and from 'our house' to 'my mom's house' or 'my dad's house,'" says Ingram, a Ph.D. whose office, Ingram & Associates Counseling and Consulting Inc., is in Royal Palm Beach.

A family split is so stressful, Ingram says, that "parents must realize that it takes about 85 percent of their energy to go through a divorce. That means there is only 15 percent left for your children, your job and yourself."

Ingram counsels grieving women like Elin to give themselves permission to slow down, to journal and get help from a therapist - all steps Elin says she has taken to help her feel stronger and more confident.

She's getting her psychology degree from Rollins College - a good thing, because she's lived what she's learning.

"The word betrayal is just not strong enough," she told People. "I have been through the stages of disbelief and shock to anger and ultimately grief over the loss of the family I so badly wanted for my children."

She's been through hell, and hell has just one exit: Adjust.

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