

Marital Transitions and the Sandwich Generation: The Implications of Divorce and Remarriage

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Introduction

The “sandwich generation” refers to persons in middle adulthood who have simultaneous commitments to help their adult children and their elderly parents. Most individuals in this stage of life are between 45 and 65 years of age (Raphael & Schlesinger, 1993). The term “sandwich generation” may refer to middle-aged adults in a multigenerational household or it can refer to concurrent responsibilities to both the older and younger generations that reside elsewhere.

Simultaneous commitments to elderly parents and adult children can produce stress for the “sandwiched” middle-aged adults, which may spill over into their own intimate relationships and have a negative influence on the quality of their marriages (Roots, 1998; Zal, 1992). Fortunately, there is research to indicate that marital quality can be sustained through periods of multigenerational responsibility (e.g., Ward & Spitze, 1998). Just as the stresses experienced by the sandwiched generation can have a negative influence on marital quality, a strong positive marital relationship can help alleviate much of the associated stress. Spouses can provide financial, physical, and emotional support to one another; thereby sharing the burdens of multigenerational commitments.

However, divorce is increasingly becoming a normative life event for individuals age 45-64 (see Table 1). For example, an estimated 39% of women and 39.7% of men born between 1945 and 1949 had been divorced by the time they reached age 50. An estimated 28.5% of women and 29.5% of men in this same birth group had remarried at least once by the age of 50 (Kreider, 2005).

Table 1
Marital History for Select Birth Groups, 1935-1949

Men Characteristics	1935 to 1939	1940 to 1944	1945 to 1949
Percent ever married by age:			
40 years	91.0	91.4	89.6
45 years	92.8	92.7	91.5
50 years	94.1	94.0	93.1
Percent ever divorced by age:			
40 years	22.7	27.4	31.0
45 years	27.4	31.5	36.3
50 years	30.2	34.7	39.7
Percent married two times or more by age:			
40 years	15.5	19.7	22.4
45 years	21.7	24.2	26.4
50 years	26.0	27.2	29.5
Women Characteristics	1935 to 1939	1940 to 1944	1945 to 1949
Percent ever married by age:			
40 years	92.2	92.2	90.9
45 years	93.8	93.9	92.1
50 years	94.5	94.6	93.0
Percent ever divorced by age:			
40 years	22.7	26.9	33.2
45 years	25.4	29.9	36.7
50 years	27.2	32.6	39.0
Percent married two times or more by age:			
40 years	15.2	16.7	22.3
45 years	18.7	20.7	25.4
50 years	21.1	23.2	28.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), 2001 Panel, Wave 2 Topical Module. (Kreider, 2005, Table 1. Marital History by Sex for Selected Birth Cohorts.)

Projections of divorce and remarriage for subsequent groups are even higher. Because of age and competing demands on their time and resources, the implications for divorce and remarriage can be somewhat distinct for those in the sandwich generation.

Influence of Marital Dissolution

Separation and/or divorce during the years of the sandwich generation are not uncommon. Reports from the Census Bureau indicate that approximately one quarter (26.2%) of divorcing men in a given year are between the ages of 45-64. A lower, but substantial percent of divorcing women (18.9%) are in the same age range. An estimated 21.4% of men who experienced a marital separation in 2001, and 18.5% of separating women, were in the age range of 45-64 (Kreider, 2005).

Implications of Marital Dissolution for the Sandwich Generation

The dissolution of a marriage during middle adulthood—either through divorce or separation—may cause a dramatic change in the stress experienced by the sandwiched generation. It is important to note that these changes may be positive or negative. Marital dissolution may actually relieve stress. In unhealthy marriages, divorce or separation may remove the stress and anguish associated with marital conflict, abuse, or infidelity. Marital dissolution may also relieve some of the caretaking responsibilities, particularly for women. The majority of elderly care is done by women and this finding appears to hold true even when the elderly parent is the spouse's parent (Family Caregiver Online, n.d.). Following a divorce, women may feel less responsible, or not responsible at all, for the care of former in-laws.

Marital dissolution could also increase individual stress levels. Divorced individuals may not be able to rely on the supports their ex-spouse provided during the marriage. These supports may include helping with the housekeeping, running errands, or keeping up on the bills. For homemakers, divorce may necessitate the need for employment. Adding full- or part-time employment to one's responsibilities for elderly parents and adult children may not leave time for personal care and relaxation.

Individuals in the sandwich generation who are contemplating divorce may find it helpful to consider the following questions. When answering these questions, individuals should try to be honest with

themselves and realistic about what their ex-spouse would or would not do following a divorce.

If we divorce (or separate):

- With whom will the adult child(ren) live?
- Since adult children do not qualify for child support, who will provide financial support for them, if needed?
- Who will be responsible for the care of the elderly parents?
- Who will help me with my family responsibilities?

Incidence of Remarriage

In light of the large numbers of divorced individuals in the sandwiched generation it is not surprising that many have also been remarried. In fact, Census data indicates 31.2% of men and 28.4% of women between the ages of 50 to 59 have been remarried at least once. For adults between the ages of 40-49 and 60-69, the percentages in remarriages are slightly lower. Still, more than one-in-five men and women in these age ranges have divorced and remarried (Kreider, 2005).

Implications of Remarriage for the Sandwich Generation

Individuals in the sandwich generation remarry for a number of reasons including: companionship, sexual intimacy, financial resources, and help with household responsibilities (Gabe & Lipman-Blumen, 2004). Elderly parents may disagree with their sandwiched child's decision to remarry. For the elderly parents, a remarriage may be seen as a threat to the time and attention that they are used to receiving. The elderly parents may still be dissatisfied with their sandwiched child's divorce and perceive this new relationship as an obstacle to reuniting the original marriage and family.

Adult children may also be less than enthusiastic about their sandwiched parent's remarriage. For adult children, parental remarriage may result in another change in residency, sharing space with stepsiblings, and concerns about material support and inheritance. The lack of support and/or encouragement from their family for remarriage may be disheartening for the middle-aged adult.

Individuals in the sandwich generation who remarry, either with or without the blessing of their elderly parents and adult children, will often face a new set of stressors. In addition to commitments to

biological kin, new responsibilities for stepchildren and elderly in-laws may be expected. Remarriage can be further complicated by additional financial considerations such as the new spouse's debt or financial obligations to nonresidential children. Sandwiched adults who are considering remarriage may find it helpful to consider the following questions:

- What assets and debts does my potential spouse have?
- What commitments has my potential spouse made to his/her ex-spouse(s), children, and parents?
- Where will we live? Will there be enough space for your my child(ren) and/or elderly parent(s)?
- If my new spouse were to die, who would take care of his/her adult child(ren) and/or elderly parent(s)?

Recommendations

In light of the national divorce statistics, married and remarried individuals should recognize that the stresses associated with the sandwich generation, if unmanaged, can negatively influence marital relationships. Efforts should be made to prioritize the marital friendship to ensure that the marriage will serve as a source of support, not additional stress. Although single individuals in the sandwich generation do not have spousal support, they may be able to utilize other types of supports. For example, extended family may take a "shift" caring for an elderly adult, if asked.

To relieve stress, single, married, and remarried adults alike may consider employing a housekeeper and/or a part-time caretaker, or enrolling their elderly parent in an adult day care. Regardless of their marital status, adults in the sandwiched generation should consider 10 recommendations offered by the U.S. Administration on Aging (2004):

- Plan ahead
- Learn about available resources
- Take one day at a time
- Develop contingency plans
- Accept help
- Make YOUR health a priority
- Get enough rest and eat properly
- Make time for leisure

- Be good to yourself
- Share your feelings with others

Resources

Administration on Aging. <http://www.aoa.gov/>
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