



Navigating Marital Separation: Research-Based Strategies

Steven M. Harris, Ph.D.
University of Minnesota

Three Types of separation

- ▶ **Trial separation**

- ▶ a temporary period of living apart to assess the relationship and its future

- ▶ **Permanent separation**

- ▶ a more serious step indicating a decision to live apart indefinitely, even if a divorce is not yet pursued

- ▶ **Legal separation**

- ▶ a court-ordered agreement, often serving as an alternative to divorce, with court-ordered decisions on issues like property division and child custody

Marital Separation-The Research

▶ **Defined**

- ▶ Married, but relationship is suspended
- ▶ “Socially ambiguous status – not quite married, not quite divorced” (Amato, 2010, p. 661)

▶ **Marital Separation Research**

- ▶ Separation & divorce conflated
- ▶ Emphases on prevalence, outcome predictors, and marital instability following reconciliation
- ▶ Limitations: dated, limited in scope, mostly quantitative with secondary data, no attention to types of

Marital Separation-Our Research

Crabtree & Harris, 2020*

▶ **Ambiguous Marital Separation**

- ▶ Begins without clarity about how the separation will end, often because one or both spouses is considering divorce
- ▶ Popular idea (e.g., “trial separation”), but no empirical research

▶ **Research Question**

- ▶ What is the experience of being separated from a spouse when the separation is initiated without clarity about how it will end because one or both spouses is deciding whether to divorce or stay married?

*Crabtree, S. A., & Harris, S. M., (2020). The Lived Experience of Ambiguous Marital Separation: A Phenomenological Study. *The Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 46, 385-398. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12419>

Marital Separation: Methods

▶ **Sample**

- ▶ N = 20 presently separated persons (14 female, 6 male)
- ▶ 36.4 years average age; separated for average of 5.7 months; white (16), black or African American (1), Hispanic/Latinx (1), and biracial (2); initiators (14) and non-initiators (6)

▶ **Analysis**

- ▶ Procedures outlined by van Manen (1990)
- ▶ 3+ readings of the data, moving from broad/holistic to line-by-line coding

Results (6 Themes)

1. Our relationship feels ambiguous

“[The most challenging thing is] just figuring out where we stand as a couple. Are we a couple? Are we a married couple? Are we just...are we just dating? Where to do we stand? How, what category do we fall into when it comes to, I guess, a couple in general? And so, I think for me, I even struggle with it now ...because, we just really don't even have a stance. We just...there's not an answer.” (P14)

2. Separation is a private experience

“To me, it's just kind of private and it doesn't, you know, it's nobody else's business unless I decide to tell them” (P19)

Results (6 Themes)

3. Separation is a lonely experience

"I think going from having him here and being able to talk to somebody, like I told you before, he's like my best friend. Anything I had wrong, we would talk about it. We were just so goofy together, and we acted stupid, we were immature, like the same stupid jokes and stuff and it's not that same way because I don't have him around. So, I'll think of something to tell him, and I'm like, 'oh I can't.'" (P7)

4. Benefits to separation

"It's actually been better than before we were separated because we've been less stressed out" (P3).

Results (6 Themes)

5. Separation is not sustainable

“Let’s just end this because [not knowing is] taking its toll on me emotionally. And I can’t handle it much longer” (P1)

6. The way out is unclear

“I thought it was going to help. I thought this was going to be the answer, that this was going to be just exactly what we needed, and it’s not. It’s not what we needed. I think that it’s making things worse. It’s made us grow farther and more distant from each other. I think if I had to do it over again, and at this point where we are now, I know I can’t change that, but I wouldn’t really want to do something like this. I would work on things we could have worked on.” (P16)

Discussion

▶ **Implications**

- ▶ Divorce trajectories and decision-making processes
 - ▶ Separation does not inevitably mean the marriage is done
- ▶ Boundary ambiguity and unsustainable nature of ambiguity (e.g., “sliding” into divorce? Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006, p. 505)
- ▶ Women’s experiences
- ▶ Clinical implications
 - ▶ Ambivalence about decision-making is normal
 - ▶ Utility of separation for decision-making?

Clinical & Practical Suggestions



Clarify the Purpose of the Separation

Avoid ambiguity: unclear separations can be emotionally harmful

Define the purpose:

Cooling-off period?

Step toward reconciliation?

Trial separation before divorce?

Is there agreement about the purpose and goals of the separation?

How will we know it is working?

Establish Clear Communication Guidelines

- ▶ Prevent misunderstandings and resentment by setting agreements/expectations about:
 - ▶ How and how often to communicate
 - ▶ Topics that are appropriate
 - ▶ Boundaries around other relationships
 - ▶ Including agreements about dating or sex or even disclosing details about the separation and relationship to others.

Cultivate Agreement on Separate Living Arrangements

- ▶ Physical space can contribute to a reduction in conflict and emotional reactivity
 - ▶ Avoid abrupt exits or hostile moves
 - ▶ Maintain respectful and neutral arrangements
- ▶ The Nest Model
 - ▶ Parents share the home the children live in.

Avoid Rushing into New Relationships

- ▶ Focus on healing, not distraction
 - ▶ Hard to give the marriage a chance with competing brain chemistry
- ▶ New relationships can interfere with emotional processing
- ▶ Use this time for introspection and clarity

Engage in Individual Therapy

- ▶ Helps with emotional regulation and decision-making
- ▶ Encourages self-awareness and personal growth
- ▶ Supports navigating the separation constructively

Consider Discernment Counseling

- ▶ Short-term process (1-5 sessions)
- ▶ Helps couples decide on future direction
- ▶ Promotes clarity without pressure to "work on" the relationship
- ▶ No requirement for the couple to be living together for DC to be successful

Prioritize Children's Well-Being

- ▶ Ongoing conflict is probably more harmful than the separation itself
 - ▶ No triangulation with children
- ▶ Keep their routines stable as much as possible
- ▶ Reassure children of both parents' love
- ▶ Can we come to agreement on a message to the kids that we can both stand behind?

Have a Written Agreement

- ▶ Informal or formal agreements on:
 - ▶ Finances
 - ▶ Parenting
 - ▶ Time apart
 - ▶ Expectations on communication
- ▶ Reduces anxiety, ambiguity, and confusion
- ▶ Consider using the “Healing Separation” template
- (handout provided)

Accept Uncertainty but Set a Timeline

- ▶ Avoid open-ended separation
- ▶ Recommend 3–6 months with check-ins
- ▶ Helps avoid limbo and promotes intentional decisions – “Sliding vs. Deciding”

Summary and Encouragement

- ▶ Be intentional and respectful
- ▶ Use support systems
- ▶ Growth is possible through this process
- ▶ Separation does not mean divorce