# Chapter 7: Divorce, Blended Families, & Aging

### 7A. Divorce

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#### Learning Outcomes

At the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following:

* Define divorce.
* Analyze divorce trends.
* Define marital entropy.
* Apply Social Exchange Theory to divorce choices.
* Explain Levinger’s Model of Rational Choice for Divorce.
* Recall actions that minimize the risk of divorce.

### Definitions

Throughout most of the world, **marriage**is the legal union of a man and a woman. In the past two decades, many countries have permitted **same-sex marriage**, the legal union of two people of the same legal sex. Notice that in modern societies, the state government claims the authority to grant marriage rights. This has not always been true for Western societies. A few centuries ago, tribal or clan leaders, a father, or elderly members of small groups could grant marriages.

To legally marry in the United States today, one simply goes to the local county or state office and applies for a state marriage license. The state also claims authority in granting divorce rights to couples. **Divorce** isthe legal dissolution of a previously granted marriage.

Most marriages still endure, and the odds are that divorce won’t happen to most marriages.

It is a myth that one in two marriages eventually ends in divorce. There are a few myths about US divorce trends that will be dispelled in this chapter. You might have heard the myth of the Seven-Year Itch where divorce happens prior to or shortly after the 7th year. Current government estimates indicate that about 75% of couples make their ten-year anniversary in their first marriage (US Census Bureau, n.d.). The myths are false, but divorce does happen more today than it did 50 years ago, and more people today are currently divorced than were divorced 50 years ago.

We’ll discuss these trends in divorce rates below, but first we must define cohort. A **cohort** is a group of people who share some demographic characteristic, typically a year such as their birth year or marriage year. The **Baby Boom** isa cohort of those born between 1946 and 1964 and represented a never before nor never repeated high period of birth rates that yielded about 70 million living Baby Boomers today.

There are few different rates for measuring divorce. The most common divorce rate used by the United States Census Bureau isthe number of divorces per 1,000 of the population. Another divorce rate is the number of divorces per 1,000 married women. The divorce rate that most hear about is the predictive divorce rate which is the percent of people who had married in a given year who will divorce at some point before death. The National Center for Health Statistics reported that in 2001, 43% of marriages break up within the first 15 years of marriage (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). That was the highest official scientifically-based divorce risks estimate ever reported. So for example, of those who married in the year 2001, about 43% are predicted to divorce at some point before their 15th anniversary. It is estimated that close to half of them will divorce before one of them dies.

Figure 1 shows the United States marriage and divorce rates per 1,000 of the  population from 1900 to 2006. Notice that divorce rates have always been much lower than marriage rates in the United States. Also, notice that marriage and divorce rates moved in very similar directions over the last century. A slight rise is visible after both WWI and WWII ended (in 1919 and 1946). A slight decline is visible during the Depression (1930s) and the turbulent 1960s. Most importantly, notice that both marriage and divorce rates have been declining in the 1990s and 2000s. Younger people today are waiting to marry until their late twenties(delayed marriage) while cohabiting has increased in the United States.

Figure 1 also shows the trends in ratio of divorces to marriages for the United States. In 1900, there was 1 divorce per 13 marriages that year or 1:13; in 1930 the divorce ratio was 1:6; in 1950 the divorce ratio was 1:4; in 1970 the divorce ratio was 1:3; in 1980 the divorce ratio was 1:2; in 1990 the divorce ratio was 1:2; and in 2006 the divorce ratio was 1:2. Today, this means that every year there are two state-sanctioned legal marriages with only one state-sanctioned legal dissolution of a marriage. For the last 12 months ending in December 2008, there was a marriage rate of 7.1 marriages for every 1,000 of the population and a divorce rate of 3.5 divorces for every 1,000 of the population. That translates to over 2.1 million marriages and about 1 million divorces in 2008.

Figure 2 shows a more detailed description of US divorce rates since 1940 and some of the factors that contributed to them. As you already noticed in Figure 1, divorce rates were relatively low prior to 1940. But in the 1940s, WWII was ongoing, and divorce rates moved upward with a spike in 1946. Keep in mind that 1946 was the United States’ most unusual year for family-related rates. Divorce rates, marriage rates, birth rates, and remarriage rates surged during this year while couples married at their lowest median age in US history.

After 1946, divorce rates fell to steady low levels and remained there until the 1960s when they slowly began to rise. The Baby Boomers directly and indirectly influenced the rise of divorce rates. In 1964, the first among the Baby Boomers became 18 and entered the prime marriage market years. For the next two decades, Baby Boomers added about four million men and women to the marriage market each year. Thus, Baby Boomers raised the numbers of married people and thereby the numbers at risk of divorcing.

#### Figure 1: US Marriage and Divorce Rates 1900–2006 and Figure 2: US Marriage and Divorce Rates 1940–2006

Directly, Baby Boomers contributed to the divorce rate. Baby Boomers and those immediately preceding them (born 1936–1945) have very high rates of divorce. Table 1 shows that the experience of ever having divorced is not directly related to age. In other words, the oldest members of society have not divorced the most. In fact, it is the Baby Boomers and Pre-Baby Boomers who divorced the most followed by the oldest and then the younger cohorts. The symbol in Table 1 signifies the highest ever divorced rates. This is in the 50–59 year old cohort (these are Baby Boomers born 1946-1955). The highest currentlydivorced rates are also found among the women and men of the 50–59 cohort. The Baby Boomers 1946–1955 still hold the highest divorce rates by any cohort in US history. Their unprecedented high divorce rates raised the overall divorce rates for the entire nation.

#### Table 1: Percent Ever Divorced \*and Percent Currently Divorced in 2004 by Age Grou tps US: Boomers Ages 40–59 in 2004

When scientists and government researchers predict the risk you might have of divorcing, they use the experiences of currently married people who have and have not divorced—therein lies part of the complication of deriving an “odds or risks of divorce” that we can have confidence in enough to offer advice to the soon-to-be-married. The United States has had its worst divorcing cohort ever, and some of them will likely divorce again before their death. The trend among younger marrieds is to remain married longer and divorce less, but what if they collectively have an increase in their marital dissolution experiences? What if all of a sudden, millions of currently married couples flock to the courthouse to file for divorce?

First, that scenario isn’t likely to happen because today’s married couples tend to remain married. Second, and this is more important, the national risk of divorce is different from your personal risk of divorce in one crucial factor—you have a great deal of influence in your own marriage quality and outcome. You and your spouse have much control over your marital experience, how you enhance it, how you protect it from stressors that can undermine it, and finally, how you maintain it.

Family scientists refer to**marital entropy** as the principle based on the belief that if a marriage does not receive preventative maintenance and upgrades it will move towards decay and break down. Hearing an evening news report on national divorce trends has much less impact on your marriage than a relaxing weekend away together to recharge your romance and commitment which is a marital maintenance strategy designed to combat marital entropy. A proactive and assertive approach to your marital quality is far more influential than most other factors leading to divorce.

The longer a couple is married, the lower their odds of divorce are. Figure 3 shows a visual depiction of how the odds of divorce decline over time. The first three years of marriage require many adjustments for newlyweds. Of special mention is the process of transitioning into a cohesive couple relationship with negotiated financial, sexual, social, emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual rules of engagement. Most couples have many of these negotiations in place by years 7–10. Since longevity of a marriage is often associated with the arrival of children, accumulation of wealth, establishment of acceptable social status (being married is still highly regarded as a status), and the buffering of many of life’s daily stressors the average couple finds it difficult and too costly to divorce, even though some features of the marriage are less than desirable.

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### Theories of Divorce

#### Figure 3: Estimated Odds of Marriage Lasting Based on Number of Years Married

Using Social Exchange Theory as a basis for understanding why couples stay married or divorce, you begin to see that spouses consider the cost-to-benefit ratio. Couples considering the cost-to-benefit ratio look at rewards minus punishments, and they weigh the pros and cons in their decisions.

**Social Exchange Theory**claims that society is composed of ever present interactions among individuals who attempt to maximize rewards while minimizing costs. Assumptions in this theory are similar to Conflict Theory assumptions yet have their interactionist underpinnings. Basically, human beings are rational creatures capable of making sound choices when the pros and cons of the choice are understood. This theory uses a formula to measure the choice making processes (REWARDS-COSTS) = OUTCOMES. This can be translated to what I get out of it **minus**what I lose by doing it**equals** my decision. In 1979, Levinger and Moles published their model wherein they discussed the rational choices made by spouses who were considering divorcing or remaining married. It’s been referred to as Levinger’s Model. Levinger’s Model is Attractions-Barriers +/- Alternative Attractions = My Decision to Stay Married or Divorce. Table 2 below shows an example of how Levinger’s Model clarifies the choices people might make and their perceived rewards and costs.

#### Table 2: Levinger’s Model of Rational Choice in Divorce

In Table 2, you see that Levinger’s Attractions are simply the magnets that draw you to the marriage or rewards that stem from being married. These are the payoffs that come from being married and include positive social status, wealth accumulation, co-parenting, sexual intercourse, health support, and a stress buffer that marriage typically brings to each spouse, as well as others. Each individual defines his or her own attractions. Levinger’s Barriers are simplythe costs or punishments that might be incurred if a married person chose to divorce. These might include losing all the attractions and magnets, changing to a negative status, suffering a division of wealth, co-parenting at a distance and without same-household convenience, experiencing a change or decline in sexual frequency and predictability, losing the health and stress buffer that married couples enjoy (even unhappily married couples experience some measure of this buffer), and others. Each individual defines his or her own barriers.

Levinger’s Alternative Attractions are basicallylures or something appealing that now-married spouses might find rewarding if they divorce. These might include liberation and the freedom that comes from being single (albeit divorced) and newly available on the market, a financial disentanglement from ex-spouse and at times child care (especially common view held among men who often share custody but pay less in the end for their children), alleviation of parenting when children are with the other parent, freedom from unwanted sexual demands and/or the possibility of new sexual partner or partners, the abandonment of overbearing stressors from marriage, as well as others. Of course, each individual defines his or her own alternative attractions.

The last two rows in Table 2 show how you can use a formula to understand the propensity a couple has to divorce or stay married. In the Stay Married formula, the attractions and barriers are high while the lures are low. Translated into Social Exchange thinking, there are many rewards in the marriage with many barriers that would prove more punishing if a spouse wanted to divorce. At the same time, there are few lures that might draw a spouse away from their marriage.

The divorce formula is also revealing. Attractions are low, barriers are low, and lures are high. In other words, there are few rewards from being married, low barriers or low perceived punishments from divorcing, with high lures to draw a spouse away from the marriage. One would expect satisfied couples to have the “stay married” formula while dissatisfied couples would have the “divorce formula.” By the way, the formula is only descriptive and not predictive (it cannot tell you what an individual couple might do). Some with the divorce formula in place remain married for years. A few with the stay married formula become dissatisfied and begin focusing on lures.

One Social Exchange principle that clarifies the rational processes experienced by couples is called the concept of equity. **Equity**isa sense that the interactions are fair to us and fair to others involved by the consequences of our choices. For example, why is it that women who work 40 hours a week and have a husband who also works 40 hours a week do not perform the same number of weekly hours of housework and childcare? Scientists have surveyed many couples to find the answer. Most often it boils down to a sense of fairness or equity. She defines it as her role to do housework and childcare while he doesn’t. Because they tend to fight when she does try to get him to perform housework and because she may think he’s incompetent, they live with an inequitable arrangement as though it were equitable.

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### What Predicts Divorce in the United States?

Years of research on divorce has yielded a few common themes of what puts a couple at more or less risk of divorce. Everyone is at risk of divorcing, but the presence of divorce risks does not determine the certain outcome of divorce for everyone. There is a geography factor of US divorce. Divorce rates tend to be lower in the North East and higher in the West. Nevada typically has the highest of all state divorce rates, but is often excluded from comparison because of the “Vegas marriage” or “Vegas divorce” effect.

Simply enduring the difficult times of marriage is associated with remaining married. Most of the factors that contribute to divorce lie to a great extent within the realm of influence and choice had by the individual. For example, waiting until at least your 20th birthday to marry lowers divorce risks tremendously. In fact, the best ages to marry are 25–29 (interestingly, the US median age at marriage for men and women falls within this age group). Being younger than 19 years old at your first marriage is extremely risky. Why?

Basically the explanation is that most young couples are disadvantaged economically, socially, and emotionally, and their circumstances have accompanying hardships that would not be present had they waited to age 25 (for example, had they graduated college first and prepared themselves for the labor force and for the emotional complexity of marriage). Many scientific studies indicate that there is a refining process of social and intellectual capacities that is not reached until around age 26 and those who marry young exchange their prime years of self-discovery for marriage. Another major individual choice-related factor is marrying because of an unplanned pregnancy. Most babies born in the United States are born to a married couple. But, today about 40% are born to single mothers of all ages. Even though many of these single mothers marry the baby’s father, numerous studies have indicated that they have a higher likelihood of their marriage ending in divorce.

Many individuals struggle to completely surrender their single status. They mentally remain on the marriage market in case “someone better than their current spouse comes along.” Norval Glenn argued that many individuals see marriage as a temporary state while they keep an eye open for someone better. “More honest vows would often be ‘as long as we both shall love’ or ‘as long as no one better comes along’” (Glenn, 1991). Glenn gets at the core of the cultural values associated with risks of divorcing  (Lauer & Lauer, 1986). These values have changed over time. As more people wanted to divorce, divorce laws became more lax and as the laws loosened, more people were able to divorce.

Robert and Jeanette Lauer are a husband-wife team who studied commitment and endurance of married couples. They identified 29 factors among couples who had been together for 15 years or more. They found that both husbands and wives reported as their number one and two factors that their spouse was their best friend and that they liked their spouse as a person (Lauer & Lauer, 1986).The Lauers also studied the levels of commitment couples had to their marriage. The couples reported that they were in fact committed to and supportive of not only their own marriage, but marriage as an institution. Irreconcilable differences are common to marriage, and the basic strategy to deal with them is to negotiate as much as is possible, accept the irresolvable differences, and finally live happily with them.

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### Combating Divorce

A positive outlook for your marriage as a rewarding and enjoyable relationship is a realistic outlook. Some couples worry about being labeled naïve if they express the joys and rewards their marriage brings to their lives. Be hopeful and positive on the quality and duration of your marriage because the odds are still in your favor. You’ve probably seen commercials where online matchmaking websites strut their success in matching people to one another. There are websites, along with DVDs, CDs, self-help books, and seminars for marital enhancement available to couples who seek them.

Doomed, soaring divorce rates, spousal violence, husbands killing wives, decline of marriage, and other gloomy headlines are very common on electronic, TV, and print news stories. The media functions to disseminate information and its primary goal is to make money by selling advertising. The media never has claimed to be scientific in their stories.

The media doesn't really try to represent the entire society with every story. In fact, the media is more accurately described as biased by the extremes, based on the nature of stories that are presented to the viewers. Many media critics have made the argument for years that the news and other media use fear as a theme for most stories so that we will consume them. Most in the United States choose marriage and most who are divorced will eventually marry again. True, marriage is not bliss, but it is a preferred lifestyle by most US adults. From the Social Exchange perspective, assuming that people maximize their rewards while minimizing their losses, marriage is widely defined as desirable and rewarding. There are strategies individuals can use to minimize the risks of divorce (personal level actions). Table 3 lists ten of these actions.

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#### Table 3: Ten Actions to Minimize the Risk of Divorce.

1. Wait until at least 20 years old to marry, 25 is better.
2. Avoid premarital pregnancy and don’t marry just because of a pregnancy.
3. Become proactive in maintaining your marriage (books, seminars, counseling).
4. Understand risks of cohabitation (cohabitation does not equal divorce).
5. Once married, leave the marriage market. Don’t keep an eye open for something better.
6. Learn to compromise with each other. Work around those irreconcilable differences.
7. Keep a positive outlook and look beyond today.
8. Take your time in selecting a mate. Don’t rush into marriage.
9. Take the media with a grain of salt. Don’t assume your marriage will be like the headlines.
10. Focus on the positive benefits of being married and don’t dwell on the negatives.

Decades of studies have indicated that those who have ever cohabited have a higher likelihood of divorce. Cohabitation has been studied especially in contrast between cohabiting and married couples. Clear findings consistently show that cohabiting and marriage are two different creatures (Cherlin, 2008). Those who cohabit tend to establish patterns of relationships that later inhibit marital duration. However, most agree this is due to individuals bringing their unmarried and cohabiting ideologies into their marriages. In other words, while people live together but are not married, they might form the foundation of their relationship with the idea that they can leave at any time, and sometimes these thoughts then translate into the marriage.

Cohabitation is more common in the United States today than ever before. Cohabiters are considered to be unique from those who marry in a variety of ways, yet the similarities between married and cohabiting spouses suggests that their lifestyles overlap. In both lifestyles, relationships are formed and often end. Cohabiters have more than twice the risks of their relationship ending than do marrieds.

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### Children and Divorce

Andrew Cherlin discussed the uniqueness of cohabiting versus married couples. In sum, cohabiters often feel financially ill-equipped to marry, have lower expectations of relationship satisfaction than do marrieds, and often expect a shorter relational duration than marrieds. Cherlin’s main thesis is the stability for children when adult intimate relationships end and his concern is well grounded in the statistics of divorce. Figure 7 (there is no figure 4, 5, or 6) shows that millions of US children have experienced their parents' divorces since 1960 with nearly one million children experiencing their parents’ divorce each year.

#### Figure 4: United States Estimates of Numbers of Children Involved in Parent’s Divorce and Number of Divorces 1960–2006

Let’s think for a minute about what is best for children in terms of their parents remaining married or divorcing. Every home should provide a safe, loving, and nurturing environment where basic needs are met and where children are nurtured into the greatness of their potential. Sounds ideal, right? But that’s not the real-world experience of most children. Familial stresses and hardships are the norm. Being a child of divorced parents does not imply that you are in some way worse off than children whose parents remain married.

Divorce is a blessing or positive life change for many children and their parents. In fact, some children of divorce are very happily married in their own adult relationships because of their sensitive searching for a safe and compatible partner and because they don’t want their children to suffer as they themselves did. At the same time, having a parent who divorced probably increases the odds of divorce for most children. Judith Wallerstein has followed a clinical sample of children of divorce for nearly four decades. Her conclusions match those of other researchers—children whose parents divorced are impacted throughout their lives in a variety of ways. The same could be said of children whose parents remained married and raised them in a caustic home environment.

Whenever a couple divorces (or separates for cohabiters), children experience changes in the stability of their lives at many levels. Some of these children have been through divorce more than once. When their parents divorce, children assume blame for it and believe that they should try to get their parents back together. In reality, the children typically don’t influence their parents’ choices to divorce directly. Children are certainly part of the equation but rarely the sole cause of divorce. On top of that, divorce brings change which is stressful by its very nature. Children worry about being abandoned. They have had their core attachment to their parents violated. They become disillusioned with authority as they try to balance the way things ought to be with the way things actually are. They become aware of ex-spouse tensions and realize that they themselves are the subject of some of these tensions.

Researchers agree that it is better for children to be forewarned of the coming divorce. Parents should make it clear to children that they are not the cause of divorce, that both parents still love them and will always be their parents. They should show them that even though divorce is difficult, they can work together to get through it. Children should never be the messenger or go between or in any other way assume the burdens associated with the dissolved marriage. Table 4 presents some core guidelines for divorcing parents. These are strategies that have been found to be present in strong divorced families. Much research is conducted on what’s working for these families. Unfortunately, many of these strategies can’t possibly work for ex-spouses who have much animosity toward each other.

They are still harboring hurt feelings and can’t get past them right now—some never get past them. Spouses who find themselves at the point of divorce would benefit, and the children would also benefit, from pre-divorce counseling. This is counseling to help them have a good divorce, not counseling to help them reconcile.

Table 4: Core Guidelines for Divorcing Parents.

* Respect each other, get along, and come to terms with the nuances of co-parenting.
* Set up and maintain predictable routines, especially with regard to the sharing of custody.
* Get professional help for children when needed.
* Ensure the safety and well-being of the children.
* Help children remember the good times before the marriage started to go sour.
* Ex-spouses should agree on discipline and be consistent in applying it.
* Encourage the children to have a strong relationship with ex-in-laws.
* Get your own professional help and avoid having the children be caregivers for the parents.
* Create new rituals.

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### 7B: Remarriage and Stepfamilies

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#### Learning Outcomes:

At the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following:

* Define stepfamily, remarriage, enmeshed and other terminology related to remarriage and stepfamilies.
* Discuss the complexity of stepfamilies.
* Recall strategies for successful stepfamilies.
* Discuss dating after divorce.

In December 2008, there were just over two million marriages and one million divorces in the United States (“Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data for 2008,” 2009). There are many society-wide trends that undergird these marriage and divorce statistics. First, there is an 86% probability for women and 81% for men that they will marry by age 40 (Goodwin et al., 2010); second, about 48.8% of women and 50% of men had cohabited to some degree in the past (Goodwin et al., 2010); third, only about 27% of women and 33% of men married have never cohabited or been married before—this means they married for the first time with no cohabitation history (Goodwin et al., 2010); fourth, 38.5% of all US births are to unwed mothers(Goodwin et al., 2010); fifth, there is a pattern of marrying, divorcing, and remarrying and even divorcing a second time (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001); and sixth, a 2001 study found that 70% of currently married couples had the husband and wife both being in their first marriage—this means 30% were in a second, third, or greater marriage (Singh et al., 1990).

Thus, most people in the United States will marry, some for the first time, some who’ve been married or cohabiting, and some who’ve parented a baby out of wedlock. Many of those married persons will divorce at a future date. Many of those divorced persons will remarry (half to three-fourths). Some of those remarried persons will divorce (a second divorce). Some of those second divorced persons will remarry, and the cycle continues. The United States is drawn to marriage, yet does not always get it right the first time. This simple statistically-based principle, “your current marriage has the best odds of not ending in divorce and becoming a source of joy and strength for you” is worth remembering. Those odds of success are highest in the first marriage, second highest in the second marriage, and so on.

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### Getting Back into the Dating Market

Some couples do divorce then remarry each other, but this is rare. Remarriage after divorce is much more likely to occur if the divorcees are in their 20s. The odds of remarriage decline in the 30s, 40s, 50s, and so on. Remarriage typically occurs sooner for the man than the woman. When a newly divorced woman or man finds themselves on the market, they often feel inept. Many express concern in lacking the courting skills required to meet someone new or initiate new relationships. For the most part, they are right. They, like most married people, mentally leave the marriage-courting market and avail themselves to the business of being married and parents. Their sudden reentry into the dating scene is typically unexpected and intimidating. Men tend to move more quickly into the dating arena, seeking for social and emotional connection from their new-found friends. Women are typically more socially and emotionally connected while married, so after the divorce they tend to have more friends and more ongoing family relationships.

A study of elderly divorced men and women contrasted their current state in terms of financial, social, and emotional well being. By far, men were better off financially and women were better off in social and emotional areas of their lives (Hammond & Muller, 1992)(Hammond et al., 2008). This tends to be true in most cases for young and old alike. Men rarely get custody of the children after divorce. If his ex-wife is awarded an average child support and alimony, he still experiences an increase in his standard of living after divorce and he has the freedom from child rearing (which is not very healthy for the children).

For example, let’s say he earned $48,000 per year and had three children. That would mean that $48,000 divided by five family members equals a pre-divorce standard of living of $9,600 per family member. Let’s say she was awarded a hefty $12,000 per year in child support and alimony. Because she now has the children, their standard of living drops to $3,000 per year per family member. His post-divorce standard of living skyrockets to $36,000 for himself. If he does the honorable thing and pays his financial obligations, then his ex-wife qualifies for welfare and he can live with relative financial freedom. That pattern, even though the details vary, is extremely common among today’s divorcees—she has the children and poverty, and he has the freedom and finances.

This, in part, explains why he is more likely to start dating sooner than her, and eventually why he remarries sooner than her. When formerly married individuals enter the dating and marriage market, they experience similar fears and anxieties that never-married daters feel. But there is a significant difference in what they bring to the marriage market place. Each has a history of a long-term sexual, social, emotional, and co-existing relationship. Add to that the issues that contributed to the marital breakup, and you are looking at a complex dating experience with divorcees experiencing the date while carrying a vast store of positive and negative memories and experiences into the date. One might expect that remarriage courtships would take longer than never-married courtships from first date to marriage. The opposite has been found to be true. Most remarrieds court for less time before they remarry. It is believed that they are more aware of themselves, of how intimate relationships work, and of what they need at the moment than never marrieds. However, it’s even more complicated than that.

When someone is on the marriage market, they do look for homogamous mates (persons of similar tastes and backgrounds). They also look for those they are compatible with and for those who survive the filtering process (elimination of undesirables from the marriage pool). But remarriers filter with a specific and unique filter in comparison to never marrieds. They look for someone who is not the same person they just divorced. They especially try to find someone who they perceive will do for them what their ex could not or would not do. Like all persons on the marriage market, remarriers look to maximize their rewards while minimizing their losses or costs (Social Exchange Theory). Figure 5 shows a diagram of some of these rewards and costs, which remarriers would typically consider while on the market. Notice on the top of the diagram that men tend to have more rewards when they come to the marriage market than do women. Add to that the absence of children and you can see, in part, why men remarry sooner than women.

The rewards list some of the desirable traits sought out by men and women alike. Some of these are emphasized more by potential mates than others. Financial security is a major draw for potential mates. Adequacy, comfort, and luxury are examples of desirable levels of financial security. For decades, Sociologists have taught the principle of relative deprivation. **Relative deprivation** isthe perception of advantage or disadvantage that comes from our own personal experiences in comparison to others. This means that we compare our current circumstances to the circumstances of others based on our past experiences. When divorced with three children, a single mother may find a potential mate attractive if he can simply relieve some of her financial burden. If divorced with three children and middle class, a single mother may find a potential mate attractive if he can maintain the middle class status. Finally, a wealthy divorcee may seek someone to provide luxury.

#### Figure 1: The Rewards and Costs Considered by Men and Women in the Remarriage Marketplace.

In understanding expectations on finances or any other desirable trait in a remarriage partner, it is crucial to consider the issue of “perceived advantage or disadvantage.” Not only do remarrieds (and everyone else) consider their current rewards in contrast to past experiences, but they do so subjectively. In other words, emotions play into the formula, which modify the maximize rewards and minimize costs decision-making process. Also, some may ignore money altogether if they feel a stronger need for companionship or trustworthiness. Sex and the intimacy that often comes with it motivate both men and women to seek out another mate. Loneliness is a big issue for divorcees. Men quickly find dating partners and are capable of attaining intimacy through dating. Women have the company of children and other family and friends that were in place before the divorce. But, those relationships may not fulfill the social and emotional needs that can be found in a spouse or intimate partner.

As simple as it may sound, if a desirable partner is available, then he or she is more appealing. Someone not in a deep relationship or engaged is immediately available for interaction and potential relationship building. Many seek another partner to distract them from their divorce pain and grief. There is nothing innately wrong about this. Healthy dating and associations can be part of the healing process. But marrying too soon, during the still-in-recovery state of mind, can be detrimental because once the injured partner heals, they may discover that they were not a good match after all. Divorce risks are higher in 2nd, 3rd, and 4th marriages than they are in first marriages. You’ve probably heard about “rebound relationships or marriages.” Marrying on the rebound is considered to be premature and unwise.

Friendship and love are essential needs all people have. Adjusting to the absences of friendship and love, even if your children are with you, is a difficult task for many. Adults often need adult friendship and love. For single mothers with custody (and the few single fathers who have custody), seeking out a co-parent who can live in the home with the family is a major reward. The single parent wants the children to have two parents influencing them and will often seek a mother or a father for the kids. For younger and older singles, children are an issue. Some younger divorcees don’t want to marry a single parent while others do. Typically, the presence of children in the divorced woman’s care will lower the odds of her remarriage.

Children over the age of 18 are not as strong a deterrent as the younger ones are. The stepfather or stepmother only commits to be a consultant to an adult stepchild rather than a day-to-day caregiver. If a single mother receives alimony or child support, the financial burden that might come with the remarriage are perceived as being lighter. Often a man must balance the financial costs as well as the social and emotional costs associated with marrying a single mother.

Physical attractiveness is important to many who remarry. It may weigh into the formula for some more than others. Divorced men, like never-married men, consider physical attractiveness when choosing another mate. It is weighed, though in comparison to the other attributes which are important, given their past marital problems and issues. When we marry, it helps to have complimentary needs. In other words, if she needs to be cared for and he needs to take care of someone, their needs complement one another. Not all needs are complimentary, and no one can fulfill all of their spouse’s needs all the time. This is true in all relationships. In remarriages, the spouses use the concept of equity in assessing their rewards. **Equity** isthe overall sense of getting a good deal (or a bad one) when considering all the perceived rewards and costs of a relationship.

To an outsider, a couple may appear to be experiencing an imbalance in give and take. Fortunately, a relationship only has to feel fair to the individual spouses. A remarried woman who wanted her ex to spend more time with the children may find it more valuable when her current husband does so and may weigh that as being more important than other contributions. Equity is subjective and changes as new needs arise or new circumstances emerge that families have to accommodate. Being educated, especially college educated, means more income and more desirable traits in a potential mate. College graduates have developed a sense of delayed gratification, have less traditional (and more diverse) family role expectations, and have many other resources to bring to the relationship in comparison to high school graduates. Owning a home as opposed to renting an apartment is an important reward.

A home provides privacy, income benefits, and a clear boundary, which can all serve to aid the development of the remarriage and new family system. Finding a healthy mate is also subjectively defined. In later years, elderly women almost always have to consider the current and near future health of a potential mate. Younger people consider health as well, but not with the same intensity as older daters who have to take into account future caregiving issues. The right age for a person to find a new mate is the one that works best for him or her given their current needs. Sometimes twenty-something mothers will marry thirty-something fathers for stability and continuity. Other times, a younger spouse may be more appealing for a variety of reasons. Some seek out the wealthy, famous, popular, or well-known as a new mate and these desires drive their filters. Finally, some simply have a void where the lost marriage or intimate relationship once resided. They may seek to find someone quickly if they perceive that the presence of a spouse or partner will fill that void.

When considering costs, keep in mind that women typically leave a marriage with more costs or losses, which on the singles scene inhibit her finding a new mate with the same ease as do divorced men. She often has custody of the children. Younger children cost money, need supervision and nurturing, and tire their mother such that she has less energy to be a companion and friend. There is no difference in divorced men and women in terms of health issues. Divorce is considered to be an extreme stressor. Divorced persons most likely suffer health declines from the stresses that came with the divorce. But some may have long-term or chronic health issues that, when considered in the overall formula, are costs and not rewards.

Single mothers often report high levels of stress, fatigue, and feeling lonely despite having people around. Over time, this may lead to health issues. If a single mother (or father) must pay court-ordered payments each month, then this is a financial cost or loss. Men are much more likely to be ordered to pay child support or alimony. To a potential wife, this goes in the loss category. Many divorcees carry unresolved issues for years at the emotional, psychological, spiritual, and even intellectual levels. When the divorce has not settled in at all of these levels, they often have unresolved issues and may have some emotional scars.

Ex-partners can sometimes be dangerous to their ex and his or her new partner. Annoying phone calls, arguments, mean or threatening letters, property damage, and even threats of harm are launched from ex-spouses to new wives or husbands. In most cases, these are not criminal in nature. Children are sometimes used as battering rams against the ex. They are mistreated, misinformed, or neglected in an attempt to seek vengeance. Entering a new relationship where entanglements from the ex are not present is more rewarding. Poor and uneducated men and women offer less financial and intellectual input to a new marriage. This may not matter to some, but single mothers often place this as a high priority. If a potential mate has many children, cares for a dependent family member or friend, or has a severely ill child, she or he may appear to be very unappealing.

Caregiving is common, but it is rarely desired by potential mates. Most caregiving is given by women. Few would willingly take on a caregiving role out of altruistic intentions. Some may take it on if other rewards appeared to compensate, creating an overall sense of equity. A desperate or overly needy person enters the relationship with a disadvantage in terms of leverage for negotiating with another spouse. Being needy or desperate may increase the odds of ending up with an insensitive or abusive partner or spouse.

Another issue common to finding a mate is the one of **propinquity** (sharing geographic closeness and meeting in the same geographic area). The Internet has changed the issue of propinquity by allowing people to interact electronically through social and dating sites that help in the filtering process. These sites can eliminate unwanted dates and yield a more desirable pool of potential mates (at least that’s what they promise).

One 2009 ranking reported that Match.com and eHarmony had 20 million subscribers; Yahoo Personals had 9 million, and chemistry.com and Perfectmatch.com each had 4 million (Sautter et al., 2010). In fact, online dating is projected to increase between 2007–2012 with revenues topping $1.9 billion by 2012 (Wang & Chang, 2010).

Sautter et al. (2010) reported that Internet dating is more common among computer-savvy and already socially networked daters. Chih-Chien et al. (2010) also reported three categories of online daters based on their motivations. First were the adventurers whothrive in the anonymity provided by the Internet which shields them from elimination through traditional social norms. Adventurers seek communication, curiosity, and even emotional support as they seek to meet new people.

Escapers to a virtual world were the second category. Escapers find the real world too harsh and relax in the relatively anxiety-free cyber world. Third and finally were the romanticswho sincerely seek for love, friendship, and sex. Sex is not the major motivation, but is a common motivation for some Internet daters (Kreider, 2008).

###

### Complexities of Stepfamilies

**Remarriage** isthe legal union of a man and woman that follows the dissolution of a previous marriage for one or both spouses. **Stepfamilies** are formed when children from another marriage or relationship are brought into a family through a new marriage. Stepfamilies can form in any of the following ways: a wife or husband was married before, a wife or husband cohabited before, a wife or husband was a single parent before and a child from that previous relationship becomes a stepson or stepdaughter. Stepchildren can be of any age. When a former emotionally or legally significant relationship existed for a current spouse, it creates a**binuclear family**, or a family with two core adult relationships formed around the original adults who are no longer together (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows the relationship between Husband 1 (H1) and Wife 1 (W1) who were married for 3 years then divorced. They had a daughter together, Marie. Husband 1 then met Wife 2 (W2) who was a widow. They married. This made Wife 2 a stepmother to Marie. Then, Husband 1 and Wife 2 had twins together—a son (Sam) and daughter (Lisa). Husband 1 and Wife 2 now have a binuclear family with a nucleus from the second marriage and one from Husband 1 and Wife 1’s first marriage. They form a stepfamily subsystem that includes Wives 1 and 2 and Husbands 1 and 2 (even though Husband 2 is deceased, his position as Wife 2’s first husband is part of the complexity of the stepfamily 1 subsystem).

Wife 1 and her daughter Marie had a single parent subsystem for nearly a decade. The complexity of this system included Marie visiting her dad and stepmom and receiving child support payments from Husband 1. For the most part, this relationship was functional and not very negative. When Marie turned 10, Wife 1 remarried to a divorced man, Husband 3. Husband 3’s former wife (Wife 3) left him and wanted neither custody nor alimony. Wife 1 and Husband 3 formed stepfamily subsystem 2 which included Marie and Husband 1 to the extent that visitation and child support were concerned. Husband 3 and Wife 1 struggled financially for the first 3 years of their marriage because of the loss of assets that came from Husband 1’s and Wife 3’s divorces.

Within one year of their marriage, Wife 1 and Husband 3 developed deeply rooted financial issues with the ex-husband. Husband 3 was angry at Husband 1, and it placed emotional strain on Wife 1 and Husband 3’s relationship. Husband 1 refused to pay child support because he was certain that the money he gave for Marie was being spent on Mike, Jeff, and Bill. Husband 1 demanded receipts from Wife 1 and Husband 3. Of course, this was not court ordered and was extremely impractical. It gave Husband 1 too much influence in Wife 1 and Husband 3’s marriage. Then Husband 1’s parents wanted to see Marie, and Husband 3 refused them as retaliation for the financial mess. Lawsuits were threatened. Things only got worse after that. Welcome to the world of the binuclear family complexity. Stepfamilies are perhaps the most complicated family systems in existence.

In February 2008, the Census Bureau gave a report of the living arrangements of children in the United States (Kreider, 2008). The highlights of the report read: In 2004, 73.2 million children under age 18 lived in American households. The majority of these children (70%) lived with two parents. Most (87%) of the children who lived with two parents lived with their biological mother and father. Twenty-six percent of all children (19.3 million) lived with one parent. The majority (88%) of these children lived with their mother.

Based on these survey results, 5.5 million children (7.6%) were living with at least one stepparent in 2005. The same figure was only 6.9% in 1996 and seven percent in 2001. By racial category, the 2004 data broke down to 8% of White, 6% of Black, 2.5% of Asian, and 7% of Hispanic children. The same report showed that fathers were twice as likely to live with a stepchild as a mother was (Olson, 1986).

#### Figure 2: Diagram of Stepfamilies and Other Family Subsystems.

When relationships have crossed more than one social arrangement over time (such as more than one marriage, cohabitation, or common-law arrangement), the social and emotional complexity of the family systems increases as does the need for stronger boundary maintenance. Figure 3 shows a diagram of the types of relationships and the demands of complexity and boundaries associated with them. A married couple with children have relatively low levels of social and emotional complexity in contrast to all the other categories presented here. Good boundaries are healthy in families. The phrase, “Good fences make great neighbors” testifies to the need and benefit from healthy boundaries. In the nuclear family, good boundaries are like good fences to protect the immediate family and to keep out all others as deemed appropriate.

In a nuclear family, there must be healthy sexual boundaries (only between the spouse or partners), healthy parenting boundaries (the parents care for, nurture, and provide structure to the dependent children), healthy financial boundaries (the parents raise the children, teaching them to work and become more independent over time), healthy emotional boundaries (family members respect the privacy of the parents and children and protect all from intrusions of other family and friends), healthy social boundaries (friends and family have their place which is not as intimate as the closeness experienced by immediate family members), healthy physical boundaries (immediate family members have their own rooms, bathroom access, locks on doors and windows, and private space), and healthy safety boundaries (where the family is guarded by the older immediate family members from outside threats and harm).

#### Figure 3: Diagram of Stepfamilies and Other Family Subsystems with Comparisons for Social and Emotional Complexity and Need for Stronger Boundaries.

Remarried couples (regardless of prior marriage or cohabitation) who have no children also have much less complexity because the ex-spouse or partners can be out of sight and mind. They have no visitation disputes, child support, nor holiday complexities that come with remarried couples who do have children. While there may be alimony issues, these are not as intricately connected since there is no co-parental vagueness that comes with joint custody or non-custodial conditions.

Widowed and divorced persons find that there are more boundary issues, especially if they become dependent on others for financial, social, and emotional support. With dependence come vague boundaries. When children are involved for the single parent, other adult family and non-family members often step in to provide support and nurturance. This typically is not of concern when an intact couple heads the family and works together to maintain healthy boundaries. In some ways, adults stepping in to help children often step in to help the single parents in various ways.

Remarried couples with children from other relationships are more complex in comparison. The ex-spouse gets co-parental influence that can easily spill into the marriage boundary if not properly guarded. Remember the exes who were disputing in Figure 1 because the father didn’t want his child support to go to her new stepchildren? This is a common problem for the remarried couple. They share their money in a combined family fund. Her earnings and his earnings go into the same pot of money as does child support. Partitioning out the ex’s child support in such a way that the stepsiblings are separated as belonging to “them and not us” can be very divisive.

Remarried schedules have to be broad and flexible. When a birthday comes up, the remarried couple may celebrate it, then the ex-spouse and their family may celebrate it. Things do not always work out as planned, so both parties have to bend and flex as needed. Remarried couples with children from more than one intimate relationship experience all of the above, plus added complexity and boundary demands. If Bill and Sue have a 14-year-old from Sue’s first marriage, a 10-year-old from her second marriage, and a 4-year-old from their marriage, plus a 17-year-old from his cohabitation, and a 14-year-old from his first marriage, then the complexities and need for stronger boundaries is even more intense.

Things become more complex for a remarried couple who have children from more than one other relationship that has legal entanglements with immediate, extended, and other family court-ordered rules of custody, visitation, and alimony. For example, if the court orders visitation every other weekend, then records and details have to be kept showing the best faith effort of both parties to comply—after all, it is a court ordered process with legal ramification to all involved. In a perfect world, people would always abide by the orders of the court. They would always make financial payments on time, and visitations would always go as prescribed. However, perfection is not reasonable in terms of expectations.

If you take any of the marriages below and add to it the issue of criminal charges or child protective orders, then the complexity and need for stronger boundaries can become extreme. Children have to be protected from criminals and once protective orders are issued, non-complying family members can be charged with crimes themselves. Under such extreme circumstances, visitation can be ordered under supervision, such as a neutral third party supervisor. The stakes become intense because of the power the state has to hold the family accountable.

Figure 4 shows the family day-to-day activities and patterns experienced by a typical nuclear family. Nuclear families typically have complete control through the parents over the day-to-day patterns and activities. Parents, in cooperation with their children, set up meal times, vacations, and all the other arrangements and plans mentioned in the diagram. They rarely have input from other family members that would diffuse the control or cause a disruption in these activities and patterns. It is a very simple form of family in terms of planning and day-to-day family events.

Now, imagine the worst case scenario mentioned in Figure 3 where there was a remarried family with criminal and or legal issues pertaining to family members. The complexity of the day-to-day goings on would increase dramatically because the control is diffused between sets of parents (step-and their biological parent spouses). In other words, day-to-day interactions get fuzzy in every area because parental authority is spread over two sets of parents.

#### Figure 4: Diagram of Typical Day-to-Day Life, Activities, and Patterns Experienced by a Typical US Nuclear Family.

Figure 5 shows how complex the day-to-day activities of the family can become. The red arrows represent areas of day-to-day interaction that may be interfered with or confused by having two sets of parents in authority. For example, when stepfather and biological mother allow the child to get a cell phone when she is only 11, but the stepmother and biological father feel that she is still too young and not mature enough to handle the responsibilities that come with having a cell phone. The more the parental authority is diffused, the less the parental continuity the child will have. If parents who have divorced and remarried other spouses don’t concur, then the child may suffer by not receiving the healthy limitations needed for their circumstances. The red arrows show how the court-ordered criminal or legal issues can interfere. Imagine also that a court has ordered protection or visitation rules that must be supervised and must be documented for children to visit a parent. Each ruling that may interfere has the potential to throw any family out of its groove or day-to-day routines.

As you may already know, the bonds of affection become strained in all types of families. It is very difficult in remarried families where unhealed hurts and boundary complexities persist. A model emerged in the late 1970s which identified family functioning on two intersecting dimensions: first,**family cohesion** isthe degree to which family members have emotionally bonded to one another, the second is **family adaptability**, which is the degree to which a family can adjust to changes in family member’s roles and relationships(Doherty, 2002). The quality of communication comes into play for each family because communication either facilitates or inhibits cohesion and adaptability. The Circumflex Model is by far one of the most powerful family models ever developed for diagnosing, studying, and treating modern families. Healthy families tend to be average in regards to cohesion, adaptability, and quality communication. Olson defined a number of extremes that occur in families and there are a number of intervention strategies that therapists utilize to mediate these extremes during family therapy.

#### Figure 5: Diagram of Typical Day-to-Day Life, Activities, and Patterns Experienced by a Remarried US Family where Criminal and/or Legal Issues are Involved.

In Olson’s model, families could be either disengaged or enmeshed. **Disengaged** means the family is too chaotic (very loose rules and weak patterns of associating, or there is little family leadership) or rigid (very strict and structured patterns of associating, or there is too strict leadership). The family could also be too enmeshed. **Enmeshed** meansthe family members are overly entangled or over involved in the personal affairs of one another to the point that the changes experienced by one family member are experienced by other if not all family members. Enmeshment is an indication of weak interpersonal boundaries. Enmeshed people lean on others for their own identity-meaning their sense of self is based on being a sister, brother, parent, or friend rather than an individual. When we lean too heavily on family and friends for our own identity we often let their actions or behaviors determine our own. They make decisions we follow because it feels like the right thing to do. We simply have a difficult time saying no because we depend too much on the decisions of others in lieu of our own decision making processes.

Remarried families find themselves making very difficult adjustments that transpire uniquely in the remarried or stepfamily circumstances. The merging of previous family systems into a new system does not occur with the ease TV viewers found among the characters playing in the Brady Bunch Series. So, what might be the goals of a remarried couple as they form stepfamilies? Most likely, the same goals shared by any first married couple. These goals might be things like meeting the needs of the spouses, children, and pets, having a secure home which functions as a safe haven from the stresses and trials of the outside world, enjoying life together with people closest to you, acquire and own assets that will ensure financial stability over the long-term, and raising dependent children into their adult roles in a successful manner.

###

### Strategies for Stepfamilies

What are strategies that are known to work in these stepfamilies? One core strategy is to recognize and deal with the events that brought all the step family members together the way they did. Stepchildren and remarried parents likely have some grief that lingers from the divorce or death of another spouse or parent. Too many stepfamilies are emotionally battle-worn in a way that makes them want to disregard this grief and get the new families moving forward. Of course, this is ill-advised. There are numerous studies, self-help books, and even Websites designed to help the remarried couple deal with the grief and transitions (United Nations Population Division, 2019).

Eventually addressing grief, loss, and heartache is the best approach. Feeling grief for a loss does not undermine the current family system. In fact, if it’s within the current stepfamily that the healing takes place, it can often strengthen the newly formed family as the sense of cohesion grows.

Many stepmothers overestimate what they can do for their new stepchildren and family. Stepmothers are notorious for not treating the stepchildren with the same affection and loyalty as they do their own children. Some argue that stepmothers are doomed by virtue of the stereotypes and family disadvantages. The antidote for this is for new stepmothers to enter their role with a few strategies. First, be realistic in your hopes and dreams. It is not uncommon for stepchildren to grow to love their stepmothers, but typically not as much as they love their own biological mother. So, perhaps expecting to have a good friendship where love may emerge after years of working at the relationship is a better approach.

Second, go slow. Resist the temptation to want to hurry things up and get them resolved so that they will be taken care of and out of the way. Healing, developing cohesion, and building flexibility and adaptation takes time if it is to become permanent.

Third, set short-term goals that are more easily attained. For example, you might set a goal to go on at least one family outing per month over the next two years as opposed to wanting to hold a family reunion where strong bonds are expected, as though you’d all been close family members forever.

Fourth, learn and know your own limits as a wife and mother or stepmother. The Superman and Superwoman mythology makes for great movies and comic book stories, but they are not real. Your limitations can be used as a healthy boundary for what you are capable and willing to do as a mother and stepmother. For example, you may find that you can’t help all the children with their homework (especially if there are many of them). Sometimes older children can be convinced to help the younger ones. Again, this has the potential to establish support patterns that reach across family and stepfamily systems.

Fifth, treat all the children with the same healthy standard of care. Children need to feel safe and protected. They want to feel loved, and sometimes it is enough to let them know that you are sincerely interested in their well-being. Love may follow your care giving efforts in due time. All children want to have a confidant, someone to share their worries with, or a source of unconditional acceptance. Let children give input and search for consensus in matters of choice such as which restaurant to dine at or which vacation spot to visit. Finally, children need, and though they may not know it, want boundaries. Show them you care by setting healthy limits, rules, and restrictions that both spouses agree upon and can uphold together.

It is important for stepparents to avoid getting caught up in the structure of their family. In other words, it is not the fact that you are a combination of his, hers, theirs, or whatever. It’s much more important to focus on how the family system functions, ensuring that the criteria mentioned in the previous paragraph are in place and working well. It also means that when adjustments are needed, that the system allows for adaptation and accommodation. If the family is functional, adaptable, and increasingly cohesive, then it has a solid base of resistance to acute and normative stressors.

One lesson learned by public educators that can be applied to stepfamilies is transparency. When assigning chores, make the process coming to those assignments clear to all. This means they’d better be fair to all. When it comes to discipline, do the same and make sure the discipline is fair and predictable. When or if biased processes are discovered, correct them openly for all children to see.

William J. Doherty published a book on family rituals in 1999. In it he framed family rituals as “intentional” efforts designed to build and connect the family members into a more cohesive group. He urged the smaller daily rituals that slowly but surely reinforce the strengthening cohesion. In the formative months and years of the stepfamily, rituals play an important role in building family cohesion. This is why it is important to travel together, eat out, celebrate birthdays and holidays, and spend time exploring activities and events that work well for most of the family. For some, family reunions become a hit and are continued for as long as they continue to be desirable. Over time, if certain family members miss a reunion or decide to no longer attend, then it’s totally acceptable to hold them for those who desire to be a part of the tradition.

It is common to have unresolved issues from past marriages and family systems which inhibit current efforts to maintain stepfamily cohesion. In this case, if an adult son or daughter and their family disaffiliate, it is wise to continue gathering. It is a myth that a stepfamily (or any family) can only be as happy as the least happy member. The weakest link in the family chain should not set the tone for the entire family system’s bond and friendship. Make such matters the focus of family discussion while together. Allow members to express their honest feelings. Make sure and share your own in return. There is a really good chance that some will like most gatherings while a few may dislike them.

Bobby McFerrin sang a song that can also provide a theme for stepfamily formation “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” (1988). At times, stepparents feel compelled to work out the finest degree of family troubles in stepfamilies and may become overly occupied in this regard. Perhaps, they sense the vulnerability the stepfamily faces from the complexity involved. Most family members enjoy rewarding and positive interactions. Be careful to keep the “happy” in the process of building the family system.

Couples who unite in both verbal and written forms of expression often find themselves leading the family in a more united manner. Consider starting each New Year with a family plan. Include in it five goals for the family that can be met by December 31st. Also include one word that might be the buzzword for these goals. For example, in a family that enjoys meals and food, they might set goals to eat five dinners out of seven together each week, eat out once per month, have a sharing time during the meal where a family member shares a best or worst moment from  the day, have friends over for dinner at least once per month, and finally, eat out at a very unusual restaurant while on the family vacation. The buzzword might simply be “dinner,” “chow time,” or “table.” It would be a word that is central to the goals of the family.

Stepfamilies can be, and typically are, happy families. But, rarely does that happiness arrive without concerted efforts to make it a happy family. Strength comes in the persistent struggle against the forces of complexity, ambiguity, and missing family history. Even though couples give an amazing effort to create a functional stepfamily system, many stepchildren leave home with unresolved issues with either the parent or stepparent. If this happens to you, then so what? In the long-term it is the husband and wife who will spend their entire lives together, not the parents and children. If children are younger than 18 and living with a parent and stepparent, then do your best to meet their needs. Invite them to take joint responsibility for their happiness and the family’s cohesion. Facilitate entertainment, positive memories, and rituals. If at the end of the day, your 18-year-old child or stepchild leaves home with issues of having been raised in a stepfamily, then accept your best effort, be happy as a couple, and move forward with your lives together.

##

### 7C: Families and Aging

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#### Learning Outcomes

At the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following.

* Define gerontology.
* Define life course.
* Compare and contrast the major theories in the field of aging.
* Recall the stages of dying and grief.
* Differentiate grandparenting styles.

###

### Gerontology

The United States of America is inhabited by many diverse people, including distinguishable generations of society’s members based on age. **Gerontology**is the scientific study of the processes and phenomena of aging and growing old. Depending on the definition of being elderly, the United States government typically sets 65 to be the elderly years, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) finds 50 to be the eligible age of membership, and many elderly define their 70s or 80s as the time they begin to feel elderly. Gerontology is multi-disciplinary with medical and biological scientists, social scientists, and even financial and economic scientists all studying the processes of aging from their discipline’s point of view.

**Social gerontology** isthe sociological subfield of gerontology which focuses on the social aspects of aging. Sociology focuses on the broad understanding of the elderly experience, their health, their emotional and social wellness, and their quality of life just to mention a few.**Family Gerontology** is the subfield that focuses on the family experiences of elderly persons. As of 2008, 12.7% of the US population was 65 years and older.1 It is projected to grow to 20% by the year 2050.2

Figure 1 illustrates the growth in the proportion of the elderly to the non-elderly from 2000 and projecting to 2050. Figure 2 compares the younger elderly (65–84) to the oldest old (85 years and older) population which is expected to more than double between 2010 and 2050. This means that in general, more people are living longer. In fact, there are more Centenarians than ever before. A **centenarian** is a living person who has had her 100th birthday. US Census counts indicated about 37,000 centenarians in 1990 and about 50,000 in 2000.

In many societies the elderly are revered (especially in Asian societies). **Filial piety**is the value, respect, and reverence of one’s elderly which is often accompanied by caregiving and support of the elderly. Grandparents and even great-grandparents are valued and included in the home of the mother, father, and their children. These families are enriched by three and sometimes four generations of family members supporting the socialization of the younger members of the family. In Western countries, the elderly and their extended family are considered co-equals and mutually independent until circumstances necessitate assistance from children and other family members.

#### Figure 1: Estimated Percentage of US Population that will be Elderly 65+, and Non-elderly, 2000-2050.4

                                                 0-64  65+

#### Figure 2: Estimated Percentage of US Population that will be 65–84, and 85+, 2000–2050.5

 ..65-84     ..85+

###

### Understanding the Generations of Life

**Life course**is an ideal sequence of events and positions the average person is expected to experience as he or she matures and moves through life. Dependence and independence levels change over the life course. From birth to the pre-teen years, children’s levels of dependence are relatively high and adults’ levels of dependence are relatively low. Newborns have little ability to nurture others, but as they are socialized and grow into their later-teen roles, things change. By young adulthood, independence is a prime value in the United States which leads many to move out on their own and gain their own experiences. A young adult’s ability to nurture is moderate, but often dormant since most pursue avenues of preparation for their adult lives rather than immediately beginning their own families. Married and cohabiting couples are much more independent and capable of nurturing and remain so throughout the grand-parenting years. As the life course progresses into later life, the oldest elderly begin to lose their independence as their health declines to the point that their resources lag behind the daily demands placed upon them. **Senescence** isthe social, emotional, biological, intellectual, and spiritual processes associated with aging(De Magalhaes, 2021).

For many in our modern societies, aging is feared, vilified, and surgically and cosmetically repaired. We do not like looking and feeling old, and senescence is viewed as a weakness. Yet many elderly find their lives very satisfying and they tend to report higher levels of self-esteem than do younger members of society (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008). Because we tend to value youth, youthful appearance, and youthful-centered entertainment, biases appear in the United States. **Ageism**is the prejudice and discrimination against a person based on his or her chronological age.

Ageism is a unique form of bias. One may be prejudiced against another racial, ethnic, or religious group while never being at risk of becoming a member of that group but ageist people are aging right now and will be until the day they die—they are essentially biased against their own future status.

###

### Theories about Aging

There are several social theories that help to understand the experiences of the elderly. In the 1960s, Cumming and Henry developed **Disengagement Theory** which claims that as elderly people realize the inevitability of death, they begin to systematically disengage from their previous youthful roles while society simultaneously prepares the pre-elderly and elderly to disengage from their roles. This was the first formal aging theory that fell short of credibility because the scientific data did not support its assumptions.

**Activity Theory** (1970s) claims that the elderly benefit from high levels of activities, especially meaningful activities that help to replace lost life roles after retirement. The key to success in later life is staying active and by doing so resist the social pressures that limit an older person’s world.

**Continuity Theory** claims that older adults maintain patterns in their later years which they had in their younger years. The elderly adapt to the many changes which accompany aging using a variety of effective personal strategies they developed earlier in their life. For example, those who participated in outdoor activities in their younger years tend to continue to do so as older adults—although they tend to accommodate their health and fitness limitations as they deem appropriate.

To really understand the elderly today, you have to understand the larger social changes that have transpired over the last century. In 1900, elderly people in the United States held a more cherished place in the hearts of younger family members. Most homes were intergenerational with grandparents, parents, and children all living in the same home and more often with kin on the wife’s side being the social connection around which three generations would live (Sweetser, 1984).

In 2000, the US Census Bureau reported that there were 105.5 million households in the country (Simmons & O’Neill, 2001). Only 3.7% or nearly four million households were multigenerational. In the United States, it  probably feels normal not to have older relatives live in the same home with their adult children. In years past, elderly family members were considered a valuable asset with their wisdom and support of their children and grandchildren while today with a greater focus on independence, elderly family members are not as valued.

In other parts of the world such as Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, older persons are most likely to be living with their extended family members. The more common living arrangement in Europe, Northern America, Australia, and New Zealand is living with a spouse or as a single person (United Nations Population Division, 2019).

#### Table 1: Elderly living with children: Countries Compared

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Country | Amount | Date |
| Japan | 65% | 2002 |
| Italy | 39% | 2002 |
| Austria | 25% | 2002 |
| France | 17% | 2002 |
| United Kingdom | 16% | 2002 |
| United States | 15% | 2002 |
| Finland | 14% | 2002 |
| Germany | 14% | 2002 |
| Norway | 11% | 2002 |
| Netherlands | 8% | 2002 |
| Sweden | 5% | 2002 |
| Denmark | 4% | 2002 |

Group of 7 countries (G7) average 27.67% 2002

**Modernization Theory** claims thatindustrialization and modernization have lowered the power and influence which the elderly once had which has led to much exclusion of the elderly from community roles. Even though this theory is not well established and is somewhat controversial, it has made a place in science for understanding how large-scale social forces have impacted the individual and collective lives of the elderly. In modern societies, the economy has grown to a state that has created new levels of prosperity for most; new technologies have outpaced the ability of the elderly to understand and use them; and the elderly are living much longer and are not essential to the economic survival of the family as was the case for millennia. Modernization can help us to understand why the elderly have become stigmatized and devalued over the last century.

###

### What Do Recent Generations Look Like?

Who makes up the generations of our day? Figure 3 shows birth rates for each of the four most recent generations in the United States. Notice the red and blue lines (blue is the top line and red is the bottom line). The red line represents the **Crude Birth Rate** (CBR)which is the number of births per 1,000 population in a given year. The Blue line represents the**General Fertility Rate** (GFR) which is the number of live births per 1,000 women aged 15–44. Both the CBR and GFR show a pattern of birth rates that were relatively high when the World-At-War Generation was first being born. Birth rates declined with the Great Depression until 1946 (the commencement of the Baby Boom). The Baby Boom represented a surge in birth rates from 1946 to 1964 and declined to pre-Boom rates in 1965. Generation X or Gen X represents the children of the Baby Boomers which spilled into Generation Y or the Millennials. It is interesting to note that there is no universally agreed upon definition of generations other than the Baby Boomers. The World-At-War Generation is slowly disappearing from the US population landscape. The majority of the elderly today are women. If you consider the elderly as being divided into three life stages, you can discern just how the elderly are composed comparing males to females. The young-old are 65–74 years; the middle-old are 75–84 years; and the old-old are 85+ years. In 2005, there were more females in all three age groups. This is because women, in most developed countries of the world, have a higher life expectancy than men. **Life expectancy** is the average number of years a person born today may expect to live.

#### Figure 3: United States General Fertility Rates (GFR), Crude Birth Rates (CBR) from 1909 to 2005 with Generation Markers for Baby Boomers; and Generations X, and Y.

The US life expectancy today is about 80 years for females and 75 years for males. Worldwide, it is 70 years for females and 66 years for males.14 Life expectancies have increased dramatically over the last 50 years in the Western nations of Canada, United States, Australia, Japan, and Western Europe.

The **sex ratio** is the number of males per 100 females in a population. Table 2 shows selected sex ratios as of the 2000 census. A ratio of 105 means that there were 105 males aged 15–24 in the United States for every 100 females in that group. This didn’t change much from 1990 when the ratio was 104.3. As you can see, in the 85+ group there were only 40.7 males for every 100 females. This is up from 38.6 in 1990.

#### Table 2: Sex Ratio for US Selected Age Groups and Total, 2000 (Martin, 2007).

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Group | Sex Ratio |
| US Total | 96.3 |
| 15–24 | 105.1 |
| 55–64 | 92.2 |
| 85+ | 40.7 |

The Baby Boomers represent 78.2 million US citizens as of July 2005 (Population Reference Bureau, 2007). This large cohort of society is moving en masse into the ranks of the elderly.

A **cohort**is a group of people who share a statistical or demographic trait. The Baby Boomers are the largest birth cohort. Nearly 8,000 Baby Boomers turned 60 each day in 2006. The US Census estimates that 57.8 million Baby Boomers will be retired in 2030. One issue for gerontologists is the financial strain the Baby Boomers will place on the rest of society once they are retired. Most speculate that Baby Boomers will not receive the same benefits from the Social Security Administration that their parents and grandparents enjoyed.

The children of the Baby Boomers are called Generation X or the Baby Bust because they were born in post-boom low fertility rate years. They were different from their parents. They grew up with the computer age and came to computer technology much like an immigrant comes to a new country. This cohort grew up in an economic state of greater posterity than did previous generations.

Generation Y or Millennials are also called the Internet Generation or Screenagers because they grew up with TV, video games, cell phones, and PDAs. Each generation is culturally distinct compared to the previous ones even though much still remains in common. There is a good chance that the children of Generation Y parents will be better skilled than their parents with a technology that has not yet been invented. Such has been the case comparing the last three generations.

In Tables 2 and 3, you see increasing life expectancies in the United States and the world. Being born in the United States affords the average member of society a longer life. North American children are born with higher life expectancies than other children around the world.

#### Table 3: United States Life Expectancies (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Year | Total | Male | Female |
| 1970 | 70.8 | 67.1 | 74.7 |
| 1980 | 73.7 | 70.0 | 77.4 |
| 1990 | 75.4 | 71.8 | 78.8 |
| 2000 | 77.0 | 74.3 | 79.7 |
| 2010 | 78.5 | 75.6 | 81.4 |
| 2015 | 79.2 | 76.2 | 82.2 |

#### Table 4: 2007 World and Regional Life Expectancies (US Census Bureau, 2007).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Region | Total | Male | Female |
| World | 68 | 66 | 70 |
| Africa | 53 | 52 | 54 |
| North America | 78 | 70 | 81 |
| Latin America | 73 | 70 | 76 |
| Asia | 68 | 67 | 70 |
| Europe | 75 | 71 | 79 |
| Oceania | 75 | 73 | 78 |

Over the past half-century, both the worldwide drop in fertility and concurrent rise in life expectancy have led to the gradual aging of the world’s population. Table 4 gives projected percentages of persons over 65 for selected regions of the world while Figure 4 displays a map of the world illustrating the percentage of older members of each country’s population in 2008. Most of Africa, with its high fertility rate and young life expectancies, has less than five percent of its population aged 65 and older. A good portion of Europe has an older population of 15% or greater. The United States is at 10–14%. Since 1950, the share of persons ages 65 and older has risen from 5–7% worldwide. As the map shows, Europe and Japan have led the way with North America, Australia, and New Zealand close behind. However, older persons are now more than 5% of the inhabitants in many developing countries and by 2050 are expected to be 19% of Latin America’s population and 18% of Asia’s. Notice that the developing countries have the lowest percentages of over 65 populations. This is due to continued high fertility rates (births) and high mortality rates (deaths).

###

### Dying

Elderly women outlive elderly men. **Widowhood** occurs when one’s spouse dies. **Widows** are surviving wives and **widowers** are surviving husbands. One sub-discipline of gerontology is thanatology. **Thanatology**is the scientific study of death and dying. Thanatology informs those who provide support and counsel to the dying.

How we define death, both our own and the death of others, is very much influenced by the cultural definition of death we incorporated into our own values while growing up. It’s very common for young college students to have lost a great aunt or uncle, great grandparent, or even a grandparent. It’s not so common to have lost a parent, sibling, or child. **Grief** is the feeling of loss we experience after a death, disappointment, or tragedy. When people experience grief, they are said to be in bereavement. **Bereavement** is the circumstances and conditions that accompany grief.

Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has published work on the stages of grief as it relates to death. She found that people who are dying or those who have loved ones dying go through a series of stages in the grieving process. The first stage is **denial**, a sense that it didn’t happen. The second stage is **anger**. Grievers ask “Why me?” or state that they hate God for what has happened. **Bargaining** is the third stage. Grievers say they will be better people if they are healed. **Depression** isa sense that all is lost or why even try. The last stage is **acceptance**. This is the stage where grievers have processed the loss and are ready to move on  (Kübler-Ross, 2009). Everyone grieves, and we all grieve in our own ways. Most people experience all the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, but there exists some variability in how individuals cycle through Kübler-Ross’ stages.

#### Figure 4: Population Aging Worldwide (Population Reference Bureau, 2007).

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### Roles

The study of aging would not be complete without focusing on family relationships and roles. Of the over 40 million elderly in the United States, about 6 million still work for pay. About 7 million take adult education courses. About 21 million are married and about 13 million are widowed. Only about 1.4 million live in nursing homes. About 32 million own their homes. In the 65 plus age group there are only 73 men per 100 women (US Census Bureau, 2007).

Just how the future of elderly family relationships will be in the coming decades is very difficult to predict. Many elderly live alone (regardless of any wishes to the contrary). The US Census Bureau reported that among those 65+ there were about 3.5 million elderly single men with no spouse or partner and over 10 million elderly women with no spouse or partner (Population Reference Bureau, 2007).Although many single older people might enjoy an intimate relationship with a partner or spouse, the rewards and costs are different for men and women in these age ranges. Combining retirement incomes and sharing living expenses might be appealing to both men and women, but elderly women are faced with a biological truth that makes the possibility of another long-term intimate relationship less appealing—that is that men die younger than women. To marry a 65-year-old man is to take on a potential caregiver role which may place the women in a stressful, very demanding, and perhaps overwhelming role. Some women have already been through something like this with a first, now deceased, husband. Many divorcees and never marrieds have found their life patterns to be established and difficult if not impossible to change. Thus, many elderly remain single and have friendships and intimacies without the long-term commitments that come with cohabiting or marrying.

#### Table 5: Worldwide Percent of Persons Ages 65 and Older23

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Country | 2007 | 2025 | 2050 |
| World | 7 | 10 | 16 |
| Industrialized countries | 16 | 21 | 26 |
| Developing countries | 6 | 9 | 15 |
| Europe | 16 | 21 | 28 |
| Oceania | 10 | 15 | 19 |
| Latin America and Caribbean | 6 | 10 | 19 |
| Asia | 6 | 10 | 18 |
| Africa | 3 | 4 | 7 |

What do trends for the unmarried in later life suggest to us? Quite simply, more divorced and separated elderly are predicted. There are higher proportions of divorced and separated elderly now than in the past. This trend is not the same for widowhood.

There is only a slight increase in widowhood compared to a dramatic increase in being divorced or separated. Another trend is the increasing numbers of those in the pre-elderly stages of life (ages 30–64). Among them, we see increased rates of divorcing and remaining single. The Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, turned 65 starting in 2011 and continuing until 2029. This cohort has the highest documented divorce rates of any age-related cohort ever studied in the United States.

The number of elderly will nearly double by the time all the Baby Boomers reach 65 years in 2029. This leads to the conclusion that when the Baby Boomers reach age 65, the prevalence of divorced elderly will rise to an even higher level because of the sheer volume of divorced Baby Boomers who will also, for whatever reason, remain divorced into their later years.

Not all retirement years are created equally. Income comparisons of married versus divorced elderly males and females show that the highest median income levels are for married males. Married females have the lowest income level in part because this generation of elderly has a relatively high rate of traditional homemakers who have fewer Social Security retirement benefits than their husbands.

Quality of life differences were investigated in the National Longitudinal Surveys-Mature Women data set. Elderly divorced and widowed women were more likely to still be in the labor force than married ones. Married women had the lowest levels of reported unhappiness and rarely enjoyed life. Feeling sad was similar among all categories.

###

### Grandparenting

The role of grandparent is a socially acceptable one in the United States. It is admired by others, bragged about by grandparents, and more often than not appreciated by grandchildren. Grandparents are given social approval by peers and society in general for being in that role. Grandparents also can be as actively or inactively involved as they desire. There are varying types of grandparental involvement and Ron Hammond has developed a few types. Most US grandparents live in another household from their grandchildren, but economic uncertainties and demographic changes with lower birth rates may contribute to the United States returning to three or four generational households (United Nations Population Division, 2019).

The**Disneyland Grandparent** isone who entertains and distracts their grandchildren from the mundane aspects of their daily lives at home. These grandparents provide a certain entertainment option that is missing from their not-yet established parents. Grandchildren come to have high expectations of indulgence when spending time with these grandparents.

The **Assistant Parent Grandparent** is the one who takes the grandchildren to school functions, practices, and doctors appointments or waits for their grandchildren to come to their house after school and before the parents return home from work. Because the parents are typically both employed, these grandparents sometimes become an integral part of their grandchild’s daily life and have an ongoing supportive role in the grandchild’s busy schedule. Many young dual-employed couples could not afford the cost of formal daycare, and many grandparents feel rewarded by the meaningful contribution they make in this role.

The **Parental Substitute Grandparent** is the one who lives in the home with the grandchild (or the grandchild lives in the grandparent’s home). These grandparents have a great deal of stress that often reminds them of the original parental stresses they faced when they were raising their own children. Parental Substitute Grandparents often express fatigue and feeling overburdened. Raising grandchildren is not what most grandparents anticipated to happen in their later lives. Grandparents in the United States often have direct daily interaction with their grandchildren. The US Census Bureau estimates over six million grandparents have their grandchildren living in their home (Population Reference Bureau, 2007). This type of grandparent is common when unwed teen mothers keep their babies, when an adult child is divorced or widowed, or when a child or son or daughter-in-law becomes disabled.

Finally there is the **Distant Relative Grandparent**. These grandparentsvisit at times and live at a geographic or emotional distance from their grandchildren. They typically can’t, or will not, have a close relationship with the grandchildren. Telephones and the Internet allow these grandparents to consult with the parents and be intermittently involved in the lives of their children and grandchildren. But many grandchildren experiencing this type of grandparenting often report a disconnect to these grandparents.

Grandparents can have a positive and nurturing impact on their grandchildren, or they can have a shameful and negative one. Some grandparents work diligently to reinforce the value of each individual grandchild, often trying not to repeat the same mistakes they made when raising their own children. These grandparents find ways to show and express their love and support of the grandchild.

###

### Elder Abuse

**Elder abuse** isthe mistreatment of, violence against, and otherwise harmful manipulation of elderly persons. It includes physical,the willful infliction of pain or injury(such as beating, choking, burning, inappropriate medication, tying up or locking up, or sexual assault); psychological, threats, intimidation, and verbal abuse; financial or material, taking financial advantage, misuse of elder’s money(such as theft, deception, diverting income, or mismanagement of funds); violations of rights such as not permitting the elder to exercise her rights(such as the right to vote or the right to due process); neglect, a failure to provide food, shelter, clothing, or medical and dental care (this is the most common form of abuse, especially for single older people); and self-abuse and self-neglect. Marlene Lee (2009) reported that elderly abuse is too common (Population Reference Bureau, 2007). She also found that non-family persons accounted for more than half of all elderly abuse. When family members verbally abused, it was more likely to be perpetrated by a spouse; however, financial and physical abuse was more likely to be at the hands of a child.

Most states sponsor programs that intervene when elder abuse or neglect is suspected. Several programs have been developed to assist older adults who do not wish to leave their neighborhoods and companions to move in with children. Home-bound elders may benefit from the attention of gatekeepers, service people such as letter carriers or neighbors who keep an eye on them and can intervene when they suspect a problem.

Elders are abused by strangers, medical professionals, paid caregivers, family members, and themselves. Studies report that from 1.5 to 4% of older people are victims of abuse in a given year. Women make up 60–76% of abuse victims, depending on the type of abuse, and those over 80 are at an increased risk of abuse. Researchers estimate that only about one-sixth of incidents are reported. Elder mistreatment includes any knowing, intentional, or neglectful act that harms or causes risk of harm to a vulnerable adult. Up to 90% of cases are committed by family members, most commonly men. All 50 states have domestic abuse reporting procedures such as toll free hotlines. Adult Protective Services (APS) isthe state or county agency that investigates elder abuse.

Every 83 minutes, an elderly American commits suicide. One in every four suicides in the United States is of a person over 65 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). White males over 85 are the most at risk. About three-quarters of men choose a gun. Women are more likely to try to overdose and are often found before it is too late. Suicide, at any age, is more common in males; females actually attempt it more often, but males are more successful at it, and older people are more successful than younger people. Depression and suicide can be prompted by chronic illness and pain, multiple losses (spouse, friends, children), social isolation, and alcoholism (which can be caused by the previous three). Some elderly couples engage in double suicide for fear of being left by each other, and some spouses will kill their mate and then themselves. As the baby boomers become old, experts expect to see even higher rates of suicide.

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