

# The Psychology of ReAttach and Complex Divorce

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## Abstract

Romantic relationships are optimal environments for fulfilling our basic needs [1, 2, 3]. It is, therefore, understandable that we attach so much value to romantic relationships [4]. Deciding to divorce or break up a long-term romantic relationship is very stressful due to the loss of love, care, intimacy, appreciation, company, security, and much more that we expect to find in the bond with this partner [3, 5]. Ending a relationship and initiating a divorce are emotionally challenging decisions, only made when a partner no longer feels that the basic needs are being met and has given up hope that this can change for the better. After a process of accumulating negative, stressful experiences and disappointments that have affected one's perception and experience, the realization of loss makes an entrance.

This article outlines the factors that contribute to complex divorces, providing support to ReAttach Specialists and ReAttach Affect Coaches in guiding families before, during, and after divorce. The aim is to identify common pitfalls promptly to prevent them while working tailored and strategically in complex divorce situations with ReAttach.

**Keywords:** ReAttach, Romance, Alienation, Divorce, Forgive and Forget Hood, W.A.R.A.

## Introduction

'All you need is love' is a wisdom confirmed by Maslow's hierarchy of needs: every human needs love and belonging, which include friendships, family, and an intimate partner [5]. Romantic relationships deeply resonate with our most profound desires, as the human condition inherently craves love and the formation of a unique bond with an intimate partner. While research may suggest that positive affect is not the sole foundation of romantic relationships [6], most couples fondly reminisce about the period of falling in love and the accompanying feelings of joy.

Unfortunately, the optimism of newly married couples expecting to live happily ever after, in many cases, turns out to be a fairy tale. Many partners expect their ideal partners to meet their basic needs, but later on face the disappointment that their ideal turns out to be imperfect after all. The first cracks in the relationship become visible when basic needs are not met, and maladaptive patterns emerge [7,8,9]. Lovers may

accumulate many adverse effects over time that disrupt their communication and intimacy. While the initial stage of marriage is often characterized by mutual interest, physical attraction, and happiness, many spouses eventually lose the love and become distant. This distance might be leading to a deterioration of their intimate bond and a decision to separate or divorce.

Even if both partners are motivated to improve the relationship, mutual over-sensitivities can disrupt their communication and intimacy. Critical and derogatory comments about appearance or communication can be forgiven, but these comments are much less easily forgotten. Body shaming can cause discouragement and feelings of inferiority. The mere expectation that the relationship might end can prepare partners emotionally for a breakup. Once these processes are in motion, the couple may choose to seek professional help to transform the negative patterns into positive growth or decide to part ways.

We question why only a few people succeed in making the right choice of partner and building a lasting marriage. Salvatore et al. (2024). examined Family Genetic Risk Scores (FGRSs) across

psychiatric disorders associated with divorce [10]. FGRSs are risk scores inferred from family relatives with psychiatric diagnoses. They found more FGRSs in divorced individuals compared to those who were stable or never married. It is interesting to explore these results in more detail. In any case, it shows that brothers or sisters of psychiatric patients or children of parents with a psychiatric disorder are at significant risk for problems within the marital relationship. It seems logical that this target group is burdened with stress factors within the family in which they grew up and that this has an impact on their functioning in the era. Growing up in a complex family can have consequences for the choice of partner, influenced by recognizable behaviors or characteristics from the partner's family of origin. The likelihood that the chosen partner also has an FGRS is high, considering the high prevalence of psychiatric disorders in young people, which in Europe is almost one in five [11].

The process of divorce can be understood in three distinct phases: pre-divorce, during the divorce process, and post-divorce. Each phase presents unique challenges and opportunities for therapy. Taking a closer look at these different phases can help ReAttach Specialists and Affect Coaches provide timely and practical support to families navigating the complexities of divorce.

## Before the curtain falls

At the beginning of the marriage, partners often report that the other person brings out the best in them, which is true. Since both partners initially expected or felt that their basic needs were being met, their maladaptive schemas remained beneath the surface, and both functioned as their best version relationally. They do not have to make any effort to make the marriage function well. However, as soon as circumstances arise in which the needs of both partners conflict or cannot be fulfilled, the optimism bias begins to fade, and the first doubts emerge. All kinds of circumstances can trigger as long as they cause enough stress. For some couples, the wedding itself is such a stressful event that the first turning point occurs immediately after the ceremony. A pregnancy or the birth of a child can also be problematic or cause a lot of stress. The couple's stress tolerance is tested at these times and determines whether hypervigilance develops. If this is the case, couples with psychological vulnerability, in particular, will have a difficult time, and it will be tough for them to get out of this without relationship damage.

## Maladaptive patterns come to the surface

Hypervigilance, a state of heightened sensitivity and alertness, can manifest in sensory weakness, intolerance, and a perceived loss of love and connectivity in the context of divorce. In the case of hypervigilance, sensory processing declines, and unprocessed stimuli will trigger negative affect that resonates with maladaptive schemas. The more unprocessed stimuli, the greater the intolerance towards the partner's imperfections, along with a focus on the negative aspects. The fairy tale turns into a nightmare as Prince Charming slowly but steadily turns ReAtt Aff Co 1(2): 53-58 (2025)

out to be an ugly frog, and Snow White is revealed to be a nasty witch. The seemingly secure attachment proves not to be as safe as initially thought. The couple ends up in a negative spiral of loss of love that seems challenging to reverse. Partners who have not experienced much insecurity in their lives are more likely to emerge from this experience unscathed than partners where one or both have developed maladaptive schemas in the past. These maladaptive schemas emerge with full intensity when the basic needs in an intimate relationship are under pressure.

## Alienation

Negative affect takes over, and the perception of the spouse becomes negatively colored, with partner intolerance projections onto the partner as negative traits that can not be tolerated or should be controlled. Alienation enters the picture: partners become estranged from each other. Alienation enters the picture: partners become estranged from each other, and parent alienation might become a source of confusion for the children.

## Seeking support

In complex relational problems, it is wise to seek help in this early phase. There are several pitfalls that a ReAttach Affect Coach should consider in advance. If only *one* partner seeks help, it is essential to be aware of the process of alienation. Resonating with negative narratives of one By initiating a conversation about the processes involved in marital stress and providing psycho-education about cumulative intolerance, loss of optimism bias, and the feeling that basic needs are not being met, the ReAttach Affect Coach plays a crucial role in creating a safe and supportive space for intervention. The Forgive and Forget Hood (FFH) can be a great place to start because this accessible exercise not only reduces the total perceived burden, but also the person intolerance [12,13,14]. Another first-aid psychological intervention is Wiring Affect with ReAttach (W.A.R.A.), which can be used to reduce acute stress, sensory overresponses, and negative affect [15, 16]. The ReAttach Affect Coach plays a crucial role in explaining the FFH and transferring the W.A.R.A. as a self-regulation tool. With this guidance, both spouses can actively reduce intolerance towards each other and increase stress tolerance, strengthening the intimate bond and rebuilding trust.

When partners respect each other, take responsibility for their actions, and prioritize each other, they can build a stronger foundation for their marriage. Research conducted by Abreu-Afonso et al. [17] suggests that several factors, including effective communication, emotional regulation, and a sustained sense of commitment between partners, influence marital satisfaction over time. These dimensions help explain how couples maintain long-term relational well-being.

ReAttach intervenes precisely at the points where these abilities begin to collapse. Through carefully guided protocols, including the rebuilding of sensory integration, mirror neuron activation,

and the restoration of optimism bias, clients are invited to reconnect with the positive affect they once experienced with their partner.

Love, like all emotions, is not just a feeling. Love is a dynamic neural ensemble [18]. The therapeutic function becomes one of restoring access to these internal networks and rebuilding the bridge toward emotional presence.

This is especially relevant in cases where early childhood trauma has shaped the internal template of intimacy. In such situations, ReAttach does not merely address communication or cognition; it also addresses the underlying emotional issues. It reconstructs developmental skills that may have never fully formed—such as self-regulation, ease, and secure identity. As Siegel (2012) notes, these deficits often remain camouflaged under layers of survival-based behavior. To maintain a connection under stress, it becomes necessary for each partner to strengthen their inner foundation [19].

Young's (1999) core emotional needs provide a valuable map in this process [20]. They include a safe connection, autonomy and identity, freedom to express emotions, ease, sports, and the presence of realistic boundaries. When these needs are chronically disappointed, dynamic, emotional fatigue and conditions are inevitable in either early life or in a couple.

Here is where a ReAttach protocol designed to restructure negative patterns becomes particularly transformative. By reducing the overactive fear system and activating the social reward system, this method enables clients to practice new behaviors and ideas by anchoring psychological safety and unconditional impact.

When psychological safety is restored, and the client can access positive affects, ReAttach progresses to its most transformative phase: New Mind Creation [21]. This protocol does not revisit traumatic memory, nor does it rely on verbal insight. Instead, it works directly with emotional states that have not yet been fully symbolized, inviting the client to associate these with emotionally salient, spontaneous concepts. Through W.A.R.A. (Wiring Affect with ReAttach) and structured Cognitive Bias Modification (CBM), the client rehearses alternative responses anchored in safety, reward, and agency. Only once this embodied shift is established can internal representations be rewritten, not as compensations for loss, but as genuinely new forms of selfhood. In this sense, the "new mind" is not an abstract metaphor; it is a neuroaffective reconfiguration born from secure connection and internal coherence.

## The die is cast

Once the decision is made and there is no return, all family members are under pressure, leading to mental overload, brooding, and egocentrism. Therefore, parents easily lose sight of the profound emotional struggle that children are going through. Lie Ken Jie et al. (2025) found that the emotional struggle children face when they feel torn between their parents is emotionally harmful (2025) [22]. The significant impact of ReAtt Aff Co 1(2): 53-58 (2025)

divorce on the children's emotional health should be carefully considered in any divorce situation.

Basic needs become important at this stage. Focusing on the turmoil the family is enduring in these situations is not helpful. Therefore, creating a holding space where emotional regulation can ensure sleep, presence, and routine becomes binding for the children's psychological safety. Creating enough holding space throughout the process of helping families in co-regulating affect is crucial to anchor these aiding components. As Bowlby (1988) noted, emotional safety comes from a reliable, attentive, and responsive presence, particularly during stressful periods, whereas caregivers must provide a secure base [23]. During a divorce, this kind of support becomes essential. Perry and Szalavitz (2017) describe it as the "state regulates story," showing that the physiological and emotional state determines how a person gives meaning to their experiences [24]. Stress can arise when there is not enough secure space, and it becomes necessary to regulate the nervous system. Van der Kolk (2014) explained that trauma lives in the body and cannot be transformed through words alone. Integration comes after somatic safety is established [25]. ReAttach protocols intervene precisely at this point by providing emotional safety first, which facilitates integration only after calming down through active modulation of affective states, enabling narrative construction so that the nervous system can process information [15].

## Building a new life

Even with the possibility of divorced parents creating a parenting plan, many parents struggle to maintain good relations after the divorce. This difficulty is often more profound than the logistics of the parenting plans. What truly obstructs healthy post-divorce relationships is the turmoil in attachment patterns and a fragmented sense of self [26]. When core emotional needs remain unaddressed and unintegrated, it is not just the relationship that suffers but also the foundation of the individual's ability to relate. To rebuild relational consistency is to restore internal safety, which is possible through emotional regulation and co-regulation with significant others, such as children, promoting secure attachment [26, 19, 24].

Upholding a secure attachment will lead to real connection, empathy, and presence. Trust and structure in any relationship need a space where emotions can be regulated, and only then can meaning begin to emerge. When caregivers who go through divorce are helped to regulate their emotional states, they become more emotionally available to the children in their care. It is not about being perfect parents. It is about becoming solid, present, and attuned enough for children to feel that someone is there. Fonagy et al. (2002) describe how the ability to make sense of our own and others' internal worlds is rooted in those early experiences of relational safety [26]. Main and Hesse (1990) show us that when caregivers carry unresolved trauma, it often shows up in the child's attachment pattern as confusion or fear [27].

This is precisely why restoring internal coherence, both in the caregiver and the child, is utterly important. Cohesion in any family system, whether biological, adoptive, or restructured after divorce, relies on secure attachment. When that is absent, relationships become disturbed or reactive.

What makes a relationship resilient is the capacity to repair, which begins with affect regulation—the integration of sensory and emotional experiences—and the rebuilding of a meaningful sense of self in connection with another. Especially for children navigating disrupted family situations or for parents facing emotional fatigue, ReAttach can help create relational consistency. Building a strong self is an act of care. It is the emotional infrastructure that enables presence, empathy, and genuine connection to flourish. Moreover, from that point on - not before - it becomes possible to care for children in a way that is not only responsible but truly attuned.

## General attitudes on people, stress-tolerance and resilience with Psychological Factors

According to Putnam (2007), Inglehart and Welzel (2005), enhancing interpersonal tolerance, emotional resilience, the capacity to forgive, and the ability to build sustainable relationships has significant implications at a societal level. Increased tolerance fosters social cohesion and reduces conflict, especially in multicultural or diverse environments. Societies with higher levels of interpersonal tolerance often demonstrate greater social trust, more stable democracies, and reduced polarization [28, 29]. Furthermore, emotional resilience and stress tolerance are essential for maintaining psychological well-being and productivity in the face of adversity. Resilient communities are better equipped to recover from crises—whether economic, environmental, or public health-related—contributing to collective stability and reducing the burden on healthcare systems [30, 31]. Likewise, Staub (2005) explained that forgiveness plays a critical role in reducing hostility and fostering reconciliation at both interpersonal and societal levels. In post-conflict societies, forgiveness has been central to peacebuilding efforts, helping to break cycles of retaliation and build shared futures, as evidenced in post-genocide Rwanda and post-apartheid South Africa. At an individual level, forgiveness is linked to reduced anxiety, depression, and aggression, promoting overall mental health and healthier social interactions [32, 33]. Additionally, combining these traits with the ability to build and maintain sustainable, empathetic relationships, they strengthen social capital, encourage cooperation, and support long-term societal resilience. Taken together, these competencies not only enrich individual lives but also contribute to creating more peaceful, inclusive, and sustainable societies [34, 35].

Overall, fostering tolerance, resilience, forgiveness, and sustainable relationships does not merely enhance individual well-being—it strengthens the very fabric of society. When cultivated

at scale, these traits reduce conflict, improve health, stimulate economic development, and create more compassionate and cooperative communities. As such, educational systems, public policy, and organizational leadership should prioritize the development of these psychosocial competencies to promote long-term societal resilience and sustainability. In the discussion section, we will provide a comprehensive explanation of the details from various perspectives.

## Discussion

The results outlined in this article emphasize the complex nature of divorce and the significant emotional and psychological difficulties it creates for individuals and families. Romantic relationships, which are initially viewed as sources of happiness and security, can transform into spaces of stress and disappointment when fundamental needs are unmet, unhealthy patterns arise, and feelings of alienation develop. The three-phase model of divorce—pre-divorce, during the divorce, and post-divorce—offers an organized framework for comprehending these difficulties and presents specific chances for intervention.

ReAttach therapy appears to be a promising method for tackling the complexities associated with divorce. By emphasizing sensory integration, emotional regulation, and the revival of optimism bias, ReAttach assists individuals and couples in rebuilding their relational abilities. The Forgive and Forget Hood (FFH) and Wiring Affect with ReAttach (W.A.R.A.) are especially effective strategies for decreasing intolerance, stress, and negative emotions, thus creating a safer emotional space for healing. These interventions resonate with the findings of Abreu-Afonso et al. (2021), who highlight the significance of communication, emotional regulation, and commitment in maintaining marital satisfaction.

The influence of early childhood trauma and maladaptive schemas on marital dysfunction is an important factor to consider. As noted by Young (1999) and Siegel (2012), unmet core emotional needs from childhood often resurface in adult relationships, intensifying conflicts and undermining relational stability. ReAttach's capacity to address these foundational issues—through protocols like New Mind Creation—provides a transformative pathway for individuals to alter negative internal representations and nurture healthier relational patterns.

The effect of divorce on children is another vital aspect. Lie Ken Jie et al. (2025) highlight the emotional damage caused by parental alienation and stress the need for children to experience emotional security during this challenging time. Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory further emphasizes the importance of providing a trustworthy and responsive presence for children throughout divorce, as it establishes the groundwork for their future relational well-being. ReAttach's focus on co-regulation and emotional safety aligns with these principles, offering a means to alleviate the negative effects of divorce on children.

On a societal level, promoting tolerance, resilience, and

forgiveness—as discussed by Putnam (2007) and Inglehart and Welzel (2005)—can diminish conflict and enhance social cohesion. These characteristics are essential not only for individual health but also for constructing resilient communities capable of enduring crises. ReAttach's emphasis on emotional resilience and relational restoration contributes to this broader societal objective, underscoring the interrelation of individual and collective well-being.

## Conclusion

Divorce presents a complicated and emotionally challenging experience that impacts individuals, families, and society as a whole. This article examined the psychological and relational aspects of divorce, highlighting the significance of timely and focused interventions to reduce its adverse effects. ReAttach therapy, known for its integrative and transdiagnostic methods, provides effective tools to tackle the emotional and sensory difficulties encountered during divorce. By enhancing emotional regulation, fostering optimism, and promoting secure attachment, ReAttach supports individuals and families in managing the upheaval of divorce and emerging stronger.

The results emphasize the necessity for a comprehensive approach to divorce, one that takes into account the interaction of individual psychology, relational factors, and societal influences. Future studies ought to further investigate the effectiveness of ReAttach and comparable interventions across various demographics, as well as their long-term effects on relational and mental health. In the end, by emphasizing emotional well-being and the restoration of relationships, we can establish a foundation for healthier individuals, more robust families, and more unified societies.

## Declaration of interest

Paula Zeestraten-Bartholomeus is the developer of ReAttach.

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