

# The “Big Four” Factors in Americans’ Divorce Decisions

by Kelly M. Roberts, Payton Birlew, Steve M. Harris, and Sarah M. Allen | May 17, 2016 8:00 am

*“Maybe it’s just human nature to keep pressing forward and looking for a solution despite feeling like you’re going to be stuck forever.” –Jan, married 14 years, thinking about a divorce*

Few personal decisions carry stakes as high as those involving marriage and divorce. Yet until recently, little research had examined the process of thinking about, or deciding to, divorce. Last year, the team of researchers behind the National Divorce Decision Making Project began investigating[1] important questions on this subject that should inform efforts to help married persons wrestling with the idea of divorce. The guiding research questions included:

- How many married people have recently thought about divorce or thought about it in the past? How often or long have they had these thoughts?
- To whom do these married people voice their thoughts[2]?
- When spouses are thinking about divorce, does it mean that divorce is imminent? Are they willing to keep working on the marriage or are they looking for a way out?

Answers to questions like these were collected by our quantitative team through a nationally representative survey of 3,000 married Americans, ages 25 to 50. The results were published in a variety of outlets, including this one[3].

To learn additional information, we conducted interviews with a sub-sample of 30 individuals who had participated in the survey and said they had recently thought about divorce (as did 25 percent of the full sample[4]). From Alaska to Connecticut and from Michigan to Florida, respondents across the country spent about an hour on the phone with our qualitative research team answering a series of detailed questions about “*how* they were thinking about their marriage, divorce, or reconciliation.”<sup>1</sup> Research questions during this phase included:

- Can you tell me more about how you’re currently thinking about the future of your marriage? How is it that you’ve come to this particular place?
- How do you make sense out of the ways your marriage has changed over time?
- Can you tell me about your decision-making process? What are some important factors you are considering as you make this decision?

After intensive analysis conducted by three universities in repeated-pattern steps, results were reconciled into a framework of themes and processes, and the researchers sent back the results to interviewees for a review. Although this research is ongoing and a second wave of interviews was just completed, the following summary represents our broader findings.

## Qualitative Results: The Big Four

Based upon our interviews, people deciding whether to divorce or continue working on a marriage commonly feel a lack of clarity over what to do. Oftentimes they struggled with the fear of making the wrong decision because so much seemed to be riding on it. Amid this uncertainty, interviewees consistently “proofed” their decision-making against several major areas of life. We have labeled the following appraisal factors “the Big Four.”

**1. Children.** Participants were highly concerned about the toll a divorce might take on their kids.

*“Well, that’s the hard part. I don’t want to hurt the kids. That’s really what’s holding us back from the divorce and why we haven’t made a decision to do it.” –BK, married eight years*

With some, children seemed to be the most decisive factor linked to staying in a marriage that was otherwise unsatisfying. A few considered the safety and well-being of their kids as reasons to consider leaving their marriages. Above all, *if* children factored into the participants’ appraisal process, those considerations seemed at least as consequential as the next three factors.

*“Because we were both working full-time and taking care of him, we were really not happy and arguing a lot, and I know that wasn’t good for our son. So I, thinking about him, that was part of the reason I moved out.” –Camerra, married six years*

**2. Happiness.** Levels of personal happiness or the happiness of family members were discussed from many angles, and not only in direct connection to how people felt about their marriage. Participants commonly talked about their jobs (or lack of work) and their feelings of satisfaction with life in general. Looping back to their marriages, the prospects for work, or the possibility of enjoying their own life choices without the influence of their spouses made for fantasy scenarios in our participants’ minds. And of course, how happy they felt so many times depended upon their spouse’s current frame of mind.

*“I mean, I’m not horribly unhappy. It’s just that I think that it’s probably more happiness out there for other people. It’s just kind of my life, you know? We’re all a product of our choices.” –Scott, married 22 years*

**3. Money.** Respondents’ financial situations also weighed heavily in their thought process, frequently playing into whether they felt free to take the next move, either toward improving their marriage or working toward leaving. Perhaps unsurprisingly, concerns about money were many times framed in more rational terms than other more emotion-laden subjects.

*“And on both of our ends we think about the effects on our son and, you know, what if we just stuck to our guns and we just got a divorce? Would we, would either of us be homeless? Without each other we probably couldn’t afford our standard of living. Take my income out, or leave me with just mine, or taking my income and leaving him with just his...our standard of living would be totally different.” –Andi, married 13 years*

**4. Love.** Love seemed to come up toward the end of conversations, almost as a final tally of some imaginary score. It kept a few participants in a marriage that might otherwise be considered lacking. Feelings of being in love, or various expressions of love, came up many times in the context of more emotional narratives. These spouses were not so much quantifying the utility of love, but reflecting on how the influence of love affected their thinking.

*“So I do try to fool [myself] into thinking [I’m] in love. And I think that you can. The times that I’ve been really desperate where I thought I was seriously considering divorce... I call it ‘you fake it until you make it.’ I’ll pretend that I’m in love with him because I know it makes my life easier if he feels like he’s really loved. And then I start absorbing those feelings. The positiveness of actions will leave a lasting impression on you, and you kind of fall into love again, you know? Then, you go through life and everything gets boring again (laughs) and you do it all over again.” –Carrie, married 14 years*

These four dimensions were pervasive; indeed, some came up in every one of our interviews. But while participants certainly considered the Big Four issues, more complex, dynamic factors were also involved in marital status decision-making, as we will explain in our next post[5]. In the meantime, we’ll conclude by sharing a quote we received that involved three of the Big Four elements:

*“[Our kids] would always tell us what they didn’t like that was going on in the house. When things were really intense, when they were very unhappy, or when there were, umm, disagreements in front of them. They were also honest with us, which again would just be like that eye opener of, ‘This isn’t working, your kids telling you when you’re behaving badly.’*

*“But they knew they could come to us and there was no repercussion for them, for [telling us we were the problem]. You know, that they were unhappy about our behavior, which was enlightening. And [their remarks] would help us kind of get back on the right path of love.*

*“We can’t be doing this, you know? This is just wrong, and you know, it’s like when someone corrects you, and when they live in the same house with you, you have to correct that behavior. We knew we were being just really, really poor examples.” –John, married 15 years*

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1. For questions about methods of data collection, coding approaches, sample demographics and other information, contact Kelly Roberts at the University of North Texas: [Kelly.Roberts@unt.edu](mailto:Kelly.Roberts@unt.edu)[6]

### Endnotes:

1. National Divorce Decision Making Project began investigating: <https://familycenter.byu.edu/Documents/What%20are%20they%20thinking%20FINAL%20digital.pdf>
2. voice their thoughts: <http://family-studies.org/in-marriage-if-you-see-something-say-something/>
3. including this one: <http://family-studies.org/how-many-married-people-have-thought-about-divorce/>
4. full sample: <http://family-studies.org/how-many-married-people-have-thought-about-divorce/>
5. our next post: <http://family-studies.org/further-dimensions-of-marital-decision-making/>
6. [Kelly.Roberts@unt.edu](mailto:Kelly.Roberts@unt.edu): <mailto:Kelly.Roberts@unt.edu>

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