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Old and Alone?

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For many years now, Elizabeth Marquardt has been producing some of the most compelling research on the children of divorce. As her research makes clear, the children of divorce leave no doubt about the negative — indeed devastating — effects of divorce among their parents.

Now, Marquardt has turned the research tables, so to speak, looking at what happens when divorced parents age — a significant demographic trend in a world of aging baby boomers.

In “[The New Alone](#),” published by *The Washington Post*, Marquardt reports on the research she has been conducting with Norval Glenn, a sociologist at the University of Texas at Austin. As Marquardt and Glenn report, divorce often leads to permanent changes in the relationship between children and parents. As they summarize, “the divorce itself has a lot to do with how parents and children get along.”

More:

The grown children of divorce in our study were far less likely to report that they had gone to either or both parents for comfort when they were younger. When they grew up, they were more likely to have strained relationships with their fathers and mothers. Most of the 18- to 35-year-olds in our study still had relatively young parents, but some had already confronted the illness and death of one or the other of their divorced parents. They struggled especially with whether and how to care for estranged fathers who were ill and often living alone, men who had done little for them but who now badly needed help from, well, someone.

What happens when aging parents need help at the end of life? Will the children of divorce feel this obligation? What about the complexities of additional marriages and additional spouses?

Marquardt begins her article with the story of one woman who wonders about her obligations to her aging mother’s new husband. If her mother dies first, is this woman responsible to take on responsibility for a man she hardly knows?

Marquardt reflects:

My friend isn’t alone in her uncertainty. Because of profound changes in how Americans organize and sustain — and often break up — our families, our nation will soon confront a never-before-seen shift in how we die and whom we’ll have around us when we do. And the likelihood is that on every level, we will be dying much more alone.

Reduced birth rates, widespread divorce, single-parent childbearing, remarriage and what we might call “re-divorce” are poised to usher in an era of uncertain obligation and complicated grief for the many adults confronting the aging and dying of their divorced parents, stepparents and ex-stepparents. And compared with the generations before them, these dying parents and parent figures will be far less likely to find comfort and help in the nearby presence of grown daughters and sons.

Almost 40 percent of adults have divorced parents. The bonds of family and kinship have been strained over the last century by advanced industrialization, career mobility, and a host of developments that have subverted family intactness and intimacy. But none of these can equal the total impact of easy divorce and the divorce culture that is now simply

taken as a fact of life.

The impact of divorce on children has been a controversial issue for decades now. Marquardt and Glenn now point to a challenge that will explode in significance in years to come. They warn of “lonely grief” as a common experience.

In Marquardt’s words:

As the generation that ushered in widespread divorce ages, an epidemic of such lonely grief may well sweep in behind it. Much of the expert literature on death and dying implicitly assumes an intact family experience. It assumes that people grow up with their mothers and fathers, who are married to each other when one of them dies. Some scholars are beginning to investigate aging and dying in families already visited by divorce. But most scholars and the public still give scant attention to the loss of other parent figures or to the deeply complicating, long-lasting effects of family fragmentation.

Here is yet another warning and reminder of what divorce represents and what happens when marriage is undermined by a social and legal revolution of this significance. This will challenge churches as well as families. “[The New Alone](#)” is a very troubling report.

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