



Why we don't group widowed people in with the separated and divorced

Sometimes the Separated/Divorced/ Widowed can be a “catch all” ministry for people the parish doesn't really know what to do with. Certainly these sub-groups do all share in levels of grief and need for understanding and comfort. Beginning Experience weekends and other programs focus primarily on the grief process and divorced people can certainly share their struggles and find some healing there.

However, there are significant differences in the needs of divorced compared to those who lost a spouse by death. In my travels around the country, many divorced people tell me that they appreciated what they got from these all-inclusive events, but they felt uncomfortable to some degree and wanted something more. Not discounting the beautiful benefits that can come from an inclusive group, the majority of the divorced seem to prefer a separate group—especially on a week to week basis—where they can talk specifically about forgiveness, custody, court, and annulment issues.

For instance, after everyone shares about shock, anger, grief, depression, loneliness, and other commonalities, the differences begin:

- The widowed spouse is gone. The ex-spouse is still alive and can remain a constant legal or emotional problem for many years.
- The deceased spouse doesn't linger to turn the family, friends or children against the ex-spouse.
- The deceased spouse is not constantly fighting the other in court battles or trying to attach and unjustly deprive the other of property.
- The widowed spouse has burial expenses; the divorced can incur substantial attorney fees.
- The widow usually gets an insurance check; the divorced get wiped out in court.
- While some widowed face anger issues at being left in a bad financial situation, it is a one-time reality. With divorced, the ex-spouse can call one into court and attach one's wages and threaten one's livelihood for as much as the next eighteen years.
- With few exceptions (suicide), the widowed spouse did not intentionally or maliciously leave or abandon the other spouse and their children.
- The widowed couple often had a good marriage; the divorced are often worn down and usually had a difficult time for many years prior to civil divorce.
- Death is somewhat expected; civil divorce (and infidelities that can precede it) is usually not.

- The widow(er) often has fond memories and misses (and even idolizes) the spouse. Many divorced are often glad to get away and struggle with hate or fear.
- The community often rallies around the widow; the divorced often get shunned and even kicked out of parish ministry.
- Death does not usually divide family and friends into separate camps; after divorce, one can lose and grieve over significant relationships former friends and relatives.
- The widow is (usually) invited to join others for holidays and celebrations. The divorced often get disinvited because others don't want to "take sides".
- Death does not usually affect the children as adversely as divorce.
- Children of divorced families have been shown (on average) to have much higher rates of emotional, school, social, spiritual, and relationship problems.
- In general, the widowed are older and new romantic relationships are not a driving need; in general, the divorced tend to be younger and can feel too young to be unmarried.
- The widow is automatically free to remarry in the Church; the divorced must face the burden, risk, confusion, and long wait of the annulment process.

In the medical field, the need is recognized for separate healing and support groups for cancer patients, alcohol and drug addicts, heart and stroke victims, and even Alzheimer caregivers. All wounded people have commonalities; but different groups require different specific remediation.

For these reasons, we appreciate workshops or weekends that address general shared issues, but believe there should also be a separate weekly places for those dealing with divorce to find more common ground on the issues with which they uniquely struggle.

Rose Sweet
www.rosesweet.com
www.CatholicsDivorce.com