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LOCKDOWN RELATIONSHIPS For better or for worse?



Denise Head, Managing Partner and Family Law specialist at Bates Wells & Braithwaite Ipswich, discusses the latest divorce statistics and explores whether Covid 19 has played a role in the current apparent increase in divorce cases.

Christmas has always traditionally been blamed for increasing the number of couples consulting divorce lawyers at the start of every new year. Whether this is true or not, the focus on family and spending time together over the Christmas holidays is, for some, indeed the happiest time of the year. For others however, it can be a time of absolute dread, with recognition and confirmation that things are not as they should be and bringing in to focus those problems that may have been previously unspoken.

Spending a concentrated amount of time with your "loved ones", with no respite offered by going to work or enjoying a non-family orientated social life, can highlight the health of your very closest relationships. The restrictions faced by us all following the 2020 Christmas bubbling was a small snapshot of time compared with the on/off lockdown restrictions in play since March.

"Lockdown" is not a comforting word. The effect of couples being "locked up together", can have consequences; sometime good, sometimes not. These unusual times have for some people, created a vacuum in which couples can reflect and consider the state of their marriage. For many that assessment of their relationship has not been either good or welcoming news.

The latest data released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) shows the biggest rise in divorces since the Divorce Act came into force in 1972. So even before I reflect on my personal experiences as a family lawyer, there does seem to be some truth in the claim that divorce is on the increase.

The media is awash with stories of the increased strain on relationships. Finances have become tighter. There were those conducting extra-marital affairs forced in to revealing their relationship and having to choose which relationship to continue during lockdown, not to mention the effect upon the other spouse of discovering this infidelity. Charities reported the exponentially dangerous increase in domestic abuse affecting both adults and children. Families, normally happy with the balance of the work/home divide, were soon bickering over whose job was more important and the new division of who is responsible for not just childcare but also home-schooling. Homes, especially those without gardens, were suddenly very confining.

But marriage is "for better and for worse". Divorce is the legal solution, and last resort, when there is no possibility of a relationship improving but it is also worth considering that things might even get better when the pandemic life pressures once again ease.

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