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Helping women navigate divorce

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Elaine Levy-Kopf smiles when she remembers her plans back in the early '70s. Newly divorced, with a toddler to care for, she figured she'd be married again within six months. It took 10 years.

In the interim, Levy-Kopf remolded herself. She learned to live independently, survived despondency, financial ignorance and social insecurity, discovered a career and the self-confidence it brought, and made of herself an entire person.

It couldn't have



Elaine Levy-Kopf, whose divorce prompted her own personal growth, says divorce can be a positive experience.

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happened without the divorce and the subsequent decade of growth, the Skokie resident now says.

"Getting divorced was the biggest growth of my life, no doubt about it. It can be constructive. It was for me," she says.

But it wasn't easy. And even now, two decades later, in a culture that seems to accept divorce as a societal reality, it isn't easy for women.

That's why Levy-Kopf, creator and director of the Northfield-based Women in Focus women's support service, has developed a six-week program just about divorce.

The program is called For Divorced Women, but it's

really for any woman contemplating, undergoing, or surviving a divorce, Levy-Kopf says.

She hopes the discussion and support groups, which start Feb. 26 and run to April 1, will provide something she desperately needed in the weeks, months and years after she and her first husband split up.

"I went to groups that gave emotional support and they were incredibly helpful. But I began thinking 'If I could create a support group, what would I do differently?' And I realized that I would add education," she says.

As far as Levy-Kopf is concerned, women in divorce need lessons in everything from self-esteem and sexuality to divorce law, financial planning and career goals.

"The women's movement has done a lot, but we've still got a long way to go," she explains. "Women are still raised to be passive in many ways. Women still don't realize they can get out of the role of victim and take charge of their own life."

During the seminars, with the help of other divorced women who remade their lives, Levy-Kopf wants to prove to group members that they can shuck the role of victim.

"We need concrete role models. For instance, one of our speakers is a single parent who is an attorney and she's going to speak about legal aspects of divorce," she says.

"The women listening can realize that they have the power to do what they want. They may not want to become a high-powered lawyer, but at least they know they have that option," she says.

Divorce can often blind women to the fact that they have any options, Levy-Kopf acknowledges.

Any divorce is emotionally wrenching, she says, whether it comes after a year of marriage, or after decades.

Divorce always hard

Even if a woman initiates the divorce — even if she breathes a sigh of relief once the papers are signed,

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■ Divorce

and looks forward to a new life without her former spouse — she's in for a rough ride.

"There's always a honeymoon period where you say, 'Thank God it's over, I'm going to move into a new place, start my life anew.' But then the reality hits," she explains.

That reality can be financially fearsome, as wives untrained for anything discover they must work to survive. But emotionally, the toll can be devastating.

"You don't have the same friends you had as a married person, or they react to you differently," Levy-Kopf relates.

"If you have a child, you have to deal with his fears as well as your own," she says. "You don't have a

discussions on divorce law and financial planning, the groups will hear about female sexuality and how to be comfortable with it.

Female sexuality, Levy-Kopf believes, is a matter not of titillation but empowerment, since women who understand it are less uncomfortable with it or with their relationships to men.

No male-bashing

And men, she emphasizes, are most definitely not the enemy.

"This is not going to be a man-bashing group," she says. "They are half the human race!"

In fact, one of Levy-Kopf's speakers will be a man.

If the women who attend all six weeks learn anything from "For Divorced Women," Levy-Kopf says, it may well be that divorce, despite the heartbreak and difficulties it undoubtedly represents, may pave the way to a fuller life and better relationships.

"Most divorced women will eventually get remarried. With a few exceptions most certainly want to enter another relationship, once they are ready. That's the key, 'when they are ready,'" she says.

"This may help them become ready, by helping them realize they can take charge of their lives."

■ Women still don't realize they can get out of the role of victim and take charge of their own life.

person there with you, and make no mistake about it, people for the most part need that one-on-one relationship. We're built for that."

When Levy-Kopf crafted her seminar series, she built from the emotional realities and moved slowly into helping women find step-by-step practical financial and career advice.

That's why her first seminar, "From Married to Single . . . A transition into the New World" is followed the next week by "Intimacy: Forming New Relationships . . . Breaking Old Patterns."

Then, before going on to

(OVER)