

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Getting the straight goods on Splitsville; Canada's first 'divorce fair' groups lawyers, life coaches and a judge to advise on smoothing separations

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By Oliver Moore

HALIFAX -- Married men were looking surreptitiously over their shoulder as they entered a local hotel last night - but not for the usual reason.

By turns furtive and relieved, depressed and angry, scores of them turned out for what was billed as the country's first "divorce fair." Eager for advice on how to smooth the path to breakup, they came to hear from lawyers, financial planners, life coaches and an Ontario judge who wrote a bestselling book on divorce.

"When you never been through this before you have all kinds of questions," said Andrew (Bubba) Tynes, of Dartmouth. "Strength is in knowledge and what better way to find out than come here, as opposed to going on the Internet and you're wondering what is BS and what is legit."

The 57-year-old actor, street musician and pipe fitter said he was on the verge of separating from his wife of 10 years. But he was cheerful about the prospect of returning to bachelorhood, his loud laugh standing out in the roomful of generally sober men.

It was an all-male gathering. The event is strictly gender segregated, with men attending last night and women today. There are practical reasons for this - organizers note that males and females may have different concerns as a marriage ends - but there's also a sense of discretion at play.

"You don't want to run into your spouse," said Maria Franks, executive director of the not-for-profit Legal Information Society of Nova Scotia, which organized the event. "Some people may not be aware their spouse is thinking about divorce."

Mr. Justice Harvey Brownstone, author of Tug of War: A Judge's Verdict on Separation, Custody Battles, and the Bitter Realities of Family Court, is speaking both days. He noted in an interview that he's seen first-hand the "emotional carnage" that can result from divorce.

"It bothers me as a judge that by the time we see parents they're in front of me geared up for a fight," he said. "I have long thought that I'd like to be able to reach them in advance. These people need counselling, they need financial advice, they need help coming up with parenting plans."

There have been similar events in Europe and one pro-family group called its emergence in Canada symbolic of a culture too ready to split up.

Andrea Mrozek, manager of research for the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, said people "default to divorce" too often. She acknowledged that not all marriages are salvageable, but argued that the majority of low-conflict issues can be resolved if people are willing to put in the necessary work.

"It is already quite easy to divorce, it is difficult to stick it out," she said. "Is [this event] capitalizing on moments of difficulty or despair in people's lives? Absolutely."

But Ms. Franks rejected the notion that they were promoting marriage breakup.

"They're going to separate anyway," she said. "They might as well understand the impact on the children, the impact on their finances, their housing."

Statistics Canada numbers from early last decade show the national divorce rate hovers a bit under 40 per cent. Nova Scotia typically runs below the average, but Ms. Franks said her organization was receiving so many divorce-related calls they knew the fair would be popular.

She noted a recent Ontario study showing that divorced or separated people were overrepresented among suicides. Part of the fair's goal is to show people that "divorce is an end but it's also a beginning," she said.

One presenter speaking to that point is transition coach Sheila Dicks, founder of the image consulting firm Dynamic Impressions.

"My topic is how divorce can be a catalyst for a better life," she said. "I'm going to show them how it can be a better thing, how it can help. I don't look at it as a failure. I don't use that word."

CANUCK BREAKUPS

The national picture

Statistics Canada estimates recently married Canadian couples' risk of divorce by their 30th wedding anniversary at 38 per cent nationally. Provincially, the lowest risk is in Newfoundland and Labrador, at 21.6 per cent. Highest is Quebec at 48.4 per cent.

The dangerous years

The highest number of divorces occurs after the third and fourth anniversaries. After that, the divorce rate decreases with each additional year.

Second time unlucky

The probability of divorcing is somewhat lower for a first marriage and higher for a remarriage.

Trends

National divorce rates peaked in 1987 after the Divorce Act was changed in 1986. They declined through the 1990s and have remained roughly stable.

Sources: Statistics Canada, Vanier Institute of the Family