



### By Susan Davis Swanson, LCSW, BCD

Fans of *Mad Men* watched the season end with Betty Draper deciding to leave her philandering, lying, cheating, dishonest, albeit absolutely gorgeous husband Don. With 3 children in tow, she is off with the new man in her life to Reno to obtain a “quickie” divorce – in those days 6 weeks of residency establishes a divorce with no contest. Will she quickly move into the arms of the man who is there to rescue her? A man she barely knows and with whom no significant conversation has taken place?

As I watched a typical scenario play out on this show; Dad and Mom bring in their 2 children, 11 and 9 to tell them that Daddy will be moving out. Sally, the daughter, is angry, but instead of any feelings dealt with, was told to be nice and then to go to her room. The son wasn't taken into account at all. The infant is, well, under 3 months old.

True to the times that very few things of any emotional substance are discussed, this family, particularly Don, drinks his troubled feelings away and Betty, who also turns to alcohol, appears awkward as she moves through a life she cannot deal with. Shut down and cut off from her own emotions (and therefore disconnected from herself), she accepted quite a level of disconnect from her husband until finally she turned to someone else who pursued her – a man who is willing, for her beauty, apparently, to take on 3 little children when he already has a grown daughter of his own.

While the emotional shut down is typical for a couple in the early 60's, sadly this scene has been played out over and over again, even today when we are supposed to be more enlightened about communication and feelings. Betty Draper, like many who divorce, will quickly move into a new relationship with a new rescuer before she has even remotely dealt with any of her own feelings of grief and loss. How can Betty, who is so shut down from her own experience, consider that her children will suffer through their own feelings of pain and loss. Sally in particular is shown as very attached to her Daddy; yet she will be expected to be the good girl and not make a fuss. How do you imagine Sally and her brother will react to the new man who will take their Daddy's place in the household?

Last season, we watched as Sally emulated her parents' coping style by taking a drink of straight liquor. What do we imagine she will do with all her own feelings of loss, conflict and emotional pain? She and her brother don't have anyone there to rescue or help them.

Betty will quickly be rescued. Research tells us that divorced people usually get into a new relationship within 2 years of the divorce. But research also tells us that 62% of second and 71% of third marriages will fail! Often because no one has dealt with the emotional fall out of grief that comes with a marriage and a life falling apart. The adults haven't which means the kids won't even have a chance to. So where will the kids act out their feelings of hurt and pain? On anyone who tries to take the place of one of their parents. Watch this and we will see how this is handled next season. Don will immerse himself in his new company and will be a visiting Daddy, but it is unlikely he can help his kids emotionally heal because he is also struggling through feelings from his damaged childhood and in so many ways is still a child himself.

Watching this I wondered how far have we actually come since the early 60's? If we do not avail ourselves of necessary information and take the steps needed, we really won't be doing this any better than was done in the past. We must allow ourselves time to grieve the loss of our prior relationship along with the hopes and dreams of what that marriage was supposed to be. We must allow our children time to grieve and give them room to be angry, upset, resentful and, yes, at times even depressed and sad. We need to understand what our children are going through so we can help them, by talking with them, keeping things routine for them, not making them our adult partners but keeping them in the position of children, not fighting with our ex in front of them (and not staying too close with our ex that the boundaries are confused). Then we can bring in someone else, but only if we are smart and learn and talk about what stepfamily life is really like. Building empathy for what every participant will be going through. Then we can be smarter than our predecessors in the 60's, 70's, 80's and 90's and create a better possibility for a healthy partnership in a remarried family. Becoming a successful couple in step takes all of this. And all too often we want the answer to our suffering to come easier. Actually, when you do all of these things, it may not be easier but it can definitely be more worthwhile.



Susan Swanson, LCSW is the Executive Director and Founder of The Stepfamily Center in Beverly Hills, California. A noted authority on issues from divorce through remarriage with children, Susan has spent over 15 years working with couples. She is licensed therapist and has attained Board Certified Diplomat status in her field. Susan has written numerous articles on the topic, offers training on working with stepfamilies to therapists and was recently awarded Cambridge's Distinguished Outstanding VIP of the year award.

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