

# Coping with Divorce



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# *Coping with Divorce*

Many people find it difficult to keep up with new responsibilities while putting old feelings behind them after filing for divorce, and the emotional issues can last long after the divorce is finalized. However, there are ways to cope with divorce, and with help from a local divorce lawyer, you can learn about more ways to deal with the psychological affects of divorce.

A divorce is so difficult because it's similar to a loss of a relationship, friendship and future. During the divorce process, you may feel many emotions over the ending of a significant relationship, including disappointment, loneliness, depression, guilt, frustration, anxiety, anger, devastation and grief. The future is no longer what you thought it would be as your daily routine, responsibilities, relationship and identity have been disrupted and changed.

Although there isn't a particular cure for your thoughts, feelings and fears, there are some healthy ways you can find to cope with divorce. You need to always remember that you can and will move on in time.

## **Grieving the Divorce**

The end of a significant relationship is a loss of companionship, support and future plans. The natural reaction to loss is grief, which is a natural way people deal with coming to terms with the way life has changed. Typically, people follow a pattern of emotions in the grieving process, including shock, denial, depression, minimization of the loss, anger, fear and vulnerability. After a while, the grief will become irrelevant.

You should recognize that you can have different feelings during the divorce process. Fighting your emotions can be counterproductive to you moving forward after divorce. Eventually your reactions and emotions will lessen as you grieve naturally. Each person has a different way and time period for dealing with grief and the loss of a relationship.

While you are grieving and adjusting to your new life, you should give yourself a break. It's okay for you to not be as productive as you were before the divorce. You need to take time to heal and figure out how to move forward. You still have a future, whether it's with or without someone, and eventually, you will have new hopes and plans that will replace the old ones.



## Tips for Coping with Divorce

Everyone has different ways of coping with divorce. A local divorce lawyer who is familiar with the divorce process can help you foresee legal issues you will need to deal with, as well as give advice about visiting professionals for more coping suggestions.

### Focus on You

Now's the time to focus on yourself and make sure you get what need while you are grieving. Find productive ways to help you cope with divorce, such as:

Establish a new regular routine with exercise, plenty of sleep and healthy meals.

Find daily activities you can do to help calm yourself like yoga, massages, vacations or religion

Explore new interests, such as causes, clubs, hobbies or projects

Find ways to meet new people

Know what you need and express it

Keep a journal of your thoughts and feelings during the divorce

Distract yourself by keeping busy with a list of to dos

### Talk it Out

When you have the chance to share your feelings with a sympathetic audience, it may help you in the grieving process. You may choose to turn to family or friends so talk about what's going on in your divorce and how you feel about it. By finding someone who will listen, you can vent the emotions you have been keeping to yourself.

Sometimes it may be hard for people who have not experience divorce to understand. Support groups are a great way for you to talk with people who are going through divorce too. These groups are usually offered through community centers or religious institutions and allow people to help each other grow and learn during the divorce process. As the Internet has grown, online support groups have helped people find help any time of the day or night.

You may find that visiting a counselor will help you work through coping with divorce. A family therapist is qualified to help you understand how divorce affects and changes your life. Learn from an expert how to manage your stress, grief and anger while adjusting to a new life.



## **Avoid Some Coping Tactics**

It may be easy to want revenge or find harmful activities that will help take your mind off the divorce. Some coping tactics you may want to avoid include:

Making major decisions about your life in the first couple months

Using alcohol, drugs or food to cope

Jumping into a new relationship

Stalking your ex-spouse

Taking your feelings out on your ex-spouse

Spending time dreaming about revenge

## **Speak to a Divorce Attorney about Coping with Divorce**

The most important goal for you to keep in mind while coping with divorce is that you will and want to move on. Eventually, you will be ready to move on with your life and not dwell on the past. Remind yourself that the divorce is not a reflection of who you are as a person. You still have a future with new plans and dreams to focus on.

A local divorce lawyer can help you with both the legal and emotional issues during and after your divorce. Get advice about how to move forward and prepare for any unforeseen problems during the divorce process.



# *Coping with a Breakup or Divorce*

## **- Moving on after a relationship ends -**

It's never easy when a marriage or other significant relationship ends. Whatever the reason for the split – and whether or not you wanted it – the breakup of a long-term, committed relationship can turn your whole world upside down and trigger all sorts of painful and unsettling feelings. But there are things you can do to get through this difficult time. Even in the midst of the sadness and stress of a divorce or breakup, you have an opportunity to learn from the experience and grow into a stronger, wiser person.

### **Healing after a divorce or breakup**

Why do breakups hurt so much, even when the relationship is no longer good? A divorce or breakup is painful because it represents the loss, not just of the relationship, but also of shared dreams and commitments. Romantic relationships begin on a high note of excitement and hope for the future. When these relationships fail, we experience profound disappointment, stress, and grief.

A breakup or divorce launches us into uncharted territory. Everything is disrupted: your routine and responsibilities, your home, your relationships with extended family and friends, and even your identity. A breakup brings uncertainty about the future. What will life be like without your partner? Will you find someone else? Will you end up alone? These unknowns often seem worse than an unhappy relationship.

Recovering from a breakup or divorce is difficult. However, it's important to know (and to keep reminding yourself) that you *can* and *will* move on. But healing takes time, so be patient with yourself.

### **Coping with separation and divorce**

Recognize that it's OK to have different feelings. It's normal to feel sad, angry, exhausted, frustrated and confused—and these feelings can be intense. You also may feel anxious about the future. Accept that reactions like these will lessen over time. Even if the marriage was unhealthy, venturing into the unknown is frightening.

Give yourself a break. Give yourself permission to feel and to function at a less than optimal level for a period of time. You may not be able to be quite as productive on the



job or care for others in exactly the way you're accustomed to for a little while. No one is superman or superwoman; take time to heal, regroup and re-energize.

Don't go through this alone. Sharing your feelings with friends and family can help you get through this period. Consider joining a support group where you can talk to others in similar situations. Isolating yourself can raise your stress levels, reduce your concentration, and get in the way of your work, relationships and overall health. Don't be afraid to get outside help if you need it.

### **Allow yourself to grieve the loss of the relationship**

Grief is a natural reaction to loss, and the breakup or divorce of a love relationship involves multiple losses:

Loss of companionship and shared experiences (which may or may not have been consistently pleasurable)

Loss of support, be it financial, intellectual, social, or emotional

Loss of hopes, plans, and dreams (can be even more painful than practical losses)

Allowing yourself to feel the pain of these losses may be scary. You may fear that your emotions will be too intense to bear, or that you'll be stuck in a dark place forever. Just remember that grieving is essential to the healing process. The pain of grief is precisely what helps you let go of the old relationship and move on. And no matter how strong your grief, it won't last forever.

### **Tips for grieving after a breakup or divorce:**

Don't fight your feelings – It's normal to have lots of ups and downs, and feel many conflicting emotions, including anger, resentment, sadness, relief, fear, and confusion. It's important to identify and acknowledge these feelings. While these emotions will often be painful, trying to suppress or ignore them will only prolong the grieving process.

Talk about how you're feeling – Even if it is difficult for you to talk about your feelings with other people, it is very important to find a way to do so when you are grieving. Knowing that others are aware of your feelings will make you feel less alone with your pain and will help you heal. Journaling can also be a helpful outlet for your feelings.

Remember that moving on is the end goal – Expressing your feelings will liberate you in a way, but it is important not to dwell on the negative feelings or to over-analyze the



situation. Getting stuck in hurtful feelings like blame, anger and resentment will rob you of valuable energy and prevent you from healing and moving forward.

Remind yourself that you still have a future. When you commit to another person, you create many hopes and dreams. It's hard to let these dreams go. As you grieve the loss of the future you once envisioned, be encouraged by the fact that new hopes and dreams will eventually replace your old ones.

### **Am I depressed or having a normal reaction to the divorce or breakup?**

Grief can be paralyzing after a breakup, but after awhile, the sadness begins to lift. Day by day, and little by little, you start moving on. However, if you don't feel any forward momentum, you may be suffering from depression. When grief triggers depression, the sadness can be unrelenting and overwhelming. Some people describe it as "living in a black hole" or feeling numb, lifeless and empty. If you think you might be suffering from depression, you may need to seek clinical help.

### **Reach out to others for support through the grieving process**

Support from others is critical to healing after a breakup or divorce. You might feel like being alone, but isolating yourself will only make this time more difficult. Don't try to get through this on your own.

Reach out to trusted friends and family members. People who have been through painful breakups or divorces can be especially helpful. They know what it is like and they can assure you that there is hope for healing and new relationships.

Spend time with people who support, value, and energize you. As you consider who to reach out to, choose wisely. Surround yourself with people who are positive and who truly listen to you. It's important that you feel free to be honest about what you're going through, without worrying about being judged, criticized, or told what to do.

Get outside help if you need it. If reaching out to others doesn't come naturally, consider seeing a counselor or joining a support group. The most important thing is that you have at least one place where you feel comfortable opening up.

Cultivate new friendships. If you feel like you have lost your social network along with the divorce or breakup, make an effort to meet new people. Join a networking group or special interest club, take a class, get involved in community activities, or volunteer at your school, synagogue, or church.



## **Taking care of yourself after a divorce or relationship breakup**

A divorce is a highly stressful, life-changing event. When you're going through the emotional wringer and dealing with major life changes, it's more important than ever to take care of yourself. The strain and upset of a major breakup leaves you psychologically and physically vulnerable. Treat yourself like you're getting over the flu. Get plenty of rest, minimize other sources of stress in your life, and reduce your workload if possible. Learning to take care of yourself can be one of the most valuable lessons you learn following a divorce or breakup. As you feel the emotions of your loss and begin learning from your experience, you can resolve to take better care of yourself and make positive choices going forward.

### **Self-care tips:**

Make time each day to nurture yourself. Help yourself heal by scheduling daily time for activities you find calming and soothing. Go for a walk in nature, listen to music, enjoy a hot bath, get a massage, read a favorite book, take a yoga class, or savor a warm cup of tea.

Pay attention to what you need in any given moment and speak up to express your needs. Honor what you believe to be right and best for you even though it may be different from what your ex or others want. Say "no" without guilt or angst as a way of honoring what is right for you.

Stick to a routine. A divorce or relationship breakup can disrupt almost every area of your life, amplifying feelings of stress, uncertainty, and chaos. Getting back to a regular routine can provide a comforting sense of structure and normalcy.

Take a time out. Try not to make any major decisions in the first few months after a separation or divorce, like starting a new job or moving to a new city. If you can, wait until you're feeling less emotional so that you can make better decisions.

Avoid using alcohol, drugs, or food to cope. When you're in the middle of a breakup, you may be tempted to do anything to relieve your feelings of pain and loneliness. But using alcohol, drugs, or food as an escape is unhealthy and destructive in the long run. It's essential to find healthier ways of coping with painful feelings.

Explore new interests. A divorce or breakup is a beginning as well as an end. Take the opportunity to explore new interests and activities. Pursuing fun, new activities gives you a chance to enjoy life in the here-and-now, rather than dwelling on the past.

**Making healthy choices: Eat well, sleep well, and exercise**



When you're going through the stress of a divorce or breakup, healthy habits easily fall by the wayside. You might find yourself not eating at all or overeating your favorite junk foods. Exercise might be harder to fit in because of the added pressures at home and sleep might be elusive. But all of the work you are doing to move forward in a positive way will be pointless if you don't make long-term healthy lifestyle choices.

### **Learning important lessons from a divorce or breakup**

In times of emotional crisis, there is an opportunity to grow and learn. Just because you are feeling emptiness in your life right now, doesn't mean that nothing is happening or that things will never change. Consider this period a time-out, a time for sowing the seeds for new growth. You can emerge from this experience knowing yourself better and feeling stronger.

In order to fully accept a breakup and move on, you need to understand what happened and acknowledging the part you played. It's important to understand how the choices you made affected the relationship. Learning from your mistakes is the key to not repeating them.

### **Some questions to ask yourself:**

Step back and look at the big picture. How did you contribute to the problems of the relationship?

Do you tend to repeat the same mistakes or choose the wrong person in relationship after relationship?

Think about how you react stress and deal with conflict and insecurities. Could you act in a more constructive way?

Consider whether or not you accept other people the way they are, not the way they could or "should" be.

Examine your negative feelings as a starting point for change. Are you in control of your feelings, or are they in control of you?

You'll need to be honest with yourself during this part of the healing process. Try not to dwell on who is to blame or beat yourself up over your mistakes. As you look back on the relationship, you have an opportunity to learn more about yourself, how you relate to others, and the problems you need to work on. If you are able to objectively examine your own choices and behavior, including the reasons why you chose your former partner, you'll be able to see where you went wrong and make better choices next time.



# *Divorce is Like a Death in the Family*

-From Lee Ann Newton

When each of my three sisters divorced, my mother made the same comment: "Divorce is like a death in the family."

Holiday gatherings are no longer the same, the dynamic has shifted and everyone must adjust. Human beings are designed for relationships, whether it is that of a friend, lover, parent or child. When those relationships end, the deep roots are not cast aside with the signing of a court document. It often takes months or even years to truly move on.

Let's look at some of the phases you may experience.

- Denial
- Anger
- Bargaining
- Depression
- Acceptance
- Numbness
- Disorganization (caused by intense emotional suffering).

## **Are you or have you experienced some or all of these?**

While these phases are usually associated with death, they can hold just as true for divorce. Grief and grieving are processes that each human being experiences and not only in the death of a loved one. We grieve for lost love, for what could or should have been. We grieve for the loss of a family dynamic, a familiar family unit. The parting that takes place in divorce can often times be as final as death.

You may be surprised by the long, arduous journey of emotions that you are experiencing, the seemingly insurmountable mountains and endless valleys.

There is no right or wrong way to work through your individual emotional phases. Being aware that they are there and giving them validation, often times will move you farther along your unique path of grief. Be prepared for unexpected reoccurrences in the future, months or even years after you believed that you were through with it, and had moved beyond the reach of the pain.

These flashback events are most often triggered by important life events, such as the graduation or marriage of a child, moving from a home with strong emotional ties, the



birth of a child or grandchild, or the death of a loved one. It is generally believed that our painful memories are all stored in the same part of the brain, so a new one can open the floodgates to old memories and the accompanying pain of grief and loss. We can be taken completely by surprise, as the agonizing memories come crashing back like massive emotional Tsunamis.

By expecting these occasional relapses and remembering that there is not a completion date to grief, you allow your emotions to flow through the stages at their individual pace. Also, realize that you may revisit a phase you thought you were finished with many times, and that is okay. Your mind knows what it needs and will process the information continually until it reaches some level of acceptance, allowing you to move beyond the grief and turn the first page on the new chapter in your life.

Allow yourself validation for your pain and grief and distance yourself from those who undermine your progress. You are a unique person and your suffering, coping and moving skills are as individual as you are. That is the way we were made.

Life is a journey, not a destination, and we move forward one step at a time.



# Complicated Grief

**Most grief reactions are resolved with the support of family or friends. Grief can lead to depression, physical decline or medically unexplained symptoms**

## **Complicated grief:**

*Be sure to consider the role of cultural beliefs with regards to their responses.*

- Delayed, absent, prolonged or distorted grief reaction related to significant loss, multiple losses, unresolved guilt, lack of support system, difficulty expressing feelings.
- Characterized by searching, yearning, preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased, crying, disbelief regarding the death, feeling stunned by the death, lack of acceptance of the death, living in the past, self-destructive behaviors.
- Impaired global functioning of mood, sleep and self-esteem.
- Terms for thought: “shadow grief” and a “high grief” death.

## **Desired outcomes for the bereaved:**

- Acknowledges the loss
- Absence of abnormal, prolonged, excessive reactions to loss
- Resumes or develops social relationships
- Expected feelings expected with the loss

## **Interventions:**

- Recognize that the individual needs to confront the loss slowly and accept it into his/her reality at their own pace. (Talk about the loss, relive the memories, talking about events leading up to the loss and expressing feelings.)
- Use supportive phrases such as “It must be hard for you now” or “I’m so sorry to hear about your loss.” Avoid phrases like “at least you had 20 years with him” or “you will have other children.”
- Watch for signs of complicated grief and activities. Start with small goals, identify realistic expectations.
- Assist the bereaved to redefine the relationship with the lost person or object. Healthy adaptation to a death involves memories of the deceased that are a blend of both positive and negative remembrances.



- If the mourner doesn't acknowledge the loss, bring up the subject. You might say "I noticed you never mention your deceased daughter. How has it been for you?"
- Provide or help them access spiritual support as requested.

**When to call for professional help:**

When the bereaved exhibits:

- Disturbing behavior, including hallucinations/delusions.
- Intense, prolonged preoccupation with the deceased.
- Long periods of depression possibly including suicidal thoughts and/or gestures.
- Living in the past, many months or years after the loss occurred.
- No emotional reaction to the loss for a prolonged period of time.
- Self-destructive behaviors, use of alcohol/drugs, reckless driving, etc.

**Expectations that complicate grief work:**

- Show a "stiff upper lip", "be strong", take care of the comfort of others.
- Discomfort with outward displays of emotion.
- Trends toward "deritualizing" the mourning process.
- "Hurry up" and get over your loss as soon as possible



# Notes from “How to survive the loss of a love”

by: M. Colgrove, H. Bloomfield and P. McWilliams

- Recognize the loss
- Be with the pain (don't avoid it)!
- You are not alone (loss is a part of life).
- You will survive
- Give yourself time to heal.
- Healing has its ups and downs: it's **not**:

bad → better **but**:

bad ↗ better

- Get lots of rest (rest is the guardian of health).
- Stick to your schedule (to maintain a sense of order).
- Keep decision- making to a minimum.
- It's OK to need comforting (be brave enough to accept the help of others).
- Surround yourself with things that are alive (don't isolate yourself from life).
- Do your mourning now.
- Be gentle with yourself
- Mementos (use, if helpful...if not, get rid of).
- Anticipate a positive outcome.
- It's OK to feel depressed (crying can be a good release).
- It's OK to feel angry.
- Remember, you're vulnerable.
- Pamper yourself
- Remaining distraught is no proof of love (love is life-supporting).
- Keep a journal (putting your thoughts on paper is a good way of getting them out and sorting thru them).
- There's a beauty in sadness (sadness, not self-pity).
- Heal at your own pace.
- Forgive the other person.
- Forgive yourself.
- You are a better person for having loved.
- Prepare to make adjustments (a new chapter in your life is beginning).
- Praise yourself for your courage to relate.
- Be open and start anew.
- The past will come up (expect this and be with that feeling, knowing it will pass).
- Growth (from weathering a crisis).

Above are some of the chapter headings from the book



# *Stages of Grief - Divorce or Breakup.*

How fast should you recover?

by the author of "How To Save Thousands on Your Divorce"

There is something important you need to remember and understand about recovering from your divorce, that is you must follow your own timetable. Too many times you will hear people suggesting that you, "snap out of it!".

Everyone is different. We all recover at our own rate.

I remember being told by a close family friend that I should be able to get over this sort of thing "within a few weeks", after all, I was young, good looking and strong.

I didn't have the heart to tell this well meaning individual that the three attributes ascribed to me were in fact completely independent of my getting better.

I also remember looking for signs, clues that my rate of recovery had accelerated. You know, things like I hadn't thought about my ex for at least half an hour. Occasionally I would feel exhilaration as I got out of bed. I took this feeling of unexplained exhilaration to mean was a clear sign that I had recovered.

You see recovering from divorce is not like overcoming some disease where there are no side effects. Divorce does change you and the rate at which you recover is really a function of how much and fast you have evolved and changed as a person.

I remember being told that you would experience, denial, grief, anger and a shopping list of other emotions. Of course little did I realize you could go backward and forward through the list. I was silly enough to think that once you had finished with one emotion, say grief you could just as easily slip back into denial then back into grief.

Recovery from divorce is about learning to deal with what has happened to you.

During the recovery process recovery is learning to deal with the shock day by day, hour by hour. Things do get better. There will be a time as you recover in the future where the pain starts to recede as you let go of the anger and the toxic emotions that hit you when your divorce began.

There will always be a time when you have a moment of weakness and suddenly you feel nostalgic for the past. You remember something you did together as a couple and you wish those times had never ended. It could be a smell, a sound, an expression that sets you back. This is normal!

Recovery is learning to deal with the feelings so that they no longer overwhelm you. Recovery is learning where to place these feelings and how to judge them in context such that they are no longer something of your everyday life.



While you are still fresh from the wounds of your marriage ending you are not in a position to judge where you are with respect to your recovery. Remain confident that while you are working on recovering you are making progress.

Consider this an unpleasant journey of discovery. Like all journeys of discovery there are often going to be paths that set you back.

1) Use this time to discover something more about yourself and how your marriage ended.

2) Try not to judge your progress against that of others.

3) Your pain is yours alone.

4) Your recovery is yours alone.

Your need to think back from time to time to remember the happy memories is yours alone.

Do not let anyone rush you. You need your own need to grieve!



# *Children and Divorce*

## **Helping your kids cope with the effects of separation and divorce**

You may be concerned about how your separation or divorce will affect your kids. Children are likely to feel unsure about what their life will look like after their parents split up, but be confident that you and your children can successfully navigate this transition. It is your job to reassure them and show them that they can continue to count on their parents to provide stability and love throughout their lives.

### **Divorce and the opportunity to grow**

One parent who successfully navigated the ups and downs of divorce with her kids likens the process to traveling internationally with children. You don't know what to expect, but you hope that your children will develop a willingness to be flexible, adapt to different 'cultures', and learn and grow throughout the challenges, rather than shrink from them. Rather than approach the process with fear and trepidation, think about the lessons that can be gained and expect that, with your support, your kids will flourish.

## **Talking with your children about separation and divorce**

### **Reassurance and love will help kids' heal**

More than anything else, kids want to feel protected and loved. Throughout the trials of divorce, provide reassurance and love to your kids every step of the way. All of us, and especially children, are resilient and we have a remarkable ability to heal when given the support that we need.

Let your kids know that even though the physical circumstances of the family unit will change, they can continue to have healthy, loving relationships with both of their



parents. Reassure them that everyone in the family will get through this. Knowing that things will eventually be okay can provide incentive for your kids to give the new situation a chance.

### **Reassurance and comfort comes in many different forms:**

Verbal communication: Beyond reminders that they will be loved and cared for, verbal reassurance should address the reasons for fear, worry, sadness or anger. For example, “I know you are upset about moving, but we will make sure you can stay in the same school.”

Non-verbal actions: Children pick up on your manner, expressions and actions almost more than your words. Offer your physical presence and support by hugging your kids, taking a walk, or just sitting down together.

### **Help kids express their feelings**

For kids, divorce means the loss of a parent and the loss of life as they know it. Even though both parents remain physically present, a child’s sense of stability is upset because the family unit is broken apart. Your support will allow them to grieve their loss and eventually adjust to their new circumstances.

Below are some important ways that you can help your children express their feelings:

Listen – Encourage your child to share their feelings and really *listen* to them. They may be feeling sadness, loss or frustration about things you may not have expected.

Help them find words for their feelings – It is normal for children to have difficulty expressing their feelings. You can help them by noticing their moods and encouraging them to talk, “I see that you are upset – do you know what is making you sad/angry/frustrated?”

Let them be honest – Children might be reluctant to share their true feelings for fear of hurting you. Let them know that whatever they say is okay. You may have to check your own feelings at the door, but it is important not to judge. If they aren’t able to share it, they will have a harder time working through it.

Acknowledge their feelings – It isn’t up to you to fix their problems or change their sadness to happiness, but it is important for you to acknowledge their feelings. You can also inspire trust by showing that you understand, “I know that you feel sad without mom here.” “I understand that you like to have dad tuck you in to bed.”



## **What I need from my mom and dad – a child’s list of wants**

I need both of you to stay involved in my life. Please write letters, make phone calls, and ask me lots of questions. When you don’t stay involved, I feel like I’m not important and that you don’t really love me.

Please stop fighting and work hard to get along with each other. Try to agree on matters related to me. When you fight about me, I think that I did something wrong and I feel guilty.

I want to love you both and enjoy the time that I spend with each of you. Please support me and the time that I spend with each of you. If you act jealous or upset, I feel like I need to take sides and love one parent more than the other.

Please communicate directly with my other parent so that I don’t have to send messages back and forth.

When talking about my other parent, please say only nice things, or don’t say anything at all. When you say mean, unkind things about my other parent, I feel like you are expecting me to take your side.

Please remember that I want both of you to be a part of my life. I count on my mom and dad to raise me, to teach me what is important, and to help me when I have problems.

## **Provide order, stability and continuity in everyday life**

The uncertainty of life after divorce often causes children to worry. The family unit they counted on is breaking apart. In addition to emotional reassurance, physical comfort in the form of order and continuity can also ease their worries. This is not always easy while splitting up into two new households, but it is important.

Establishing continuity doesn’t mean that you need rigid schedules or that mom and dad’s routines should be exactly the same. However, creating some regular routines in the day and consistently communicating what to expect will provide more comfort to your kids than you might realize.

## **The comfort of routines**

Many people know the benefit of schedules and organization for younger children, but forget that older children appreciate it as well. Kids feel more safe and secure when they know what to expect next. This can be about things as minor as dinner time, bath time and bedtime. Setting up a few established routines or rituals will show the continuity of mom and dad’s love and diminish uncertainty about new living arrangements.



## **Avoid blaming**

When talking with your children about the separation or divorce, it is important to be honest, but not critical of your spouse. Depending on the age of your children and the reason for divorce, this may require some diplomacy.

Here are a few suggestions for talking with your kids about the separation or divorce:

Make plans to talk with your children before any changes in the living arrangements occur.

Plan to talk when your spouse is present, if possible.

Be respectful of your spouse when giving the reasons for the separation.

Tell the kids about changes in living arrangements, school or activities, but do not overwhelm them with details.

## **How much information to give**

Age level should be your guide in determining how much to tell your child about the separation or divorce. Generally younger children need less detail and will do better with a simple explanation. Older children will seek out more information and it will be up to you to share information without saying too much.

## **Misunderstandings kids have**

Many kids believe that they had something to do with the divorce. They may remember times when they argued with their parents, received poor grades, or got in trouble and associate those conflicts with their parents' break up.

## **One very important message for kids about divorce**

“Although the discussion about divorce should be tailored to a child’s age, maturity, and temperament, be sure to convey one basic message: What happened is between mom and dad and does not have anything to do with the kids. Most kids will feel they are to blame even after parents have said they are not. So it’s vital for parents to keep providing this reassurance.”

Treat your child’s confusion or misunderstandings with patience. Reassure your children that both parents will continue to love them and that they are not responsible for the divorce.



## **Take care of yourself so you can help your child**

The first safety instruction for an airplane emergency is to put the oxygen mask on yourself before you put it on your child. Providing good care for your children means being emotionally available to them, and you can only do that if you are taking care of *yourself*. Depending on your physical and emotional state, you will either be reassuring or distressing to your child. If you are able to be calm and emotionally present, your kids will feel more at ease.

### **Steps to take care of yourself**

Avoid isolating yourself from people.

Build your support group.

Take care of your health and your children's health.

Eat a healthy balanced diet

Exercise

Keep a journal

Keep laughing

Try to bring humor and play into your life and the lives of your children as much as you can –it relieves stress but more importantly, it adds joy and provides a break from sadness and anger.

### **Steps to keep your relationship with your spouse civil**

Do not argue with your spouse in front of your children or on the phone.

Refrain from talking with your children about details of your spouse's behavior.

Make it a priority to develop an amicable relationship with your spouse, as soon as possible.

Be polite in your interactions with your spouse.

Choose to focus on the strengths of all family members.

If you are feeling intense anger, fear, grief, shame or guilt about your spouse, find someone to help you work through those feelings. By processing your emotions through writing or talking with supportive people, you will be modeling ways for your kids to better cope with their strong emotions.

### **How to deal with a difficult personality (Take the long view)**

Disagreements are bound to arise when dealing with your ex. If you find yourself, time after time, locked in battle, and frustrated about his or her inability to put the children



first, try to step back and remember the big picture. It sounds clichéd, but it will be best for your kids to have a good relationship with *both* of their parents throughout their lives. If you can keep that long term goal in mind, you may be able to avoid disagreements about daily details.

## **Get the social support children need after a divorce**

Children need people to talk to other than their parents. Some kids may avoid telling their parents their true feelings because they feel guilty adding to their problems. They may more freely express themselves with someone outside the situation, whether it be a friend, teacher, relative or counselor.

### **Enlisting the support of others**

Be sure to tell your children's teachers, counselors, caregivers, babysitters, and athletic coaches about the situation at home. Teachers in particular should be trained in helping children. Other key people in your children's lives will appreciate knowing what is going on and you can let them know how best to support your children.

Kids may need to learn new skills to manage stress and to cope with situations over which they have no control. Additional skills and support may come from:

Relatives – Aunts, uncles and grandparents can be good listeners. If you do not want your kids to visit your ex-spouse's relatives, you should honestly question whether that is for the best.

Family friends – Visits or outings with family friends can be a great outlet for sharing.

Teachers and school counselors – Educators will be able to monitor classroom behavior and prevent problems.

Faith-based counseling – Many religious organizations provide support for families.

Trained mental health professionals – A child or family therapist can help children work through their feelings one-on-one or in a counseling group.

## **Recognizing anger, anxiety, depression and traumatic stress in your kids**

Sadness, anger and anxiety are normal responses to loss. Love, reassurance and support for your children should allow them to heal, but sometimes factors beyond your control overwhelm your children and can create long term problems.



## **Why is my child having such a hard time moving forward?**

Many children go through their parents' divorce with relatively few problems, and others have a very difficult time. Significant changes in a child's life can trigger the body's fight-or-flight response – anger or fear – and if a child cannot adequately express or mentally process those emotions, the child may feel extremely powerless and “freeze.” This reaction is the basis of traumatic stress.

Anger - Your kids may express their anger, rage, and resentment with you and your spouse for destroying their sense of normalcy. *Angry outbursts that continue or become violent may be signs that they need help coping with their feelings.*

Anxiety - It is natural for children to feel anxious when faced with big changes in their lives. *If they seem to be worrying endlessly about minor and major situations, or if their anxiety is causing eating and sleeping problems, they may need more support.*

Depression - Sadness about the family's new situation is normal. But sadness coupled with a sense of hopelessness and helplessness is likely to become depression. *When children feel depressed they may withdraw from their parents or loved ones, neglect their homework, dissociate from friends and discontinue pleasurable activities. Their eating habits may change or they may engage in some form of self-destructive behavior or act out.*

Traumatic stress or shock - Trauma is determined by the child's *experience* of the event, not simply the event itself. Different children in the same family may have dramatically different reactions to divorce. *Trauma may cause depression and anxiety at the time of the separation or years later. It may also reoccur during weekends, holidays or times when the child misses the complete family unit.*

## **Warning signs of more serious problems**

If a child gets stuck in certain emotions, they may have a hard time getting 'unstuck.' Fear and uncertainty affect kids in a variety of ways, and you should be attentive for behaviors that signal your child needs help. Your availability, willingness to listen and reassurance should help them, but sometimes outside help is necessary as well.

## **Red flag**

Recognize that it will take some time for your kids to work through their issues about the separation or divorce, but you should see gradual improvement over time. *If things get worse rather than better after several months, that may be a sign that your child is stuck in depression, anxiety or anger and could use some additional support.*



Professional intervention may be necessary. Cognitive behavioral therapy can be very helpful with anxiety and depression.

Watch for these warning signs of divorce-related depression or anxiety:

Sleep problems

Poor concentration, chronic forgetfulness, declining grades

Drug or alcohol abuse

Sexual promiscuity

Self-injury, cutting



# *Tip Sheet for Parents*

## **Top 10 List of Things Parents Can Do to Help Their Children Adjust to Family Change**

Offer simple explanations about the changes in the family. Children especially need to hear what will not change, i.e. will attend the same school, will continue with swimming lessons, will keep their dog, etc.

Reassure children many, many times that the changes are not their fault. They didn't cause it, they can't fix it, but you will help them cope. You cannot say this enough.

Help your children accept the fact that divorce is a final decision.

Do not allow your children to become your peers. Avoid confiding in and relying on them as you would a good friend. Children do not do well while attempting to meet adult emotional needs.

Do involve your children in household chores and decisions. Tell them that their input is valuable. Feeling needed in this way is a good thing.

Do not give up your power as a parent out of guilt. Your children need clear and enforced limits now more than ever. Because the changes cause insecurity, children will test those limits to see if you are for real. Set limits and consequences with calmness and clarity.

If one parent drops out of your child's life, say: "I don't know why your mother/father hasn't made arrangements to see you, but I know one thing, it has nothing to do with you! You are very lovable and I enjoy being with you very much."

Do not criticize the other parent. It directly affects children's identities. They see themselves as half Mom and half Dad. When one parent is labeled stupid or lazy, children assume they must be thought of that way too. And it actually causes them to think less of the criticizer in the long run.

Do not put children in the middle by using them as spies when visiting the other parent; by asking them to carry messages back and forth; or by expecting them to take sides between parents.

Listen. Take time before bedtime, in the car, on Saturdays to listen. Begin by saying you know it has been hard for them. Repeat their words back to them. Let them know that all their feelings are OK and talking them out really helps.



## Specific Tips for Teachers When the Focus of Concern is Divorce

1. Don't be afraid to say; "I don't know what to say or do."  
"I feel uncomfortable."  
"I will talk to you later when I have thought more about it."
2. Ask what thoughts they have about the divorce;  
How was it explained to them.  
What questions they have about it.  
What is bothering them the most.  
What fears they have.

Help them to face the reality of the divorce. Many times the student will want to remain in a fantasy world, denying the reality of what is happening to them.

3. Find out what they want to know about the divorce. Explain why parents divorce and the difference between parent/child love and husband/wife love. Emphasize the things they can and can't control.

What happens next; custody, visitation, court, a move, will brothers and sisters be split?

Explain what their parents may be going through (survival, anger, confusion). Help them to understand the parents' side of divorce. Parents are neither good nor bad. They make mistakes.

Talk to them about what to tell friends – how to answer their friends questions.

Don't give them more information than what they ask for.

4. Find out the feelings they are having; shame \*guilt, \*anger, sadness, loneliness, relief.  
\*If they don't mention these feelings, help them bring them out.



Let them have their emotions. Tell them that a divorce is something to be sad about. Don't condemn them for having emotions. Encourage them to let their emotions out a little at a rather than holding them it. Let them know that their emotions are common ones in response to divorce.

Don't over-emphasize the happiness of their parents.

There is no "best" age to adjust to a divorce. The concern is the feelings the student has.

Ask them how they feel about;

- Their mother going to work.
- Not seeing their father as often.
- That their parents may not seem to care about them anymore.

5. Don't be judgmental or moralistic. Don't say;
- Tough luck kid.
  - Be strong.
  - It will pass.
  - Poor thing.

Each child may respond differently to a divorce. Don't label all children of divorce as mis-fits or delinquents. Children of divorce don't always cause trouble.

6. Do provide structure and limits: "Yes, your home is in an uproar now. That is unfortunate. There are certain behaviors that are expected at school regardless of what is happening at home. These are.....  
I will help you all I can with the things that are bothering you and it is important that you act in the way that is expected here at school."

Don't be too strict/over-permissive/over-indulgent.

Provide success for the child regardless of how insignificant it may seem. Provide opportunities for the child to be "in control" of something.

7. Set time aside to talk with the child. Let them know that you know what they are going through. Let them know that what they are doing is hard work.



Physical contact is so important.

Many times all they want is for you to listen without you giving advice.

8. Inform all school personal (nurse, office, counselor, other teachers involved with the child) when you find out that a child is going through a divorce.
9. Be aware of your own time urgency to “heal” things or to have the student “get on with it.” They will determine their own time line for healing.
10. Recognize all the losses a student is experiencing.
11. Be aware of the roller coaster effect.
12. Have books in your classroom that tell how other children reacted to the divorce of their parents.
13. Have activities that help the child deal with the emotions generated from a divorce.

“Around the time my parents were going through a divorce, I had many dreams that my mom died – and my dad would never care.”



# *Supporting Children of Divorce*

## **What Research Tells Us Works**

Overall, the children who do best after divorce and separation are those whose parents listen to their children and nurture an independent and empathic relationship with each of them;

fully support their children's relationships with the other parent (making them feel loved and wanted in both homes);

develop positive strategies for setting limits and imposing appropriate discipline;

continue to hold reasonably high expectations for their children, regardless of trying circumstances; and

shield their children from their parental disagreements and resentments.

## **Suggestions for After-Divorce Parenting**

Accordingly, consider the following as behaviors to avoid, or helpful behaviors to support the well-being of your children as you create a post-divorce parenting relationship:

### **Behaviors and Strategies to Avoid**

Don't force your children to choose one parent over the other.

Don't use your children as messengers between yourself and the other parent.

Don't put down, criticize or talk negatively about the other parent in front of your children.

Don't play "the blame game" around your children, recounting in their presence, one-sided views for the reasons for the divorce, or assailing the other parent for behaviors and issues that arise after the divorce.

Don't allow your children to become your caretaker or confidant. Rely instead on your friends, adult family members and mental health professionals for your support. Managing your emotional or social adjustment to divorce is your responsibility as an adult. Your children should remain free to be children, and to concentrate on their friends, school work and activities.

Don't play "private investigator" by interrogating your children upon their return from the other parent's home. Both parents are entitled to move forward with new lives. Extensive questioning of children about their time with the other parent only makes children feel guilty about enjoying that time.

.Don't discuss the economic or legal details of your divorce with your children.



Don't overreact if your children begin to act differently for a period of time. Many children react to the stress of divorce by regressing from established and more age-appropriate behaviors. However, if those behaviors persist for several months after the divorce, consulting a professional is prudent.

### **Positive Behaviors and Strategies**

Do make sure that your children feel loved, wanted and safe in your home.

Do take an active role in developing a respectful approach to communicating with the other parent. Avoid hurtful arguments remember your goal is effective co-parenting over the long run, not "victory" in the short term.

Do encourage frequent and regular contact between your children and the other parent, absent extraordinary circumstances (such as abuse or addiction).

Do give the other parent "the benefit of the doubt" and a private opportunity to respond to troubling reports made by children. Children sometimes exaggerate issues, distort facts or even fabricate information about the other parent. Such behavior may be an effort to bond with the parent they are with at the time. And, children may even unconsciously seek to re-involve you and the other parent in dialog (even a "fight" can be perceived by children as a re-connecting of their estranged parents), with some hoped-for chance for your reconciliation. And, of course, even children of intact families seek to manipulate parents to meet their own ends.

Do get help for any mental health or substance abuse difficulties. The stress of divorce may exacerbate these conditions without support.

Do encourage interaction between your children and the extended family of the other parent. Parents' divorce or separation should not displace children's important relationships with their grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

Do notify the other parent if it becomes necessary to change the parenting time schedule because of conflicts. If scheduling conflicts persist and you remain at impasse, consider returning to mediation.

Do remain conscious of the emotional and developmental assets that both you and the other parent uniquely offer your children, and how these may change, at different times in their lives.

Do remember that effective communication requires: listening, tolerance, honesty, consideration, empathy, and respect. A little humor can go a long way in such efforts, as well!

Do be patient with yourself, and your spouse or co-parent. Time is a great healer, but things will not change overnight.



Do "take care of yourself" during the turmoil of divorce or separation. Reserve time and resources to engage in positive activities that you find rewarding and that promote your health and sense of well-being.

Do some reading and educate yourself on the special challenges of this period in your life. Divorce or separation is not something about which you will have all the answers: it may be new to you, and it is always difficult.

