



Coping With Divorce or Separation

Divorce has a profound impact, whether you were married one year or fifty. When your marriage ends, you lose the person with whom you planned to live your life; the person with whom you shared the emotional, physical and financial aspects of your life. You lose your companion, lover and in some cases, co-parent. In addition, divorcing couples face major changes in family structure, relationships, finances, living arrangements, household responsibilities, and more. This guide is intended to help you understand and cope with the emotional impact of divorce or separation. *Note*—This guide contains basic information only; for specific advice on your unique situation, consult with your physician, a psychologist, therapist, or other professional. For information on helping children cope with divorce, see the guide *Helping Children Cope with Divorce or Separation*.

Coping with Loss

Divorce and separation create an acute sense of loss. The person who you came home to each day, talked with about the minor details of life, and with whom you shared your daily routine is now absent. If you have children, you have lost—to some degree—your co-parent, with whom you shared the day-to-day joys, responsibilities, and challenges of parenting.

Each person deals with loss uniquely. Many people expect that dealing with the feeling of loss from a divorce is something they can “work through” or “get over.” However, the reality of dealing with a significant loss is that it is a chaotic, cyclical process with good days and bad days, or good moments and bad moments. Feelings tend to come in waves—sometimes expected, and sometimes not. A song on the radio, or something else

you associate with your marriage may evoke strong feelings. Other times, feelings seem to come from nowhere. This is not evidence that you are losing your ability to cope, but rather, a common response to loss.

Grief is a natural reaction to loss. Most people experience the grieving process during and after a divorce. Current thinking describes this process as consisting of four “tasks” of grieving. This framework offers a way to identify all that is involved in grieving but keep in mind that these tasks are not separate aspects of grief. You may work through the different aspects of the grief process again and again in different ways.

Accept the reality of the loss. From the moment you know that your marriage is over, you accept it mentally. However, it may take a much longer time to accept it emotionally. For weeks or months, you may reach for the telephone, or even dial the number to call your former spouse, only to realize he or she is no longer a part of your life. It is then that you have to remind yourself that your marriage is over. However, even after adjusting to your new life without your marriage, you may have a new surge of disbelief. You may feel torn between wanting to accept reality, and feeling unable to do so.

Experience the pain of loss. Typically, the first reaction to a significant loss, such as a divorce, is denial and shock. You may feel emotionally numb. This is a coping mechanism to give you the time you need to absorb what has happened. Once reality sets in you experience the pain of loss. How long does the pain of loss last? The answer is different for everyone and every situation. Someone who is divorced because his or her spouse was unfaithful may need a different amount of time to deal with the loss than someone who watched his or her marriage disintegrate over several years. It can take several years to establish a new sense of normalcy.



If there were serious problems in your relationship, you may think that coping with your divorce will somehow be easier or less painful, especially if you previously wished that the relationship was over. But even if you had an extremely difficult relationship, there were probably strong connections that kept you in it. During and after your divorce, you may feel a loss of those connections. You may feel angry, guilty and sad that the relationship never flourished in the way you hoped. Or, you may be suddenly more aware of the positive qualities in your former spouse now that you don't have to deal with the negative aspects of the relationship. You may also be surprised at the intensity of your feelings of loss, and even question the validity of those feelings. It is important to know that these confusing feelings may make coping with divorce more, not less, complicated.

Adjust to your new life. Each day you may be confronted in small or large ways with the reality of your new, single, life. Your former spouse is not there to go to lunch with, to call in the evening, to celebrate the holidays, to go on vacation or to do the taxes. The process of adjusting may go on for a long time. Holidays and other traditions may also be constant reminders—as are daily rituals—and each one requires adjustment. The empty chair at the dining room table, mementos from your vacations together—they are all reminders of your loss.

Find ways to move on. At first, you may struggle to adjust to your divorce. As time goes on, your life will continue to evolve, just as you do. If you continue to have a relationship with your former spouse, for example if you are co-parenting children, you will find that as you grow and change, your relationship with him or her will grow and change as well.

Understand that change involves growth. Coping with divorce is an experience no one wants, but the difficult work of sorting through your intense emotions and new experiences may cause you to learn new things about yourself, or to find new strengths which can result in emotional growth or maturity.

If you are having difficulty coping with the emotional issues of divorce, seek help. Many employers offer an EAP (Employee Assistance Program) that provides free emotional support on a variety of issues. Ask your human resources representative if EAP services are available to you.

The loss you have suffered will create new thoughts, dreams, aspirations and beliefs. Try to embrace these changes.

Common Responses to Loss

A significant loss, such as divorce, causes tremendous turmoil in every aspect of life and creates a wide range of physical, emotional, and cognitive responses. As you cope with your divorce, you may experience a variety of symptoms. While your responses will be unique to your situation, understanding what responses are common and normal among people experiencing a significant loss, may help you better cope with these responses if you experience them.

Physical Responses to Loss

Following your divorce or separation, you may experience physical reactions such as shortness of breath, headaches, nausea, loss of appetite, insomnia and fatigue. Intense emotions also place the immune system under more stress, and therefore you may have an increased tendency to get sick. Your body is vulnerable now because much of your energy is being used to cope with your loss and the changes in your life. Even though it may be the last thing on your mind, taking care of your body is essential to keep you physically strong enough to deal with the emotional crisis you are experiencing. *Note*—If you are having physical symptoms that are new or extreme, such as chest pain, consult your physician.

Cognitive/Emotional Responses to Loss

The mental and emotional symptoms experienced during grief may include numbness (initially), confusion, sadness, guilt or anger. Some of the most common emotional responses include:

- Denial/Numbness/Sense of detachment
- Sadness
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Inability to concentrate
- Guilt
- Relief
- Hopelessness
- Confusion
- Helplessness
- Longing
- Preoccupation

Coping with Loss

There are things you can do to help yourself work through a loss experience. The following tips may help you cope with your feelings from your divorce or separation:

- **Give yourself permission to grieve.** You need time to deal with your loss. It is common to feel a wide range of emotions during and after a divorce, including anger, resentment, sadness, relief, guilt, fear, and confusion—and these feelings can be intense. Allow yourself to experience your feelings, but try not to let them overwhelm you. Feelings that are pushed aside generally wait, unchanged, until they are given attention in some way. However, if you are feeling constantly down, nervous or fearful, seek help from a professional.

- **Find outlets that feel right to you.** It's important to have outlets for your emotions where you aren't judged, criticized, or told what to do. It may take some experimentation, but try to find ways to express your feelings. You may want to try writing in a journal, exercising, taking walks or pursuing artistic outlets such as pottery or painting.
- **Seek support.** Most people find that talking about their feelings helps them to deal with and accept their loss. Reach out to trusted friends, family members and other resources for help and support.
 - *Strengthen your existing friendships and expand your circle of friends.* If your divorce has impacted your social network, try to meet new people. Attend a lecture, join a class or club, get involved in your community, or volunteer.
 - *Join a support group.* Support groups offer an opportunity to talk with people in different stages of adjustment to their divorces, vent emotions, and seek help and advice.
 - *Get professional help.* Depending on your existing support system, your personal style and how well you are coping with your divorce, you may want to seek the help of a mental health professional.
- **Focus on moving forward.** Try to look forward towards the future, rather than backwards at your divorce. Over time, the intensity of your painful feelings will lessen. Your feelings of loss do not go away, but they become easier to manage and no longer demand all of your energy. As the intensity of your grief lessens you are able to focus more of your energy towards moving forward with your new life.

Take Care of Yourself

When coping with a major loss such as divorce, you may notice your body seems to need more attention—you feel more tired and out-of-sorts. Try to respect what your body needs and do your best to keep yourself healthy so you'll have the strength you need. The following suggestions may help:

- **Get a physical.** Divorce affects you emotionally and physically. See your doctor for a complete check-up. If you had an existing medical condition, it may be worsened by the stress of your divorce. Keep in close touch with your doctor so medical conditions and medications can be closely monitored.
- **Eat well.** In the early months after a divorce, or at times when your feelings are very intense, it is common to lose your appetite. Physically, as well as emotionally, you still need good nutrition. Try eating small amounts of nutritious foods throughout the day, rather than three large meals. If you experience significant change in your weight (10 pounds or more), or are still losing or gaining weight after a couple of months, talk with your doctor. Although appetite loss is one of the most common reactions to a loss, some people experience an increase in the amount they eat, which is often a form of self-soothing. While this might temporarily take your mind off of your loss, this coping strategy ultimately doesn't work.
- **Exercise regularly.** When you exercise, your body releases endorphins, which are natural mood elevators. Exercising can help reduce stress, and help you stay physically strong during this period when the alterations in your immune system caused by loss and change make you more susceptible to illness. If you were not exercising regularly before the divorce, start (with the approval of your doctor) with an activity you enjoy that is not overly strenuous. The time you devote to exercise will boost your energy overall, and may help you

regain focus. *Note*—Conversely, too much exercise can wear you down. Consult with your doctor before starting any exercise program.

- **Focus on your breathing.** Heightened anxiety brought on by loss and change usually results in shallow, rapid breathing. If you consciously slow down your breathing, take a few deep breaths, pause briefly between exhaling and inhaling, and relax your shoulders, you can lower your anxiety level.
- **Avoid drugs and alcohol.** Drugs and alcohol may, at first, seem to provide easy relief for your pain and grief, but in reality, they do more harm than good. Alcohol is a depressant that can further add to your saddened mood, and many drugs numb you, removing your ability to deal with your true feelings. Remember that there are no quick fixes for the emotions created by your divorce. *Note*—If you are relying on drugs and/or alcohol to cope with your divorce, you may need professional help to overcome a dependency on these substances. Talk to your doctor or ask your benefits coordinator if your company offers any benefits that can help. Some companies may offer support in the form of substance abuse counseling, education and referrals.
- **Get plenty of sleep.** After a divorce, you may experience disruptions in your sleep patterns. Both insomnia and fatigue are common after suffering a loss. You may find that you now need much more sleep to feel refreshed. Or, you may not be able to sleep more than two hours at a time. Too much or too little sleep can make you irritable and tired, so try to find a balance that works for you. If you're having trouble sleeping for an extended period of time, speak to your doctor.