



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.

Coping with Change

While change is inevitable, it is also one of the greatest causes of stress in our lives. Divorce creates changes in many aspects of your life. Some of the most common changes include:

- **Change in Identity.** You no longer occupy the role of husband or wife; you are a single person—possibly a single parent. You will need to rethink your identity as an individual, parent, family member and friend. You will need to reexamine and redefine who you are and who you want to be.
- **Change in Finances.** Financial issues are one of the greatest sources of stress in a divorce. Most people go from one two-income household to two one-income households on the same income level. Dividing financial obligations and assets, and determining child and spousal support can create significant tension between former spouses.
- **Change in Family Structure.** If you have children, a divorce does not mean the end of your relationship with your spouse. Instead, it means your family must change its structure. The process of redefining the family takes time, effort and involves trial and error. For more information on children and divorce, see the guides *Helping Children Cope with Divorce and Separation* and *Single Parenting*.
- **Change in Relationships.** Relationships with family and friends of your former spouse will likely change, or end. There may be changes in your other relationships as well. People may take sides in your divorce, for example. Or you may change some of your relationships, by spending more time with single or divorced people and less time with couples.
- **Change in Social Life.** You may find that you are no longer invited to or you no longer wish to attend certain social events, especially those that are geared toward couples.
- **Change in Responsibilities.** Every couple has their own unique way of defining and dividing up the responsibilities of their partnership (earning money, raising children, house and yard work, etc.). Now you must handle these responsibilities independently. You may have to assume tasks formerly shared by two adults, a situation that may feel overwhelming.

The following tips may help you successfully cope with changes associated with divorce.

- **Recognize that change—whether good or bad—causes stress.** Take appropriate steps to manage your stress. Get plenty of sleep, exercise, eat well and find outlets—taking a walk, meditating, journaling, etc.—for your stress.
- **Maintain as much stability as you can.** Emotions impair judgment, and you may later regret major decisions you made during a time of emotional upheaval. In addition, you need time to reestablish your equilibrium, regain your self-confidence, and determine who you are and what you need. Maintaining stability can provide a sense of security and safety, which is beneficial to healing. If you must make major decisions, try to wait until you are able to think clearly and rationally. Talk to a trusted loved one and seek the help of a professional (attorney, real estate agent, tax expert, etc.) who can provide objective advice. Be sure to ask friends for referrals—and check credentials before hiring anyone.

- **Set realistic expectations.** Know your limits, aim for what is realistically attainable and say “no” to demands you cannot meet. Over-extending yourself may eventually lead to exhaustion and/or resentment.
- **Prioritize.** There may be any number of things you must do after your divorce: opening new checking and credit card accounts, finding a new place to live, moving, changing children’s caregiving arrangements, etc. Create a list of necessary tasks and prioritize them by their importance. Focus on the most essential tasks and work through them. Accept that less important tasks may not get done, or may not get done immediately.
- **Stop unproductive worrying and focus on constructive problem solving.** For example, when you start worrying that you’ll never find another house you can afford, instead think: “If I stay focused and move forward one step at a time, I’ll make progress.”
- **Get help.** Establish and/or rely on a support system of family, friends and/or colleagues. Studies have shown that those people who have more support are less likely to experience detrimental effects of stress. Getting the help you need will keep you from getting overwhelmed and allow you to concentrate on the essentials.
- **Avoid isolation.** You might feel like being alone, but isolating yourself from others can lead to loneliness and depression. Reach out to others for support during this difficult time.
- **Maintain a positive attitude.** Although this is a difficult time, keep your spirits up and your self-esteem intact. Focus on your strengths. Surround yourself with people who support, value, and energize you. Try to view this as an opportunity to change, grow and explore new possibilities.
- **Keep a sense of humor.** Remembering to laugh and not take life so seriously is always a good idea when you’re feeling stressed.
- **Explore your interests.** Divorce is a beginning as well as an ending, and a perfect opportunity to explore new interests and revisit old ones. Think about the activities, causes and issues that excite you and find ways to get involved. New interests focus your attention on the present and future, and away from your past. Exploring interests also helps you to make new friends.

Managing Stress

Dealing with the loss and change from a divorce is extremely stressful. It helps to be aware of your sources of stress and your style of coping.

While everyone experiences stress in their own unique way, there are some common symptoms. Recognizing your own personal signs of excessive stress is the first step to managing it. Begin by asking yourself the following questions:

- Do I often feel out of control?
- Do I feel constant pressure to achieve?
- Do I have difficulty concentrating?
- Do I have feelings of depression, helplessness, anxiety or panic?
- Do I have difficulty falling asleep or do I wake frequently during the night?
- Do I suffer from frequent headaches?
- Have I experienced a significant loss of or increase in appetite?
- Do I feel unusually tired?
- Do I cry (or feel the desire to cry) often?
- Do I feel faint or dizzy for no apparent reason?
- Do I experience frequent nausea?
- Do I experience shortness of breath or feel tightness in my chest without exertion?
- Do I regularly feel the need to smoke or have a drink to relax?

If you consistently answer “yes” to even one of these questions, your body may be sending you signals that you are stressed. However, these are just a few of the more common symptoms. Take a minute to think back to a time when you were particularly stressed. What stress signals do you recall feeling? Pinpoint those situations, people or places that consistently trigger stress. Make changes to those situations or avoid them as much as possible. For example, if you feel stressed rushing to work each day, adjust your schedule so you leave 15 minutes earlier. This simple exercise in self-reflection can get you on the right path to controlling stress.

Note—If your stress level becomes overwhelming, or you are experiencing serious physical effects (e.g., chest pain, difficulty breathing), depression, heavy drinking or drug use, consult your health care provider immediately.

Managing Your Stress

To successfully manage stressful situations, consider the following tips:

- Believe that you can intervene and reduce or eliminate stress in your life. While often difficult, you can make positive changes in your life.
- Assess your expectations. Consider whether your expectations are realistic and scale them down to attainable levels if necessary.
- Prioritize. Prioritize those activities that are most important and accept that some things will not get done.
- Don't overcommit yourself. Learn to say no.
- Strive to be a good person, not a perfect person. Tell yourself that you do not have to be everything to everyone all the time.
- Simplify tasks. Purchase food that is easy to prepare, combine errands into one trip, and set aside a block of time to do tasks (e.g., returning telephone calls, paying bills, etc.).

- Make time to relax and enjoy a favorite activity. If necessary, restructure your thinking to give yourself permission to take the time.
- Take care of yourself. Eat well-balanced meals, eliminate cigarettes, alcohol and drugs from your lifestyle, get plenty of rest to increase your ability to resist stress and exercise regularly (under the advice of your physician) to help you release tension and withstand the impact of stress. See the section “Take Care of Yourself” earlier in this guide.
- Have fun and laugh! Humor can significantly reduce stress. Enjoy the company of others and remember to laugh at yourself.
- Consider participating in a stress management seminar. Ask your employer if they offer any within your organization.

For additional tips on managing stress, please refer to the guide *Stress Management*.

Pressure to Date

Friends—in well-meaning efforts—may encourage you to date or pressure you to stay busy, oftentimes well before you are ready. These efforts can leave you feeling angry, isolated or wondering why you aren't adjusting as quickly as everyone else thinks you should be. Try to understand that your friends only want to help, but explain to them that you need time—as much as it takes—to learn who you are without your former spouse before sharing your life with someone else. On the other hand, you may meet someone fairly soon after your divorce who offers comfort and brings pleasure into your life. You may again feel pressure from well-intentioned friends who suggest that you are “running away” or “moving too quickly.” The truth is, there is no set timetable, and only you will know what is right for you in terms of beginning new relationships. Trust your instincts and do whatever makes you feel happy. Be true to your own feelings and needs.

Helpful Resources

American Psychiatric Association

1000 Wilson Boulevard Suite 1825
Arlington, VA 22209
888-35-PSYCH (888-357-7924) Answer
Center

www.psych.org
www.healthyminds.org

The American Psychiatric Association is an organization of psychiatrists working together to ensure humane care and effective treatment for all persons with mental disorders. HealthyMinds.org, the American Psychiatric Association's online resource for anyone seeking mental health information, provides information on many common mental health concerns, including warning signs of mental disorders, treatment options and preventative measures.

American Psychological Association

750 First Street, NE
Washington, DC 20002
800-374-2721

www.apa.org
www.apahelpcenter.org (APA Help Center)

The mission of the APA is to advance the creation, communication and application of psychological knowledge to benefit society and improve people's lives. The APA Help Center is an online resource for brochures, tips and articles on the psychological issues that affect physical and emotional well-being, as well as information about referrals. The "Psychology Topics" section of the web site includes information about a wide range of mental health topics, including depression, as well as an interactive "Find a Psychologist" feature, information on choosing a mental health provider, a patients' bill of rights.

American Self-Help Group Clearinghouse

Self-Help Group Sourcebook Online
100 E. Hanover Avenue, Suite 202
Cedar Knolls, NJ 07927
973-326-6789
www.mentalhelp.net/selfhelp

This national organization provides information on local, national and international self-help support groups, ideas for starting groups, and opportunities to link with others to develop needed new national or international groups. Visit the web site for a searchable database of support groups.

National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology

1120 G Street, N.W., Suite 330
Washington, DC 20005
202-783-7663
www.nationalregister.org

This organization provides listings of psychologists according to geographic area and specialty.

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