



TIP SHEET



Coping with Separation and Divorce

For most people, it's a shock when a relationship breaks down. Even if you've known for some time that things aren't working out, the final decision to part will stay with you for a long time.

Recovery from separation and divorce can be a tough process. Along the road to recovery you may feel anger, hate, distress, depression, confusion, guilta whole range of emotions. You can expect good days and bad days. The separation process is the same process you go through when a loved one dies - it is the process of grief. This process is painful and can take a long time, even years, for some people to come through. Although people experience it differently, most people go through four main stages:

- Shock and denial - Things are very confusing, and it is hard to believe (or perhaps you don't want to believe) that the separation is actually happening.
- Sadness and depression - Strong sense of loss, sometimes regret, sometimes guilt.
- Anger and blame - Sometimes we blame ourselves or our partner or someone else (whether or not they actually had anything to do with the situation).
- Resolution or moving forward - Accepting the situation, making adjustments to life and ourselves and getting on with a new future!

Research has shown that both men and women may continue to experience negative effects in emotional and health terms for some years after the divorce or separation. It is important to have some strategies for dealing with the grief and anger of a broken relationship, and being able to move on to the future. One strategy is having a greater awareness of how absolutely NORMAL it is to experience all these emotions in the wake of a relationship that has broken down.

On top of the emotional turmoil that accompanies the end of a relationship, there's a host of practical issues to address. These might include:

The children - providing support and time, access arrangements, childcare, telling the school, seeing in-laws, birthday and Christmas arrangements.

Money and property - who lives where, surviving on less income, managing the finances, who gets what in the home, pets.

Friends and family - telling parents/siblings/extended family members/friends, deciding how much to say and who should tell whom, maintaining friendships and relationships with in-laws.

Personal survival - which friends can support you practically and/or emotionally, how you'll create space to grieve, whether you might benefit from counselling, building relaxation into your schedule, treats can you reward yourself with when times are tough.



Personal Survival

This issue is often the most neglected. After a relationship breakdown, many people find themselves struggling with feelings of low self-esteem and self-confidence, and with so many things to organise it can be easy to forget to give yourself time for your own feelings. Be kind to yourself and gratefully receive all the support you can get from friends and family.

Some helpful ways to look after yourself include:

- ✓ Take control of your life as feeling out of control, helpless, hopeless and blaming others for your situation gives control of your life to other people. Allow yourself to have the confidence to believe you can cope.
- ✓ Rebuild your life by setting yourself some short-term and long-term goals.
- ✓ Allow yourself to validate your anger but how you respond is your responsibility. Responding in a destructive way will not achieve anything.
- ✓ Make sure you are getting enough sleep as the stress involved in separating can mean that you won't get enough sleep. If this problem persists you should consult your doctor.
- ✓ Eat regular, healthy meals. It is easy to forget to look after yourself if you are feeling stressed.
- ✓ Talk to family and friends – don't use your children for support or a sounding-board. As a parent, you should be there to support them, which will be hard at such a stressful time. It is important to talk to

people and feel supported to help you work through the grieving process.

- ✓ Find other ways to help yourself and be kind to yourself. Participate in activities you enjoy, such as listening to music, exercising and spending time with and having fun with your children, friends and family.
- ✓ Avoid alcohol and non-prescription drugs.
- ✓ Consider having a divorce ceremony or other ritual to help you create a meaningful symbolic end to the relationship.
- ✓ Allow yourself to start moving on - It's normal to feel anxious and fearful when life's changing. But with more than two in five marriages ending in divorce, you're far from alone - there's an ever-expanding network of advice and support groups available.

The Children

This is undoubtedly one of the toughest times to be a parent, but your children need to know what's happening. You may think that hiding the severity of the situation protects them, but it actually leaves children feeling confused and may drive them away as they feel they can't trust you.

Children often fear that they will lose one of their parents in a divorce or that their parents will abandon them and they will have to fend for themselves. Telling the children that you are going to get separated or divorced can be a very difficult obstacle to overcome, but it is something that must be done in order for the children to begin to accept this dramatic change in their life. Some important guidelines to follow when telling your children include:

- ✓ No matter what the age, it is important that the parents tell the children what is going on.
- ✓ It is important that you tell the children about the divorce when you can be together for a long period of time. A non-school day would probably be the most preferred time, because they are going to feel very alone and they will need someone there to feel a sense of safety and security.
- ✓ It is best if you and your spouse can take the time to determine what you are going to say about your divorce before you talk with your children. Get your story straight so that you don't contradict one another or argue while you are breaking the news to your kids. If you need help deciding what to say to your children, schedule an appointment with a mental health professional.

- ✓ If possible, you and your spouse should tell your children about your divorce together, even if it requires putting your animosity aside for a while. You will convey to them that, although your marriage may be ending, you can cooperate as their parents, and that they still have a family — just a different kind of family — and you will both remain actively involved in their lives.
- ✓ Be honest with your children about why you are getting divorced, but remember to keep their ages in mind and avoid sharing the lurid details behind your split. Tell them as much as they need to know and *no more*. If you haven't been able to hide the discord in your marriage, you may want to acknowledge what your children already know by saying something like, "We know that you've heard us fighting a lot, and here's why. . . ."
- ✓ Be very clear with your children that your divorce has absolutely nothing to do with them. Otherwise, they may feel somehow responsible for the divorce and assume that if only they had behaved better or gotten higher grades you would not be ending your marriage.
- ✓ Try not to get emotional when you tell your children about your divorce. Watching a parent cry or get very upset can be frightening for children. Don't add to their anxiety with histrionics and overly dramatic behaviour. You're likely to make them more concerned about your emotions than their own. Consequently, they may not let you know exactly what they are feeling.
- ✓ If your children are having trouble coping with the news of your divorce, all they may need to turn their frowns into smiles is some cuddling and a little extra attention. But sometimes it's not that simple. When your children need more than what you can give them, consider involving a school counsellor, mental health professional, social worker, relative, or another adult who's especially close to your children.

FOR FURTHER HELP: If you have any questions or need further help contact your GP or the number detailed below. Psychologists employed by Queensland Psychology Centre have at least six years of education and training to equip them to provide a professional and timely service to you in the area of coping with separation

Reference: Divorce for Dummies: 2nd Edition