

The Emotional Impact of Divorce

What happens to peoples' feelings during a separation and divorce?

This beginning phase of deciding that a marriage will not work can be extremely painful for both partners. The situation has probably built up over a number of years. Both spouses may feel bitter, angry, and betrayed but at the same time unsure they want to leave the marriage. There is uncertainty and confusion.

It is important during this time not to force yourself to make a decision before you are ready. Talking with a trusted friend or counselor about the state of the marriage, either alone or as a couple, can be helpful in clarifying what you want to do.

The months before a separation can be difficult because one or both partners may be denying how bad the situation is. Divorce is a drastic and difficult step to take. Partners may feel:

- guilty or ashamed because they feel they have failed
- grief over losing someone important and the structure of their life together
- worry about what will happen with the children.

More than anything, separation and divorce mean the death of a relationship and a way of life. As such, a divorce needs to be mourned just like any death. Sad feelings do not mean that the divorce is a mistake. Strong feelings to be talked out at this time include:

- sadness
- anger
- anxiety
- guilt
- betrayal
- embarrassment
- shame.

How does divorce affect children?

The effects of divorce on children vary widely. They depend a great deal on whether parents are able to maintain a friendly cooperation with each other in raising the children. A bitter divorce in which custody is contested is extremely upsetting to children, who may feel that the divorce is their fault.

Traps for divorced parents include being self-involved and forgetting how needy their children are during and after a divorce. These parents are unable to meet their children's needs and they may get angry at their spouses. This anger is a natural reaction, but expressing it in front of the children is harmful to them.

What are the major emotional issues in forming a new life?

People who have not dated for years need to learn how to have a social life without their partner. The loneliness of living without another adult needs to be managed.

If the divorce has come about because one of the spouses has a new relationship:

- the partner with the new relationship may have to deal with guilt and has to manage the

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strain of managing that new relationship

- the partner who was left for the new relationship has to deal with feelings of anger, jealousy, sadness, and rejection.

Self-esteem may need to be rebuilt after the sense of failure that can result from a divorce.

Lack of trust in the opposite sex can be an issue for years.

In dating or forming new relationships, step-parenting issues can be difficult. Often children feel insecure and want their parents to themselves, or they have a fantasy that their biological parents will get back together. They may not want someone new to take on the role of a parent. Children need to feel that they have not been divorced, and they need continuing regular contact with both parents.

How can divorce be managed in a healthy way?

- Face your fears: of living alone, of taking care of yourself, of being responsible, of others disapproving, and of the unknown. Take new risks in spite of the fears.
- Ask for help: from friends, family, support groups, clergy, or professional counselors. Divorce is too much to face alone.
- Deal with guilt by becoming aware of it and controlling it, rather than allowing it to control you. Guilt may arise because one spouse may feel that he or she is hurting the other or the children. The person may feel that if he or she had been different, the marriage would have survived.
- Notice the anger underneath the guilt. Low self-esteem can make people feel guilt and a sense of failure rather than anger at a difficult situation or at the other person. If anger is there, feeling and acknowledging it can make you feel more empowered.
- Pay attention to the children's needs:
 - Manage visits in a cooperative way.
 - Assure the children that the divorce is not their fault.
 - If possible, make sure they see both parents regularly and have their own space in each home.
 - Make it clear that the parents will not be getting back together.
 - Do not confide in children about relationships between adults but, at the same time, do not keep secrets about what is happening.
 - Make sure they know you love them.
 - Get counseling for them if they show signs of distress.
 - Inform school teachers or counselors that events in a child's life are changing.
- Get professional help for yourself if you start to feel depressed or have trouble recovering your joy in life.

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