

Separating from a partner



After a marriage or significant relationship breakup it may seem as if nothing in your life is stable: your home, your finances, your routines can all be turned upside down. You may feel as if you don't even know yourself anymore and be worrying about the impacts of the breakup on your children, extended family members and your friendships.

It often takes more time than we want to recover from the emotional pain of separation, so try to be patient with yourself.

But it's important to know that there are ways of working through the practical and emotional adjustments to this major life event and you can learn strategies that can help you establish a fresh start.

Recovering emotionally after separation

1. Acceptance

It is normal to have a range of strong emotions, and they are often quite surprising to us during times of significant change.

Try to accept your feelings, even if you don't like them. Sometimes just observing what your emotions are can help to take the sting out of them. For example, saying to yourself "I notice I feel guilty" is more helpful than "I am guilty".

2. Manage expectations

Don't expect to manage your normal daily load as efficiently during this time. When we are stressed, we do not retain information as well, or cope well with high demands. We can be irritable, prone to forgetfulness and experience feelings of confusion and doubt.

During a separation you may also feel tired or exhausted and your sleep patterns may change. It is normal to feel as if you are struggling, so it's important to give yourself a break. Be realistic about what you can achieve and give yourself time to make decisions, it's hard to see choices clearly when you are overwhelmed with intense feelings.

3. Talk things through

Talk to friends and family members you can confide in. Don't go it alone. Many people (men and women) work through relationship breakdowns much more effectively if they attend

courses to learn about managing emotions, parenting after separation or about positive ways to move on to be a healthier, wiser and stronger person.

You may also like to attend personal counselling to help you come to terms with the breakdown.

4. Look after your health

Eat healthy foods, drink plenty of water, establish routines that are easy to maintain and try to get some exercise every day. These activities will help your body manage the emotional upheaval and ease feelings of stress.

Avoid using alcohol, drugs or food to help you cope. Trying to dull the pain this way can lead to more problems. Take notice of your habits and ensure you are not slipping into any destructive patterns. It is far better to reach out to others for help at this time than struggle alone.

5. Seek further support

Make sure you ask the correct people for the help you need. Your family and friends can be wonderful social supports, but any legal or financial questions are best directed at appropriate professionals.

If you are worried your grief or sadness or anger is not improving over time, don't hesitate to discuss your emotional state with your doctor. He or she may not prescribe anything for you, but it's always a good idea to have your doctor informed if you are in doubt about your mental health.

6. Rebuild

When things begin to settle, find new interests and outlets for friendships. A relationship breakdown can often mean that you lose connections and friendships (even if sometimes only for the short term).

This is an opportunity for you to finally go to that art class, take up a new interest and find some new faces to be around. Often it's hard to get the motivation, but if you can push through any resistance you might feel and do it anyway, you may be well rewarded!

Children and Separation

Although parents are often upset and confused at this time, it is important to try to understand what your children are going through and to consider their feelings as well.

Children have to deal with many changes and adjustments as a result of their parents separating: changes in family lifestyle, rules and discipline. There may also be a lot of other changes, for example, a new house and a new school and a new person in mum's or dad's life, and perhaps fewer treats as there will be less money coming in.

1. Reassure

Assure them that both parents still love them, no matter what. You may have fallen out of love with their other parent, but the children still love that person and may not understand why you are separating.

Let them know that they do not have to take sides. They love both of you, so attacking or criticising the other parent hurts the children

2. Explain and be honest

Give them a simple, honest account (but not one that blames or points scores against the other parent, or gives unnecessary detail). Explain who is moving away, and when and where they will see the other parent. Tell them this was an adult decision and that they are not to blame in any way.

3. Be understanding

Be understanding if children play up or are distressed. Children need time and understanding as they adjust - many children are taken unawares when they hear their parents are separating and need a lot of assurance as they come to terms with the changes in their lives.

4. Keep it civil

Never use the children as go-betweens. Don't ask your children to deliver messages to the other parent or say negative things about the other parent.

This is damaging to the child and reflects badly on you - children find it very difficult to deliver messages and don't want to be drawn into fights.

5. Alert family and friends

Let significant others know what is happening (ie. the school, class teacher, and the parents of their friends). These people can also watch out for your children.

6. Be respectful

Find a way to communicate politely and respectfully with your former partner and keep them informed about important matters regarding the children (health, injuries in your care, and education, for example).

About Relationships Australia

Relationships Australia is a community-based, not-for-profit organisation with no religious affiliations.

For over 70 years, we have been supporting children, adults, families and communities.

As a federation of Relationships Australia organisations in each state and territory, we have over 118 service locations across the country, with our National Office based in Canberra.

We provide a broad range of services including counselling, family dispute resolution and mediation, family violence prevention, support and recovery services, and mental health services.

Our services are for all members of the community, regardless of religious belief, age, gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle choice, cultural background or economic circumstances.

Relationships Australia receives funding from the Commonwealth Government, as well as state and territory governments, and other sources.

Next steps

For more information on our services and how they can support you, or to find your nearest centre:

Call 1300 364 277

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