

# DIVORCE RECOVERY GUIDE



**McNamara** **LAW OFFICE** PLLC  
*Solving Family Law Problems Since 1992*

281-358-3444 • [www.mcnamaralawyers.com](http://www.mcnamaralawyers.com)

**Primary Office – Kingwood**  
1412 Stonehollow Drive, Suite C  
Kingwood, TX 77339

**By Appointment – Downtown Houston**  
The Lyric Center, 9th Floor, 440 Louisiana St.  
Houston, TX 77002



For most people, divorce is much more than a major legal process. It's also a challenging time of transition that can negatively impact virtually every area of life: emotional, psychological, domestic, parental, financial, physical health, social, vocational, and more.

This special **Divorce Recovery Guide** contains hand-picked articles, book excerpts, advice, and more to help you recover from the inevitable stresses and pressures of divorce. And just as importantly, this Guide will empower you to build the satisfying, strong, and inspired new post-divorce life you desire – and deserve.



## *contents*

### **3 Getting Back to The Basics of Divorce Recovery**

The first step is to lay a new foundation for your life. Here are five tips to help you get started.

### **5 4 Grounding Tools to Help With Divorce Grief**

Use these tools to cope with divorce grief and navigate the emotional hurdles of going through the divorce process.

### **7 Tips for Managing Depression and Anxiety**

Depression and anxiety are inevitable during divorce, but if managed properly, they will dissipate.

### **9 How to Let Go of the Past After Divorce**

Moving on after divorce can be difficult, but there are actions you can take to make the process smoother.

### **11 The Power of Forgiveness**

If you're feeling stuck in your divorce recovery, you may need to forgive your ex. Here's how.

### **14 Nurturing Mind and Body During Divorce**

Taking good care of yourself through the stresses of separation and divorce is absolutely vital.

### **17 Divorce Stress: Learn to Identify and Manage It**

How you cope with divorce-related stress is crucial.

### **19 8 Tips for Coping with the Brave New Post-Divorce World**

Embrace your painful feelings, but avoid a full-blown pity party with these tips to manage your post-divorce funk.

### **21 6 Tips for Bouncing Back After Infidelity**

Don't let feelings of anger and resentment paralyze you.

### **23 Why Being Friends with Your Ex Usually Doesn't Work**

It will likely stop you from moving on with your life.

### **25 Dating After Divorce: 14 Helpful Tips to Live By**

Don't take the decision to date after divorce lightly.

### **27 The Effects of Divorce on Children**

Proactive steps to ensure that your kids grow up to be happy, healthy adults.

### **30 Emotional Parenting in Divorce**

Your child's emotional needs are as important as their physical and financial needs during divorce.

The articles in this Guide are provided for general information and may not apply to your unique situation. These articles do not take the place of a lawyer, accountant, financial planner, therapist, etc.; since laws and procedures vary by region, for professional advice, you must seek counsel from the appropriate professional in your area. The views presented in the articles are the authors' own and do not necessarily represent the views of this firm or of [Divorce Marketing Group](#). This Guide is published by and Copyright © Divorce Marketing Group. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Any use of materials from this Guide – including reproduction, modification, or distribution – without prior written consent of Divorce Marketing Group is prohibited.



# Getting Back to the Basics of Divorce Recovery

The first step in your divorce recovery is to lay a new foundation for yourself and your life. Here are 5 tips to help you start reconstructing your most basic physiological needs.

By Dr. Andra Brosh, Clinical Psychologist

**D**ivorce recovery is unique because it embodies a combination of disillusionment and despair around the sudden loss of your deepest attachments. Your most basic dependency needs are at risk, and the person you were counting on for everything has disappeared. This is one of the reasons I don't teach people to "let go" too early in their recovery. It's very scary to jump into a new life with no safety net in place.

You have been severely traumatized on a psychological, spiritual, and emotional level, and this is why one of the first steps in recovering from this kind of loss is rebuilding your foundation. It's a delicate balance to untie the knots of a marriage while trying to build new connections to something stable.

Divorce recovery is a dance that takes time, patience, and a lot of support. A foundation provides the stability and strength needed to support the structure being built on top of it. When the foundation gets shaken or shifts, the structure is threatened and can crumble to the ground. In many marriages, small fractures in the foundation develop over time leaving it vulnerable and unstable. The cracks and fractures might be small lies, missed opportunities for connection, hurt feelings, or snide comments, which pave the way for a full-blown disaster like infidelity or walking out on the marriage.

Divorce hits like an earthquake. What you thought was strong and steadfast has broken into a million pieces, leaving you feeling like you are standing on unsteady ground. Knowing this can help you understand why you feel lost and ungrounded.

Sometimes, things need to be broken down so that they can be rebuilt in a new and better way. This is why the very first step in your divorce recovery is to lay



a new foundation for yourself and your life. Rebuilding your foundation is an opportunity to create an even stronger support system both internally and externally. Your internal foundation includes your physical and emotional wellbeing and your external foundation will include your social support system.

When I teach about divorce recovery and getting grounded, I like to refer to the psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. His hierarchy is portrayed in the shape of a pyramid with our most fundamental human needs at the bottom, and the need for self-actualization at the top.

Divorce deeply affects the bottom three layers which include (from bottom to top):

- Physiological needs
- Safety needs
- Love and belonging needs.

## 5 Tips for Divorce Recovery

### 1. Get Enough Sleep.

Divorce is very disruptive to the rhythms of your life, but it also throws off your circadian rhythm. Your body functions on a built-in 24-hour clock, and when that clock is off so is your body. The first thing to be affected is your sleep, and when you don't sleep well you put stress on your body, make poor decisions, and have trouble functioning well. To ensure that you maintain a healthy circadian rhythm you'll want to make sure that you're keeping a solid sleep routine by going to bed at a decent hour, waking up at the same time each morning, and eating foods that support sleep.

Getting enough protein in your diet, or eating a little bit of a healthy complex carbohydrate (like a sweet potato) before bed can really improve sleep. Omitting computer screens at night, doing some stretching before bed, and taking a bit of melatonin to support your sleep are all good options too.

### 2. Drink Plenty of Water.

Water is one of the most basic needs for physiological health, but somehow it becomes a low priority. Water is the basis for human life and without it you'll become dehydrated, develop poor digestion, and feel depleted. Getting enough water boils down to making a commitment to drink it. Getting a water bottle you love that's easy to lug around can improve your hydration habit. The general recommendation for water intake is 1 liter of water per 50 pounds of body weight, but drinking a glass every hour can be a starting goal. To improve water absorption, you can add a little bit of sea salt to your cup or bottle. I really like the app "[Waterlogged](#)" to manage your water intake.

### 3. Develop Healthy Eating Habits.

The stress and negative emotions of divorce are what

*"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."*

*~ Buckminster Fuller*

cause people to lose weight. While this is often seen as one of the few benefits of divorce, this kind of weight loss isn't really that healthy. When the body is stressed (or perceiving a threat) digestion slows, cortisol rises, and many other systems become altered to ensure your survival. This is why you

might not feel hungry or forget to eat.

The fight or flight system is designed for short-term use, so when it goes on too long it can create health issues. Imbalanced eating or skipping meals will wreak havoc on your physiology. Blood sugar is key to maintaining a stable mood, and not eating well throughout the day will cause it to fluctuate. This can lead to emotional imbalance and insulin resistance if it continues. Eating small meals regularly throughout the day, even when you're not hungry, will help balance blood sugar and will ensure your body is getting enough fuel to keep going.

### 4. Eat More (Healthy) Fat.

Healthy fats like raw, grass-fed butter, ghee, olive oil, and coconut oil are very healing when under stress. Fats keep you full longer, and they're nourishing for your nervous system and brain. In fact, your body can't perform many of its daily functions without fat. Incorporating delicious fat-rich foods like nuts, seeds, avocado, and nut butters will provide your body with long-lasting sources of energy, and they will also help you stabilize your blood sugar. Unlike carbohydrate-rich foods like bagels, muffins, and nutrition bars, fats slow digestion and provide an alternate source of fuel that the body prefers in times of challenging transition.

### 5. Breathe Deeply.

This is such a basic recommendation, but we all forget to breathe. Breathing is a natural part of the body's survival system, but we can still control how deeply we breathe. Simply taking a deep breath into your diaphragm will calm your nervous system and send messages to your mind and body that you're actually doing okay. Shallow breathing sends a message of fear and that the body should be on alert. Again, setting reminders in your phone can be really helpful in remembering to breathe so using an app like "[Stop, Breathe & Think](#)" can help you regulate your breathing. ■



*Dr. Brosh is a licensed Clinical Psychologist and a board certified Holistic Nutritionist using a blend of psychotherapy and holistic nutrition in her work as a divorce recovery expert. She honors the connection between mental and physical health when helping clients heal from an emotional trauma like divorce.*

[www.psycheandsalt.com](http://www.psycheandsalt.com)

A silhouette of a person sitting on a beach, looking out at the ocean during a sunset. The person is in the foreground, and the background shows the ocean and a colorful sky with orange and pink hues.

# 4 Grounding Tools to Help With Divorce Grief

Use these tools to cope with divorce grief and navigate the emotional hurdles of going through the divorce process.

By Ling Khao, Separation Adjustment Coach

Separation is a time when we need to recognize the need to make a conscious effort to look after ourselves first – both physically and emotionally. Research shows that a child's ability to positively adjust to a separation is strongly related to the psychological adjustment of his or her parents. Without learning effective coping skills for divorce grief and putting ourselves first, it can be so easy to lose sight of our own physical and emotional health and well-being.

## **When We Are Coping with Divorce Grief, Helping Our Own Children Becomes an Unwavering Struggle**

To paint a clearer picture, think of the analogy of an airplane's oxygen mask warnings. You hear the flight attendants repeating this at the onset of every departure: "It is necessary to put on your own mask first, before assisting others." Essentially, if you go through the motions of each day in a mental blur, carrying emotional and physical baggage that has drained and exhausted you, you will immediately become a less effective parent when your children need stability the most.

It is normal and quite healthy to feel a range of emotions from the loss of a marriage or relationship. It isn't just a loss of close proximity with someone; it's also the loss of intimacy, familiarity, security, and friendship. These losses, what-if's, and regrets combined with the intricate process of physically separating

your life from your ex's, may make recovery seem like a monumental challenge that cannot be overcome.

If you were the initiator of your separation, you may have already gone through the “rollercoaster” of emotions and be ready to move on. Or, you may be finding the emotional aftermath of separation much harder than you initially expected, and now you're beginning to fully feel the brunt of the emotional upset.

If your separation was unexpected or unwanted, you may still have to process the full scope of your post-separation emotions. This can be challenging, especially when it appears that your ex seems to be coping much better. As a result, you may find yourself fluctuating between strong emotional states of acceptance and denial, guilt and shame, fear and despair, and anger and resentment. Everything may seem to be overwhelming, daunting, and uncertain. Moving forward may feel like an impossible task.

Regardless of whose decision it was to separate, the best thing that you can do for yourself and your children is to allow yourself to sit with the despair. Allow yourself to feel the gravity of your loss. It doesn't matter what that loss is: the loss of your best friend, the loss of the one person who vowed to be with you through the good times and bad, the loss of a father to your beautiful children, the loss of financial security and stability, or the loss of something else.

## Give Yourself Time to Move On from Divorce Grief

As you allow yourself to experience the pain of the grief, you are paving the way towards recovery. Remember that emotions fluctuate day-by-day, hour-by-hour, and even minute-to-minute. Know the emotional pain doesn't last forever.

However, if you find yourself becoming too overwhelmed with painful emotions, learning grounding techniques can help. Grounding techniques are simple exercises you can perform to center yourself and connect to the present moment. Grounding skills can also be used to help manage daily stress and anxiety.

## 4 Grounding Exercises to Help Cope with Divorce Grief

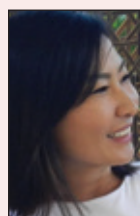
1. In a standing position, gently rock forwards and backwards. Feel the weight of your body, moving from your heels to the balls of your feet. Push your feet down into the firmness of the floor – notice the floor beneath you, supporting you. Feel the muscle tension in your legs as you continue to rock back and forth. Then, slowly rock your body from side-to-side, transferring your weight from one foot to another. Notice the pressure points on the soles of your feet as you do this.

2. Either in a seated or standing position, become aware of the sensations in your entire body by quickly scanning yourself from head-to-toe. Notice any areas of tension. Take a mindful stretch by interlocking your fingers and fully extending your arms out in front of you. Notice how your body feels when you do this. Then slowly stretch out behind you, holding the pose for a few seconds. Again, notice any new sensations in your body (possibly in your shoulders, arms, or chest area). Gently shake your hands and arms in a spiral movement.
3. Take a slow deep breath – inhaling and exhaling through your nose. As you inhale, notice your lungs refilling naturally. While exhaling, make sure to empty out your lungs completely. Continue to take six more slow deep breaths. Notice your ribcage rising and falling, or the air moving in and out of your nose with each breath.
4. Turn your attention to your environment. Notice your surroundings in detail. What are five things you can see, four things you can touch (notice the temperature and texture as the objects contact your hands), three things you can hear (perhaps a sound from your computer, cars outside etc.), two things you can smell or like the smell of. Finally cross your arms over your chest, giving your arms or shoulders one firm, but loving, squeeze.

## Embrace New Beginnings and Move on from Divorce Grief

The exercises above can be performed as one long sequence or as individual parts. That is, each step can be used as a short stand-alone grounding tool. Repeat each step more than once if needed and experiment with each technique in different situations. It's also best to practice these techniques when in a calm state, so when emotional storms do arise, you can draw upon them as needed.

Moving forward, memories, worries, fears, self-criticisms, and other unhelpful thoughts will no doubt pop up again. Grief doesn't just suddenly end. To deal with the emotional impact of loss and embrace your new beginnings, you may need to learn to let those feelings flow freely through you, without getting swept up or overwhelmed by them. ■



*This article has been edited and excerpted from The Kids are Alright: Supporting Your Children Through a Separation or Divorce – a free resource for mums. Ling Khao is a mum, writer, and Separation Adjustment Coach at Move Forward & Flourish.*

[www.divorcemag.com/blog/author/ling-khao](http://www.divorcemag.com/blog/author/ling-khao)



# The Best Tips for Managing Depression and Anxiety During Divorce

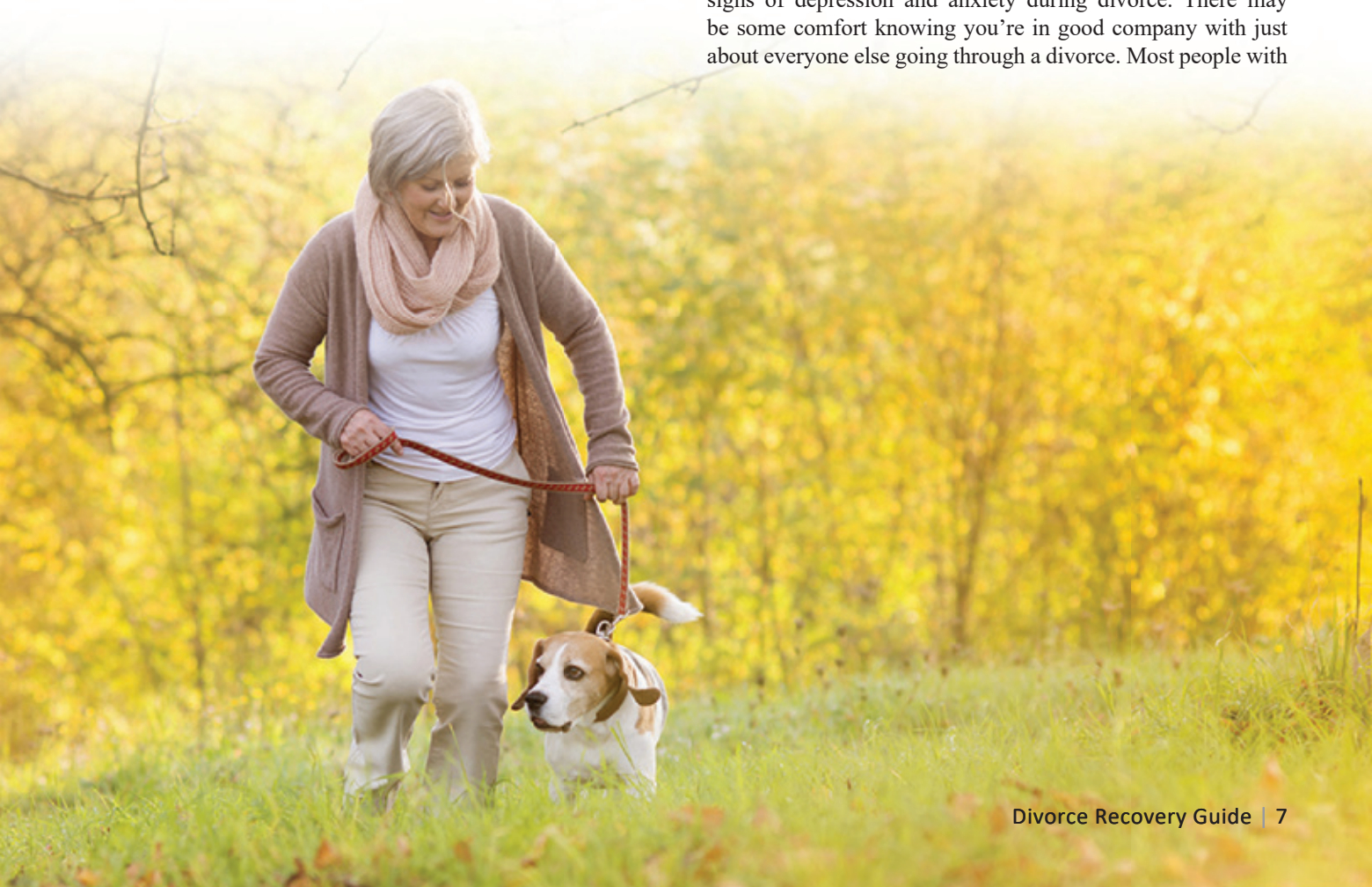
Depression and anxiety during divorce are inevitable – but not endless. Learn to manage these feelings, and they will eventually dissipate. Here's how to start.

By Kat Forsythe, Therapist and Coach

When Ron left, Sally spiraled into such sadness that she could hardly bear it. She'd asked for the divorce, so she was surprised at her despair, as well as depression and anxiety during divorce. To compound her melancholy, she had trouble sleeping, and woke up each night at 3:30 with her heart beating so hard, she thought she was having a heart attack.

During divorce recovery, you won't leave home without these feelings. Some divorcees escape the torture of these challenges, but most of us dive headlong into them. They can be as mild as down-in-the-dumps or as severe as constant weeping and vomiting.

If you feel as though you're surrounded by a curtain of black gauze and you can see happy people on the other side but you can't get to them, welcome to the all-too-familiar signs of depression and anxiety during divorce. There may be some comfort knowing you're in good company with just about everyone else going through a divorce. Most people with



divorce depression experience one or more of these signs during the divorce process.

The good news is that these feelings are usually only temporary until your brain catches up with your new life. The not-so-good news is that, for the most part: “The Only Way Out Is Through.” The only way through these two nasties is to navigate them with all the tools you can find, frequently with outside divorce coaching. You can mitigate your pain, but you can’t erase it.

Here’s encouragement: In the process of facing and managing your emotions head on, you’ll hone an arsenal of treatment regimens that will serve you for the rest of your life. If you work on handling them now, you’ll be able to reach in your quiver of arrows later and shoot these two effects down to size.

In all my work with folks journeying through divorce,

agitation: yelling at other drivers on the road, or disgust with the person with 12 items in the 10 item checkout line. You’ll know when your irritation stems from your own sour mood. Use these incidences as a sign to put on the brakes. The old adage of “take a deep breath and count to 10” works because it gives your over-worried brain a tiny but critical break.

## Drugs and How They Impact Your Depression and Anxiety

A word about drugs for depression. I believe that some depressions and many anxiety disorders are intense and severe enough to warrant prescribed drugs, usually an SSRI (Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor), better known as Prozac, or its many cousins. These drugs require a 4-6 week adjustment period, taking the drug religiously every day, and continuing daily for

**If you feel as though you’re surrounded by a curtain of black gauze and you can see happy people on the other side but you can’t get to them, welcome to the all-too-familiar signs of depression and anxiety during divorce.**

here’s the #1 tip I’ve discovered to combat these feelings: no matter what, keep moving.

Movement is motivating – even the smallest effort begins to balance your mood. Sitting still is stifling and stagnant (unless meditating or sleeping). When depressed, the tendency is to plant yourself in one place, not move, and obsess over the precipitating event, rehearsing it over and over in your mind. From that seated or prone position, deep despondency ensues, manifested as weeping, worry, anger, fear, or physical illness (most frequently nausea). None of these are good for your mental health!

First, ask yourself, “If I weren’t feeling this way, what would I be doing?” Then, try on that activity for size.

## Take Baby Steps

If you can’t get up and move, you may have lost the ability to self-motivate. In that case, talk yourself into motion by taking baby steps. For example, if you can’t get up from a prone position, talk yourself off the couch. Say, “Slide your legs off the couch. Put your feet on the floor. Sit up slowly. Lean forward. Stand up. Take three steps.” Three steps get you far enough away from the bed/couch/chaise that you’re less likely to return.

Then, do the simplest things: brush your teeth, change your clothes. While still in motion mode, put on your shoes, pick up your keys, and walk out your front door. Keep yourself in motion. Getting outside the house – even going for a mini walk – is a mood booster. Keep moving at an even pace, not too fast and not too slow.

Anxiety causes erratic motion – too fast or too slow. When you feel your heart pounding, slow down. Watch for signs of

months or years until it’s time to wean off. Prozac and family (Celexa, Zoloft, and others) are mood elevators, and they must be taken as prescribed, or they can cause serious side effects.

Self-medicating: using over-the-counter drugs, herbal remedies, alcohol, marijuana, or stimulants (Red Bull, No Doze, as well as recreational drugs or “uppers”) are less helpful in treating long-term depression/anxiety problems because the amount and regularity of taking them isn’t consistent. Don’t try to medicate yourself.

If you’ve tried the behavior modification techniques (“Keep Moving” is the #1 example) and you’re still despondent – and you believe you’re seriously depressed or anxious – see a doctor or medical professional for guidance and the right drug for you, immediately.

Depression and anxiety are common byproducts of divorce, and for good reason! Everything familiar is changing. Your emotions and reasoning are straining to capacity to recalibrate and get you through the turbulent waters of change. Take time to recognize your moods and address them head-on. Start with “keep moving” to keep the depression demons at bay.

Take one baby step at a time – that’s one less step you’ll have to take later. Keep going, keep moving; your divorce-related depression will eventually dissipate. ■



*For more than 25 years, Kat’s passion has been helping people navigate the turbulent waters of life, especially divorce. She helps clients rediscover, redesign, and reclaim the life they want to live – based on their own strengths and her practical, no-nonsense six-tiered plan.*

[www.katforsythe.com](http://www.katforsythe.com)



# How to Let Go of the Past After Divorce

Moving on after divorce can be difficult, but there are actions you can take to make the process smoother. Try the following suggestions and start looking forward to a happy future!

By Wendi Schuller, Therapist and Author

It can be hard to let go of the past after divorce. Focusing on what was instead of what is can hinder you from moving on post-divorce. Divorce may come as a shock, and fixating on what used to be gets in the way of taking action now.

Some people interviewed for this article said they kept dreaming about the past – likely through the lenses of rose-colored glasses – as the present was too painful to think about. Others felt that if they denied what was happening (i.e., that their spouse was leaving them), things would go back to the way they were.



One sign that a person is hanging on to an ex-spouse and not letting go is talking endlessly about them. An acquaintance went on and on about her former husband until somebody else changed the subject. She did not date but instead wallowed in that relationship which she failed to leave behind post-divorce. There were no children and it was a clean break. I occasionally run into her former husband; he has never brought up his ex in conversation with me, and he was able to move on with his life. He is happily remarried and is a proud step-father.

You must realize that you can and must choose whether to stay mentally and emotionally attached to a former partner or face the cold truth of reality that they are not coming back.

### How to Let Go and Move On

Part of getting beyond reliving the past is filling the void left by your divorce. When an old life and marital relationship ends, something has to fill this gaping hole. This was the

**Instead of focusing on  
what you're missing,  
look for the silver lining in  
your divorce cloud.**

problem with my acquaintance. She did not try to meet people, take a class, or pursue new endeavors. The void remained.

One of the first steps to moving on is replacing the loss of friends (those who departed from your life with your ex) with new friends, pursuits, hobbies, and adventures. Expand your social circle by joining a special interest group or renewing friendships that may have fallen by the wayside when you got married. I joined travel and book clubs. Other divorced pals are in film and hiking clubs.

If you haven't already done so, go find your "tribe"! There are many studies globally that show the health benefits of being connected to others, so you must leave the (depressing) safety of your sofa by enjoying pleasurable outings with like-minded people.

### Stay (or Get) Mentally and Physically Active

A new job during the early phase of my divorce proceedings was mentally stimulating, and it gave me less time to think about my losses. Others have taken courses or changed career paths after a divorce. Take up a sport for a physical challenge (start slow if the only "sport" you've engaged in for years is

channel surfing). The goal is to keep mentally and physically active to fill the void and find life more satisfying. When your agenda is crammed full of entertaining events and pleasurable pursuits, looking ahead instead of behind becomes much easier.

Some divorced individuals told me that they became more active in their churches, synagogues, or mosques. The support received helped them realize that they were not alone and that other people care about them. Divorced people in the congregations offered advice and shared their own stories. One divorced friend even met her next husband in her church's singles group.

### Start New Traditions

Rituals and routines can keep one rooted in the past. If you always went out for Sunday brunch with your spouse, make it a Saturday brunch with friends. Discover different dining or coffee venues. Doing the same activities at the same places that you did when married triggers memories.

My boys and I dropped some routines that we did with their father. Instead, it was exciting to dream up fresh ways to have family fun and create new experiences after divorce. My sons and I shook up Christmas rituals by leaving town over the holidays several times. Think about what no longer serves you or keeps you tethered to your former spouse, and drop those traditions, habits, and routines like a hot coal.

### Focus on the Positive

Being in the company of positive people can help you leave the past behind and notice what good things lie ahead. They tend to look at the bright side of life and not dwell on the negatives. Emotions are contagious, and being around these people is uplifting.

Instead of focusing on what you're missing, look for the silver lining in your divorce cloud. I gave up being on the party circuit and entertaining, which we did to further my husband's career. After divorce, I realized how draining the constant parties were and am so glad to have given them up. I have more time for my sons, which resulted in a closer relationship with them.

Think about what aspects are better in your life now, and keep looking forward to your next adventure. ■



*Wendi Schuller is a nurse, hypnotherapist, and certified in Neuro-linguistic Programming (NLP). Her most recent book is The Global Guide to Divorce, and she has over 200 published articles. She is a guest on radio programs in the US and UK. [www.globalguidetodivorce.com](http://www.globalguidetodivorce.com)*



A person in a blue shirt and dark pants stands on a sandy beach, looking out at the ocean. The sky is filled with dramatic, colorful clouds in shades of blue, orange, and yellow, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The water is calm, reflecting the colors of the sky.

# THE POWER OF *Forgiveness*

If you're feeling stuck in your divorce recovery, you may need to forgive your ex – and yourself. Here's how.

By Dr. Pamela D. Blair, Life Coach and Therapist



**I** never thought about forgiving myself or my spouse until I got into therapy after my second marriage ended. Naturally, anger was an important part of the healing process. My therapist told me I had to honor my anger to get the work of divorce done, to make sense out of it all, and, ultimately, move towards forgiveness – to forgive not only my husband, but also the situation and, most of all, myself. By allowing room for my anger at my husband, I was able to create a place where forgiveness and understanding could be born.

Before I discovered the healing power of forgiveness, I was having trouble letting go enough to move forward – I was still wrestling with demons in the night. There's a passage in the Bible that reads: "I will not let you go unless you bless me." (Gen. 32:27). I believe we benefit the most from divorce if we choose not to "let it go until it blesses us" – until we can see the growth potential in it, and until we can understand our attachment to the past. Pain remains pain until our consciousness grows because of it. Then, it becomes power: the "blessing" that grows out of wrestling with the pain.

Some days, just surviving alone was an excruciatingly frightening experience. I felt victimized, traumatized, and paralyzed. In those early days, it never occurred to me that I had done anything that needed forgiving, and the thought of forgiving my husband was not even in my consciousness.

Then I began to look at the role I had played in my marriage, and realized I was responsible for giving away my power in the relationship. I began to see that my husband left in response to some of the dynamics that I had created in the marriage. For the first time, I could see the meaning of forgiveness. I forgave myself for thinking that the only way I could be loved was to abdicate my personal power, and I forgave him for not being able to love me the way I wanted to be loved.

I think the greatest awareness around this forgiveness process came when I realized my contribution to the ending of my marriage, and that divorce, for us, was inevitable.

## The Meaning of Forgiveness

What does it mean to forgive? Merriam-Webster defines it as "to give up resentment against, or the desire to punish; stop being angry with; to give up all claim to punish or exact penalty." If we are to forgive, then we must first surrender the right to get even. We then cease defining the one who

**If we forgive, then we can also reach a point where we wish our injurers well; this act of forgiveness then becomes some kind of miracle after we've made meaning of the situation.**

hurt us in terms of the hurt that was caused. Keep in mind, there's nothing in Webster's definition about the need to reach approval of the injurer's actions: you can forgive your spouse's infidelity, for instance, without approving of that infidelity.

If we forgive, then we can also reach a point where we wish our injurers well; this act of forgiveness then becomes some kind of miracle after we've made meaning of the situation.

How do we get to "meaning making"? One way to make sense of your divorce is to realize that your choice of partner may have been based on an old and unhealed need (probably from your childhood) – not on a current or realistic expectation. During the first seven years of our life we usually internalize that parent from whom we need the most approval; later on, this internal parent influences how we choose relationships.

According to Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. – one of North America's leading authorities on relationships and the author of the bestselling book *Getting the Love You Want* – you unconsciously chose your partner because he or she had some of the same traits as your primary caregiver(s). "We are attracted to people like our parents in order to finish the business we didn't finish with them," he says. "Unconsciously, we feel like we're in survival mode, and so when we meet someone who is similar to our parents, we go into a kind of euphoria because deep down inside we believe we're now going to get what we didn't get in childhood. That's what triggers the impulse most commonly called 'romantic love'."

If you're willing to acknowledge that your choice of partner was "beyond your control," then it becomes easier to forgive yourself.

## Letting Go

"Forgiveness is integral to letting go. We are bound to the people we cannot forgive. Holding even a small grudge takes up space in the soul and captures the energy needed for moving on. To bless the people who are our oppressors is the only way to heal the wounds they have inflicted and to break the chains that bind us to them," writes Elizabeth O'Connor in *Cry Pain, Cry Hope* (Word Pub.).

Letting go means letting go of the resentment, pain, and hate that has probably been an important "driver" – one that helps you stand up for your rights in the divorce process. However, holding on to resentment for too long will

eventually consume you. How long is too long? I don't like imposing deadlines on grief work, but the short answer is that you should let go when you're tired of it – when you feel your energy so depleted that it's hard to get out of bed in the morning. Look at how much hating the other person is draining your own internal resources and blocking your growth.

Holding on to a dead relationship is usually the result of feeling a need to put closure on unresolved issues. The desire to resolve issues in the present is a good one, but it becomes a problem if we get stuck in a determination that we must resolve the issue in a certain way. For instance, you might think: "I'm not letting go of this until my ex says he/she is sorry, or gives me all his/her money, or suffers as much as I have." Holding on can literally permeate your life, keeping you from living in the present; it can cause illness and can prevent you from experiencing new things. When you're stuck in anger, you become a slave to a kind of circular living and thinking, going around and around without attempting to move ahead. If you continue in this circular mode, you risk becoming hopeless, depressed, fatigued, and chronically negative.

You may be using your resentment to hold onto the relationship. It's common for people going through the pain of divorce to maintain their anger stance because it enables them to at least remain connected to the relationship in some way; they'd rather have a horrible relationship with their ex than no relationship at all.

The relationship has come apart, but in some way it still exists – especially if you have children. Letting go does not mean forgetting the good times, or that you must move from love to hate. Some part of you may always love your ex, and that's okay.

Letting go of your past is not the same as avoiding it. If you ignore or repress the painful events in your past because you believe they'd be too painful to relive, you prevent yourself from moving past them.

## Stuck in the Past

Another way of getting stuck is by clinging to positive feelings or events. If you've blocked everything except your happy memories of the relationship, you might be afraid to move on – afraid that nothing will compare to the past. Recognizing and accepting this fear as normal is the first step to creating a world full of new experiences. You also need to allow plenty of room for the grieving process before you can

**Have you forgiven yourself? Most of us in the process of divorce or its aftermath find it more difficult to forgive ourselves than to forgive our partners.**

trust there's a new world full of opportunity waiting for you.

Getting free from the hold the past has on you doesn't mean you have to forget the good times (or the bad). Remembering can serve some very important purposes. Remembering can occupy your mind with pleasant thoughts for a much needed "vacation from pain" – and most importantly, it can generate learning that will serve you in the future.

One key to letting go of past hurt is to focus on meeting your own needs in the present. Keep reminding yourself that forgiveness is a process, and it might be a longer one than you'd like. Have you forgiven yourself? Most of us in the process of divorce or its aftermath find it more difficult to forgive ourselves than to forgive our partners.

Being able to let go of negative feelings towards others is highly dependent on your ability to let go of negative feelings towards yourself. When you've developed the ability to let go of your own past mistakes and to acknowledge your humanness, it's almost magical how effortless it becomes to let go of the mistakes of others.

## Suggested Actions

- Write the following affirmation out on a piece of paper and place it where you'll see it upon awakening each day: "I am now ready and willing to release, let go, and forgive myself for any contribution I have made to the ending of my relationship."
- Write down what you have difficulty forgiving yourself for. Now look at what you've written, noticing how you judge yourself, and make a conscious effort to understand and forgive yourself.
- Light a candle and say the following words as you look into its flame: "I release you, \_\_\_\_\_ (ex-spouse's name), into the light, and I do this for my highest good and yours." ■



*Pamela D. Blair (Ph.D.) is an author, life coach, therapist, and couples counselor. As a therapist, she is known for her holistic approach and her innovative personal growth workshops. Her office is located in Shelburne, Vermont. However, she is not limited to only seeing clients in the Vermont area: all you need is access to the internet and you can do private sessions on Skype or Facetime. [www.PamBlair.com](http://www.PamBlair.com).*



# Nurturing Mind and Body during *Divorce*

Taking good care of yourself through the stresses of separation and divorce is absolutely vital.

By Diana Shepherd, *Divorce Magazine* Co-Founder

**Y**our teenage son has “borrowed” your car without permission again – so now you can’t drive your daughter to Brownies. Your daughter is having a meltdown on your front lawn while your neighbors watch with disapproval. There’s a message on your answering machine from your ex saying he/she can’t take the kids this weekend because he/she got a fabulous deal on airfare to Bermuda and is leaving tomorrow for 10 days of sun and sand with his/her new love interest. The house is a mess, your savings account is down to double-digits, and your son says he “just has to have” that new pair of \$150 running shoes, or he’ll be branded as a “loser” at school.

Suddenly, you don’t feel so good: your stomach is upset, your chest feels tight, and you can feel a wicked headache/backache/cold coming on. The stress in your life has risen beyond your ability to cope with it, and your body will respond with a “breakdown” wherever it’s weakest. If you tend to catch viruses easily, you’ll come down with a cold or flu; if you have a “bad back,” it will get worse; otherwise mild allergies will become moderate to severe – you get the picture.

According to the noted Social Readjustment Rating Scale (also known as the “Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale”),

except for the death of a spouse or child, divorce produces more stress than any other life event. If you ignore or deny your feelings of stress, you’ll end up sick or injured (clumsiness often goes along with stress) – and then you’ll feel even more stressed at having to cope with your disability in addition to all the other challenges you’re facing. Divorce-related stress is unavoidable, but you can learn to manage your stress so that it doesn’t seriously damage your body and spirit. The only thing that’s required of you is a genuine willingness to change – everything else will grow out of your commitment to health and happiness. Without that commitment, however, any steps you take towards better health will be severely limited in both scope and efficacy.

## Managing Stress

If you’re facing the challenges of divorce right now, it’s probably safe to say that stress is your constant companion. Researchers at Georgetown University Medical Center in Washington, D.C., have found that emotions can cause chemical reactions in our cells. This means that negative emotions (such as fear, anger, or even fretting) can have a detrimental impact on every part of



your body – including the organs that support your immune system. If stressful thoughts and feelings can actually damage your physical health, you can see why managing stress properly – and taking better care of your body – is so vital at this stage of your life.

So how do you relax and de-stress? If you're like most people, what leaps immediately to mind are "treat" behaviors: smoking, drinking, taking drugs (prescription or "recreational"), eating a carton of chocolate ice-cream – whatever gives you feelings of pleasure and well-being, no matter how transitory. Unfortunately, all of these are band-aid solutions – they temporarily ameliorate some of the symptoms without addressing the root of the problem – and none of them contribute to health and vitality.

### Scanning for Tension

A good place to start an effective stress-reduction program is to find out where you hold stress in your body. The first time you try the following exercise, you should probably be lying down with your eyes closed. Take the phone off the hook, and tell your kids or housemates that you don't want to be disturbed for at least half an hour. In this exercise, you'll be scanning your body from the tips of your toes to the top of your head, looking for places where you hold tension then consciously letting that tension go.

Focus your attention exclusively on one part of your body at a time, starting with your feet. Wiggle your toes. Rotate your ankles, and flex your feet so your toes are pointing up towards the ceiling, then down and away from you. Is there any tension in your feet or lower legs? If so, intentionally increase the tension for a few seconds, then exhale deeply and relax that part of your body, imagining the tension flowing out of you with your breath. Move your attention upwards to your thighs, buttocks, and hips. Flex each muscle in turn, checking for tension and discomfort, then let it go with a deep exhalation. Repeat for your stomach, chest, and shoulders. Pull your shoulders up towards your ears, hold them there tightly for a few seconds, then drop them down as far as they will comfortably go while you exhale. Now focus your attention to your throat, mouth, cheeks, eyes, forehead, and scalp. Notice any tension, exaggerate then release it.

The benefits of this exercise are twofold:

1. You'll discover where you hold stress in your body.
2. You'll give your body a break by releasing tense areas.

### Yoga and You

Yoga is an excellent way to treat mind and body simultaneously. From the Sanskrit word *yuj*, which means "to yoke," yoga is

**Yoga is an excellent way to treat mind and body simultaneously. From the Sanskrit word *yuj*, which means "to yoke," yoga is designed to yoke or join the mind, body, and breath.**

designed to yoke or join the mind, body, and breath. Hatha Yoga (the most common type in North America) can help you release built-up tension and stress, strengthening the body while calming the mind.

Before trying yoga or meditation on your own, you should meet with a qualified instructor to learn how to do it properly – which poses you should practice, and which you should avoid. Your instructor will guide you through the correct positions, and teach you the basics of proper breathing, meditation, and other relaxation techniques. Once you've learned the poses, all you need to practice yoga is a quiet, comfortable

place and about 20-40 minutes each day to breathe and stretch your stress away.

### Food and Mood

Here are some suggestions on using food to improve your mood:

- **Cut back on caffeine**, including coffee, tea, cola, and chocolate. Women take note: caffeine has been found to play a huge role in PMS, from breast pain to mood swings. For some people, one cup a day is too much; you'll need to experiment to determine your threshold.
- **Drink pure water**. Ideally, you should be drinking about two liters of filtered water every day. This is one of the simplest, and yet most vital, steps you can take to improve your health.
- **Increase "good" fats**. Hundreds of studies have identified a relationship between depression and the absence of foods rich in polyunsaturated fatty acids in the diet. According to Gary L. Wenk, Ph.D., author of *Your Brain on Food: How Chemicals Control your Thoughts and Feelings* (Oxford University Press, 2010), "Your brain needs a balance between Omega-3 fatty acids and a similar fatty acid called Omega-6." Both of these fatty acids influence many important brain functions, including depression. "However, it is imperative to get the proper balance of both Omega-3 and Omega-6 in order to achieve optimal brain function," warns Dr. Wenk. "My advice: include leafy green vegetables, flaxseed, canola oils, kiwi fruit, walnuts or marine fish in your diet every day." (To watch Dr. Wenk's TED talk on why food choices are key to a long, healthy life, go to [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SvkaK2Al0o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SvkaK2Al0o))
- **Take your vitamins**. "Vitamin B-12 and other B vitamins play a role in producing brain chemicals that affect mood and other brain functions," say Dr. Daniel K. Hall-Flavin, who serves as one of the Mayo Clinic's online experts. "Low levels of B-12 and other B vitamins such as vitamin B-6 and folate may be linked to depression." Ask your doctor about which vitamins or supplements might be right for you.

- **Butt out.** Aside from increasing your risk of lung cancer and heart disease, smoking triggers the release of stress hormones in the body.
- **Avoid Sugar.** In *Stress Management for Dummies* (second edition, 2013), author Allen Elkin suggests that you: “Avoid highly sugared treats. They’ll give you a boost in the short run but let you down in the long run.” He also suggests that you choose snacks that have “high energy proteins and are high in complex carbohydrates. They’ll give you a longer-lasting pick-me-up.” Elkin offers loads of great stress-busting tips and advice in this highly-readable book – everything from overcoming anger to goal setting, meditation to organizational skills.

## Exercise Your Options

If you really want to minimize the negative effects of divorce-related stress on your body, you need to do more than just eat right. You need to exercise.

What’s the best form of exercise? The one you’ll do. The best exercise equipment in the world won’t do you a bit of good if you can’t bring yourself to use it.

If you’ve been sedentary for the last few years, you *must* see your physician before you start an exercise program. If you haven’t had a full physical examination in the last year, now’s a great time to have one. Please be aware that pushing your body too hard too fast is a recipe for disaster – at the very least, you’ll probably sprain or tear a muscle; at worst, you’ll have a heart attack.

Unless your doctor vetoes the idea, a good place to start is by taking daily walks, slowly increasing the speed, distance, and duration. If you can’t stand the idea of walking “aimlessly,” give yourself errands to accomplish on your walks: instead of driving, walk to the bank/post office/milk store. Arrange to go for walks in scenic areas with friends so you can enjoy their company as well as the surroundings while you walk.

If your lifestyle can accommodate it, consider getting a dog: you’re guaranteed daily exercise, and it’s nice to come home to a happy, enthusiastic welcome instead of an empty house. (Also, you’ve probably heard of the therapeutic side-effects of pet ownership: that stroking an animal lowers your blood pressure and decreases tension.) If owning a dog is out of the question, you could always “borrow” one: your neighbor would probably be thrilled if you offered to take her dog for a daily walk in the park.

Walking can also help you sleep better at night – good news for those suffering from divorce-related insomnia. In a study involving more than 700 men and women, researchers discovered that people who walked at least six blocks a day at a normal pace experienced fewer sleep-related problems such as nightmares, or trouble getting to or staying asleep; in fact, they were one-third less likely to have trouble sleeping until their wake-up time than people who didn’t walk at all. And those who walked the same distance at an aerobic pace were 50% less likely to suffer sleep problems than non-walkers.

Dr. Andrew Weil, who has seen people achieve maximum

fitness through walking alone, offers the following benefits of walking in his book *Eight Weeks to Optimum Health* (Ballantine Books):

- You already know how to do it
- You can do it anywhere
- It requires no equipment, just a good pair of shoes
- It carries the least risk of injury of any form of exercise
- It can provide a complete workout, equal to or better than any other activity

## Touchy Situations

Chances are, there wasn’t a lot of positive touching during the last months – or even years – of your marriage. You’ve probably heard about the therapeutic benefits of touch, which include reducing stress and blood pressure and increasing relaxation and feelings of well-being. If you are without a romantic partner right now, how can you take advantage of these benefits? The simple answer is to get a massage.

Massage is one of the oldest natural remedies around: rubbing a sore spot on your body seems to be a basic instinct, like eating when you’re hungry or the “fight or flight” response. If you’ve ever had a full Swedish massage, you know how relaxing it can be. But many experts believe that it offers other benefits as well, including:

- Reducing muscle tension, swelling, and inflammation
- Relieving “tension” headaches and chronic pain
- Soothing the nervous system
- Improving blood circulation
- Aiding digestion
- Increasing joint mobility.

Other common types of therapeutic touch include: Reiki, Shiatsu, Feldenkrais, Rolfing, and Craniosacral therapy. Some involve deep, vigorous massage; some work on acupressure points; and others involve the lightest of strokes.

## Seeing Results

If you invest the time, energy, and commitment into caring for your body properly, it will repay you generously. But as an impatient North American, you’re probably wondering when the rewards will start to show up.

“Both from observing the effects of natural therapies and from watching people try to make lasting changes in how they live, I have concluded that two months ... is the critical time for you to see effects of therapeutic regimens as well as to replace old habits with new,” says Dr. Weil. “If you can follow a program of healthy living for two months, you will have made the commitment of time and energy necessary for it to work.” ■



*Diana Shepherd is the co-founder and Editorial Director of Divorce Magazine. An award-winning author and editor, she has been writing about divorce, remarriage, and stepfamily issues since 1995. [www.DivorceMag.com](http://www.DivorceMag.com)*



# DIVORCE STRESS

Divorce stress is not uncommon when faced with the end of a marriage. Learn how to identify and manage it in both yourself and your children.

By Marina Edelman, Marriage and Family Therapist

**D**uring the Olympics, one of the female gymnasts was asked how she handles pressure and stress. She said that she doesn't view pressure to perform as a negative; instead, she labels the feeling as "excitement" instead of "stress" or "pressure." This is not a big stretch since stress can be good as well as bad. Without some stress, we would not have the adrenaline to win races, solve problems, take exams, and make changes in the world.

Stress can be defined as mental, physical, or emotional disturbance that alters homeostasis of the body and can be experienced both physically and psychologically. It is a form of pressure experienced by a person due to external impact from a job, school, death of a loved one, marriage, and divorce. Change has been identified as the dominant cause of stress in most cases.

Stress is also accompanied by a feeling of threat where the affected person assumes an endangered state of mind. Stress is an undesirable and unpleasant state usually manifested through actions, the way of thinking, and feelings.

Chronic stress cannot be ignored and must be dealt with to avoid decreased immune function, which leads to worsening of ill-health and causes debilitating symptoms.



The easiest way to start dealing with divorce-related stress is through adopting the following actions and practices:

- Avoid rushing.
- Exercise.
- Take deep breaths.
- Talk about it: putting an adjective to a feeling releases the negative energy stored in the body.

You can also engage your mind to help manage your stress:

- Use positive mental imagery.
- Focus on the task at hand rather than imagining the outcome.
- Avoid negative thoughts.
- Reflect on thoughts and actions that led to a particularly good performance.

## Stress: Signs and Symptoms

Stress is an individual experience and symptoms vary. The signs and symptoms listed below may also be signs of disease, so you shouldn't ignore them just because you believe they are stress-related. You must get more serious symptoms checked out by your doctor.

### Physical signs and symptoms of stress include:

- ✓ Chest pain.
- ✓ Pounding heart.
- ✓ High blood pressure.
- ✓ Shortness of breath.
- ✓ Fatigue.
- ✓ Diminished or increased sex drive.
- ✓ Muscle aches, such as back and neck pain.
- ✓ Headaches.
- ✓ Dizziness.
- ✓ Clenched jaws and grinding teeth.
- ✓ Tight, dry, or a feeling of a lump in your throat.
- ✓ Indigestion.
- ✓ Constipation or diarrhea.
- ✓ Increased perspiration.
- ✓ Stomach cramps.
- ✓ Weight gain or loss.
- ✓ Skin problems.

### The psychological signs and symptoms of stress include:

- ✓ Sadness.
- ✓ Depression.
- ✓ Crying.
- ✓ Withdrawal or isolation.
- ✓ Insomnia.

- ✓ Mood swings.
- ✓ Worry.
- ✓ Restless anxiety.
- ✓ Irritability, anger, decreased anger control.
- ✓ Overeating or loss of appetite.
- ✓ Feelings of insecurity.
- ✓ Decreased productivity.
- ✓ Job dissatisfaction.
- ✓ Changes in close relationships.
- ✓ Increased smoking.
- ✓ Increased use of alcohol and drugs.

Everyone experiences divorce stress differently – including children and especially teenagers. Teen girls and boys tend to manifest stress differently from each other; signs of stress in teenaged girls include:

- ✓ Procrastination in doing her homework.
- ✓ Overreaction to a situation with a friend.
- ✓ Frozen while taking a test.
- ✓ Loses temper easily and is unusually moody.
- ✓ Excessively tired.
- ✓ Uses aches or pains as an excuse to stay home from school.
- ✓ Takes out aggression on a younger sibling.

In teenaged boys, a certain amount of moodiness is normal. Here are some signs to help you differentiate between “normal” and “stressed-out” in teenaged boys:

- ✓ Arguing is normal; constant anger is not.
- ✓ Withdrawal from parents is normal; pulling away from family and friends is not.
- ✓ Anxiety is normal; feeling constantly overwhelmed is not.
- ✓ Being upset for days after a bad experience is normal; more than two weeks is not.

## Get Help

Pay attention to your body and it will serve you well. If you aren't able to cope with divorce stress on your own, please consult a mental-health professional who can help you identify triggers and implement new coping strategies to minimize the effect of life's rollercoasters on your health and well-being. ■



*Marina Edelman is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist who offers solution-focused and evidence-based psychotherapy and counseling, including assessment and treatment for a range of emotional, behavioral, and psychological difficulties. [www.marinaedelman.com](http://www.marinaedelman.com)*

# 8 Tips for Coping with the Brave New Post-Divorce World

You must embrace your painful feelings, but avoid a full-blown pity party day in and day out. Consider these tips for managing your post-divorce funk.

By Carrie L. Ward, Social Service Worker

**Y**ou're embarking on a new adventure! You are beginning a new chapter! You are starting over! You are setting foot on a post-divorce world where anything is possible! These are the words of well-meaning friends, colleagues, and family members. They are meant to provide encouragement, a positive spin on a series of negative events, and to help you re-frame your current situation as something new and remarkable – a jumping-off point of sorts. And, let's face it, they sound so much better than the alternatives such as: Your life as you knew it is over! Your ship has sailed! Your chapter has ended! Your book is closed!

But, I've decided those "brave new world" phrases aren't right for me just yet. Life as a recently divorced mother of two does not feel like an adventure. It is not an exciting new chapter. It is not an opportunity to blaze new trails. Not yet, anyway. Rather, it is sad. It is painful. Sometimes it is downright agony. And it is okay to embrace those feelings, even if those around you are ready for you to get better and move on.



## Emotional pain can come in waves – sometimes gentle, sad, tolerable waves, and sometimes big, crashing, unbearable tidal waves.

You can only move forward at your own pace – baby steps sometimes – and you will only feel better when you feel better.

It is totally understandable that you and those in your circle of friends and loved ones have entirely different perspectives on your life. Generally, with the passage of time, comes the expectation of a return to normalcy. And though your post-divorce normal is likely different than your prior normal, folks who care for you want you to feel better and may think it is about time that you do.

Nursing a broken heart is a painful task. But here is what I know: emotional pain can come in waves – sometimes gentle, sad, tolerable waves, and sometimes big, crashing, unbearable tidal waves. Maybe you already know how to surf. You’ve navigated other turbulent waters and developed the skill-set to handle them. Or maybe you haven’t, and divorce feels like the worst thing that has ever happened to you and your family. If this is the case, you may be less exuberant about the process of starting over. There is no shame in that. Nursing a broken heart is a big, complicated, painful task.

And while it is okay – necessary, really – to embrace your feelings, it is equally critical that you avoid existing in a full-blown pity party day in and day out, because that probably won’t help much in the long run.

### Tips for Coping with Your Post-Divorce World

So, what to do with your broken heart? Consider these tips for managing your post-divorce funk.

#### 1. Accept it.

When people offer you words of comfort, whether they resonate perfectly with you or not, accept it for what it is – loving support meant to show they care and want you to feel better.

#### 2. Feel it.

Let yourself feel your emotions – whatever they are – all the way down to your toes. Cry if you need to. Get mad if that’s what works for you. And then do something, anything, that helps you move forward in a positive direction.

#### 3. Fight it.

Fight the urge to crawl under the bed and stay there. Keep getting up, getting out, and moving on. Don’t waste precious moments of your life in misery.

#### 4. Fix it.

You have life left to live. How can you make it better? What energizes you? Think about it, make a plan, and then get busy working on it.

#### 5. Try it.

What are you waiting for? There is no time like the present to try those things that you have been putting off. Been saving a project for a rainy day? It’s raining. Start it today. One of my favorite sayings is “motivation follows action.” Getting started is the hard part. Once you start, you’ll be surprised how motivated you are to continue.

#### 6. Reduce it.

Break down big tasks into bite-size pieces. Want to run a 5K? Start by walking around the block. In the words of Lao Tzu, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Take that first step.

#### 7. Write it.

Make lists, write stories, journals, post-its – the choice is yours. Things get real when you write them down. Put pen to paper to reflect on your thoughts, feelings, and future plans.

#### 8. Learn from it.

Divorce changes people. You may feel different about life, relationships, love, and happily ever after. It will take some time to assimilate these new feelings. Pause and reflect on this and learn from your experiences. Find something you can take away from this difficult time and use it as a building block for your future.

If these tips don’t click for you, add your own. Whatever you do, remember that there are people who care about you and want to see you succeed. Maybe your ex is no longer one of them, but that’s okay. Don’t discount the support of those who are here for you right now. You need them. ■



*Carrie L. Ward is a divorced mother of two daughters and a long-time social service worker/administrator. Her marriage to her college sweetheart ended after 23 years, resulting in an unexpected and abrupt change in the direction of her life. With the support of steadfast friends, family, coworkers, and a wonderful therapist, Carrie is rebuilding her life, her confidence, and her strength.*





# 6 Tips for Bouncing Back After Infidelity

When someone has cheated on you, the anger and resentment you feel towards them is understandable. But these emotions can paralyze you, affecting your ability to move on from the infidelity.

By Chris Armstrong, Certified Relationship Coach

One of my four rules of relationship coaching is that I will not try to salvage a relationship or marriage if there has been infidelity. I will not waver from this. But dammit if I will not help a client that has been cheated on and has decided to end their marriage. Bouncing back after such deceit is not easy but it is achievable.

Here are 6 things you can do to move on after your spouse has cheated.

## 1 Let Yourself Grieve

You will cry. You will have anger. You will want to be alone. This is you. This is us. This is human. One of the worst things that one can do is to put on a false sense of bravado or hide their emotions. When we suppress instead of allow ourselves to grieve, the internal pain manifests itself in ways and at times that are unhealthy and yield long-term, negative consequences.

## 2 Do Not Overthink the “Why”

Your marriage has ended because they cheated on you. To this day, you are still not sure why. So there you sit thinking about every possible rationale.

- You’ve gained weight and they were no longer attracted to you?
- They went on a lot of trips and grew lonely in the hotels?
- There was so much time with the children and working on the online business that you were always too tired to stay connected in the bedroom?

## Be the bigger person: it will show your cheating partner that you are not a wounded bird, and in the long term, the effect that they had on you was nil.

It could be these reasons and it could be many other reasons. I need to share something with you that you may not want to hear. In the scheme of things, the ‘why’ does not matter. Again, your marriage has already ended and no rationale you can think of will have justified the infidelity. What’s more, the more you think about the why, the more you are second-guessing yourself and unwittingly sabotaging the life you are trying to rebuild.

### 3 Resist Posting it all over Social Media

Posting on Facebook may give you an opportunity to release in the moment but it also creates weeks of constant reminders through the countless “likes,” comments, and emojis. It also creates opportunities for friends and family to weigh in, throwing unintended fuel to the fire. This will not help you bounce back.

### 4 Find Meaningful Outlets

“Meaningful” is a very deliberate word because we are good at doing things, anything, to occupy our minds, but if those things are not who we really are and do not truly resonate with us, they will prove to be temporary buffers from the negative feelings of the divorce and infidelity. On the other hand, if there are hobbies and activities that have always brought you joy, find a couple of hours a week to get back into them. You will smile and it will be natural. You will remember the good things and those memories will be pleasant.

This brings me to the most important reason for finding meaningful outlets: the more you can invest in them, the more they will help.

### 5 Remind Yourself of Who You Were when You Were Happy

Divorce can be an embarrassing experience for someone. Being cheated on can be even worse. We feel unattractive and unworthy of a faithful relationship with someone that supposedly loved us. What’s more, it is

almost always the case that some of our friends and family know about the cheating. But, the cheating is a microcosm of a life that has been full of moments that made us happy.

- We remember being asked to the prom by three girls/guys we liked;
- We remember having game night and martini’s with our friends;
- We remember being flirted with by the bartender at that place on Sycamore.

Keep these memories in your frontal lobe so that the pain of divorce and infidelity can be replaced by the confidence of who you are and the faith that there is a happy life to be had.

### 6 Be the Bigger Person

When someone has cheated on you, the anger and resentment that you are prone to feel towards them is understandable. But when these emotions are turned outwards towards the cheater, they can paralyze you, affecting your ability to move on. You must resist this.

- When you see them every other weekend to drop the kids off, converse with them.
- When they come to the soccer game with their new squeeze, introduce yourself – don’t wait for the awkward moment where you bump into each other.

Taking this approach will help you find your pride and self-regard that almost certainly lapsed when you found out about the infidelity. “I am not hiding because I am bigger and stronger than that.”

It will also put things into perspective for the one who cheated on you. You are not a wounded bird, and in the long term, the effect that they had on you was nil. This puts the rest of your interactions with them on a level playing field.

This is not to suggest that you should forgive cheating – I think the complete opposite. But, one needs to forgive an offense in order to truly move on. ■



*Chris Armstrong is a Certified Relationship Coach and Emotional Intelligence facilitator who cuts to the chase and speaks from the heart. A regular blogger at DivorcedMoms.com, he is also an experienced advocate for women’s equality and women empowerment, having spoken at more than 180 events and taught more*

*than 350 sessions on matters in this arena.*  
[www.mazeoflove.com](http://www.mazeoflove.com)

# 7 Reasons Why Being Friends with Your Ex Usually Doesn't Work

It's a good idea to be civil and cooperative with your ex; however, being friends with them probably won't allow you to move on with your life after divorce.

By Terry Gaspard,  
Licensed Clinical Social Worker

**W**hile it's normal to want to undo the past, being friends with your ex usually doesn't work out. It's a noble endeavor to want to be a friend to a former spouse but it can fuel your child's reconciliation fantasies and prevent both adults from healing and moving on with their lives.

It's especially problematic for the person who was left – or the dumpee – because having regular contact with the person who rejected them can make a person feel confused or give them a sense of false hope. On the other hand, the dumper would probably admit to feeling guilty upon seeing their ex regularly or worry that they are sending the wrong message.

When my marriage ended, I had the misconception that two good people (myself and my ex) should be able to stay friends after our divorce. In my case, I was looking for closure – but soon realized that letting go of the reasons why our marriage dissolved was a healthier decision. I also came to terms with the fact





that I didn't need to have all of the answers to why my marriage failed in order to move on.

There are many reasons why people strive to be friends with their ex after a breakup or divorce. Certainly one of the main reasons is that they have unfinished business that they hope to resolve. Or they may want to keep the non-intimate part of the relationship going because they have caring feelings towards their former spouse.

Erin, a 40-something teacher, confides, "I couldn't understand why two civilized adults couldn't visit with our kids and hang out like friends. But Jason told me it hurt him too badly because I broke it off and he was reminded of his pain every time we got together." This experience is a common one for the dumper who might feel especially hurt if their ex has a new partner and they don't. It can add salt to an open wound that has not had sufficient time to heal.

Another reason why people want to stay in close contact with a former partner after a breakup is guilt. Sometimes the

**While it's normal to want to undo the past, being friends with your ex usually doesn't work out.**

person who is the dumper feels guilty about leaving the relationship, especially if they were unfaithful, and they want to remain friendly with the dumpee to help to ease their guilt. In this case, counseling with a qualified therapist is a more effective way to deal with these leftover emotions.

Further, some individuals keep their relationship alive because they hope for reconciliation but they don't necessarily acknowledge it. According to Susan J. Elliott, author of *Getting Past Your Breakup*, "Examining your quest for contact and being honest about your real intentions will help you stop making excuses to make contact."

Conner, 48, reflects, "I did all I could to keep in touch with Karen with the hope that we could fix things and one day get back together – even though I knew she was in love with someone else."

## Why Being Friends with Your Ex Doesn't Work

1. **Most of the time, a post-breakup friendship is a setup for further heartbreak**, especially for the person who was left and probably feels rejected.
2. **It does not give you or your ex time to grieve the loss of the relationship or marriage**. Like all losses, the breakup of a long-term relationship or marriage causes people to go through various stages of grief. In order to heal and move through anger and denial, it's essential that individuals have the emotional and physical space to do this. Trying to maintain a friendship may extend the healing process.
3. **You need to forge a new identity**: After a breakup, it's essential to lose your identity as a couple and to return to who you were as an individual, rather than half of a couple.

4. **It can cause confusion for your children**. It's normal for most children to experience reconciliation fantasies and seeing their parents spend time together (social events, holidays, etc.) can cause them to long for their intact family. Children benefit from parents who are collaborative but not necessarily friends post-breakup.

5. **You might not have been true friends and it's problematic to start now**. Sometimes, especially when there are children involved, a person may feel pressured to preserve a friendship that never existed or that disappeared during your marriage. So just say "no" and remain cordial to each other.

6. **You need energy to "take care of yourself"** and to form new relationships. Maintaining a close friendship with an ex (especially if it's emotionally or physically intimate) can delay this process.

7. **Acceptance is the final stage of grieving the loss of a loved one**, according to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, and a post-breakup friendship doesn't facilitate this process.

At some point, it's important to accept the breakup of your marriage and come to a place of "it is what it is." These anecdotes from bloggers help to explain how acceptance and setting boundaries with your ex can facilitate creating a new chapter in your life.

Katie, a 30-something high school counselor, reflects, "When I broke it off with husband Kyle, he took it very hard. I thought that if we stayed in touch and hung out sometimes it would help him adjust, but it only made things worse. I let my guilt and his feelings of rejection be the driving force rather than common sense. It took him years to get over our breakup and I was left feeling even more guilty because of the pain I caused him."

Justin, a 40-year old accountant, shares: "It just didn't work for Heather and me to remain friends. It got complicated without three kids and they felt more confused when we tried to get together. Then when I started dating Susie, they didn't like her and kept talking about wanting their mom and me to get back together. It wasn't fair to them and I didn't want to give them false hope."

Truth be told, it's a great idea to be civil and cooperative with your former spouse – especially when you have children. Being allies with your ex can help children adjust and thrive post-divorce. That said, maintaining a friendship with your former spouse probably won't allow you both to move on with your life after a divorce. Giving yourself time and space to regain independence and a sense of identity will serve you and your children well in the long run. ■



*Terry Gaspard (MSW, LCSW) is a licensed therapist, college instructor, and nonfiction author specializing in divorce, women's issues, children's issues, and relationships. As a therapist, she helps people heal from the pain of divorce and other losses. She is a regular contributor to TheGoodMenProject.com, DivorcedMoms.com, and DivorceMag.com.*

[www.movingpastdivorce.com](http://www.movingpastdivorce.com)



# Dating After Divorce: 14 Helpful Tips to Live By

You shouldn't enter into the decision to date after a breakup or divorce lightly. Healthy dating requires openness, flexibility, and self-confidence to ensure good results.

By Dr. Tarra Bates-Duford,  
Marriage, Couples & Family Therapist

The process of divorce is one of the most difficult things someone can experience during the course of one's lifetime. Divorce is a very confusing time in the life of a family as well as those that love them. For many of us, when we hear that a couple is divorcing, several thoughts flood our mind, e.g., "They were so perfect together," "They always seemed so happy," "I didn't know they were having problems", "They always seem to work things out," etc.

Going through a divorce can be a major life transition, affected by how partners engage with each other following the decision to divorce and individual perceptions about why the divorce is happening (who is thought to have given up on the marriage, infidelity). It throws us into a major life transition that is colored by intense feelings and emotions that can be debilitating. I believe that fear is the main culprit that holds us

back from not only healing and letting go of our pain, but also from moving forward into a new life, with new possibilities, and new people.

## Fear Can Motivate You to Change – or Keep You Stuck in a Rut

Although fear can be destabilizing, it can also serve as a positive motivator for change. Unresolved fear can act as a paralytic agent that can force us into stagnation or lead us to the uncomfortable feeling of being “stuck”. When we are feeling stuck, we remain in a fixed position. We cannot move backward, nor will we have the opportunity to progress forward. Fear has the ability to consume our thoughts, creating self-doubt and rendering us unable to fully confront or process our feeling appropriately.

Divorce is one of the most frightening, confusing, depressing, and anxiety-invoking experiences one can ever experience in life. It is associated with an increase in depression – people experience loss of partner, hopes and dreams, and lifestyle. The decision to end a relationship can be traumatic, chaotic, and filled with contradictory emotions. There are also specific feelings, attitudes, and dynamics depending on whether one is in the role of the initiator or the receiver of the decision to break up.

You should not enter into the decision to date after a breakup or divorce lightly. The decision to start dating again should be a personal one – not a choice that’s prompted or insisted upon by friends and family. Healthy dating requires openness, flexibility, and self-confidence to ensure better dating outcomes. Those who are not comfortable with themselves and their direction in life will find it extremely difficult, or almost impossible, to find happiness with someone else.

## 14 Dating Tips to Follow After a Divorce

1. Make sure you are dating for the right reasons. Ensure you are not dating to avoid being alone, are uncomfortable being alone, or if you are trying to fit within some time frame of when you “should be” dating.
2. Ensure you have fully processed and resolved any underlying issues regarding your former spouse and the divorce.
3. Accept yourself as an individual, no longer as part of a couple.
4. Identify and accept that dating practices may have changed during the time you were married, so you will need to adapt to the changes.
5. Dating can be scary. Allow yourself to explore any and all fears surrounding dating, the dissolution of the marriage, and any betrayal that may have led to the divorce.
6. Avoid negative thinking or ruminating about past failed relationships.
7. Determine your dating/love intention, i.e., are you interested in casual dating, or dating with the opportunity for long term commitment?
8. Do not act out of desperation: dating anyone, accepting anything, or overlooking potential red flags this person

**The decision to start dating again should be a personal one – not a choice that’s prompted or insisted upon by friends and family.**

may not be the right person for you.

9. Do not assume the first person you date following a divorce will be “The One.” Everything and everyone that has come into contact with you has changed your life in some way; you are not the same person you were before you got married, so your taste in people, desired attributes, personal appearance, etc. may have changed.
10. If you feel you are ready to date, do not let anything stop you. Do not be side-swiped by people or children that insist there is a specific time frame to start dating following a divorce.
11. Explore multiple dating options to increase your options, such as blind dates, online dating websites or apps, dates arranged by friends or family, etc.
12. Do not beat your date over the head with what went wrong in your prior relationships or marriage.
13. One of the most important things to remember when dating is to have fun and enjoy the dating process. Do not try to force a relationship; if a romantic connection is present, the relationship will evolve.
14. Keep in mind not all dating experiences will become romantic relationships, as you will find that you have more of a social connection than a romantic connection. If a dating relationship does not turn into a romantic relationship, you may have acquired a new friend.

Like most negative things in life, negative experiences can be turned into positive. Following a divorce, former spouses can use their divorce as an opportunity for personal growth and maturity. Former partners can take inventory of their life – mistakes and all – and devote time and energy to discovering who they are, what they want for their future, and who they want to spend the remainder of their lives with.

Processing a divorce takes time, patience, and dedication, but in the end, former partners will be able to put their divorce behind them. They go on to be centered, stable, self-assured, capable people who find the happiness they felt they had lost. ■



*Dr. Tarra Bates-Duford (Ph.D., MFT, CRS, CMFSW) is a Forensic Psychologist and a Certified Relationship Specialist. She also has extensive experience as a separation and divorce mediator. The founder of Family Matters Counseling Group, she has 20 years of experience working with couples and families dealing with issues of divorce, mental health, and relationships.*

[www.familymatterscounselinggroup.org](http://www.familymatterscounselinggroup.org)





# The Effects of DIVORCE on Children

When parents split up, the family changes – and these changes can be very painful for the children. Here's an explanation of the most common effects of divorce on young children, as well as some proactive steps you can take to ensure that your kids grow up to be happy, healthy adults.

By Dr. Donald Gordon and Dr. Jack Arbuthnot, Clinical Child Psychologists

Most parents ask themselves some hard questions when they split up. Parents wonder what the break-up will do to their children. Will the children understand what's going on? How will they react to each parent as the family changes? Will they be OK with a new step-parent? Will they be OK if there are step-siblings? Will their grades in school suffer? Will they draw away from their friends? Will they suffer some emotional harm forever? Does the children's age make a difference? Is it different for boys than for girls?

For most parents, the important thing is that their children survive the split-up. They want their children to grow up to be healthy adults. Many children do, of course. Some are even better off in many ways; for some children, a break-up is better than staying in an unhappy family. A separation can also be better than being in a home where parents argue so much.

This article will discuss the typical reactions of young children – from preschoolers to pre-adolescents – and offer some advice on how to help them through the process.

## Preschoolers

Preschoolers most often react to their parents' break-up with fear and guilt. They're confused: young children are not able to understand what is going on and why. They think that if Dad can leave their life, Mom can too. They may think that if parents can stop loving each other, they can also stop loving them. Young children often worry about who will take care of them, if

there will be enough food or money, where they'll live, and so on. There really is no age where children are not upset by stress in a bad relationship.

Parents will often see children go back to early behaviors: for example, the child may want a security blanket again, or they may have problems using the toilet. There may be an increase in wanting to masturbate. They may cry, cling, or disobey. They may have night fears or fears at separation. Children may imagine strange things about why one parent is gone. Children often think they caused the break-up; they may think Dad or Mom would not have gone if they had behaved better. If a parent is very upset, a child may hide his own feelings so he won't upset the parent.

### How to Help Preschoolers

Young children need to be told clearly and often that their parents will take care of them, and that both Mom and Dad still love them. They need to be told that they are still a family, no matter where each family member lives. Parents need to explain in a simple way why the break-up happened; this will help the children know that the problems are between Mom and Dad and that the break-up is not their fault. They need a chance to talk about their fears. Each parent should frequently set aside time to talk to the preschoolers about how they feel. Both parents should spend lots of time with their children.

Parents should also avoid conflict in front of the children. Young children will listen to their parents' arguing and may think they are to blame. When violence has occurred, the safety of the children must be insured; a violent parent can help repair the harm by setting a good example of anger control. Showing respect for the other parent can undo the damage to children who have seen violence.

Children need to spend good one-on-one time with each parent. Most of them are very sad not to be with the absent parent more – for children under three, one week of being away is too long. Their sense of time is much shorter than that of older children.

### Young Children (Ages 6–8)

Children aged six to eight years old respond most often with grief. They express their grief through crying and sobbing; this happens with boys more than with girls. They also feel a deep yearning for the absent parent. The children will miss that parent intensely, even if their relationship with the parent was not good before the break-up. Since they don't see the absent parent often, they usually won't express the anger they feel toward him or her. They will express their anger toward the custodial parent, and they may blame him/her for the absence of the other parent. When contact with the absent parent is reduced, children at this age often believe that parent has stopped loving them. This reaction causes emotional trauma.

Young children often hope Mom and Dad will get back together. They may feel that it is their job to take care of and comfort their parents, and many will try to solve the problems between their parents. It is not healthy for young children to

## Parents should also avoid conflict in front of the children. Young children will listen to their parents' arguing and may think they are to blame.

reverse roles with their parents.

Research tells us that children are affected when they see their parents fighting. It affects their ideas about how people solve problems with each other. Children do not get used to the fighting – instead, the fighting wears them down. Physical fighting is especially damaging: children will copy their parents and hit other children.

When parents try to get the child to take sides, there can be a “tug of war” on the emotions of a child. Some parents may tell their children that the other parent is bad, or that the other parent caused the problems. Each parent may really believe this simple view. Children caught in the middle are the most likely to lose this war.

### How to Help Young Children

All children need protection from the hurts and anger of parents. They should not feel pressure to take sides, so never criticize the other parent in front of the children. They need to know that both parents still love them. They will be taken care of even if Mom and Dad do not live together. Children must be able to spend time with the absent parent. They need to know it is okay to love that parent. Young children are not sure their parents still love them – so they need more love and support now.

### Preteens (Ages 9–12)

The response of children aged nine to twelve years old to a break-up is not the same as younger children. This age group is more advanced in their thinking, and they are able to see many points of view in the matter. Most of these children can understand some of the reasons for the break-up. They will seriously and bravely try to make the best of it.

These children will often hide the distress they are feeling. They may say they see their nonresident parent enough when in fact they miss him or her terribly. They may be afraid to ask for more time with their other parent because they know this will upset the resident parent.

About 25% of children at this age will take sides in the parents' battle, most often siding with the mother. Although they are better able than their younger brothers and sisters to see both sides, they still tend to see things in black-and-white terms. This results in a need to label one parent as “the good guy” and the other parent as the “villain.”

Children at this age are likely to feel intense anger, and, unlike their younger siblings, they are very aware of their anger. Anger is normal in the break-up of a family. A badly shaken sense of self is also common at this age. Children may have



many health complaints or problems, including infections, headaches, stomach aches, asthma, etc. The stress the children are going through aggravates these problems. Doctors report that children from split homes come to their offices far more often than other children.

Family break-ups can also lead to problems with peers. Children may not have as many friends as before, and they may fear that their peers will reject them. These children are more likely to become friends with other “rejected” classmates. These new friends may have emotional or behavioral problems, which can lead to more serious problems: failing school, breaking laws, or engaging in risky sex, drug, or alcohol abuse.

Preteens have developed new thinking skills, which allow them to understand cause-and-effect relationships, but they still lack a larger view of how things work. They are likely to feel very let down, and they may “act out” by trying to hurt one or both of their parents using the power they think they have. They might say mean or unkind things, or accuse parents of changing

or having moral lapses. They may refuse to spend time with the parent they now see as guilty.

Parents should not accept this: in a gentle way, make your preteens aware that you expect them to be civil and polite to both parents. Concrete examples may help. Remind them that even though Aunt Mary is bossy or Grandma is strict, the children must still go on family visits, during which they are expected to be polite. And even though

they may not like a certain teacher, they must still show respect to him/her.

They can be given some control over minor aspects of their time with the other parent. For example, they could choose to take along a friend or suggest activities. Or, they could choose to call the other parent now and then, etc.

## How to Help Preteens

Children at this age need to be able to talk to each parent about the break-up and about life after the break-up – to express their concerns, fears, and complaints. And they can understand a little about how the parents feel. It is okay to say that Mom and Dad do not agree about everything, but tell them that Mom and Dad do agree about the children.

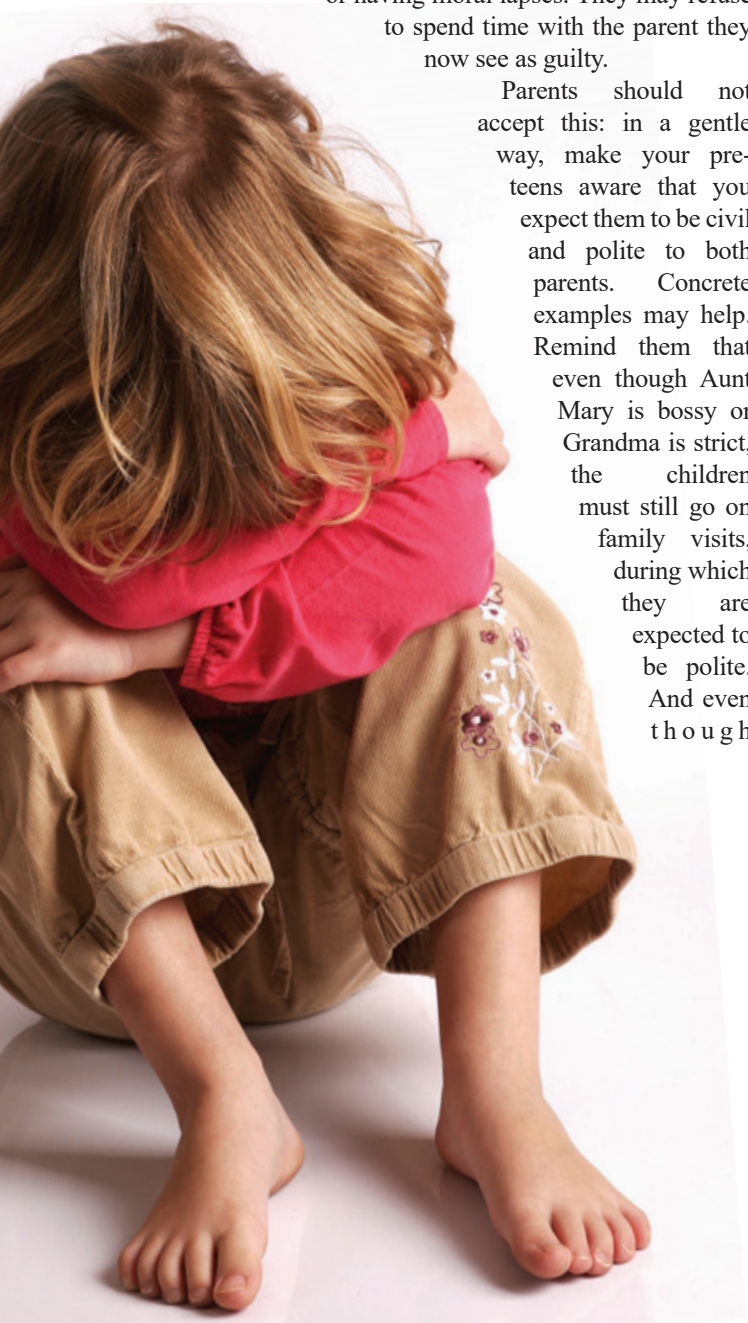
Parents should offer love and support to their preteens, and they need to acknowledge their children’s anger. Often, the children yearn for the parents to get back together. If this is not going to happen (and it usually isn’t), children should be told clearly and with no doubt; creating false hope does not help the children.

Parents must control their anger towards each other. If their anger becomes violent, parents must disengage, and they should avoid contact until they learn control. Parents should minimize conflict in front of their children – this is very important if the conflict is unresolved or is spiteful. Children learn social skills by watching conflicts get resolved; if parents can negotiate and compromise, they model good social skills. This can lessen the effect of the conflict.

Parents must allow the children to love the other parent. Encourage children to call or write letters, and help the children give the other parent gifts on special days (birthdays, Christmas, Father’s Day, etc.).

Say good things about the other parent in front of the children: praise your ex’s good qualities. In spite of your anger and sadness, at one time you saw enough good qualities to want to marry or move in with this person; surely some of those qualities are still there!

Avoid making children “choose sides.” Most parents are not aware how often they do this, and many truly believe they never do this. Trying to get children to side with you damages their relationship with the other parent, which leads to more stress and causes anger toward both parents. ■



*This article was adapted with permission from What About the Children? A Simple Guide For Divorced/Separated And Divorcing Parents (CDE, eighth edition, 2011) by Donald A. Gordon (Ph.D.) and Jack Arbuthnot (Ph.D.). This booklet is part of the “Children in Between” online course for separating and divorcing parents. The Center for Divorce Education (CDE) is dedicated to advocating for children and helping parents to minimize the harmful effects that divorce and separation have on children. [www.onlinedivorce-education.com](http://www.onlinedivorce-education.com)*



# Emotional Parenting in Divorce: Beyond the Time and Money of Parenting

Should parents spend as much energy meeting their child's emotional needs as they do their physical and financial needs during divorce?

By Dr. Deanna Conklin-Danao, Divorce Coach and Therapist

**W**hen divorce involves children, the parenting discussions tend to be dominated by time and money issues:

- Where are the kids going to live?
  - What days do I get to see the kids?
  - How will we divide the holidays?
  - How much child support will I receive?
  - How are we going to pay for school and activities?
- It's easy to understand why these issues take up so

much space – they are the tangible, physical and measurable aspects of the parent-child relationship. It's the parenting equivalent to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In that hierarchy, physical needs are the base followed by emotional needs. In simple terms, focusing on the physical aspects of life such as eating, breathing and finding shelter needs to happen before you focus on your feelings.

Early theories on parent-child attachment also followed this theme. They looked at a parent's ability to



meet their child's physical needs as the primary driver of attachment. It wasn't until the 1970s and the rise of "psychological parenting" that the importance of meeting a child's emotional needs moved to the forefront of parent-child attachment theory.

### Going Beyond the Physical Aspects of Parenting

While the "physical" aspects of parenting are certainly important for divorcing couples, it is critical that that couples spend as much (if not more) energy on the emotional aspects of parenting during divorce, such as:

- How is my child adjusting to the changes in our family?
- What is the developmental stage my child is going through?
- What is his/her unique personality and how do these intersect with decisions we are making for the divorce?
- What is my child's relationship like with me?
- What is it like with his/her other parent?
- How can I improve those relationships?
- Am I taking care of my child or is he/she taking care of me?

The list could go on and on.

When I do a parenting plan with divorcing couples who have children, my first questions are about their goals and concerns regarding the divorce. Almost all of them list the effect of the divorce on their children as their #1 worry and helping their children successfully adjust as their #1 goal. These answers become the touchstone we use whenever the process seems to be getting derailed.

### Keep the Emotional Part of Parenting Present During Divorce Discussions

The processes of collaborative divorce and mediation are designed to improve communication and problem-solving in a constructive way. When couples use these processes, it can often be easier to keep the emotional part of parenting present in the discussions and move away from the rigidity of the numbers.

For example, many people say, "I want 50% of the parenting time." What does that really mean? Would you be happy with 8 p.m. to 8 a.m., which is technically 50% of the time? Most people mean they want a meaningful relationship with their child and to be engaged in both weekday and weekend activities with their child. From this point, they can begin talking about what that really looks like for their child in this stage of life, and that discussion allows for the child's emotional needs to be considered alongside their financial and physical needs.

### Recognizing Your Child's Emotional Needs Is Key

It would be unrealistic to ignore the physical and financial realities of parenting; these are important aspects of parenting. At the same time, though, recognizing the importance of the emotional aspects of divorce on your child's life and proactively creating a plan to help your child navigate divorce will allow you to make better decisions in the long run.

### Protecting Your Children

When I talk with parents about children and divorce, the first thing they usually want to discuss is how they can protect their children during the process. The most valuable advice I can give is to minimize conflict and to ensure that the kids are not placed in the middle of the conflict. Children shouldn't feel that they need to choose between their parents or that they are responsible for protecting their parents emotionally.

While this is the most important thing that parents can do for their children during divorce, there are other ways that parents can put their child's needs first, including developing a manageable and realistic parenting schedule that takes the child's developmental stage and unique personality into account.

Building a parenting schedule around your child's developmental stage will reduce their physical and emotional stress by meeting their unique needs. The other layer to consider is a child's temperament and personality. For example, some kids thrive on routine; these kids need to really know their schedule and might struggle with transitions (especially younger and special needs children). They will need more physical and emotional support to ensure the transitions are not disruptive.

### Create and Implement a Post-Divorce Dispute Resolution Process

Parents who share decision-making around issues such as medical treatment, religion, extracurricular activities, and education need to have a process in place to resolve disagreements – because disagreements will occur. For instance, you've both been on the same page about medical issues, but then one of you wants your child to go to therapy, while the other one doesn't see the need.

Consider creating a post-divorce dispute-resolution process that involves multiple steps. For example: first, the parents have a discussion, they might go for consultation to get more information (e.g., a medical provider, teacher), and then meet with a neutral third party (e.g., mediator, divorce coach) before going to court.

### Consider Professional Assistance if Necessary

Sometimes, caring for your children's emotional needs during divorce may require professional assistance. Being in therapy during the divorce process can allow you to sort through painful feelings so that you make decisions that are good for your future, as well as your children and divorce priorities. Utilizing a divorce coach or child specialist during the process can ensure that the kids' needs are front and center. While all these things can be emotionally and financially challenging at times, they will be worth it in terms of protecting your kids. ■



*Dr. Deanna Conklin-Danao has been in private practice since 2006, seeing children, adolescents, and adults individually and in family and couples therapy. She also provides divorce coach services for people searching for extra support and structure during their divorce process. [www.drconklindanao.com](http://www.drconklindanao.com)*