

divorce matters

Coping with stress and change

Marital separation and divorce can be two of the most difficult events in an adult's life. Much stress comes from three sources:

- the daily tasks and responsibilities that must be reorganized,
- the loss of significant relationships and possessions,
- and the need to establish a new identity as an individual.

Restructuring the family

For most couples with children, a divorce does not mean the *end* of a family. Instead, it means the family must *restructure* the way it handles household chores, family finances, parenting roles, and relationships with extended family and friends. This reorganization can create much stress.

Household chores

Tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and shopping must be managed. Each parent may have to assume tasks formerly shared by two adults, a situation that may feel overwhelming.

Family finances

Financial arrangements often must be reworked, adding considerably more stress and tension between parents. Finances may become a leading source of anger.

Sources of Stress

1. Restructured family life

- Household tasks
- Family finances
- Relationships with extended family, friends
- Parenting roles and responsibilities

2. Loss

- Spouse
- Security
- Family life
- Sexual relationship

3. Change

- Being single again
- Questions: Who am I? What do I want to do with my life?

Parenting roles

If one parent is the main wage earner and the other the main caretaker, each may have to cover both roles after a divorce. Parents must answer various child care questions: Who will stay home with a sick child? Who will leave work early to take a child to the dentist?

Relationships with extended family and friends

Interaction with extended family and friends must be reconsidered. Family members may take sides, disrupting relationships and removing potential sources of guidance and comfort.

Losing significant relationships, possessions, and dreams

Everyone needs the love, security, closeness, and belonging that comes from relationships with others. Marriage is one of the most significant relationships. Its loss causes much of the stress and emotional turmoil of divorce.

Not all individuals experience loss with the same intensity, in the same way, or at the same time. Some people experience loss of closeness when they realize the relationship is ending. For others, the idea of separation can be overwhelming, and they hang onto the hope that the relationship can be saved.

Other losses resulting from separation and divorce undermine a person's sense of security and well-being. Although they do not realize it, many people become attached to a way of life, a home and possessions, pets, and daily contact with children.

Changing identity

Divorce is a crisis that affects a person's identity. Individuals no longer occupy the role of husband or wife. At the same time, they must rethink changes in their roles as parents, workers, and caretakers. People often are caught off guard by the need to reconsider questions such as "Who am I?" and "What do I want to do with my life?"

Detecting personal stress symptoms

People develop patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior that signal stress. If you are not aware of these patterns, you might ignore their signals. On the list below, check the responses you make to stressful situations.

Behavioral changes

- crying,
- withdrawal from others,
- aggression,
- substance misuse (drugs, alcohol, tobacco, food),
- agitation,
- exhaustion,
- restlessness,
- disrupted sleep,
- other emotional changes,
- sadness,
- guilt,
- depression,
- anxiety,
- tension,
- irritability,
- fear,
- fatigue,
- mood swings.

Thoughts and feelings related to stress

- thinking you cannot cope,
- feeling frightened for an unknown reason,
- worrying about everything, large or small,
- feeling afraid that something bad will happen,
- feeling that you are about to fall apart,
- having the same worrisome thought over and over,
- having a negative view of yourself,
- having a negative view of the world,
- feeling bored with everything,
- being unable to concentrate,
- having nightmares,
- feeling helpless,
- feeling hopeless,
- feeling worthless,
- feeling unable to make decisions,
- feeling confused,
- blaming yourself.

Taking charge of your life

One way to reduce stress is to take charge of your life. Here are some suggestions for ways you can regain personal control.

Relax by

- sitting in a quiet place and thinking of nothing,
- listening to music and floating with the melody, and
- tensing and relaxing your muscles.

Control your environment by

- scheduling activities so you don't have to rush,
- setting priorities and sticking to them,
- taking on one task at a time,
- taking drugs only when a doctor prescribes them,
- saying no to a request, and
- balancing work and play.

Slow down by

- eating slowly,
- walking slowly,
- talking slowly,
- listening until others are finished speaking,
- starting activities early, and
- getting enough rest.

Control your anger by

- telling someone how you feel before you lose control,
- walking away from a situation until you cool off,
- doing something physical to work off pent-up energy,
- respecting another person's right to have a different opinion, and
- praising others more than criticizing them.

Schedule recreation by

- going somewhere you enjoy with a friend or relative,
- playing your favorite sport,
- working on your favorite hobby, and
- engaging in a relaxing activity.

Understand yourself by

- talking over personal feelings and concerns with a trusted friend or relative,
- listing your good points and posting the list where you and others can see it, and
- building close relationships with people who make you feel important and appreciated.

Remember, if your negative emotions begin to interfere with your role as a parent or employee, it may be helpful to seek support from a professional counselor or therapist.

Adjusting to divorce

Although individuals are different, most adults need two or three years to adapt to the changes separation and divorce bring. People who also encounter problems such as job loss or illness during this period need additional time for adjustment. For adults, this involves three basic tasks.

Task 1—Accepting the divorce

Individuals must accept that the marriage is over and establish an identity that is not tied to their former spouse. For this to occur, the individual must be convinced that there is no use investing further in this relationship.

Former spouses must make peace with each other. This involves realizing that continued nastiness only creates more nastiness in return.

Often this realization creates a more balanced view of the relationship. An individual able to forgive the former spouse for the marriage's end is able to appreciate what is good about that person.

Individuals also must recognize their part in the breakup. They must stop blaming their former spouses and examine honestly their own role in the relationship. Such self-examination includes

- remembering the reasons for originally choosing the mate and making necessary revisions in expectations for future mates,
- accepting individual contributions to the destructive patterns of behavior within the marriage so that these patterns are not repeated in future relationships, and
- exploring how individual experiences growing up may play a role in marital struggles.

Task 2—Balancing being a single person and a single parent

Individuals must establish sources of support for each of these roles. They need to begin feeling competent as a single person and as a single parent.

Task 3—Establishing future-oriented instead of past-oriented goals

People who are adjusting well are ready to move on. They begin to have new hobbies or leisure activities, or enter into new dating relationships. In contrast, those not ready to move on may need more time to mourn the loss of a spouse. These individuals may not have exhausted their efforts to rekindle the relationship. They may not realize that the relationship is over.

A final note

Dealing with the stress and change from a separation or divorce is not easy. It helps to become familiar with your sources of stress and your style of coping. Take time to think about ways that you can take charge of your life by controlling your environment and your anger with positive coping skills.

Realize that adjusting to divorce takes time. Be sure to pat yourself on the back occasionally as you move forward in reestablishing your life. Baby steps toward adjustment can sometimes be as significant as giant steps. The important thing is to keep moving forward.

Originally developed as *Parenting Apart: Strategies for Effective Co-Parenting* by M. Mulroy, R. Sabatelli, C. Malley, and R. Waldron (1995), University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension. Adapted with permission for use in Iowa by Lesia Oesterreich, ISU Extension and Outreach family life specialist.