

Divorce



Regardless of the circumstances, divorce is a significant loss, and we grieve the loss of a marriage in many ways. You might feel shocked, depressed or angry at what occurred. Many times people experience guilt for things they wish they had done or said differently. In any divorce situation, it's important to give yourself time to grieve. There's no need to push away your emotions and there isn't a timeline for when you should "snap out of it." Talking with a counselor or support group is a great way to work through your grief.

Life after Divorce

Though it may be difficult to grasp, there is hope and life after a divorce. The following tips offer practical wisdom during this transition:

- **Practice self-care** – When dealing with divorce, you need to support yourself physically, emotionally and mentally. Staying physically active can help you feel better and experience less stress, anger and anxiety. Embracing positive coping methods is always wiser than turning toward negative behaviors.

- **Find positive people** – Anyone can be negative, and it's tempting to find others who will encourage you to complain about life or your former spouse. Instead, choose to surround yourself with supportive, positive people who can help you reframe your losses into opportunity.
- **Focus on what you can control** – Learning to let go can be difficult. Instead of dwelling on things you can't change, think about what you can control. This will help you stay more positive and keep your mind and body healthy. Because you're not responsible for how others think and feel, focus on your own outlook. Making a to-do list of important tasks can be a great way to help you feel like you have control again.
- **Avoid impulsive decisions** – When you're in transition avoid making huge life decisions. There might be a thrill from a major purchase or hasty career change, but you could regret it after you have weighed the pros and cons.
- **Do what you enjoy** – It's important to socialize and spend time with supportive friends and family members. You shouldn't feel guilty for making time for activities and hobbies you enjoy.
- **Avoid unhealthy coping methods** – The emotional stress of divorce can lead us to make poor life choices. Watch out for negative ways of dealing with your emotions. Unhealthy behaviors might include:
 - Drugs, alcohol, gambling or risky sexual behavior;
 - Following, stalking or seeking revenge against your ex;
 - Making impulsive purchases or choices;
 - Acting angry and/or violent toward others; and
 - Entering a new relationship quickly.
- **Cooperate and Communicate** – There's still a benefit to you and your family by communicating with your former spouse, especially when it involves your children. Seeing interactions as a battle to be won doesn't help anyone.

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Children and Divorce

The following information will help you guide your kids through the transition of life after a divorce:

- **Assure your love** – Children often misinterpret the situation and accept blame, thinking the divorce is their fault. They also can deal with fears of abandonment. Therefore, it's critical to emphasize your love for them. Reassure your children that you will never leave them. It's important to listen to their fears. Remind your children that your love for them won't change, even if the family looks a little different than before.



- **Establish routine** – Traditions and routines provide stability for a child in an uncertain time. These can be as simple as reading before bedtime or an evening walk after dinner. The key is consistency. Consider discussing a plan with your former spouse to maintain similarity between the two households.
- **Be flexible** – It's important to remain flexible if your ex is unable to visit or has a conflict. Having a fun, alternative activity is a great option for those unexpected times. Also, encourage your child to enjoy their time with their other parent. Avoid looking disappointed or upset when they leave, so as not to miscommunicate emotions to your child.

- **Be amicable in front of the kids** – It's wise to avoid fighting with your ex in front of your children. Never use children as messengers, spies or a sounding board for your complaints. Children who witness angry and volatile disagreements are more likely to adjust poorly to the divorce. The best transitions are when children are encouraged to have positive relationships with both parents.

Divorce never affects only one person. It's painful and difficult, but there is help available. Be courageous and seek out therapy, family counseling or support groups. Allow the experiences of others to help you in this transition time.

Sources: www.apa.org/helpcenter/healthy-divorce.aspx

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Addressing Divorce in the Workplace

Going through a divorce is never easy, but divorce can be as emotionally devastating as losing a close family member. Yet, unlike when a loved one dies, no provision is made for grieving. There is no allotted time off from work, no days set aside to mourn the end of a marriage. How do you get back into the swing of things when your life has been turned upside down? How can you concentrate on job responsibilities when your thoughts are elsewhere? How can your co-workers and supervisor help?

Q: Should an employee going through a divorce share the news with all co-workers or just a select few?

A: The employee has to figure out what works best for him or her. People tend to share news with those with whom they're close. Even if you work in a large department or division, you usually only work closely with a few people. It's probably best to let your immediate co-workers know what is going on, but it's not necessary to make a general announcement to others.

Q: Should divorcing employees take time off from work to mourn the end of their marriage, or should they dive into their work in an effort to distract themselves from their pain?

A: During a traumatic event such as a divorce, employees need to make a conscious effort to plan how they will get through and survive their loss. This may mean taking time off from work, reducing the number of outside

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activities in their lives or seeking assistance from a mental health professional or support group. For some, maintaining usual activities and being with supportive co-workers every day can be helpful, but drowning yourself in work to avoid dealing with your loss is unhealthy and usually only prolongs the healing process.

Q: When an employee is going through a divorce, does his or her work usually suffer?

A: People cope very differently with traumatic life events. Most employees will be able to cope in various healthy ways, but others' work may suffer. During a stressful life event, you'll usually see some shift in how one functions, but for how long and to what degree depends on the employee's constitution and the strategies they implement for managing the stress.

Q: Should an employee going through a divorce expect co-workers and his or her supervisor to make allowances in terms of his or her workload, taking time off from work to help with the children, meet with lawyers and the like?

A: This should not be an expectation, but it depends on the work environment and the relationships that have been cultivated with co-workers and the supervisor over time. What's most important is that the employee keep lines of communication open with his or her supervisor at all times by letting him or her know what is needed to get through this trying time so that the manager is not kept in the dark. For example, if employees need time off from

work because they are going through a particularly bad time, it's critical that, whenever possible, they plan this in advance with their supervisor. That way he or she knows that the employees aren't just being irresponsible and blowing the job off, but rather are going through some difficult adjustments and shifts that may impact their work schedule.

Q: What can help recently divorced employees or those going through a divorce get through the workday?

A: Again, employees need to make a conscious effort to take care of themselves. Oftentimes, people going through a divorce tend to think about everyone but themselves – especially when children are involved. Along with getting the children settled, they need to deal with financial, legal and housing issues. In all this, they tend to suppress their own emotional needs, which can be detrimental in the long run. Therefore, they need to locate resources to help them, either the employee assistance program (EAP) at work or other community-based services, such as local community centers that offer programs or support groups focused on issues of divorce. The employee also may need to connect with a therapist, counselor or mental health clinician to share feelings about this new status. Getting through the workday may not be as difficult as it seems, as long as the employee is taking care of personal needs by making use of available resources.

Q: How can co-workers help? Should they leave the employee alone or be as supportive as possible?

A: Co-workers should take cues from the employee, being as supportive as the employee allows them to be. Those who are close to the employee should always inquire as to how he or she is doing, without being intrusive or pushy. They should let the employee know that they are available to listen and are concerned and care about him or her. Co-workers also should encourage the employee to seek help from the EAP at work or treatment providers in the community.

Q: Do most organizations or businesses have services available to help employees going through a divorce?

A: Most organizations have internal or external employee assistance program services to help employees going through a divorce. Most EAPs provide assessment and triage as well as brief counseling and referral services. Some internal EAPs also offer support groups for divorced individuals or can make referrals to outside self-help groups.

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Q: Do co-workers tend to have as much sympathy for someone going through a divorce as, say, someone who is suddenly widowed? Divorce is, after all, one of the top 10 life stressors.

A: Most co-workers will recognize that this is a very difficult life event and are usually sensitive to that. Whether they maintain that level of sensitivity throughout the entire process is hard to say. It really depends on how the employee handles the situation. Even though the divorce rate in our country is high, marriage is such a core value in our society that there is a sense of tragedy when one hears that a friend's, acquaintance's or co-worker's marriage is splitting up. Clearly, it doesn't elicit the same degree of sympathy as losing a spouse or a child to death, but it is still viewed in our society as a major stressor and loss.

Q: Because most people, particularly women, experience some sort of monetary loss after a divorce, should an employee expect his or her supervisor to compensate him or her with more money?

A: No, this should not be an expectation. Employees will need to deal with the realities of their sudden shift in finances and lifestyle change that typically accompany a divorce. But they need to know there are resources out there to help. Some organizations have set up emergency loan programs whereby employees can borrow small amounts of money on short notice. Credit unions also may offer short-term loans for eligible employees, and there are free community financial seminars to help individuals prepare for and recover from a divorce.

Q: If the employee needs an increase in salary to survive but isn't eligible for a pay raise soon, should he try to find a higher paying job during this difficult period?

A: When people are in the midst of a stressful situation, as a rule they shouldn't make major life decisions. It's difficult to think clearly and use sound judgment, as perception is often distorted. They should work with someone to examine what their options are before making an impulsive decision about changing employment. When you're going through a stressful period or significant change, you typically want to maintain as much consistency in your life as possible.

Q: Is there anything else an employee can do to help him or herself during this time?

A: The employee should take full advantage of his or her EAP at work. Oftentimes, employees going through

a divorce may worry primarily about their children. EAPs can help employees manage their stress by counseling their children or by putting them in touch with outside resources to address their needs. Other employees don't seek help because they feel they can't afford it. EAPs can help connect employees with those organizations and programs that offer sliding scale fees for mental health treatment.

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Children and Divorce

Today, about one in two marriages end in divorce. The majority of these occur with children under the age of 18. Because parents can represent security for a child, children can become scared and confused when they see their parent(s) hurting or distracted. Therefore, many parents worry about how the divorce will impact their children.



Talk with the Kids

Communicating clearly to your children is critical during the transition of a divorce. Otherwise, children often misinterpret the situation and accept blame, thinking the divorce is their fault. When possible, try to have both parents present to talk with the children. Without a clear, civil conversation, kids often accept the responsibility of trying to get the parents back together. The following key points will help guide your discussion:

- Tell your children what is happening;
- Explain how this will and won't involve them;
- Ask your children what questions or concerns they have; and
- Share with your children what the end result will be.

Child Reactions

Extra support and additional conversations will probably be necessary during this transitional time. Children may experience physical, emotional, mental and/or behavioral reactions to the divorce such as:

- Younger children may regress to childhood behaviors they long outgrew. Desiring a pacifier, wetting the bed and experiencing separation anxiety are common; and

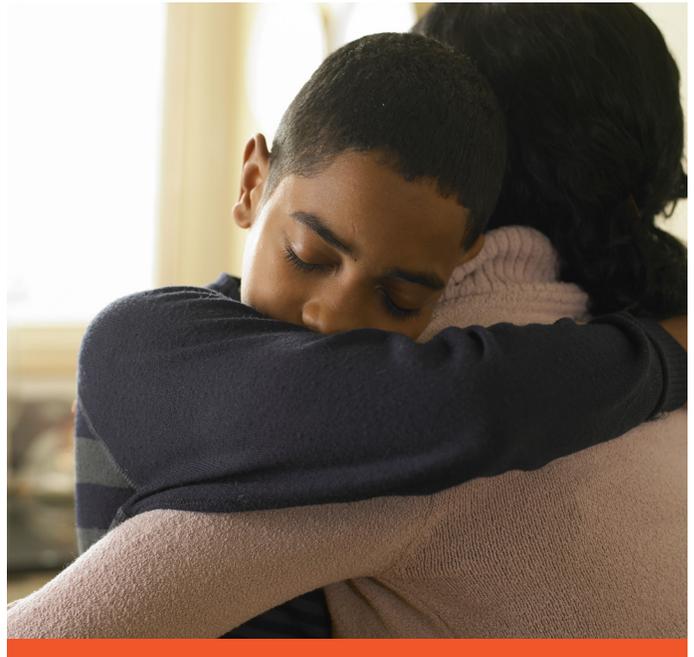
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- Older children can experience feelings of guilt, anger, and possibly relief. Depression or anxiety may occur, as well as withdrawal from family and friends. These emotions may trigger them to act out their anger through aggression.

Symptoms and Behaviors to Watch

You may begin to notice some more serious symptoms or behaviors. Do not feel like you are on your own. There are a wide variety of support services available through your child's school, community organizations, and medical and mental health professionals. Monitor your children to gauge how they are handling the situation, and don't hesitate to educate yourself about the resources in your community.

If your child is showing signs of aggression at home or school, this is an indicator of internal struggle. Children may withdraw from socialization and no longer cooperate with tasks. There could be academic or behavioral problems at school. Specific emotional symptoms might include low self-esteem, moodiness, irrational fears and repetitive behaviors, and a minimal desire to communicate with one or both parents.



Strategies for the Family

Without exception, your family will experience change. To minimize the potential negative effects of divorce, consider the following points of wisdom for yourself, the children and the dual-households:

For You:

- **Acknowledge** – It's perfectly acceptable to let your children know that what your family is going through is sad. When you express this, it gives your children permission to experience their emotions without feeling guilty or confused.
- **Support** – Look outside your children for your support during this emotionally charged time. It is not their responsibility, or within their capability, to maintain your emotional health.
- **Respect** – Remember, your ex-spouse is still your child's mother or father. Refrain from complaining about your former spouse's flaws and faults in front of them. Likewise, arguments you have should remain private.
- **Be direct** – Your children are not messengers or spies between you and your ex. Be direct when you need information and go straight to your former spouse. It is unfair and awkward to use the kids as a go-between.
- **Be reliable** – Keep your plans with your child. Do not cancel unless absolutely necessary. If the unforeseen does arise, sincerely apologize to your child. Stability and trust are fundamental needs during the divorce transition.



The Next Step

Many parents who divorce often start out "parallel parenting." Here, contact and communication between the former spouses is often quite limited. Though the parents may be heading toward the same parenting goals for their children, their relationship may be fairly difficult. In time, parents often move to "cooperative parenting." This occurs when ex-spouses are better able to communicate with one another. Scheduling events and making decisions about the kids are made cooperatively.

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For the Kids:

- **Prepare** – Keep the kids in the loop as much as possible. Springing last-minute changes and decisions on them increases the potential for anxiety, instability and strained relationships.
- **Keep it simple** – Complicated and confusing details are not necessary when you talk to your kids. Keep conversations regarding their father or mother short, simple and factual. Avoid your commentary on the situation.
- **Give permission** – Communicate with your child that you desire them to have a good, healthy and loving relationship with your ex. Unless there is threat of danger (i.e., emotional, physical or sexual abuse), give your child "permission" to enjoy and foster that relationship.
- **Release** – Clearly affirm that divorce is between parents, not parents and children. Reiterate it is not their fault and release your children from any feelings of guilt.
- **Reassure** – The importance of your love cannot be understated. Reassure your children you will always love them and be their parents. Divorce cannot change that.

For the Household:

- **Manage finances** – Conversations about household finances, as they relate to your ex, and child support should remain private matters. Financial issues should not be discussed in front of the kids.
- **Have structure** – If possible, try to establish similar rules in both households. Structure communicates stability.
- **Establish a routine** – A good routine in the midst of change is helpful. Your child will feel more secure when he or she clearly knows what to expect.

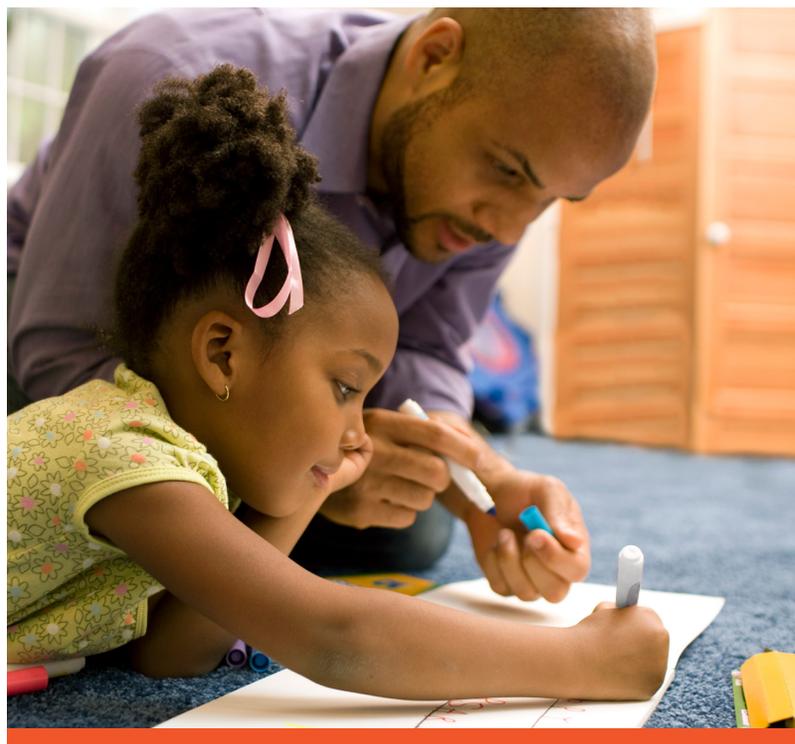
Divorce is painful, but there is help available. Be willing to seek out family counseling or support groups if you feel that your family could benefit from them. You are not the first to navigate the rough waters of divorce; allow the experience of others to help you in this time of transition.

Sources:

www.aacap.org/aacap/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/Facts_for_Families_Pages/Children_and_Divorce_01.aspx

www.aamft.org/imis15/content/consumer_updates/children_and_divorce.aspx

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Your employee assistance program offers confidential help for personal problems and concerns. Concerned

about a troubled family member who won't get help? Feel tired and exhausted, but don't know if it's burnout, loss of motivation, depression or all three? Late for work too often? Has the use of alcohol or drugs created a crisis you are facing right now? The bottom line, never wonder if your concern is appropriate to contact OEAP. So, if you've been putting off taking action to solve a serious issue that is weighing on you, give OEAP a call today.

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