

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Let's Stay Together? Contemplating Divorce

When you married your spouse, you expected it to last forever. And while the notion of "happily ever after" is seen in Hollywood all the time, movies rarely follow the romance through to the strife, hard work and hardship that some long-term relationships eventually encounter.

Communicate Your Feelings

Whatever your reason for considering divorce, it's a decision that calls for a lot of introspection, reflection, analysis and discussion from both you and your spouse; during this process it's vital that you:

Be open to change. The relationship as it stands is not working—if it's going to succeed, then you and your spouse must be willing to accept that the way you communicate, behave and view the relationship requires a fresh approach.

Communicate your needs. Many people are disappointed when their mate doesn't intuitively know what they're feeling or thinking. Don't blame your spouse when he or she fails to read your mind; positively discuss your needs in concrete terms—instead of hurling "You don't…" or "You never." accusations, turn the tables and focus on "I feel." or "I envision." phrases. Doing so will help your mate feel less threatened and allow you to more deeply explore what it is you believe the relationship is lacking.

Be honest with yourself and spouse. Ignoring or glossing over major issues between you and your mate may smooth things out now, but they're likely to come back to haunt you down the road—remember that relationship problems can't be worked through until they're acknowledged beforehand.

Think about what you can do to improve the relationship. While you may be able to rhyme off your spouse's shortcomings, what have you done for the relationship lately? Look for ways to show appreciation and support for your spouse and the relationship on a daily basis, and you might find the favor is returned to you.

Seek support. A third party, like a marriage counselor, or your spiritual advisor, can help the two of you work through major issues and provide the objective perspective you need to overcome sticking points in the relationship.

Consider whether your partner is committed to the relationship. It's very hard to save a relationship if one of you has already moved past it—if your partner refuses to get help or to work on the relationship, you might have to face the hard truth that divorce is inevitable. You may still want to seek professional help to work through your feelings and chart a positive plan for your future.

Responses to Divorce

If you've done what you can to work through the relationship and have come to the very difficult conclusion that the marriage is over, you may feel lost and unable to cope. Divorce is one of life's most difficult challenges, and similar to death in that it signifies the ending of a crucial relationship and can trigger a grieving response. The response usually involves several common stages and reactions including:

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Shock/denial. At first it's often difficult for partners to accept the end of their marriage, especially if it was not something they chose. They may refuse to believe what is happening and experience a feeling of unreality or numbness. Partners may also engage in rituals or everyday activities that were done with their partner or play back conversations or past events in their minds.

Anger and guilt. Anger is a strong emotion that can express itself in a number of ways—individuals may become hostile and resentful of their ex-spouse by blaming them completely for the marital break-up, or they may become easily agitated and have frequent emotional outbursts. Strong feelings of guilt over the relationship break-up may also emerge as a result of the person directing their anger inward.

Bargaining. Often the individual will try to make a deal, offering something to get back what has been taken away. As human beings, this is a typical response to negative change, and it's only natural to want things as they were before the upheaval.

Depression. This can be the most difficult stage of grieving the loss of a marriage as individuals may feel emotionally and physically drained, listless and lacking a purpose in life. They may find themselves having emotional outbursts (for example—breaking into tears), their self-esteem may be particularly fragile and they may feel unworthy of love. They may no longer find pleasure and joy in activities that once were enjoyable and may feel as if they are being punished.

Acceptance. This is the final stage of grief where an individual accepts their loss and realizes that life must and will continue; upon acceptance, the individual is now able to refocus on their goals for the future and on developing new relationships.

People going through a divorce may not follow these stages in order, but go back and forth or experience several at one time.

Because of the distress a divorce can create, one may also experience physical symptoms such as headaches, backaches, insomnia, fatigue, gastric and bowel upset, and ulcers—if this is the case, consult with your family physician.

Coping with Divorce

Although you may not be able to change what happened, there are things you can do to take care of yourself and help you move through the grieving process:

- **Recognize your feelings and give yourself permission to feel them.** Find ways to express these feelings (e.g., writing letters, crying, talking to a friend).

- **Pay attention to your health and treat your body well.** Get enough sleep and exercise, eat healthy food, and avoid using alcohol or drugs to numb the painful feelings.

- **Build a support system around you.** This can include joining a divorce support group in your community, reaching out to friends or relatives for help, or working with a counselor for emotional support.

- **Don't make any major life decisions.** A career change, long-range move, major financial purchase or a remarriage should not be considered for at least six months to a year after a divorce. Allow yourself time to heal and regain your equilibrium.

- **Re-establish a routine.** Develop new rituals and activities unlike the ones you used to engage in with your spouse. Don't cling to old customs or habits if they are not helpful.

- **Establish a social life.** Don’t isolate yourself. Accept friends' invitations. Try a new activity. It will help give you a "break" from your grief and give you the chance to meet new people.

- **Take a holistic view of yourself.** Get in touch with your deepest feelings, thoughts and desires—the ones you may have suppressed or been unable to share with your ex-spouse. Anticipate a new and wonderful life—the one that you deserve.

Understanding the emotional and physical stresses that accompany divorce is the first step in learning how to deal with them. When you accept your feelings and learn ways to care for yourself during this difficult time, you will find that not only can you cope with divorce; you can also survive it and even thrive after it.