

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

Moving Forward After Divorce

As a practical matter, there are a number of things that people can do to help themselves cope while grieving the loss of a marriage.

Prioritize - Unfortunately, life doesn't stop just because one is hurting. Despite grief, there will be chores that need doing and bills that need paying. There may also be any number of extraordinary tasks that must be accomplished during the transition from married to single person (such as finding an apartment, turning on utilities, changing addresses, etc.) which add to the general stress. Creating a list of such necessary chores can help to reduce their stressful impact on one's life. All chores should be placed on the list in the order of their importance. Starting with the most essential, each chore is then worked through and crossed off the list as it is completed. The simple act of prioritizing and checking off list items helps make sure that all necessary chores get accomplished, and further helps to generate a feeling of control over what might otherwise be experienced as unmanageable demands.

Put things away - As soon as it is practical to do so, start living as a single person again. Put old photographs and mementos away where you don't have to look at them all the time. Start paying your own bills and handling those aspects of life that your ex-spouse used to do for you. Limit your contact with your ex-spouse. In general, do what you can to confidently look forward towards the future, rather than backwards at your divorce.

Talk about it - Many grieving people find that their suffering is somewhat lessened when they are able to share their hurt feelings with a sympathetic audience. For this reason, it is often helpful for grieving people to tell trusted family and friends that they are getting divorced, and to request assistance from these trusted people as they are able to offer it. Finding someone who can and will listen and allow one to vent their hurt emotions and fears and offer comforting advice often proves very helpful. Not everyone is a good listener, however, and those who are will have lives of their own and may get fatigued over time, especially if one's grief process is not brought under control. Some friendships might also prove too fragile to survive one's divorce and will be lost in spite of best efforts. It is best to use judgment when deciding with whom to share, how much to share, and how often to share so as not to overly fatigue one's supports.

If existing supports prove inadequate, other support opportunities can be created by attending support groups or by working with a professional therapist.

Support groups are self-help meetings attended by people going through the same sorts of circumstances. Generally sponsored by community centers and religious institutions, divorce support groups provide a face-to-face forum where people in different stages of adjustment to their divorce come together to educate and support one another.

Online divorce support groups are also available 24 hours a day on the Internet, offering a less personal, but more accessible support format. One caveat with regard to online support forums is that they can be plagued by 'trolls' - people who are there to insult and ridicule legitimate members. Keep your thickest skin and sense of humor handy when using online supports.

Psychotherapy and counseling can also be excellent options for obtaining divorce support - A qualified therapist is a trained and empathic listener with an expert understanding of how divorce affects and changes lives. He or she will be able to provide a safe place where the divorcing person can vent their emotions and talk about their fears, especially those feelings that are too private and intense to talk

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about elsewhere. He or she will also be able to provide expert guidance on managing stress, grief, and self-defeating thoughts, remaining an effective parent to your children, and rebuilding an effective life in the aftermath of divorce. The 'chemistry' between therapist and client is important. It is often a good idea to interview one or more therapists prior to committing to work with any particular one so as to find one who feels safe and best appears to offer appropriate guidance.

Support yourself - In addition to seeking support and guidance from others, there are also good ways you can help yourself to cope.

Maintaining (or starting) healthy routines is a primary means of self-support that frequently gets overlooked. Divorce is a stressful time of change, and many of the good habits one has formed to help maintain health can be lost in the shuffle. At a personal level, making time to exercise regularly, get enough sleep, and eat regular healthy meals can help to preserve health and reduce the effects of stress. Keeping select important pre-divorce family routines intact (such as eating together as a family, or attending religious services) is also advisable as this continuity can be a comfort to all.

Keeping a journal of your thoughts and feelings as you go through your adjustment to being divorced can provide many benefits. Most pressingly, journaling allows a further outlet for emotional upset. Describing pain and the difficult situations being coped with in writing helps one to gain a better grip and perspective on those emotions and situations, both in each immediate situation described (it feels good to purge pent up feelings), and also across time as growth and movement become apparent. Journaling is cheap, requiring only a notebook and a pen, and can be done at any time of day or night, making it an ideal self-help strategy.

Distraction - Sometimes it's not enough to write or talk about how one is feeling. In such situations, being ready and able to distract one's self can be helpful. Watching a television show or movie, reading a book, surfing the net, exercising, cleaning the house, organizing files, and other attention-demanding tasks and chores can get one's mind away from painful feelings that otherwise might drag out into depression. It is helpful to prepare in advance a list of what needs doing, and to get copies of compelling books and other media handy so that when distraction is needed, it will be easy to pick something healthy or worth doing with which to distract one's self. Although television is always available, it is not necessarily the healthiest or more edifying choice.

Self-soothing - Divorced people are often wounded people, and wounded people need to be gentle and compassionate with themselves while they heal. Treating yourself to a few comforting and healing experiences you might not otherwise allow yourself can be in order. Massage, relaxation routines, a long bath or hot shower, or a plate of one's favorite food can help produce relaxation, calmness and a sense of being cared for, all of which can be balm for a bruised soul. Religious, yoga and meditation retreats, vacations, and similar excursions can have a similar effect. So long as finances allow and healthy routines do not get bent too much, such comforts and small extravagances can help smooth the healing process.

Explore dormant interests - In divorce, one door slams shut, and people tend to spend a lot of time adjusting to that closure. What they come to see after a while, however, is that when one door closes, others open. Divorce is thus a beginning as well as an ending, and a perfect opportunity to explore new interests. Finding one or more causes, clubs, fields, hobbies or projects one is interested in (and wants to work in/on) is beneficial in a number of ways. New interests capture attention and bring it into the present, away from a focus on the past. In so doing, they help people to start thinking of themselves as explorers and decision-makers and not simply as victims of circumstances outside their control. Exploring interests can make you happy and also help you to make new friends.

Avoid dangerous and self-defeating coping behavior - Divorcing people are often wounded people, and wounded people sometimes hurt so much that it clouds their judgment. When one is hurting, one can be tempted to do most anything that promises to remove the pain. The problem is that some solutions for removing pain work well in the short term, but can be dangerous in the medium and long

terms. Failure to use judgment in deciding how one will cope with emotional hurt can result in negative, sometimes severely negative, outcomes:

- Avoid using drugs or alcohol or gambling or promiscuous sexuality as a means of coping with pain or loneliness
- Avoid diving into a new intimate relationship just because you're lonely
- Avoid acting on angry impulses you might have towards your ex-spouse
- Avoid stalking your ex-spouse
- Avoid cultivating revenge fantasies involving your ex-spouse. Your successful life post-divorce will be your best revenge
- Avoid making large decisions for a while after your divorce (divorce arrangements notwithstanding).