

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

The Big Split: Kids, Separation and Divorce

Dealing with a divorce or separation can feel as heart-wrenching as the passing of a loved one, because it signals the "death" of a relationship. No matter how it happens, a break up can take its toll, both mentally and physically, on everyone involved. But despite the sense of grief and loss the split can stir up, separation and divorce can offer parents and children a chance for personal growth and discovery, especially when the months or years leading up to the event have perhaps been filled with conflict and tension. Get your family back on the road to healing and recovery with the tips below.

The Hard Part—How to Tell the Kids

No matter how the separation came to be, you and your partner need to set aside your differences and decide how you are going to tell your children. Make this as easy on them as possible by:

Giving a concrete reason for what is going on. Instead of going into detail about your spouse's shortcomings, offer an age-appropriate explanation of why the two of you have decided that separation is the best option for the family. Children know more than you think: taking an honest approach will prevent feelings of anger and resentment down the road.

Being specific about changes. Discuss how this will affect their daily lives, which parent will be leaving the household and how often the kids will see each of you.

Reassuring children that it's not their fault. Kids will find a way to blame themselves for their parents' problems. Your children need to know there was nothing they could have done to prevent the separation. Remind them often—through words and attention—that your love for them will not change even if the living arrangements do.

Encouraging children to express emotions and ask questions. Kids heal faster if they're allowed to talk through their thoughts and emotions. Never badmouth the other parent as it puts children in a situation where they're forced to choose sides. While you may not always agree with your soon-to-be ex, you need to stay united in your commitment to your kids.

Coping Strategies for You

Maintain a united front. A separation or divorce shouldn't mean divided parenting. Make arrangements for regular talks to keep one another updated on school, vacation plans or problems that need to be dealt with and work together to hammer out an action plan.

Take care of yourself. While helping your children cope with your separation or divorce is crucial, you won't be able to offer much support if you're busy falling apart. Deal with your emotions, and avoid burdening your kids with your anger or frustration by talking to a close friend, family member or spiritual leader about what you're going through. Shed stress and keep your energy levels up by squeezing regular exercise—whether it's walking, swimming or yoga—into your day and avoiding common break-up "buddies" like alcohol, tobacco and unhealthy food choices. While they may seem like a good idea at the time, they're likely to leave you feeling even more frazzled and stressed. At worst, they can lead to an unhealthy "crutch" for coping with your problems or even an addiction.

Get help. If your arguments with your ex are starting to become a problem, or if you're feeling overwhelmed or alone, consult a professional who can help you work through your issues—
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independently, as a couple and as a family—and uncover new ways to handle the new family dynamic constructively.

Separation or divorce is a tough road filled with obstacles and potential pitfalls that can steer you off course and stop you from moving forward with your life. But by maintaining a civil (if not positive) relationship with your ex-partner and handling this life challenge with grace, skill and sensitivity, you'll create an environment for yourself and your kids that is not only healthier, but ultimately happier too.