
Managing a relationship breakdown

Summary

- What you feel during a relationship breakdown may be very hard, but it usually passes.
 - Take one day at a time, and accept that some days will be better or worse than others.
 - From the separation, you may find a way to be more independent, stronger and happier.
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Breaking up is a tough time. It can be better or worse depending on how you deal with it. Here is some information to help you recognise how you're feeling, and why.

You'll also find tips for getting through the end of your relationship in a healthy way.

Knowing when your relationship is in trouble

According to Relationships Australia, noticing **early warning signs of relationship breakdown** can help a couple resolve conflicts. Early warning signs include:

- you don't do things together as much as before
- you have recurring arguments about the same issues that are never resolved
- you feel dissatisfied and unhappy
- you have sex less often, or it isn't what it used to be
- one partner spends increasing time on interests and activities outside the relationship
- there is a loss of warmth and friendliness in the relationship, one or both of you speak of no longer being in love
- you feel tired and less able to meet responsibilities at work and at home
- arguments about the children continue
- one of you has an addiction problem that is affecting the relationship.

These behaviours can be signs of a relationship breakdown, and may trigger the start of a lonely and worrying time.

How you cope over that time will depend on your ability to manage your own thoughts and actions, and to recognise when things are out of hand.

How break-ups can make you feel

Expect some emotional ups and downs when you and your partner separate. At times, you may feel excited about your new life, and free. But you will probably have very sad feelings too and a sense of loss. You may even feel a bit scared.

It's understandable if you experience negative emotions from a sense of loss. Separation can be painful, and may involve the loss of:

- your family structure and routines
 - daily contact with your children
 - the family home
 - friends and social life
 - support and approval from your family and community
 - meaning and identity
 - the opportunity to have children
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- financial security.

These losses may be even harder to accept if you don't want the separation, or your family and friends don't support you.

Separation can also bring up practical problems, such as where you will live, how you will support yourself (and any children), and how you will share parenting.

Money is a particular issue for many couples who separate, and **women** are more likely than men to experience financial hardship after divorce.

Common feelings

Despite the circumstances of the relationship breakdown, you may still feel sadness, rejection and confusion. Your world has been turned upside down, and with so much change you may feel overwhelmed. You might find yourself experiencing a range of behaviours such as crying, having trouble sleeping, losing your appetite, or feeling unable to concentrate at work. If you have children, you may also struggle to look after them for a while.

Let's look at some common feelings during a separation. You may feel:

- relieved that things are finally out in the open
- nervous about how you will juggle work and home commitments
- positive and excited about the future
- worried about legal matters, finances and perhaps a new relationship
- sad, consumed by the loss, unable to move on or simply numb
- ready for change and new beginnings.

In other words, a relationship breakdown is a time of heightened and mixed emotions. But, if you take time and care for yourself, you will come out the other side.

Grief is a process

Regardless of whether you initiated the separation or not, you may still experience grief. Someone that you used to care about, or may still love, is moving out of your life.

To **cope with your grief**, let's look at things that might help you:

- Look after yourself – try to eat healthily, keep your sleeping and exercise routines, and plan for treats and the things you enjoy.
- Everyone copes differently – you could try to keep busy, perhaps distract yourself with new people and new activities, or talk to friends and family and others who can support you, or consider some quiet reflective time by yourself.
- Avoid rushing into a new relationship.
- Avoid using alcohol or other drugs to ease any pain.
- Talk to your GP, or seek counselling, if you have any concerns about your health and wellbeing.

Beyond your grief, you need to be practical too. It's important that you look after your finances, for example. Talk to **Centrelink** (Tel. 136 150) if you need advice on income support and family assistance payments.

Call on financial counselling services if you need help paying your bills, sorting out your superannuation entitlements, budgeting or dealing with debt. Both the **Australian Government** and **private providers** offer these services.

What's not a healthy response to separation

Relationship breakdown is a key factor in worsening family violence and depression. (Some people can have an extreme response to separation, which can be dangerous to them, their partner or their family.) So, be familiar with the signs of an abnormal response to separation. And know when to get help.

Anything that is an attempt to belittle, demoralise or punish a person is unhelpful, and in some cases may even be illegal (such as vandalising a car or other property). Regardless of how bad you feel after separation, it doesn't help to:

- steal from each other
- lie about each other
- seek to damage each other's new life
- take out your frustration and anger on your children.

The separation will be easier on everyone if each party takes responsibility for behaving with self-respect and maturity.

Depression

Sadness experienced from a relationship breakdown may be intense, which may lead to depression.

Depression is a serious illness that affects mental and physical health.

People with depression find it hard to function every day. They may become socially isolated, or unproductive at work and home, and stop enjoying their usual activities. Other signs of depression can be significant weight change, lack of concentration, and reliance on alcohol or drugs.

If these problems last longer than two weeks, it's time to seek professional help.

Violence

Another unhealthy response to separation is violence. Some people feel enormous rage when their relationship falls apart, and they may try to punish their partner. If you feel you cannot control your anger, or you are worried about your partner's anger, please seek help immediately.

Family violence, stalking and abusive or threatening language and behaviour are never acceptable

The safety of everyone in the relationship, including children, must come first.

If your partner is violent:

- avoid contact as much as you can
- only meet in a public place
- ask a friend or family member to be with you at meetings
- don't respond with aggression
- keep a record of abusive incidents, including stalking
- seek legal advice about what you can do.

If you think that you are in immediate danger, call 000 for the police.

Remember...

- What you feel during a relationship breakdown may be very hard, but it usually passes.
- Take one day at a time, and accept that some days will be better or worse than others.
- Most importantly, keep yourself and your **children** safe and healthy.
- From the separation, you may find a way to be more independent, stronger and happier.

Where to find help

- **Relationships Australia** provides counselling, mediation, dispute resolution, relationship and parenting skills education, community support, employee assistance programs and professional training. Services and programs are available nationally. Tel. 1300 364 277
- **Relationship Australia's Women and Separation** resource for helping women in a relationship breakdown
- **Relationships Australia's Men and Separation** resource for helping men in a relationship breakdown
- **Family Relationships** Tel. 1800 050 321
- **beyondblue**
- **headspace** – for information on finding support during a relationship break-up
- **Lifeline** Tel. 13 11 14
- **MensLine** Tel. 1300 78 99 78

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