
Relationships – remarriage

Summary

- Be sure that you are emotionally free to remarry.
 - Allow time for new relationships to develop.
 - Treat each other with respect.
 - Be prepared for the stepfamily to be different from your previous experience of family.
 - Consider the needs of children involved.
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One third of Australian marriages are second marriages, and many of these marriages include partners with children from a previous relationship. Starting a new life together is exciting, but it can also present challenges to a couple in their relationship as partners, parents and step-parents.

Some people adjust to the end of a marriage and move on to other relationships reasonably quickly and easily. However, others in this situation may experience difficulties in establishing a successful new relationship, given their past experiences.

- If you are considering remarrying, some questions to ask yourself might be: Have I come to terms with the end of my previous relationship?
- Do I find myself constantly thinking about my previous relationship either negatively or with grief that it ended?
- Can I put the thoughts and emotions of my first marriage behind me?
- Can I recognise some of the things that contributed to the breakdown of my previous relationship? (If you are aware of what did and didn't work from your previous marriage you can use these as tools to give the second marriage the best environment to thrive.)
- Have I regained a sense of self-confidence?
- Do I feel comfortable or safe living alone? (Sometimes people enter into new relationships to avoid feeling vulnerable living without a partner, for financial reasons or for the sake of having a relationship.)
- Am I emotionally ready to commit to a new partnership (and potentially, a new family)?
- Are emotions from the past resurfacing in my new relationship?

Remarrying can bring up unresolved feelings from a previous marriage for both adults and their children. It is important not to play out old hurts and frustrations on the new marriage.

Be aware of strong emotional reactions you may have to your new partner. They can be a response to an unresolved past issue. It's ok to have these feelings but you need to acknowledge they are affected by your past experiences.

If you find it difficult to deal with any unresolved anger, grief or frustration, you can talk it through with your new partner, or get some support from a counsellor or support service.

Remarriage – choose your partner carefully

Be realistic about the type of person you want to marry. It is important to reflect on what worked and what didn't work in your previous marriage, and to confirm what makes you compatible with your new partner.

Past experiences and relationships can influence our choice in who we re-partner with. If you have children, you also need to consider how your marriage will affect them. Talk to your children about your remarriage and about

how they are feeling.

Remarriage and stepfamilies

If you or your new partner have children from previous relationships, then your marriage will form a **stepfamily** or blended family. This will involve adjusting to a number of changes, both for parents and children.

Living and financial arrangements when remarrying

Often difficulties arise in stepfamilies when a partner moves into an existing home, particularly if there are children. Children who have had full access to the family home are unlikely to welcome newcomers, as it will mean having to share resources. Conflict is highly likely in these situations. In the same way, the partner who lived in the home first is likely to consider that it is their home – this may cause arguments which will have a negative impact on the relationship.

Given this, it may be in the best interests of the new stepfamily to move to a house that is new to all parties, if possible, rather than moving into one of the existing houses. This can help establish a neutral place for you both and any children from previous partnerships to live. If this is not possible or realistic, and you are sharing a residence one of you had previously in a different relationship, it is important to outline how this will work.

It is also important to discuss how money will be distributed. Should you open both joint and separate bank accounts, so that money can be allocated for children from the former relationship or for individual needs?

Money is often a measure of power and it is important that both members of a couple feel that they have influence in a relationship. Couples who share finances need to consider and discuss important issues before – not after – moving in together.

Learning to live in a stepfamily

When a **stepfamily** is created, it takes time and effort for everyone to feel comfortable and to adjust to a life together. No matter what your circumstances are, every stepfamily goes through a period of readjustment following this major life change. This does not mean the adjustment period is always negative but there will be different roles and boundaries that are in the family unit that were different before.

Step-parents need to learn ways to relate to stepchildren, both in showing affection and providing discipline. It is very important to make every effort to treat all children, both biological and step-children, equally. In the beginning however it can be best to allow the biological parent to discipline their biological child.

Both the biological parent and step-parent need to work as a team setting the same boundaries, enforcing rules and communicating the same key messages. Children look to adults to tell them that things are safe and ok. If you are working together and consistently this can provide comfort for the children.

Children need time to negotiate new roles and relationships. Communicate often with each other and as a family. Check in with how your partner is feeling and check in with the kids about how they are feeling. If there is an open dialogue, issues can be dealt with as they occur instead of waiting for feelings to build up.

In the beginning it is likely that you will have less couple time as the children's needs are being met. When the things have settled down it is important to find couple time together.

Acknowledging that stepfamilies are different

Be prepared for the stepfamily to be different from your previous experience of family in various ways including:

- In contrast to other family types, stepfamilies are formed as a result of loss, either in the form of the separation of parents or the death of a parent. Children who may have hoped that their parents would reunite are faced with the reality that this will not happen. As a result, children may still be grieving or be distressed from the break-up of the first marriage and this can make it difficult to adjust.
- There are many more family relationships in stepfamilies. There are usually a parent, grandparents and extended family members from the first marriage to consider.
- Life has changed, so problems will arise. Stepfamilies often go through particular stages, which include

fantasy (hopes of a Brady Bunch), confusion (fantasy not coming true), crazy time (division between members), stability (adjustment) and commitment (acceptance of the situation and being prepared to work through issues).

Seeking advice about remarriage

If you are having doubts about remarrying or need some help working through some relationship issues, you may find it valuable to talk about your difficulties with a relationship counsellor. Counselling can also help you face the challenges of your second marriage. A good couple bond is at the basis of a successful stepfamily.

Where to get help

- **Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia** (PACFA) National Register (Family and Relationship Therapy) Tel. (03) 9486 3077
- **Australian Association of Relationship Counsellors** Tel. 1800 806 054
- **Family Relationship Advice Line** Tel. 1800 050 321
- **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
- **Stepfamilies Australia** is an organisation that aims to strengthen stepfamilies Tel (03) 9663 6733
- **Kids Helpline** Tel. 1800 55 1800
- **MensLine Australia** provides national telephone and online support, information and referrals for men with family and relationship concerns Tel. 1300 78 99 78
- **Qlife** provides telephone and online support to help lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex communities work towards better health, including mental health Tel. 1800 184 527
- **beyondblue** is an independent non-for profit organisation that provides telephone and online support for depression, anxiety, and related disorders, as well as online resources and information Tel. 1300 22 4636

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