



Moving on from divorce

You can go through divorce or you can grow through it, they say. So how do you put the pieces together again?

There is no quick fix solution to divorce, but you can take steps which will help you through the healing process moment by moment, then day by day, week by week and year by year.

People think that for a divorce to happen things must have been building up for some time. In some situations this is true. In others the end of a marriage can come as a terrible shock. In either case there is a tendency to sift through everything that has happened or read every book on the subject of relationships to find out why, to find a response. Eventually the question changes from 'why?' to 'where shall I go from here?' To start with you can't understand why

everything in the world is carrying on without you, but after a while you realise you need to find a way to jump back on. This might be immersing yourself in your work, exercising, taking up a new interest, finding a support group, or getting a new job. Filling the time you would normally spend with your partner is key, as is making new friends who will lift you.

It's important, too, to learn how to move on emotionally. And you have to find a way to forgive - yourself and your partner. This gives you a sense of release and the opportunity to start afresh. But it is an act of will, not of feeling, and it is a continual process, forgiving again and again, little by little, day by day.

Making my peace

After my husband left, the divorce went through in a few months and three weeks afterwards he had married again. Within a short while I felt that I had to learn to forgive him so that I could move on with my life. I managed to write a letter and I sent it to him but I have no idea if he received it, or if his new wife allowed him to read it.

It was amazing how I felt a sense of

release in doing that. However it took a number of years for me to forgive her. It is horrible to have bitterness; from then on I just felt sadness.

Five years later I learned that he had cancer and was near his end. I asked some mutual friends to contact him and arrange for me to visit him. I wanted us to make our peace before he died. He agreed but his wife wouldn't allow it. I

learnt that she was saying terrible things about what I had or hadn't done. I felt sorry because I don't know that he could have been happy with her.

It took me a long time to get over the divorce. I found it really hard being on my own. The house had horrible memories so a friend helped me find a new home which was wonderful - a new *continued on next page*

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beginning with new associations. I kept working because I knew I had to support myself. But once I got myself on an even keel, I started to question everything. Why had it happened to me? Why I would never have a family?

The importance of friends

I got strength from my friends from church who would ring me up and read passages from the Bible which they felt would be helpful and encouraging. They would come round and sit with me or take me out for meals. I got involved in different activities and eventually began to enjoy being single again.

I had two or three relationships but the first one was emotionally very traumatic because it opened up all sorts of wounds. Although I regret not having any children I am grateful they didn't have to go through the trauma of the divorce and I am fortunate that my brother's children make me feel very much a part of their family.

Looking back

Before this happened to me I had no idea how devastating divorce was. I felt that if my husband had died, I would have grieved but at least I would still have had happy memories. However in divorce, I felt I had failed as a wife, and all I had was pain, rejection and shame. I had very low

self-esteem and lacked confidence. And I found that there were issues to do with communication and abandonment in my family and upbringing that I needed to address.

Now I feel I have matured and am much more sensitive and understanding of people through this. I hope that I am less likely to make judgements and am much more caring towards people who have gone through emotional trauma. I am now remarried and together my husband and I are helping other people learn to grow through their divorce.

Liz

Forgiveness

Forgiveness is not:

- giving people the right to continue hurting you
- accepting them back until you see a change in their behaviour
- necessarily trusting the person again
- pretending it doesn't matter
- trivialising the hurt or wrongdoing
- a one-off action - you will need to forgive again and again

Forgiveness is:

- giving up one's right to revenge and bitterness
- releasing the person from their debt
- liberating you from the past
- allowing you to begin the journey of healing and growth
- the route to peace of mind
- the means of gaining personal self-respect
- a choice not a feeling
- letting God deal with it

If I don't forgive:

- I'm the one who will suffer
- I am bound to whoever I'm angry with
- I can't move on

Don't forgive too soon. You need to go through the process of grieving, anger and guilt before you can forgive. You may need to forgive both yourself and your former spouse.

Depression

Many people going through divorce will experience depression. For some this will be particularly severe. If this is the case with you, then don't be afraid or ashamed of seeking professional help immediately. The symptoms may include changes in your sleep and appetite, lack of energy, lack of concentration, crying. You may feel lonely, empty, and isolated. You will get past this time but if you feel overwhelmed, then tell your doctor and ask to be referred to a counsellor – or call an organisation that can put you in touch with local help.

Feeling normal again

About a year after I had finally realised that my marriage was over, I saw an advert for the Divorce Recovery Workshop pinned on a noticeboard. I didn't like the sound of it and it meant spending a weekend in Devon. That meant a long, difficult journey by public transport to the other end of the country - but I knew I would have to go.

I wasn't expecting it to be life-changing - but it was! I met other people like me, even vicars, who were facing divorce. All these people in my situation, all in various stages of grief and suffering, and we all had something in common. It meant that we bonded with each other. After such a long time I felt normal again because I was with other people who felt the same things. They knew. And you could even laugh together, surrounded by love and support.

Starting over

Coming back home was hard. In the journey I had a sinking feeling. I was worried that everything would be just the same: the misery, the heartache. But I moved on from that point. I had new strength, new friends, and new thoughts. I had stepped out into the world on my own - and survived.

I got involved in as many activities as I could to fill the evenings and a friend invited me to a dancing class. This was agony because you had to touch other men and I had never touched anyone except my husband. You had to dance with them and occasionally talk to them. It was awful but I kept going because I loved the dancing and eventually I had tremendous fun.

Then and now

I am in a new relationship now and life is good, but I still find things hard. I am fine until the children arrive and I have to share them with my ex. They cope by keeping mum and dad separate so I don't know what they are doing with half their lives. There is no more togetherness. I had to drop off my grandchild with my ex and half an hour later I was in floods of tears. It stirs up that feeling in my stomach again and it's because the family is broken. The grandchildren have to be shared and it's a constant reminder of what has happened. All those lives altered because of a decision made by one person.

Jenny

The legal process

- Choose a solicitor with whom you feel comfortable, whom you trust, and who seems to understand and empathise with your position. They are not your counsellor or your friend, but it is vital to feel that you can rely on them.
- Don't be rushed into making decisions.
- The divorce itself is usually very straightforward. The settlement of finances and children is a far more complicated matter.



Getting through divorce

- Find a local divorce recovery group where you can share what you're feeling with others who have also experienced this pain.
- Try counselling - make sure you find someone with whom you feel comfortable, safe and understood.
- Avoid drink, alcohol or drugs to get you through - they just suppress the emotions for the moment and are more likely to cause other problems.
- Get plenty of sleep, but not too much.
- Make sure you eat well.
- Take exercise.
- Avoid rushing into another relationship.
- Try writing down your feelings - putting how you feel into words, will help you begin to address them.
- Don't be swayed by other people's opinions of how you are coping - there is no time limit on the grief you are feeling.
- Seek out friends who build you up; avoid ones who don't help you.
- Set yourself small goals, perhaps breaking a task into smaller units, and celebrate your achievements, no matter how small.
- Take it day by day.
- Be gentle with yourself. Physically and mentally you are under par so don't expect too much of yourself.
- Avoid looking back at your relationship with rose-tinted spectacles.
- Have as little contact as possible with your partner - you will heal more quickly.

Getting help

One of the hardest things about the divorce proceedings was the legal side. This is where I felt most alone, I think, as my ex-husband was a businessman and I was used to him dealing with all the finances and formalities. None of my friends or family felt able to advise me on what to do and I was constantly aware that my husband would use any means to protect his interests. I didn't feel in a fit state to do anything, but eventually there was no avoiding the situation.

Once I had made the decision to put things on a formal footing, I was urged to "find a good solicitor". But how do you know who to go to? How do you compare? No one seems able to give you general advice because each person's situation is unique. I found out that firms offer a free initial consultation, but I didn't shop around; it was too hard to go through the process again. The first solicitors I tried seemed OK.

Twists and turns

I had been assigned a female solicitor - my ex had told me that he always used female lawyers as they were the most tenacious. However, I walked into the room and she seemed fresh out of college. I tried to be objective and to-the-point in summing up what had happened. I am a private person and I was in smart, plush offices telling a stranger about the failure in my personal life. It was humiliating. She stressed that she couldn't tell me what I should do but could only give me the options and follow my instructions when I had come to a decision.

I started proceedings and I came to trust my solicitor, although I seemed to have so many reasons to contact her and each time I was aware that it was costing me money. The tension of the situation was made even worse by the pressure and fear of the expense. Then she sent me a letter saying she was leaving the firm at the end of the week. My case was passed on to her colleague, however the firm tried to charge me for the privilege of bringing her up to speed on my case.

Progress

I then turned to some friends, living some distance away, who were solicitors. They told me to change to a new firm. This was a very scary process. I was afraid that the momentum would be lost and that it would cost me more money, but their advice proved invaluable. My new solicitor was a man, and a senior partner and he was much more prepared to fight my corner. My friends continued to prove a good sounding board for me to discuss the advice he was giving me. Occasionally, still, I had to challenge him with the actions he was prepared to take. It was only through having my friends giving me the confidence to stand up for myself in this way that gave me the courage to do this.

It was a huge relief when we reached a settlement. Each day had been filled with dread as I waited for the post or phone calls giving me the latest instalment of the proceedings. *Karen*

What went wrong?

Understanding why your relationship failed is the first step towards recovery. Many books and programmes urge you to share the blame in the breakdown but this can be too simplistic, and often quite painful. Instead of looking at whose fault it is, it might be more helpful to consider the relationship as a whole rather than individual contributions. Ask yourself:

- how were things when we first met?
- what attracted us to each other?
- what made our relationship good?
- how have we changed?
- what external factors have influenced our relationship?
- what has stopped us overcoming our differences?

This will initially be quite an emotional process but it will ultimately help you to let go and move on. Be prepared to accept that you will continue to have good days and bad days.

You're not alone

While society allows people who are bereaved years to recover, those who are divorced or separated are expected to quietly pull themselves together in a matter of weeks. With family and friends unlikely to understand the emotional trauma you are experiencing, many people acknowledge the huge value of self-help groups in speeding recovery. Meeting others who know what you are feeling because they've been there, or are going through it themselves, helps you to feel 'normal' again while being supported and encouraged.



Extra help

Support groups

Aquila

A network of local divorce support groups throughout the country, Aquila offers a variety of services accessed through its annual membership. Aquila was founded in 1991 by a group of people who had all experienced a relationship breakdown, and realised that support and understanding from others going through the same trauma played a vital role in their own recovery.

www.aquilatrust.org
Tel 01892 665524

Divorce Recovery Workshop

A course of six weekly evening sessions, or a weekend residential course, this self-help group is based around a series of videos which provide the opening for a discussion in small groups. The leaders are volunteers who have been through divorce themselves and they seek to provide a safe environment for people to share their response and experience and gain an understanding of their feelings.

www.drw.org.uk
Tel 07000 781889

DivorceCare

An international initiative which has a strong Christian emphasis in its seminars and support groups where leaders are people who understand the impact of divorce. Each session is based around one of 13 video presentations. There is also DivorceCare for Kids to help children come to terms with what is happening to their family. Visit their website (www.divorcecare.com) for information on contacts within the UK.

Parentline Plus

A support group to help parents in separation. There is a free guide to 'helping you put your children first' and a 24 hour helpline. 'Parents Together' groups and workshops encourage parents to share their experiences with others and get new ideas on how to bring up their children in a difficult time.

Tel 0808 800 2222
www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Bookshelf

Missing being Mrs by Jennifer Croly. Monarch Books, ISBN 0825460522. (Available from Care for the Family: B990)

Divorce by Frank Retief. Christian Focus, ISBN 1857924215

Growing Through Divorce by Jim Smoke. Harvest House Publishers, ISBN 1565073223

Care for the Family

If you have been divorced and are now parenting alone, then *Single Parent Family* is a bimonthly email newsletter from Care for the Family. The organisation also offers a pen-pal scheme, counselling referrals, activity breaks for single parent families and other initiatives.

For more information contact Care for the Family, Garth House, FREEPOST, (CF4636), Cardiff CF15 7GZ, or phone (029) 2081 0800. Information is also available online at www.careforthefamily.org.uk/spf

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