

Coping through the Change Curve

Everybody experiences family separation differently but there are certain stages that most people go through. At the Centre for Separated Families, we talk about dealing with the ending of a relationship as being a process. We use something called the change curve* to help to describe that process. The change curve identifies the emotional states that you are likely to experience. This sheet offers some ideas about how to cope through the different stages.

Shock and Denial

The early stages of separation produce feelings of shock and, if the separation is unexpected, those feelings can be pretty intense. You may find that ordinary day-to-day activities become difficult to perform, that you find it difficult to concentrate or that you cry or shake. It can also be difficult to accept what is happening and you may find yourself imagining that the separation isn't real or that it is only temporary.

These feelings are perfectly normal. Your body produces chemicals to help you to cope with the stress and anxiety that the separation often brings but these can make it difficult to function normally. At this point, it's important that you take good care of yourself.

- **Get active**

Exercise triggers the release of a brain chemical called serotonin which boosts your mood and reduces feelings of anxiety and stress. Exercise also helps to discharge feelings of anger and will help towards improving sleep patterns. You don't need to run a marathon, just go for a brisk walk, play your favourite sport, vacuum vigorously or work on the car or in the garden.

- **Get as much sleep as you can**

You might find that your sleep patterns are disturbed. This is quite natural. Plenty of exercise, reducing your caffeine intake and keeping regular bedtime hours will all help you to get a good night's sleep. Try to wind down before you head off to bed. If you keep chewing things over in your head, try writing them down and keep a notepad by the side of your bed in case you wake up. If things get really problematic, talk to your doctor.

- **Eat properly**

In the early days after separation, it can sometimes be difficult to summon up the energy or enthusiasm to cook properly, especially if your children are not with you. Try to prepare and eat proper meals whenever you can and make sure that you drink enough water. Think, also, about the food that you're eating. Foods that are high in fats and sugars often lead to mood swings. Try eating wholemeal bread and pasta, fresh fruit and plenty of vegetables.

- **Don't rely on alcohol or drugs**

When you're going through a difficult time, it can be tempting to use alcohol or drugs to make things feel better. Whilst there's nothing wrong with the odd drink, in the long run, alcohol and drugs will have a negative effect on your mood and health. They will also reduce your ability to stay in control of your emotions.

Anger and Frustration

After you have survived the initial shock of the separation and the reality hits home, you are likely to feel angry and frustrated. You may be angry with your children's other parent for what they have done, angry with yourself for something that you have done, simply angry that life has been so unkind to you and your family. You may also be frustrated by your inability to make things feel better and feel guilty about how the separation is affecting your children. When emotions are running high, it can be easy to make the wrong choices. You may feel like hurting your children's other parent showing how badly you've been hurt but a bad decision now can have negative effects on your children for ever.

Find ways to release your anger or frustration. Get active by going for a brisk walk, running, swimming, going to the gym or digging the garden. Find someone to talk to so that you can get negative feelings out of your system. Go to the recycling centre and smash your empties into the bottle bank as hard as you can. Find somewhere where you won't disturb anyone and shout! And don't forget that alcohol and drugs will impair your judgement – what seems justified late at night can become a terrible mistake by the morning.

Depression

Most people feel 'low' as they go through divorce or separation. However, these feelings of sadness and low energy can develop into something more serious. If they do, it's important that you get the right kind of help. If you are at all concerned, talk to your doctor.

- **Be kind to yourself**

Family separation can knock your self esteem. You can feel lonely, isolated and helpless. You might find yourself going over and over things in your head. It's important to be kind to yourself. Wrap yourself up in front of a favourite film, make yourself a special meal, have a long soak in the bath, treat yourself to something small to brighten your day.

- **Take one step at a time**

It may take some time for your life to feel normal again. Don't force things along or try and kid yourself that everything is fine. Cut yourself some slack. Take care of yourself, accept that there will be difficult days and enjoy the days that feel more positive. In time, there will be more good days than bad.

- **Set good routines**

Life before the separation will have had its own routines. Many of these will be lost and it can leave the world feeling chaotic. Try to keep old routines that are useful such as meeting friends or taking your children swimming and get new routines in place as soon as possible. If you need to take time away from work, that's fine, but work can offer structure when the rest of your life is changing.

Experimentation, Decision and Integration

This can be a time of optimism leading to the point where you feel you are able to make choices about the future. Eventually you will feel that you have moved into a new phase of your life. However, it's important not to try and rush things. Your new feelings of hope can easily turn to despair if you try to do too much too soon. A new hair cut and some new clothes may be a good idea as you begin to move forward but be careful that you don't turn your whole life upside down.

Try to set yourself small, achievable targets. Nothing too big, just something simple to start with. It could be something like painting the bedroom, tidying the garage or learning a some new software. This is also a good time to start adult education classes, join a gym or try a new hobby.