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

Emotional Coping and Divorce

Divorce is generally a stressful and unsettling event. At minimum, a major relationship is ending, all sorts of routines are upset, and in the midst of the stress of transition there are legal hoops to jump through before things can be resolved. Add in the volatile emotions that are frequently associated with divorce and you have a difficult situation indeed. In this section, we will talk about practical ways that divorcing people can cope with and make the best of their stressful circumstances.

There are really two sides to the divorce process; the human emotional side and the formal legal side. Different coping strategies and skills are appropriate to address each of these aspects of divorce.

Emotional Coping

Divorce can trigger all sorts of unsettling, uncomfortable and frightening feelings, thoughts and emotions, including grief, loneliness, depression, despair, guilt, frustration, anxiety, anger, and devastation, to name a few. There is frequently sadness and grief at the thought of the end of a significant relationship. There can be fear at the prospect of being single again, possibly for a long time (or even forever), and with having to cope with changed financial, living and social circumstances. There can be anger at a partner's stubborn obstinacy and pettiness, abuse, or outright betrayal. There can be guilt over perceived failures to have made the relationship work. There can be overwhelming depression at the thought of the seeming impossibility of being able to cope with all the changes that are required. Any and all of these emotions are enough to make people miserable, and to find them wanting to cry at 3am in the morning.

Painful as they are, these sorts of emotions are generally natural grief-related reactions to a very difficult life-altering situation. Though there is no 'cure' for these feelings, there are some good and healthy ways to cope with them so as to suffer as little as possible, and to gain in wisdom, compassion and strength from having gone through the experience. The emotional coping process starts with allowing one's self the freedom to grieve and ends with moving on with one's life.

Allow grieving to occur. Grief is a natural human reaction to loss. Grief is not a simple emotion itself, but rather is an instinctual emotional process that can invoke all sorts of emotional reactions as it runs its course. The grief process tends to unfold in predictable patterns. Most commonly, people move back and forth between a shocked, numb state characterized by denial, depression, and/or minimization of the importance of the loss, and outraged anger, fear, and vulnerability. The dialog between numb and upset continues over time as the person emotionally digests the nature of the loss. Ultimately, enough time passes that the loss comes to be thought of as something that happened in the past, and that is not a part of day-to-day life. Grief doesn't so much go away as it becomes irrelevant after a while.

Fighting grief is often counterproductive. Most of the time it is best to allow yourself to grieve in the ways that come naturally to you, at least part of the time. Eventually life comes back to 'normal' and the intensity of loss retreats. Different people take different amounts of time to go through their grief process and express their grief with different intensities of emotion. The amount of time people spend grieving depends on their personalities, and on the nature of their losses. Someone whose marriage was betrayed might take a longer time to work out their grief and to do it in a more vocal way than someone who chose to leave a marriage of their own accord. Someone who found out suddenly about their spouses' affair might grieve differently than someone who has watched their marriage deteriorate for years.

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It is not realistic that grief over a lost marriage should be worked out in a month or even several months. Most people will continue to deal with the emotional ramifications of loss for many months, sometimes even several years. Several years is a long time, however; really too long to spend exclusively grieving when life is so short. People who find that grief has not for the most part abated after 12 months have gone by are strongly urged to seek the assistance of a professional therapist.

Choosing to move forward. While grief can be immobilizing at first, after a while, most grieving people find that, little by little, they are ready to move on with their lives. For a time, they may find themselves moving on and grieving at the same time. Over time however, if everything goes well, the grieving process loses steam and more energy becomes available for moving on with life.