

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

Looking after yourself during a separation or divorce

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

Separation and divorce are massive life changes that bring a lot of different emotions and stresses for most people.

Stress can make it difficult to manage your emotions and can impact on your parenting and your relationship with your child. This is why it's so important to look after yourself during a separation or divorce.





When you look after your own health and wellbeing, you're better able to:

- parent the way you want to
- notice and support your child's emotions and needs; and
- show your child positive ways to cope with stress and manage emotions.

The better you're coping with the separation, the better your child will cope.



In this resource:

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Tune in to your own emotions

It's important to be aware of your own reactions and feelings at this stressful time, and to think about what helps you feel calmer or more in control.

Find some space and time to think about the following questions:

-  **How are you feeling about the separation?**

It's common to feel strong emotions like sadness, grief or anger during and after a breakup. Some parents feel relieved or empowered. Many also face added pressures related to the separation like moving house, financial losses and spending less time with their children. Remember that whatever you're feeling is likely to be normal for people navigating separation and the stress it brings.

- **What have you been doing that's working for you right now? What helped you stay calm in front of your child at a time you felt really frustrated, angry or sad?**

Regular moments of self-care help you to regulate your emotions and respond and be the kind of parent you want to be. It might be things like getting out in nature, doing something you find relaxing or that makes you laugh, crying in the shower, singing in the car, or spending time with a friend. Some people find writing their thoughts and feelings down helpful, either in a notebook or in a letter they can then burn to shift the negative energy.

- **What would you say to a friend going through this?**

Notice what you're thinking about yourself, and saying to yourself. If it's not what you'd say to a friend, try to stop. Just as you might advise a friend, focus on the strength you have shown to cope with all the stresses of a separation or divorce.

- **Who else knows what you're going through and can support you?**

When your family is navigating life after parental separation or divorce, you need the support of your 'village' – the friends, family and community members who you can rely on in tough times. Who can you talk to? Who is always offering to help, or would love to if you only asked? It might be practical support, like someone looking after your child so you don't need to drag them to a meeting, or emotional, like meeting up with a friend you know will listen while you vent.

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I got so depressed about my separation from my husband that for the last three days of term two I couldn't get out of bed and get my children to school. When I was that low, I knew I needed to activate my own support team to help me pull through – not just for me, but especially for the kids.

ANONYMOUS, MUM OF THREE



What other parents found helpful during a separation or divorce

Knowing what has worked for other parents can help you think of ways to look after yourself during a separation or divorce.

Other parents who have navigated separation have shared strategies and supports they found helpful, like:

Be kind to yourself

Remind yourself that you're doing the best job you can right now. It's normal to feel overwhelmed as you deal with all the extra responsibilities and 'work' that comes with navigating separation.

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Separation and divorce are up there with the most stressful things you can go through in your life! On top of becoming a single parent, there is a whole lot of admin, things to organise and paperwork. It's a whole new way of thinking because there is so much to navigate through. It can be very stressful. Navigating Centrelink, mediation – and then the wellbeing of children.

ANONYMOUS, MUM OF THREE

Another parent told us she found it helpful to 'just take it a moment at a time'.

Notice the things that are going right and the parenting wins. Look for even small changes in your child's behaviour, and focus on the moments of joy you've shared together and times you feel most strongly connected with them.

Connect with people with similar experiences

It can be really helpful to talk with, or hear the stories of, people who've been through a separation or divorce themselves. It could be a friend outside the family, or maybe a support group (online or in your community).

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I've become a lot more strategic about human connection ... I've been deliberately finding people that I could talk to about how I was feeling. We don't need people to fix it or to give us advice; we just need them to listen empathetically.

JOHN, DAD OF THREE

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Try to find other people in a similar situation. Search groups on Facebook – you could follow single mum pages or budgeting pages or relationship ones. Even if you don't want to be brave enough to comment, sometimes it's really nice to read the comments and think, 'Oh, that's a really good idea' or 'It's not just me'.

AMANDA, MUM OF TWO

Ignore unhelpful views or comments

There are a lot of unhelpful views and assumptions about separation and divorce. Looking after yourself might mean avoiding certain people, situations or social media pages, so you can ignore those negative assumptions. Focus on your values and strengths as a person and as a parent.

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I reassured my kids that it is OK for me to be a single parent. I know that kids can thrive in single parent families.

ANONYMOUS, PARENT OF TWO

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Separation is a massive change and a really hard experience to go through. And while you're navigating this change and trying to be the best parent you can be, you are also dealing with societal expectations that say the best life for children is where they live in one house together with both their parents. It takes a lot of strength to get through this and to support your children through it too.

JOCELYN, MUM OF TWO

Seek advice

Sometimes it's helpful to get advice from a service or professional who is experienced in helping parents navigate separation and divorce.

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I got myself some advice from a relationships counselling service, and that was really, really helpful because that enabled me to get a different perspective on the situation ... Yeah, kind of reaching out to the services when I needed to, and just taking it a bit at a time.

EMI, PARENT OF FOUR

For advice or referral to local services that can help, check out [Family Relationships Online](#) or call 1800 050 321.



Look after your health

Looking after yourself also includes the everyday things that you know are good for your health and wellbeing, but that can get forgotten or moved to the bottom of your priorities when you're dealing with a lot of challenges. Things like:

- getting as much sleep as you can – choose an early night over TV, or nap while your toddler is napping
- doing some exercise – even just a short walk outside
- trying to choose healthy food
- taking 10 minutes to do something that relaxes or nourishes you – like practising breathing exercises, listening to a guided meditation or just sitting in the sunshine; and
- learning to say no (you might not be able to do everything you used to do) and to ask for help when you need it.

Look forward

It's OK to grieve or feel angry, but after a while it's more helpful to start looking forward towards the future. Your child needs you to be the best 'you' that you can be. Separation can be an opportunity to think about what you can or want to do differently now – both for yourself and with your child.

Some things to think about:

- What's something you've always wanted to do – like an art class, or a fishing trip with your child?
- Are there different parenting practices you want to try now?
- What do you want your child to remember and say about their childhood and time spent with you?
- Are there new family rituals and traditions you can create with your child?

If you're struggling to manage feelings like anger or distress or you're feeling 'stuck' and unable to move forward, you might need to seek professional help. A psychologist or counsellor can help you learn and use positive strategies for managing difficult emotions. See your family doctor/GP for a referral, or call the [Family Relationship Advice Line](https://www.familyrelationshipadvice.gov.au) on 1800 050 321.

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Now as I look back at that time, I acknowledge that yes, it was really hard. But the separation also allowed me to become the parent I wanted to be. Over time my children and I created new rituals and routines that we love, and that wouldn't have been possible before. Our bond and understanding is so much stronger now and that was an unexpected outcome from a really tough experience.

JOCELYN, MUM OF TWO

To be able to support your child's mental health and wellbeing, you need to notice and look after your own wellbeing. Looking after yourself isn't an indulgence; it's essential. By doing so, you can parent in the way you want to, and model healthy coping strategies and ways for your child to feel and express their emotions. Look after yourself, so you and your child can look after each other.

Further resources

Check out the following resources for more information on supporting children through a separation or divorce:

Talking to your child about separation and divorce



Parenting after a separation or divorce



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