

## Dealing With Emotions after Separation and Divorce

I'd like to give you a broad-brush of the ways people talk about their emotions after a divorce or separation. Some people describe their experience of emotions after a marriage ends as a roller-coaster ride of emotions. Others call it a whirlwind, some even liken it to riding a wild horse that is trying to kick you off, while they hang on for dear life. But however you describe it, it is not usually regarded as a smooth or predictable ride! And most descriptions give a sense of things being out of control at an emotional level, and a sense of "being done to" by the process.

It is common for people to say they think they are losing it, or going gar-gar, or that they are hanging by their fingernails, or they are lost, frightened by the intensity of feelings, that they don't know how they can go on. Some are sure they must be crazy, because surely no-one else gets as affected as they are. There might be times when they feel they are settling, and then something triggers their pain, and they are back in the storm of emotions all over again. It is a chaotic, demanding time.

It is not uncommon for people to experience physical symptoms during this time of emotional upheaval. Dizziness, nausea, problems with sleep, appetite, digestion and concentration are common. Some find they are listless, sluggish and depleted, while others can't seem to stop, finding that they are wired and tense. And some swing between the two. It can be important to have a physical exam and a chat with your Dr if these things are happening, as your body can become strained from living with such complex, unpredictable emotions.

### Emotions

#### Shock

Whether you are the person who made the choice to end the relationship, or the person who has experienced the other ending the relationship, there are common emotions experienced as you both come to terms with the death of your marriage. You both made a commitment to each other which has now been ended: You are confronted with the need to let go of all the dreams, hopes and expectations of that relationship. And that is a huge psychic shock. A death of hopes, aspirations and a way of life. So it is not surprising that most people experience shock at first.

#### *Shock can take different forms:*

Retreat/Denial from friends and family, from yourself, from thoughts, from the reality of what is happening. You may find that you refuse to talk about it if this is the path taken. Some people leave jobs, towns...some just run away. People who retreat may reject help from others, and may live as if they hope it will all go away. Retreat, if it lasts, will delay the healing that needs to occur: it is just a

postponement of what will need to be faced. But it can keep you alive until you can face what has happened.

Healthy retreat is necessary to give you time to sort out what you are feeling, what you need, but this usually takes place after the shock has passed.

Some people in the shock state need to talk to others over and over, almost as if trying to hear that it is real. There is a constant rewind of the video of the breakup that is stored in their mind.

Some people get highly social, making sure they don't have to think or feel.

In many ways, all these choices give the person some time to come to terms with what seems unbearably painful. The initial time of shock gradually gives way to a level of acceptance that the relationship and its dreams have died. There has been a real and final death, even though there will be parts of you that will probably continue to move between hope that something will happen to reverse the situation. So there may be a to-and-froing between acceptance of the end, and hope for a reconciliation for some time. And this oscillation is demanding emotionally as well.

### **Loss of control**

Many people feel that things are out of their control. This could be because it was not their choice, or that the children do not live with them, or that their partner keeps making decisions that impact on them. This can lead to a loss of a sense of respect, and a feeling of helplessness, hopelessness or anger.

### **Anger**

Anger is a normal part of grief. That means it is a normal part of divorce and separation. It can be scary, especially if you are not used to your own, or another's anger. If there has been DV in the relationship, the partner who uses violence may threaten and/or use violence in more extreme ways. So this can be a dangerous time for some and the police, courts, or other agencies may need to be involved.

You will feel anger because dreams are thwarted, things are not in control, and you have many losses. No matter how well you do the process, there will be times when it feels the other partner got a better deal than you. It can feel unjust, that you have given more than the other. If there have been affairs, there may be a sense of feeling betrayed, which can feed the anger.

### **Guilt/Shame**

- For feeling like you "failed" at marriage or that you didn't try hard enough
- For the things you've done or left undone
- For breaking your own moral code or religious values
- For disappointing your partner/family/friends/community
- For what effects it will have on the children

## Some focussing questions

- Have any separation/divorce experiences/events left you feeling guilt, embarrassment or shame?
- What helped you to deal with these powerful feelings?