

SIMPLE STEPS

to
Separating
Positively



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Practical Strategies
to
Survive Separation

A PSYCHOLOGISTS GUIDE

Simple Steps to Separating Positively

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Introduction

Many people underestimate the complexity of separation and the impact it has. Even when you want the separation it can have a huge impact on your emotional and physical health, your children (if you have any) your extended family, your social life, and of course your bank balance.

This booklet is specifically designed to give people practical strategies to navigate this process. While there is nothing that can take away the pain completely, there are definitely things you can do to make life easier for everyone concerned. The aim is to help people move on with their lives.

Chapter 1

Deciding to Separate

“Relationships are like glass. Sometimes it’s easier to leave them broken than hurt yourself putting it back together”

Anon

Many people reading this have made the decision to separate, however there will be many who are still not sure whether to stay, or leave the relationship. Separation is a huge decision, and of course a very complex one.

Everyone’s situation is unique, and not all relationships can or should be saved. I do however think it is useful to think about why you are wanting to separate before you make any decisions. In therapy I discuss in detail why someone wants to end a relationship, and broadly speaking there are six main things people bring up.

We have grown apart and we have nothing in common anymore

As life progresses, we are all constantly changing and evolving. The different stages in our life teach us different lessons and shape us whether we like it or not. One of the issues appears to be that while some couples change in the same direction, in other cases each person moves in a different direction.

Just to be clear, I’m not talking about common interests here. A common misconception is that we need to have common interests with our partner to have a great relationship. Whilst it is nice to share similar interests there is no evidence common interests are as important as we have been led to believe

According to Dr Paul Gibney looking at the following 7 areas can help with looking at how compatible you and your partner are.

Intellectual

Emotional compatibility

Spiritual / moral / values compatibility

Cultural and Aesthetical compatibility

Relational skills compatibility

Sexual compatibility

Social compatibility

Literally I ask client to rate how compatible they believe they are with their partner in each of those areas. According to Dr Gibney an overall score of 80% or so may represent a workable relationship.

Sometimes we realise we were perhaps never really compatible, but stayed together for many other reasons. At other times we may chose to leave because we have simply moved in different directions. There are of course some people realise they are compatible and perhaps decide to work on the relationship.

All we do is fight

Like it or not conflict is part of life. It is very hard to have a meaningful relationship with anyone and agree on everything. Seriously think about it, how can you possibly have two very unique individuals, with different genetics, different upbringings, different life experiences and even different brain wiring (we all know how different men and women are) and expect to agree on everything. It is simply not going to happen.

The truth is that conflict is healthy. How you deal with conflict as an individual and as a couple is the real issue to consider. Please don't think that this is about resolving conflict either, most relationships experts agree the key is managing, rather than resolving conflict.

It has been found that 69% of arguments between couples are unresolvable, and that most relationships will have at least 10 areas of disagreement that will be unresolvable for the entirety of the relationship.

The important point to consider is whether or not the conflict is healthy or unhealthy. Unhealthy conflict can be detrimental not only to the relationship but also to the individual. At its worst it may be domestic violence and if this is the case you need to seek professional advice.

Avoidance of conflict is also very unhealthy and is a strong predictor of separation. For a couple to agree on everything means that someone may be suppressing their emotions and just giving in. Ultimately this often leads to underlying resentments and a lack of connection.

Successful relationships are able to deal with conflict well and can agree to disagree. Couples who have unhealthy conflict styles often feel very unhappy and unfulfilled in their relationship. Understanding your conflict style can be very useful for not only understanding the relationship but also for thinking about how best to move forward with separation.

1. I am no longer attracted to my partner also known as “I love them, I’m just not in love with them anymore”

I must say that this is one of the trickiest situations to deal with. Many people present saying they love their partner deeply, but they are no longer attracted to them or have romantic feelings for them.

I guess this is where the philosophical questions about what “love” is take place. Conversations about the differences between romantic love and enduring love often ensue, and it really comes down to one’s own individual opinion.

For me “love” is that sort of unconditional love where you actively show care and concern for the physical and emotional wellbeing of the other person.

You know the sort of love where you just genuinely want the other person to be happy, and are truly interested in their life. There does however need to be some attraction to the other person and maintaining this attraction in a long-term relationship is important.

A little cautionary note about these whole “chemistry” phenomena. It is scientifically proven that when we first meet someone our bodies produce more sex hormones such as oestrogen and testosterone. Dopamine is also more heavily secreted during this time. Dopamine is a beautiful neurotransmitter that is important in pleasure bonding and attachment. It appears that our body continues to produce higher

amounts of dopamine for about 6-12 months. Long enough for us to meet fall in love and procreate to ensure the survival of the human species.

Essentially the chemistry we first experience very rarely stays with the same intensity in long term relationships. Attraction however does stay, but people often confuse attraction and chemistry.

Many people ask if they can fall in love with their partner again. The short answer is yes, but it won't be the intense dopamine fuelled chemistry that occurs in the initial stage of a relationship. Instead, it can be a deep intimacy and attraction that comes with enduring love. The reality is to get this back takes hard work, patience and dedication, and both parties need to be motivated to address the underlying issues. Some people however feel the gap is too wide and that separation is the best option.

2. My partner has cheated on me

Sadly, many people present after there has been some infidelity in the relationship. Typically people present as very fragile and in this situation emotions are especially high. For most an affair, be it physical or emotional represents the ultimate betrayal, and it truly shakes people's belief in themselves, the world and others.

One of the main misconceptions is that if someone cheats you should leave the relationship. If only it were that simple. When people are faced with this situation, they realise it is more complex than this.

If you have only recently found out that your partner has been unfaithful, then I often suggest people take some time before they make any decisions. Put simply it may not be a good idea to make a big decision about separation when your emotions are so intense. I am in no way suggesting that you should stay in the relationship, I am simply suggesting that you take some time to let your emotions settle. Once your emotions have subsided, even just slightly, you will be in a position to decide whether you would like to leave or rebuild the relationship. If you wish to continue in the relationship it is often a good idea to seek professional help to address the underlying issues that led to the infidelity.

Whether you stay or leave is an individual decision that only you can make, and one that requires a great deal of thought. It is possible to rebuild after an affair, however this will take work and commitment to process the underlying issues that led to the affair and navigate a way forward. Often people who chose to leave do so because their sense of self has been so damaged and they do not think it can be repaired if they remain in the relationship.

I just can't put up with this anymore

Often people present in therapy stating they can just no longer put up with a particular aspect of the relationship. It may be that they can no longer put up with their partners gambling, their overworking, their mood, the way they treat the kids, how they don't feel listened to or appreciated. and the list could go on. While there may be explanations for example why the person drinks, or can't talk about their emotions, or yells at the kids, often the reason no longer matters.

Often people get to a place where they have tried to give their partner the benefit of the doubt, but they are no longer prepared to live with the behaviours. In essence it has become a deal breaker.

To other people it may seem like you are making a big decision over something that has been happening for a long time. But to you it is just no longer acceptable. People in this situation are typically very clear about their desire to separate. Remember it is your decision and your life and if you no longer can put up with a certain behaviour then that is your choice.

3. I've met someone else

When someone wants to leave one relationship because they have met someone else, it is again useful to look at the underlying issues. Like I mentioned previously, when we first meet someone, everything is new and exciting. In the early stages when we are getting to know each other we produce lots of dopamine. Dopamine makes us feel warm, cuddly and bonded, but it does not stay around forever. Many people compare this new relationship to their old relationship, but the true question is "are you comparing apples with apples"

In the vast majority of cases is not accurate to compare your new shiny, sweet relationship full of dopamine, to your old relationship with kids, commitments, financial pressures and normal levels of dopamine. It appears to take about two years for a couple to really get to know each other, warts and all. Consequently, it is advisable to be very cautious when making comparisons.

I believe the best approach here is to end your old relationship, before pursuing your new relationship. In my experience though this rarely happens. The excitement and exhilaration of a new relationship combined with increased levels of dopamine is too strong to resist.

My suggestion here is that you go slow, be careful, and try to have a realistic look at the future of this new relationship. Unfortunately you also need to accept that having someone else will add an extra complication to the separation process, and that often this complication adds very high levels of emotions.

On a final note, given the enormity of the decision to separate I always think it is a good idea to ask yourself the following simple questions: -

What are the main reasons I am deciding to leave this relationship?

Is my decision to leave based primarily on short term circumstances or short-term emotions? Or have I given my decision lots of serious thought?

How have I contributed to the breakdown of this relationship?

What are the things I would have to change, or compromise on, to make this relationship work?

Do I like the person I have become in this relationship?

Have I explored all the avenues I have wanted to explore?

Do I want to be in this relationship any longer?

Again, not all relationships can or should be saved, and there are times when it is appropriate to walk away from the relationship. In my opinion if a relationship is causing you significant and continued distress, then that

is reason enough to leave. Regardless of whether people think you should or you shouldn't, ultimately it is your decision.

Whatever your situation, once you have made the decision to separate it is then time to move to the next stage.

Chapter 3

What's best for the kids?

The good news is that parents are largely in control of how much divorce will hurt their children”

Lisa Rene Reynolds

Probably the thing that is of greatest concern for parents is how separation will impact the children. There is so much to talk about on this topic however here I just plan to give you an overview. This section will discuss how children are likely to cope, according to their age and development, and how best to minimise the impact on children.

The first thing I want to do though is calm peoples greatest fear, which is that divorce is going to be devastating on the children, and negatively affect them long term. The reality is that while divorce will not be pleasant and will be stressful the Australian psychological Society states

“the majority of children who experience parental divorce adjust well and do not exhibit severe or enduring emotional or behavioural problems” (APS, 2007)

The research indicates it is not separation, divorce or the change in the family structure that has the most negative effect on children, but rather the levels of conflict and the quality of parenting that will have a strong bearing on how children cope.

So what does this mean? Essentially the message is this separation will definitely be an adjustment, but parents can minimise the pain and suffering of children by:

1. Ensuring children have a strong emotional base
2. Ensuring good levels of parenting and co-parenting
3. Minimising and managing conflict

So while it is hard for any parent to see their children upset, the good news is that as parents we have control over how we behave, which can in turn have a positive impact on our children.

A strong emotional base for our children

What does a strong emotional base mean? It means being there for your children, listening to them, helping them solve problems, encouraging and supporting them, giving them routines and boundaries. It also means letting them know that you are dependable and trustworthy, and that above all else you love them unconditionally.

The emotional support that a child will need will depend on their age, and the developmental stage they are at.

Infants 0-2

Children in this age group are highly dependent on their parents and need lots of nurturing to ensure they have secure attachments. They typically have a strong physical and emotional connection to at least one parent. Infants however have very little perception of time, and therefore lengthy separations from a parent (particularly their primary caregiver) can cause emotional distress.

The important things to remember here are that infants need frequent contact with each parent, to ensure that trusting and secure relationships are established.

They may have little concept of what is actually going on, but they will pick up on stress levels and conflict. Ensuring infants have routine and predictability is very important for infants as is lots of love, nurturing and play.

Pre-schoolers 3-4 years

Preschool children are a little less dependent on their parents than infants, however they still do not have the cognitive abilities to understand what is going on. Their bodies however can pick up on the stress and they may react to separation with shock. They see themselves as very connected to their parents and as a consequence may blame themselves for the separation. They are also very sensitive to hearing criticism about the other parent and may perceive this as criticism of themselves. Since they do not yet have the ability to understand or express how they are feeling some children may regress

in their toileting, their sleep patterns, their behaviour, and even their language.

While preschoolers have a better time perception than infants, a short time can often feel like a very long time to them. They should not really be separated from their parents for long periods of time (Hetherington, et al, 1989).

Again children in this age group need predictability and routine. You may even have a calendar or a chart so that they can see what is going on. In addition they need what every other preschooler needs, love attention, fun, laughter and play.

Be mindful though, that children of this age group are very attuned to you and will pick up the emotional tone of how you are feeling. Many people mistakenly think that they can express their emotions around a preschooler as they don't know what is being said. While they may not understand the words they pick up on the emotional tone and can become distressed because they don't know what to make of it.

Young school age children 5-8

Children in this age bracket are beginning to feel more separate from their parents. Whilst they are starting to be able to express their feelings they are still not great at it. Often time's children in this age group respond to a separation with sadness, and want desperately for their parents to reconcile. They often miss their parents when they are not around, and can even feel abandoned by their parents. They can be clingy at changeovers, and sometimes they can express their worries through behaviours that are difficult for us to understand as parents.

These children need lots of patience and understanding, and encouragement for them to express their feelings without judgement. Talk to them specifically about how they feel about the separating and their desire for their parents to reconcile.

Older school age children 9-12

Children in this age group are able to talk about their feelings, and are more able to understand the separation process and the reasons behind it. Whilst they can express their feeling, they do tend to be fairly black

and white in their thinking, and as a consequence can have an opinion on who is to "blame". It is not unusual for children in this age bracket to align themselves with one parent who they see as the good guy.

In addition children in this bracket are much more aware of society and acceptance of others and may experience shame and embarrassment at their parent's separation. They can feel sad and alone and different from others. This may also lead to anger at one or both parents for putting them in this situation.

It is important to be mindful that at this age children are starting to branch out beyond the family unit. Continued involvement in the outside world such as social engagements, sports and hobbies is essential for this age group. In addition children in this age group should be encouraged to talk about how they are feeling about the separation process. Discussion of intense feelings such as sadness, anger, embarrassment and loneliness are especially beneficial.

Adolescents

I don't know about you, but I would not be an adolescent again for all the money in the world. At the best of times adolescence is difficult, but throw in a separation and it can be quite painful.

Adolescents are much more separate from their parents and tend to cope better than younger children. While initially the pain may be very intense they do have the cognitive ability to make sense of the separation. They do however need to be given time for this to occur, and generally don't want to talk about it to their parents. When they are pressured by their parents they can often get annoyed (understatement) and respond by shutting their parents out more.

Accepting that this is still a difficult transition for your teenager is of paramount importance. Adolescents still need predictable routines and guidance from their parents. They need a parent who is there to talk to and who will listen and give them guidance on the many things that are going on in their lives. They are thinking about heading out in to the big world, and while the separation is significant, they have other issues on their mind as well.

Parents need to remain consistent with adolescents, but also be very mindful that they need a great deal more flexibility with arrangements to ensure they are able to continue to participate in social activities.

Telling your children you are going to separate

How you tell your children that you have decided to separate will clearly be dependent on their age and their personality type. However there are a few important tips that can help people.

Vital tips when dealing with your kids

The top 10 DO's

DO

1. Constantly remind them that you love them
2. Remind them the separation is not their fault. Many parents overlook this one as they can't possibly see how the child would think it was their fault. So many times I have had people say that they felt responsible for their parent's separation. As crazy as this may seem to us parents, to kids it's not so crazy.
3. Assure them are still a family, just a different sort of family
4. Provide routines and boundaries
5. Continue to discipline and have consequences for your children
6. Encourage your child to talk about their feelings and listen to your children's feelings, without always trying to "fix it"
7. Be flexible with your ex around special occasions such as birthdays Christmas, mother and fathers day. To children these rituals are unbelievably special, and if the less tension around these times the better
8. Remind children how much their other parent loves them
9. Recognise that this is a very emotional time for children and a little bit of latitude and compassion may help
10. Love your kids more than you dislike your ex!

TOP 10 DON'TS

DO NOT

1. Argue in front of your kids!!!
2. Argue in front of your kids!!!
3. Talk badly about the other parent.
4. Use your children as messengers
5. Interrogate your children after they have been with their other parent.
Sometimes people think this is subtle but questioning children about this often makes them very uncomfortable.
6. Expect your children to emotionally support you
7. Be inappropriately or overly emotional around your children
8. Use your children as weapons
9. Put your children in a position where they have to choose between parents
10. Tell the kids intimate details about why you separated.

Obviously there is so much more that could be said on this topic, but the essential thing to remember is this. As parents you have the ability to control how stressful this experience is for your children.

You will get over the separation eventually, however if you make it really ugly and painful, your kids may be dealing with the fallout long after you have moved on.