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Emotional Considerations Surrounding Separation

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Separating from your partner is a challenging and emotionally draining time. Something (or a variety of things) has changed since the time you were married, whether that was over the course of a few months or a few years. Everyone is completely unique, and each partner acts as a distinct individual who will be experiencing the separation in their own way. No two experiences are the same. Comparing yourself to one another, or to others who have experienced a separation/divorce will not serve you well. The emotional impact of a separation/divorce often resembles loss and grief reactions.

As per grief expert, the late Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, there are five stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). These stages are not linear, and can appear in varying order, but they offer us a loose structure. This may help you to identify your feelings, and in turn begin to process them. It is common to only experience a few and not all of the five, and that is perfectly okay. David Kessler, author of "Finding Meaning, The Sixth Stage of Grief, has explored a sixth stage in grieving, "meaning". As you deal with acceptance, there is meaning. Acceptance of your decision to separate, and/or acceptance of your separation. Acceptance does not mean you are okay with it, but that you acknowledge the reality of your loss. Exploring meaning may assist in reducing your future worries and anxieties, as it provides us with an intention. It does not take away the pain, but it softly cushions it as we continue to move through these challenging times.

Coping with the impacts of separation/divorce is challenging. Managing your grief/loss reactions as well as staying productive at work, parenting, caregiving, financial stress, etc takes a toll on your mental and physical health. Here are a few tips to follow to help with this difficult adjustment. As well, we will explore some strategies on how to communicate with your children and support their adjustment.

Check in on how you're feeling - It's OK to feel sad, angry, exhausted, frustrated and confused. These feelings are hard and valid. Also, an increase in worrying and anxiety about your future are reasonable and expected. Your life has changed, and you will need time to adjust. Recognizing that your feelings will change and pass within

minutes, hours or days can be comforting. Even if your marriage was unhealthy and the separation feels liberating, venturing into the unknown is frightening.

Self Compassion - Be kind and gentle with yourself. Give yourself permission to feel and to function at a less than optimal level for a period of time. You are human; you will need time to heal. These feelings are exhausting and it will take time for you to feel energized again. It would be helpful to maintain healthy coping strategies along the way (i.e., being active, hydration, nutrition, and positive self talk).

Physical and Emotional Health - Finding time to exercise, eat well and rest can be a challenge in the best of times. Make it a priority to take care of yourself and to keep to your routines as

much as possible. As separation is a transitional time, it is recommended that you avoid making major life decisions or changes at this time. Finding and using healthy coping strategies will allow you to feel your pain, as well as heal. Relying on healthy coping strategies versus nullifying acts (i.e., alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, excessive social media, etc) will ultimately support both your physical and emotional well being. Take time to explore your interests and reconnect with things you enjoy doing apart from your spouse. Sign up for a class you have always wanted to try, volunteer, and take time to enjoy your life and meet new people.

Communication - Make an effort to avoid arguments with your partner. Responding instead of reacting will be helpful to maintain your stress levels. Taking a deep breath before responding can help with this. If a discussion begins to turn into a fight, calmly suggest that you both take a break and revisit. Speaking in a calm tone will help in keeping the conversation steady. Consider keeping legal matters in the hands of your trusted legal advisors. Do not involve your children in the conflict. Avoid arguing with or talking negatively about the other parent in front of your children. Do not use them as spies or messengers, or ask them to take sides.

Social Supports - It is not recommended that you go through this alone. Sharing your feelings with friends, family, or a trained therapist can help you feel supported and strong. Isolating yourself can lead to increased anxiety, low mood, high stress, becoming easily distracted and difficulty focusing. Asking for help when you need it is a strength. Support groups are also available should you want to connect with others who may have similar experiences.

Stay Positive - With all the changes that are occurring it is helpful to view it all as a learning process. What works here? What does not work for me (or my children)? How can I adjust things? Finding a way to move forward with reasonable expectations will make this transition easier. Be flexible, and surrender to the present. Focusing on the

past may bring on sadness/anger and focusing too far on the future may bring on symptoms of anxiety. If you have children, family traditions will still be important but some of them may need to be adjusted. Depending on your children's age, having them participate in planning new family activities can be empowering for them (and you).

Supporting Your Children During This Difficult Time

Your children are attempting to adapt and adjust to many changes all at once. It is important to recognize that each child will cope with this news in their own way (as will you, as parents).

They will be experiencing their own array of feelings and reactions so be gentle and mindful. You will not fix this. They too will need support to move through this adjustment. Here are a few tips to help you navigate difficult discussions with your children.

Acknowledgement - The feelings of grief and sadness your children are experiencing are real. Let your children express their feelings. It is reasonable to be sad/angry/disappointed and it will take time for them to process and understand the impact of these new circumstances. Create a space where you can engage in a meaningful conversation that is not rushed. Let your kids know that you are here with them, and this time is for them. Try to avoid multitasking or using your phone during this time. Make sure your kids know that your divorce is not their fault. Listen to and ease their concerns, and be compassionate but direct in your responses.

Be Open and Honest - Ask them how they are feeling while being aware of their body language/expression.

For kids under 12 years old - Go slow and steady. Ensure that they understand what you are telling them and watch for emotional responses (words aren't always easy). If they are calmly tearing up, ask "this is hard news to hear, is it making you sad?" If they are starting to tense up/yell/jump around, ask "this is really sucky, are you feeling angry?"

For kids over 12 years old - They may or may not want to engage in a conversation right away. They may want space to process the information. Keep the conversation open for them to return to.

For all kids - We need to **validate** their feelings.

- Leave judgement out
- Do not try to fix the problem
- Do not add in your own feelings (ex. I feel sad too, I'm also going through this)

- Accept their feelings (ex. “yes this sucks, it’s ok to feel angry, sad, disappointed etc.”)
- Put aside your discomfort and let your child feel like they are being heard
- Try to avoid adding in “but you’ll still see your mom/dad,” “we’ll have fun doing other things,” “my parents were also separated.”

Processing and releasing their feelings - After we validate feelings, it’s often helpful to assist children in processing these feelings and/or releasing them (depending on if you have an expressive, quiet, physical, or creative child). Some ideas:

- Writing about their thoughts/feelings
- Putting a marker/pencil/paint to paper and drawing how they’re feeling
- Putting sticky notes/masking tape on bottom of their shoe with what they’re mad about and stomping around
- A pillow fight
- Going for a run/bike/walk

There may be changes in your child’s behaviour as they process this news. Be curious about it and promote healthy discussions about feelings in your household. Once they have been able to process/release feelings, it’s much easier to discuss and focus on the “so, what now?” Explore some reasonable and rational thoughts and plans. Comfort and reassure them.

Maintain as much stability and routine as possible - Try to keep your children’s daily and weekly routines as familiar and stable as possible.

Offer consistent discipline - Co-parenting relies on communication and consistency. If your children are sharing time with both parents separately, creating an agreement on bedtimes, curfews, consequences and other everyday decisions will be beneficial for all.

Maintain your “Parent” Role - Continuously show your children that they can rely on you. Make and keep realistic promises. Avoid confiding in them about your personal feelings surrounding the divorce.

Journeying through a separation/divorce is a big transition which will bring on big feelings. There are social changes and fears about the future. In addition, there is *grief* and intense feelings resulting from a loss. Be gentle with yourself and your children. We *do not* need to solve or fix these feelings....we need to validate these feelings and sit alongside them.