

# HELPING A FRIEND OR FAMILY MEMBER THROUGH DIVORCE

A marital separation is a time of turmoil for everyone involved. Regardless of the length of marriage, who left whom, whether or not there are children or how old they are, the separation signifies a rupture in the marital relationship. The family unit can never be the same. It is a time when those going through it need friends and family the most, but too often the support isn't there.

Most likely, the absence of support is not because people don't care but because they just don't know what to do. Rather than say or do the wrong thing, they do nothing. The effect is to leave the separated person feeling even more isolated and bereft than s/he already does.

The ideas offered here were gathered from people who have been there. They represent things that people did for them that were especially meaningful or things that they *wish* had been done for them. This is only a sample of ways that you can help someone coping with separation or divorce. We invite your suggestions as well.



## ***If You Know Someone Going Through Separation or Divorce...***

### **Don't try to figure out who is the "Good Guy" and who is the "Bad Guy."**

Reasons can be complex, developing over a long period of time and rarely lend themselves to simplistic assumptions about who did what to whom. Therefore, you do not need to take sides. It is possible to remain friends with both partners, but many people find it too difficult to maintain confidentiality with both. If you are a family member, it is important to maintain a cordial relationship with both partners if children are involved.

### **Express your concern, just as you would about any other life event.**

Because a separation involves what goes on between two people in an intimate relationship, friends and family members often feel it is none of their business. The details ARE none of their business, but the FACT of the separation is a major event in the person's life and one that will consume much of his/her daily focus. Acknowledging it, rather than acting as if nothing has happened, will help the person feel less isolated.

### **Call or write periodically.**

Even a message on an answering machine or a quick e-mail lets a person know that you're thinking of him/her.

### **Continue to include the person in social gatherings, but don't invite both partners to the same event.**

Invite the person to share a meal, go to a movie or a ball game. Let him/her know that s/he is still someone you want to be around.

### **Give a hug.**

Direct human contact is a great comfort—perhaps even a necessity, according to some experts.

### **Offer to go with the person to an attorney.**

Sometimes having someone accompany him/her is all that's needed to help someone take a necessary practical step. Depending on your relationship, you might offer to sit in and take notes.

### **Listen. Listen. Listen some more.**

Try not to judge, and squelch the need to fix it (because you can't). Talking about the separation—even if it's the same theme over and over—helps the person process it.



## ***If You Are Separated . . .***

### **Feel the feelings.**

The only way around is through. As painful as the feelings may be, burying them will not make them go away. It is important to experience what they have to teach you.

### **Get professional help.**

It's normal to be "crazy." A counselor can help you manage the "rollercoaster" of confusing emotions and the often overwhelming feelings of anger and sadness. Especially if there are children, a professional can offer guidance in helping your kids cope and in finding ways to work cooperatively with the other parent.

### **Join a support group.**

Others who are "in the same boat" know exactly what it's like. By sharing their own experiences, they can offer emotional support and understanding as well as practical suggestions. You will know instantly that you are not alone.

### **Consult an attorney.**

Even if you think the separation is only temporary, *today* it is your reality. You will be better prepared by learning the facts about your situation and the options available to you.

### **Tell friends and family how they can help.**

What time of the day or week is worst for you? Is there a task that was your partner's responsibility that is now a problem? Friends and family members will be glad to know something specific that they can do.

### **Go slow.**

Be kind to yourself. Use the time of separation to heal, to learn as much as possible about who you are and what you want.

## ***And Remember . . .***

### **Each person's journey is unique.**

Even though circumstances may be similar, the path that one person takes can be very different from the path taken by another. Sometimes we take a few steps back, go around in circles or run into a deadend. Even these seeming wrong turns are essential to the process. Forgo judgment, forget what "should" be, and follow your path where it takes you.

### **It takes however long it takes to get wherever you're going.**

Separation and divorce force you to remake your life. You can use the time as well to remake *yourself*. The destination is rarely visible at the beginning, when the future may loom as a huge black hole. Patience, compassion and a willingness to look at your own piece of the puzzle can help you move forward.

an end is also a new beginning . . .

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2711 Covered Wagon Way  
Olney, MD 20832-2512

**301-924-4101**

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