

**WOMEN**

**and Separation**

**Managing New Horizons**

*Relationships Australia*

## **Why this book?**

This book is for you if you are a woman going through separation or divorce.

It was written to:

- ◆ help you make sense of your feelings
- ◆ help guide you through some constructive choices
- ◆ raise your awareness of some services that may help.

The people at Relationships Australia listen to and work with women by speaking to individuals and participating in women's groups. They are also familiar with research findings, which can help explain the process of separation.

Separation presents many challenges for women. We would like to thank the women whose experiences and advice contributed towards this book.

We do not advocate separation or divorce, nor do we wish to diminish the distress that many men experience. Separation is an extremely difficult time for all concerned.

## **How to use this book**

This is a book to be read and reread. When you reread it consider how your feelings may have changed since the last time.

*“Follow the path to healing even though  
you don't believe you will heal“  
(BG, aged 37, three years on)*

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## Separation and women's experience

Separation and divorce are among the toughest experiences you will ever have.

Women report a range of intense feelings at various stages of separation. Below are samples from a very long list:

- ◆ **scared** about the responsibility for the economic future of themselves and the children
- ◆ **sad** about the break-up of the family unit
- ◆ **nervous** about how they will juggle work and home commitments
- ◆ **resentful** about career sacrifices they have made in their role of homemaker
- ◆ **hateful** towards their former partner
- ◆ **bitter** about their new circumstances
- ◆ **worried** about dealing with bureaucracies and the legal system
- ◆ **fearful** of making the same mistakes in another relationship
- ◆ **concerned** that the relationship with the former partner may remain in conflict.

These responses, all painful and distressing, are perfectly normal. You probably have other feelings you can add to the list.

The good news is that most women face these intense feelings and go on to live fulfilling and happy lives. The not so good news is that it takes time.

*“Separation provides the opportunity for personal growth. But you don't have to go it alone” (FL, aged 48, three years on)*

## Separation and grief

*“I divorced my husband, but my parents divorced me”  
(KL, aged 36, two years on)*

You may already know what it feels like to grieve the death of a close friend or relative. Many women report that separation is harder to manage than bereavement because their former partner still exists.

Separation is complex and can involve the loss of:

- ◆ partner and the parenting team
- ◆ the usual family structure and routines
- ◆ daily contact with your children
- ◆ the family home
- ◆ friends and social life
- ◆ support and approval from your family and community
- ◆ meaning and identity
- ◆ the opportunity to have children
- ◆ financial security.

These losses are particularly difficult if you:

- ◆ didn't want the separation
- ◆ are still unrealistically hoping for reconciliation
- ◆ feel betrayed by your former partner
- ◆ do not have a support network or are ostracised by friends and community
- ◆ fear a future of living alone.

In addition, separation means:

- ◆ practical issues become more difficult, eg fulltime responsibility for the children
- ◆ abrupt changes in the nature of some of your adult relationships.

Separation is extremely difficult and you can expect to experience intense emotions.

## Women's grieving

The path through separation is unlikely to be a neat straight line. You will find yourself experiencing the highs and lows that come with grief and loss including anger, numbness, and despair.

The emotional impact will test your strength and your capacity to look after yourself properly.

Be prepared for 'triggers' that may set off the feelings and memories all over again.

## How should I be feeling?

There are no rules about how you should be feeling. We all progress at different rates. The trick is not to give yourself a hard time or use unhealthy ways of coping.

Don't let anyone tell you how you should feel. Identify what helps you. You may choose to:

- ◆ divert feelings into normal routines (work, hobbies, clubs)
- ◆ let off steam by exercising
- ◆ express feelings in humour
- ◆ develop strategies for dealing with practical concerns
- ◆ join a separation group.

*"At first I felt paralysed. I managed to get up every morning and get through the day. But now I am starting to feel alive again"*  
(RM, aged 55, two years on)



## Choices you can make

Knowing you have choices allows you to assert some control over your life.

You may not be able to see choices easily when you are overwhelmed by intense feelings. But options do exist. In time you will begin to notice the choices that are available.

Some of the important choices other women have made during and after separation may help you.

You can choose to:

- ◆ accept that it is over and plan for the future
- ◆ survive – one day at a time
- ◆ learn new skills or polish up your old skills
- ◆ seek help
- ◆ be there for your children
- ◆ not be the victim
- ◆ not be lured into fighting
- ◆ not be the one who drives an unnecessary legal battle
- ◆ recover and rebuild your life.

Try to be a reasonable woman  
in an unreasonable situation

## Counselling

Counselling can help you clarify your thoughts and assist you to develop new strategies. Most women who seek counselling say that they found it helpful and wish they'd done it sooner!

Relationships Australia 1300 364 277

## Your changing role

You may not know:

- ◆ how to fix a leaking tap
- ◆ what to do when the electricity goes off
- ◆ how to balance your cheque book or pay bills using the internet
- ◆ how to organise a mortgage
- ◆ when the car last had a service.

For some women practical matters and economic planning were taken care of by their former partners. If this was the case for you, don't despair. Learning to do these things yourself can help you feel independent and more confident about the future.

*“Face each day as it happens, deal with each fear as it comes up” (AG, aged 35, one year on)*



## The separation

### Who initiated the separation?

*“I am the one who left and I hurt as much for him as I did for myself” (JH, aged 49, seven months on)*

The majority of separations and divorces are initiated by women. Of the 53,100 registered divorces in Australia in 2003, 43% were initiated by women.<sup>1</sup>

#### Initiators of divorces

Wife	43%
Husband	32%
Joint agreement	25%

If you were the initiator, you may have already gone through the emotional ‘roller coaster’ of distress (refer page 7) and be ready to move on. It may seem that your former partner has fallen into a hole and is unable to move on. You may feel:

- ◆ you are more in control of the situation
- ◆ guilty about the break-up
- ◆ worried about the effect on the children
- ◆ anxious about the financial implications.

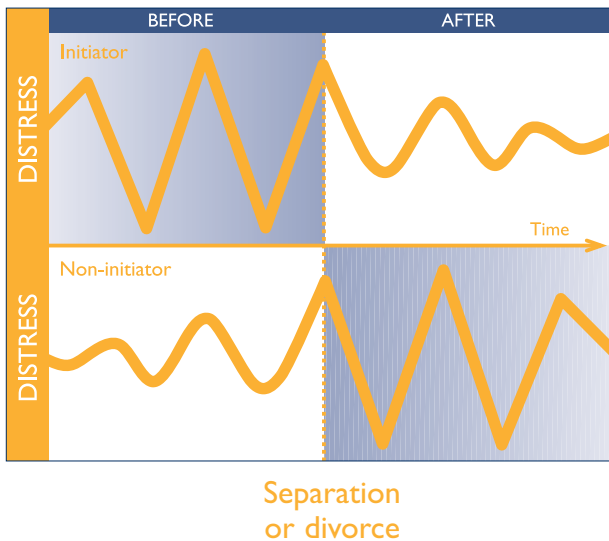
If you were not the initiator you may be struggling while your former partner seems to be coping much better. You may feel:

- ◆ powerless about your social and economic future
- ◆ betrayed as if something has been taken away from you through no fault of your own
- ◆ shocked or confused
- ◆ desperate to be given another chance.

## Differences between the initiator and the non-initiator

*“I thought the ride would never end”*  
(JK, aged 27, two years on)

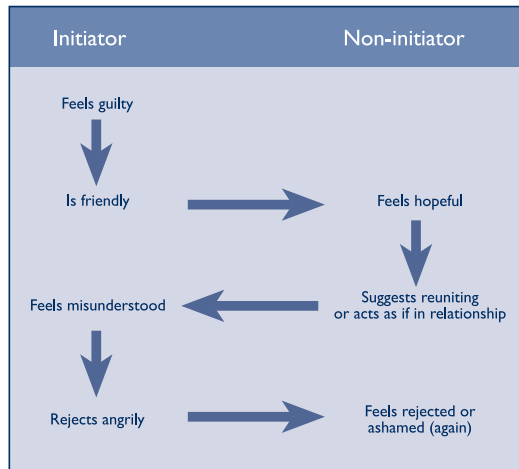
Both the initiator and non-initiator have intense feelings, but they have them at different times, either before or after the separation. In the diagram you can see that the initiator has the most distress before separation, the non-initiator has the most distress after separation. You may feel you're on an emotional roller coaster.



## Mixed messages

Some women find it hard to understand why their former partner does not accept that the relationship is over despite the fact that they have made this clear. On the other hand some women find it hard to let go and accept that a relationship has ended. They hope the former partner will change his mind. They may misread the signals and express an inappropriate level of intimacy.

Once one person begins to misread the signals it can set off a chain of misunderstandings which ends in arguments and distress. You may be able to recognise yourself and your former partner in the chain of events in this diagram.



## How to avoid mixed messages

Other women who have found themselves feeling guilty about ending the relationship recommend making it very clear that it is over. They suggest:

- ◆ restricting contact with him (eg one call per week, fortnight or month)
- ◆ restricting socialising or going out together
- ◆ restricting doing things for him
- ◆ not having sex with him
- ◆ avoiding intimate discussions with him
- ◆ ensuring support is available for him from other(s) apart from you (refer to *Men and Separation* page 34).



If you are the one who hopes for reconciliation, remind yourself that there is no evidence that he wants to get back together unless he specifically says so.

Separated people do sometimes rebuild a friendship together. But this may take a long time if it happens at all, and usually follows a long period of non-contact. The emotional bonds created by the original relationship take a long time to disentangle.

## Blame and guilt

If you ended the relationship, you may feel it was all your fault and experience guilt or cycles of shame and anger. Remember, it usually takes two to make or break a relationship.

If your former partner ended the relationship, it is very easy to find yourself blaming him. Blaming takes attention away from the pain. It gives a sense of justice in what feels like an unjust situation, but stops people moving on. Some couples get so caught up in blame and anger that it affects the children.



Blamers become victims because they:

- ◆ are powerless
- ◆ become helpless and hopeless
- ◆ look backwards instead of forwards
- ◆ don't take opportunities to help themselves.

If you find yourself constantly blaming:

- ◆ try not to dwell on it
- ◆ think about new ways of responding
- ◆ understand you have the resources to get through this experience
- ◆ look for constructive choices
- ◆ be wary of extreme views.

## Looking after yourself

### Ideas that have helped other women

- ◆ Understand that you need time to deal with separation.
- ◆ Be honest with yourself and take responsibility for your life.
- ◆ Be clear about where you do and don't have choices.
- ◆ Ask for help to deal with guilt, self-pity, hopelessness or feelings of revenge.
- ◆ Avoid the language of blame.
- ◆ Commit to looking after yourself – continue to do the things you enjoy.
- ◆ Don't use your children as your sounding board.

### Strategies that have worked for other women

- ◆ Talk to people about how things are for you.
- ◆ Seek assistance in the areas in which you are unfamiliar, such as financial counselling or home maintenance.
- ◆ Experiment – find out what works for you.

### Maintain your health and well being

- ◆ Eat sensibly.
- ◆ Exercise in ways you enjoy.
- ◆ Watch for signs of stress or depression.
- ◆ Be careful with smoking, drinking, drugs and gambling.

*“I started taking care with my appearance, going out and exercising” (MG, aged 40, two years on)*

## Ask for help

Many women find it difficult to ask for help. They may feel stretched meeting children's needs, or may think that counselling is only for people who have a mental illness. Support is available from:

- ◆ friends and family
- ◆ work colleagues, and employee assistance programs
- ◆ your local doctor or health centre
- ◆ your community centre or counselling service
- ◆ parenting or separation groups (refer pages 31-33).

Ask for help with babysitting if you need to.

## Stay in contact with friends

Maintaining your social networks may not be so easy now that you have separated but they are still important for support and future relationships. Make the effort even if you feel you don't have the time.



Withdrawing socially may leave you feeling more isolated and alone. Your friends will not want to hear endless stories about your former partner so try to get the balance right and make new connections with others in similar situations.

*“I knew that some of my old friends were only trying to help but saying ‘you are better off without him’ or ‘there are plenty of fish in the sea’, didn’t make me feel any better”  
(JL, aged 57, five years on)*

## Your financial situation

*“After we separated my financial situation changed dramatically. I needed help to sort it all out”  
(WH, aged 45, 18 months on)*

## Look after your financial concerns

Financial hardship is often one of the most significant challenges of separation. You may manage to juggle your finances most of the time but constantly worry about unpredictable expenses.

For more on finances read *Me and my Money* (refer page 34).

## Financial counselling can help you

Government financial counselling services provide information, advice and practical support for people experiencing financial difficulties. They are useful if you are:

- ◆ unable to pay for rent or electricity
- ◆ having difficulty budgeting
- ◆ needing advice on pension entitlements
- ◆ having problems with debts (refer page 32).

## Returning to the workforce

If you have not worked for a period of time prior to separation, you may find getting back into the workforce daunting. Talking to a careers counsellor or a jobs network provider is a good start.

# Mothers and children

## Children and separation

Children react to separation in different ways. The way your children react will depend on:

- ◆ family relationships before separation
- ◆ your children's ages and personalities
- ◆ how both parents manage the situation.

Most children will be vulnerable and have many fears, some realistic, some unfounded. Most will express strong feelings and younger children will often experience fear of abandonment and separation anxiety. This is often triggered by particular events such as saying goodbye. These are normal reactions to an extremely stressful time.

Generally, children are resilient in the face of major changes and once their situation has stabilised, mothers report that most children manage well. Occasionally some children take a while to settle down. Seek professional help, particularly if there are other difficulties in their lives such as problems at school.

## Helping your children accept separation

Explain what is happening in ways that they can understand. Reassure them that both parents love them and the break-up is not their fault.

For understanding and managing the effects of separation on children read *What about the Children?* (refer page 34).

## Residence and contact

Arrangements for children after separation vary.

- ◆ Living mostly with one parent and seeing the other parent at certain times
- ◆ Spending substantial amounts of time with each parent.

Usually residence and contact arrangements reflect the ages of the children, the capacity of both parents to care for them and how the family worked before separation.

Try to work out these residence and contact arrangements so that both parents continue to be involved. Research shows that shared parenting works in many circumstances but may not be appropriate where there are violence or drug and alcohol issues. Ensure that the new arrangements take into account grandparents and extended family.

**Residence:** where the child lives on a day-to-day basis.

**Contact:** when children see their other parent or other family members.

These terms may change as the result of 2005–2006 family law reform.

### Parenting plans and mediation

Australian family law reform in 2005–2006 encourages parents to agree on a workable parenting plan. Plans can be easily changed according to children's changing needs and your own circumstances.

**Family and child mediation** assists separating couples to make decisions and develop parenting plans on residence, contact, property and other financial matters. Contact a mediator, counsellor or your lawyer (refer pages 31-33).

Ask for *Share the Care*, Relationships Australia's parenting plan.  
Call 1300 364 277

## Always a parent

Separation should not mean the end of a relationship with your children for you or your former partner. The family will continue, but in a different form. Your children may have two homes.

New rituals and routines will be established. If you were the primary carer before the separation you may now spend some time away from your children. This can be rewarding once you have adjusted to it.

Contact with both parents is important for stable and happy children so encourage your children to stay involved with their father.

60% of children say:

- ◆ they liked the loving and caring of each parent
- ◆ they liked the positive personal characteristics of each parent
- ◆ they would like more contact with the parent they see less of.<sup>2</sup>

Any changes are difficult for children, so keep change to a minimum and involve them as much as possible. Whilst you can't prevent change, you can assist them to cope with it. Children will adapt if they are given structure and stability.

Different doesn't have to be worse.

## Absent parents

Sometimes the father is totally absent. Maintaining a positive image of him in a child's mind can be very difficult, but it is still important.

For books with useful advice on parenting, refer page 34.

## Being there for your children

Being there for your children is very important. Keep important routines and ways of relating and develop new ones together. The challenge is to find time to do it all without falling in a heap. It may be difficult at first because of all that is happening in your life.

Inform the school of the changes and stay involved with the children's activities and their friends.



Try not to:

- ◆ expect your children to look after you emotionally (you are the parent)
- ◆ talk negatively about your former partner to the children
- ◆ ask your child to play 'messenger' between parents.

Be alert to any signs of distress including physical illnesses or changes in behaviour, and encourage them to attend counselling if they need to talk to someone outside the family.

Even adult children may experience intense emotions at this time.

## Consider getting help with your parenting

There are many good courses and books that can assist you with your changed parenting role (refer page 34).

## Relating to your former partner

Some people believe when they separate they will no longer have to deal with their former partner. But if you have children, this is not possible – you remain linked forever as parents.

The challenge is to make the ongoing parenting relationship as manageable and as constructive as possible.

Be civil to your former partner, irrespective of how he approaches you, but never compromise safety.

Constructive co-parenting involves establishing a businesslike relationship with your former partner. Here are some practical tips to assist you.



- ◆ Remember to keep your goals uppermost.
  - ◆ Focus on the children, not the past relationship.
  - ◆ Hold meetings at a neutral location if possible.
  - ◆ Use the telephone, email or a communication book if face-to-face discussion is a problem.
  - ◆ Consider legal advice, mediation or counselling if you have difficulties.
  - ◆ Be flexible. Children have commitments and special occasions will arise.
- ◆ Do not breach or allow any breach of a court order that prohibits contact with your former partner.

## What if ‘businesslike’ doesn’t work?

In some situations a businesslike interaction may not be possible. Some parents, for a variety of reasons, are not supportive of the children’s relationship with the other parent. In these situations the other parent can feel distressed, powerless and angry and may feel their children are being denied the right to a relationship with them.

If you are in such a situation:

- ◆ do not use the children as a way of getting even
- ◆ view your conflict ‘through the eyes of the children’
- ◆ consider mediation with your former partner and focus on practical issues
- ◆ examine your own behaviour and what you can do to help the situation - speak with a counsellor
- ◆ debrief with friends or family
- ◆ consider legal advice and action
- ◆ remain realistic
- ◆ use Children’s Contact Services (refer page 31).

No matter how hostile the situation, many women find strength in maintaining their position and dignity.

Stop any negotiation if the discussion becomes abusive.

You **must** obtain legal advice if you are not going to comply with a court order.

Stay away from your former partner if either of you is affected by drugs or alcohol.

## Violence and abuse

38% of women have been in a violent relationship<sup>3</sup>. Violence is never acceptable.

If your relationship is physically violent or verbally or sexually abusive, your safety and the safety of your children must come first. Therefore some of the material contained in this booklet may not apply to you.



If there is violence or abuse by your former partner:

- ◆ keep contact to a minimum
- ◆ limit face-to-face communication
- ◆ meet in a public place
- ◆ be accompanied by a friend
- ◆ avoid retaliation
- ◆ keep a record of abusive incidents, including stalking
- ◆ call the police
- ◆ seek legal advice about other options.

Remember you are not responsible for his abusive behaviour.

Seek support for you and your children. Family violence services can provide assistance and refuge (refer page 32).

If you are being violent or abusive:

- ◆ it is not acceptable and may be unlawful
- ◆ it impacts on the children and may reduce your contact with them
- ◆ seek professional help.

## Making formal arrangements

Parenting arrangements are decided in the ‘child’s best interests’. Laws about property arrangements vary depending on whether you are married or de facto. Seek legal advice for property and child support agreements.

### Agreeing

The best outcomes generally occur where couples negotiate their own mutually acceptable agreements about:

- ◆ property settlement – how your cash and assets will be split up
- ◆ parenting and contact arrangements - who the resident parent will be and what contact the other parent will have
- ◆ child support payments – who will pay how much to assist with child-related costs.

You may need to use professional services (lawyers, family and child mediation) to help with agreements and arrangements. These may need to be formalised by a court.

Some couples are unable or unwilling to reach agreement in this way. Arrangements may have to be decided for you by a judge. While it may add to the confusion, stress and powerlessness you already feel, in some situations this may be the best solution.

### Of those who divorce:

50% sort matters out between themselves with the help of lawyers, mediation and counselling out of court.

45% make court applications, but most do not go to trial. They sort matters out through mediation or exhaustion.

Only 5% of court applications go to trial.<sup>4</sup>

## Do your legal homework

*“I had to find out about my legal rights so I could make the best long-term decisions for myself and the children”  
(AL, aged 40, six years on)*

Your lawyer is your consultant who will advise you on your particular situation and the potential outcomes.

Legal advice is not the same as a court battle. It should provide sound information and options for settlement that need not involve legal action. Many lawyers experienced in family law will give you an initial free or reduced rate consultation and negotiate on your behalf about property, finance and the children. Check to see if you are eligible for Legal Aid.

Contact:

- ◆ your state Law Society or Law Institute for family law specialists
- ◆ the Family Law Hotline on 1800 050 321
- ◆ your nearest Community Legal Centre or Women’s Legal Service [www.naclc.org.au](http://www.naclc.org.au)
- ◆ the Legal Aid office in your state or territory at (refer pages 31-33) [www.nla.aust.net.au](http://www.nla.aust.net.au)

### **Lawyers cost money – do your research first**

- ◆ Think about the information your lawyer will need.
- ◆ Prepare some written questions.
- ◆ Work to understand the system.

### **When you visit your lawyer, ask:**

- ◆ a friend to take notes
- ◆ for an estimate of costs at each stage
- ◆ for the likely outcomes.

If dissatisfied with advice, seek a second opinion.

## Negotiation methods

Negotiation is hard work but if you don't attempt it, you may find that:

- ◆ parenting arrangements don't work for you
- ◆ child support payments don't accurately reflect your former partner's income
- ◆ expensive legal processes are taking over
- ◆ you feel exploited or resentful.



Sometimes it is impossible to discuss things directly with your former partner. Family and child mediation can assist you to make decisions about your relationship and develop a workable plan for the future. This can include sorting out assets and financial matters, as well as future parenting responsibilities.

Mediators do not take sides, represent either party, or provide financial or legal advice.

Proposed reforms to family law in 2005–2006 will offer parents low cost mediation assistance to assist them negotiate parenting plans.

It is also likely that mediation will be made compulsory before court proceedings can begin in most cases. However the presence of family violence or child abuse may make mediation inappropriate.

## Intimidation

If your former partner is intimidating you, mediation may not be appropriate. Tell your mediator – your lawyer can negotiate on your behalf.

## **Don't give away the store!**

- ◆ Don't commit to an agreement immediately after separating just to get it over and done with.
- ◆ Don't sell yourself short – or go for too much.
- ◆ Be clear and realistic about what you want.
- ◆ Get legal advice before signing any document.

## **Formalising arrangements**

### **1. Property**

Once you have agreed on a settlement, formal application to the court for 'consent orders' are usually prepared by a lawyer.

Consent orders for property are necessary; otherwise your former partner may ask to change your property settlement in the future.

Applications must be in the required form explaining how the assets and debts will be divided between you and your former partner. After you have both signed, the orders are processed by the court and are legally binding.

### **2. Parenting**

While property orders are final, orders in relation to children are not. Their needs may change over time.

It is best if parenting orders are flexible and contain general agreements about the children's care. However, if there is a high level of conflict in your relationship, you may need to obtain orders with more detailed arrangements. You will then have to apply to the court for new consent orders each time your children's needs change.

## 2. Child support payments

The Child Support Agency (CSA) has very clear rules on how much child support must be paid. It depends on:

- ◆ each parent's gross annual income
- ◆ the number of children
- ◆ how many nights per year they spend with each parent.

Parents have a range of options for child support. Contact the CSA for information on entitlements. Ask your legal aid office if they offer advice on child support disputes (refer page 33).



## **What happens if you can't reach agreement?**

If you are unable to reach agreement on particular issues you may need to make an application to the Family Court. Once you start court proceedings you are in an 'adversarial' environment, which means one person is set against another.

The court will continue to encourage you to come to agreement without a trial and mediation is part of the court process.

However, if you still cannot reach agreement, a Family Court trial may be needed where a judge will determine the parenting or property issues in dispute.

Going to trial happens in only a few cases. It means asking someone who does not know you to decide what is best for your children and what is fair in financial terms. Think carefully beforehand. Sometimes the fight can be more damaging than the issue. Once the court action is over, you will need to co-parent again.

**Going to trial can be costly and stressful but sometimes it is the only option.**

## Dealing with institutions

*“When seeking assistance from government agencies I always took my knitting and my lunch” (LC, aged 45, six years on)*

Remember that all institutions are acting according to legislation, not making things difficult just for you.

- ◆ Be courteous and respectful with the employees of institutions you deal with. This brings out helpful responses.
- ◆ Ask questions if you don't understand – understanding new information is especially difficult under stress.
- ◆ Avoid blame or recriminations either towards your former partner or ‘the system’.
- ◆ If the service is unsatisfactory speak to a supervisor or use their customer complaints procedure.

Gather all relevant information before you act or make decisions.

- ◆ Seek advice from the Family Law Hotline (1800 050 321) or your lawyer.
- ◆ Talk about mediation with Relationships Australia (1300 364 277), other mediation organisations or your lawyer.

## Remember

The more you can agree on with your former partner, the more you will minimise your engagement with ‘the system’. But do not jeopardise your personal safety, or be pressured into making an unfair agreement.



## The future

Many women report positive and healthy changes in their lives and discover aspects of themselves that they never knew existed. They recognise that life changes, and many talk of finding inner strengths, new friends and new resources.

### New relationships and moving on

Close relationships are important to everyone. Often after separation there is a great need to reconnect and to feel wanted and cared for once more.

Some women shy away from starting another relationship and find it hard to trust again. Others move straight into a new relationship which may ease the pain initially. While this can often be a healing experience, it may not allow sufficient time for you to work through past issues.

Whatever occurs for you, take it slowly.

- ◆ Give yourself time to grieve the loss of the relationship.
- ◆ Take time to re-establish your own identity.
- ◆ Look after yourself.

Some women join interest groups and enjoy companionship but remain unattached. Some establish a committed relationship that includes children from other relationships.

Choose wisely and find out what works for you.

Read *Partners – A Guide to Successful Relationships* (refer page 34).

*“When the clouds finally lifted I could see the sunshine”  
(AS, aged 38, 12 years on)*

# Research about women and separation

## Separation and divorce

In 2003 :

- ◆ 27.3 years was the median age for women to marry<sup>1</sup>
- ◆ 39.9 years was the median age for women to divorce<sup>1</sup>
- ◆ 8.7 years was the median duration of marriage to separation<sup>1</sup>
- ◆ 50% of divorces involve children and of these 62% involve children less than 10 years of age<sup>1</sup>
- ◆ 43% of marriages will end in divorce<sup>5</sup>

## Women and their children after separation

- ◆ 88% of separated children live with their mothers<sup>5</sup>
- ◆ 19.9% of children under 15 live in one parent families<sup>6</sup>
- ◆ Nearly one third of all children living with only one natural parent either had no or next to no contact with the other natural parent<sup>7</sup>
- ◆ 25% of children will have separated parents by the time they are 18 years of age<sup>8</sup>

## Impact of separation and divorce on women

Women are more likely to experience financial hardship after divorce than men<sup>9</sup>

- ◆ Many women are severely economically disadvantaged after separation<sup>10</sup>
- ◆ Separation and divorce are recognised as factors contributing to anxiety and depression<sup>11</sup>
- ◆ One year after separation, the average woman's income drops by \$21,400 or 42%<sup>12</sup>

## New partners and new families

Blended families can place a strain on parent-child relationships.

- ◆ 80% of men will re-partner within 5 years<sup>13</sup>
- ◆ 69% of women will re-partner within 5 years<sup>13</sup>
- ◆ remarriages following divorce have the highest risk of divorce<sup>5</sup>
- ◆ 8% of children live in step or blended families<sup>1</sup>

## Where to get further assistance

Contact any of these national organisations. They can refer you to services in your area.

<p><b>Australian Government information relating to women.</b> The Women's Portal is a website for women with links to government services.</p>	<p><a href="http://www.women.gov.au">www.women.gov.au</a></p>
<p><b>Centacare Australia.</b> Australia-wide services for families and individuals.</p>	<p>1300 138 070</p>
<p><b>Centrelink – Family Assistance Office.</b> Information on all government benefits.</p>	<p>13 61 50 <a href="http://www.centrelink.gov.au">www.centrelink.gov.au</a></p>
<p><b>Children's contact services.</b> Provide a safe, neutral location for handover of children between resident and non-resident parents, and for supervised contact.</p>	<p>1800 050 321 <a href="http://www.facs.gov.au/frsp">www.facs.gov.au/frsp</a></p>
<p><b>Child Support Agency.</b> Ensures all parents meet their child support responsibilities. Website includes information about legal services, services in your local area, and calculators for child support.</p>	<p>13 12 72 <a href="http://www.csa.gov.au">www.csa.gov.au</a></p>
<p><b>Community legal centres – national office.</b> Provides legal assistance to disadvantaged people.</p>	<p>(02) 9264 9595 <a href="http://www.familylaw.gov.au">www.familylaw.gov.au</a> &amp; <a href="http://www.naclc.org.au">www.naclc.org.au</a></p>
<p><b>Domestic violence.</b> See Family violence.</p>	
<p><b>Drug and alcohol services.</b> 24-hour confidential service providing information, assessment, counselling and referral.</p> <p>VIC Directline NSW ADIS</p> <p>QLD ADIS SA ADIS</p> <p>WA ADIS ACT ADIS</p>	<p>1800 888 236 1800 422 599 (02) 9361 8000 1800 177 833 (07) 3236 2414 1300 131 340 (08) 8363 8618 (08) 9442 5000 (02) 6205 4545</p>
<p><b>Family Assistance Office.</b> Payments information for people on family assistance.</p>	<p>13 61 50 <a href="http://www.familyassist.gov.au">www.familyassist.gov.au</a></p>

**Family Court of Australia.** Information about the function of the Family Court. [www.familycourt.gov.au](http://www.familycourt.gov.au)

**Family Law Hotline.** A free helpline to assist with family law problems. Provides information about options and where family services for separating families are located. 1800 050 321

**Family Law online.** A Commonwealth website designed to give easy access to the family law system resources, including Information about relevant services. [www.familylaw.gov.au](http://www.familylaw.gov.au)

**Family Relationships Centres (opening 2006-2008).** Information, referral and mediation services for families and separating couples. To find out if one has opened near you, call the Family Law Hotline. 1800 050 321

**Family Services Australia.** Australia-wide services and referrals to over 65 member organisations for families and individuals. 1300 365 859  
[www.fsa.org.au](http://www.fsa.org.au)

**Family violence.** Provides assistance and refuge for victims of family violence. [www.dvirc.org.au](http://www.dvirc.org.au)  
(Click on 'Information & Referral')

ACT	Domestic Violence Crisis Service	(02) 6280 0900
NSW	Domestic Violence Line	1800 656 463
NT	Darwin: Domestic Violence Counselling Service	(08) 8945 6200
NT	Alice Springs: Alice Springs Women's Shelter	(08) 8952 6048
QLD	Domestic Violence Telephone Service	1800 811 811
SA	Domestic Violence Crisis Service	1300 782 200
TAS	Domestic Violence Crisis Service	1800 633 937
VIC	Domestic Violence and Crisis Service of Vic	(03) 9373 0123
WA	Women's Domestic Violence Help Line	1800 007 339

**Financial counselling (Commonwealth service).** Free financial counselling services to people in low income groups experiencing financial crisis. 1800 050 321

**Interpreter services.** Assistance for those who may not understand or speak English fluently. 13 14 50

Centrelink Multilingual Service 13 12 02

**Legal Aid offices.** National Legal Aid website for all States and Territories

[www.nla.aust.net.au](http://www.nla.aust.net.au)

ACT	Canberra	1300 654 314
NSW	Sydney	(02) 9219 5000
NT	Alice Springs	1800 019 343
NT	Darwin	(08) 8999 3000
QLD	Brisbane	1300 651 188
SA	Adelaide	1300 366 424
TAS	Tasmania	1300 366 611
VIC	Melbourne	(03) 9269 0234
WA	Perth	1300 650 579

**Local councils.** See the local government section of your telephone book.

[www.gov.au](http://www.gov.au)

**Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs.**

[www.dimia.gov.au](http://www.dimia.gov.au)

**Regional Law hotline.** Information and referral service to legal advice for people living in rural and remote areas.

1800 050 400  
1300 364 277

**Relationships Australia.** Australia-wide services for families and individuals

[www.relationships.com.au](http://www.relationships.com.au)

**Women's legal service – national office.**

State services for women requiring legal assistance.

Women's Legal Resource Centre NSW	(02) 9749 7700
Women's Legal Service Victoria	(03) 9642 0877
Women's Legal Service Queensland	(07) 3392 0670
Women's Legal Services South Australia	(08) 8231 8929
Women's Law Centre of Western Australia	(08) 9727 8855
Women's Legal Services Tasmania	(03) 6442 0974
Top End Women's Legal Services NT	(08) 8982 3000
Women's Legal Centre ACT & Region	(02) 6257 4377

## Suggested reading

There are many books and pamphlets available that can help you with parenting and separation. You can download some from websites, or a local library, community centre or bookshop can assist you.

Child Support Agency, *Me and my Money*, 2004  
Call 13 12 72 for details

Fisher B, Alberti R E, *Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends*, Impact Publishers, 1982

Hannibal M E, *Good Parenting Through Your Divorce*, Marlowe & Company, 2002

Jarratt C J, *Helping Children Cope with Separation and Loss*, The Harvard Common Press, 1994

Long N, Forehand R L, *Making Divorce Easier on Your Child: 50 Effective Ways to Help Children Adjust*, Contemporary Books, 2002

Relationships Australia, *Men and Separation*, 2003  
Call 1300 364 277 for details

Relationships Australia, *Partners – A Guide to Successful Relationships*  
Call 1300 364 277 for details

Relationships Australia, *Share the Care*, Parenting Plan, Collaborative Parenting Apart, 2005  
Call 1300 364 277 for details

Relationships Australia, *What about the Children?*, 2003  
Call 1300 364 277 for details

Ricci I, *Mom's House, Dad's House: Making Two Homes for Your Child*, Fireside, 1997

Seddon E, *Creative Parenting After Separation: A Happier Way Forward*, Allen & Unwin, 2003

Stones R, *It's Not Your Fault: What to do when your parents divorce*, Piccadilly Press, 1994

Teyber E, *Helping Children Cope with Divorce*, Jossey-Bass, 2001

Zimmerman J, Thayer E S, *Adult Children of Divorce: How to Overcome the Legacy of Your Parents' Breakup and Enjoy Love, Trust and Intimacy*, New Harbinger, 2003