

Parental separation and divorce

The initial impact

Separation and divorce can have far-reaching implications for every member of a family whenever it happens. If your parents are separating, or have recently separated, you may be trying to cope with changes such as losing your family home, loss of sense of stability and changing relationships within the family. Even if you expected your parents to divorce or separate, it is not unusual to experience a variety of intense feelings whatever your age when they separate. Different kinds of losses, both practical and emotional, may affect you:

- loss of 'home', physically and emotionally
- loss of financial stability if your parents' situation changes
- loss of trust in the stability of relationships
- loss of parental interest as they struggle with their own lives and feelings
- loss of continuity, and the uncertainty which goes with it
- loss of whatever your family has meant to you up until now.

The longer-term consequences Initial feelings of sadness, grief and hurt can be a reaction to any kind of loss. The separation or divorce of your parents may represent a significant loss to your family stability, and it is not uncommon to feel unsettled, including having difficulty concentrating on work.

However much tension you have been aware of in your parents' relationship, their decision to finally separate may still affect you. You may feel powerless and helpless, as you are unable to alter the situation you are facing, and the consequences of your parents' choice might lead you to feel frustrated.

Although the decision to separate or divorce is your parents', you can still feel guilty about the ending of your parents' relationship. You may feel that you are partly to blame in some way, or that you should have done more to help them or that if you had been at home it might have made a difference. You might even feel selfish and guilty for thinking about yourself at a time like this. But remind yourself that your parents are adults and responsible for their own lives, decisions and mistakes.

In addition to sadness, both for yourself and your parents, you may also feel that your parents are letting you down and have betrayed your trust in them. Instead of the parental support you have been accustomed to you may be faced with an unwelcome role reversal which requires you to be an emotional anchor to one or both of your parents. In response to the changes in their own lives, your parents

may be preoccupied and place unfamiliar, unreasonable or difficult demands on you. This may cause conflict and divided loyalties within the family which may make you feel very alone.

The turmoil involved in family break up can create insecurity about practical arrangements, money, or where 'home' is. There can be confusion and uncertainty about what has and is going to happen. You may experience fear and anxiety on your own behalf, on behalf of siblings, or for one or both of your parents.

To enable you to deal with these changes, take time to consider how you can maintain the part of your life which is your own and separate from your family.

Helping yourself

It can be difficult to help yourself but consider if any of the following might be possible:

- Are you able to keep some distance from the conflict between your parents?
- If your parents are leaning too heavily on you for support, is there anyone else they can confide in? Is it something you can suggest to them?
- Can you involve yourself about the provisions being made for you, or let people know what you need and want to do? Having a home continues to be important into adult life even if you spend little time there.
- Is it possible to overlook differences, for siblings to pull together?
- Can you consider some of your extended family as a source of support?
- You may have to rely more on your own resources so take care to develop and maintain your independence.
- Can you seek other sources of support, perhaps talking to your friends? It may help to actively seek people/friends you know who have been through a similar experience.
- In order to support other people you need to look after yourself. Ensure that you are getting sufficient sleep and exercise and that you are also eating healthily.