

# How to navigate a civilised break-up

Ending a long-term relationship can be agony, not only for you but for children and grandparents, too. Here's our expert guide to easing the pain all round

Going through a divorce is one of life's most stressful experiences, and something most of us hope we'll never have to experience. But with four in 10 marriages hitting the buffers, parting ways can become a painful reality, despite the best-laid plans.

Whether you make the decision to end a relationship or have it forced upon you, a divorce hurts. It can be stressful, frustrating and eye-wateringly expensive. But there are ways to make it easier for everyone involved.

'Divorce itself isn't the most damaging thing, it's how it's managed,' says Arabella Russell, a counsellor for Relate. 'If both parties are able to navigate this difficult time as decently and respectfully as possible, there will be far less damage.'

## DEAL WITH EMOTIONS FIRST

While you may want to put a failed relationship behind you as quickly as possible, rushing into things is a big mistake – you may find it difficult to make sensible decisions.

Kate Daly, a counsellor who went through a divorce herself, says it's important for both parties to come to terms with the split before putting plans into motion, especially if the break-up was a surprise or involved infidelity.

'The person who started thinking of splitting up first has had more chance to get used to the idea and may have already begun to make plans and look for solutions,' says Kate, who has created an app (amicable.io) to help couples through the minefield of divorce. 'The



other person is in a different place, angry and still in shock. In this state, they are more likely to dig their heels in.'

Before you can move forward, neither of you should be acting out of spite. If you need help to get there, try counselling.

## FUTURE-PROOF YOUR HAPPINESS

Once you've both come to terms with the separation, you need to plan for the future. Don't dwell on the past – focus on what's important for you all to be happier. Instead of asking 'what am I legally

entitled to?', ask yourself 'what do I need and what do our children need to be happy?' By changing the question, you'll find different answers – which you and your ex could be more likely to agree on.

## SORT THE PRACTICAL STUFF

When you've worked out your goals, knuckle down to the practicalities of dividing your property and finances, and working out access to children.

With all these issues to tackle, it's no wonder many turn to a lawyer for help. If you do need one, Arabella says it's important to remember 'they will never be a replacement for talking together and reaching mutual agreements.'

Many of the most amicable splits happen through mediation, which is free for those who qualify for Legal Aid. It's recommended for everyone considering divorce, and anyone heading for the courts is obliged to consider it. It involves working with a neutral third party to reach solutions on splitting assets and childcare, and is generally quicker and cheaper than battling through legal channels.

'Mediation is not about mending your marriage,' says lawyer Mary Banham-Hall of focus-mediation.co.uk. 'It's to help find the best way forward for everyone.'

According to Mary, the average agreement is usually reached in less than five sessions of mediation. This adds up to around £1,500, compared with at least 10 times that for court costs.

Another money-saving option is an

online 'quickie' divorce, but reaching agreements on childcare and finances usually requires expert help.

## FOCUS ON FAMILY

Divorce can be traumatic for children, too, so they'll need plenty of love, support and reassurance. Children should be told about a break-up face to face, preferably with both parents present.



Plan where and when you are going to have the conversation and have a clear idea of what you want to say.

Arabella says: 'Be age appropriate with the detail, but the message will stay the same: "We're not good together, but we'll never stop loving you." Talk about

what isn't going to change and make it very clear that it's not their fault.'

Be ready for questions. Children can feel left out of the decision, so need to feel listened to and understood.

'Don't make them feel like pawns stuck in the middle,' says Sue Atkins, author of *The Divorce Journal For Children* (£15.99, sueatkinsparentingcoach.com)

Sue adds that you shouldn't criticise your ex in front of your children, or ask him about his new partner, if he has one. 'Try to make sure your children are getting a positive message about how you handle adversity,' she says.

With emotions running high, it's not easy. 'You can only strive to do the best you can,' says Sue. 'Remember that divorce is a process, not an event, and everyone in the family will be at different points on the journey.'

## 'WE MANAGED A DIVORCE WITHOUT BITTERNESS'

Rebecca Whitehead, 38, from Kingston upon Thames, separated from husband James after 16 years together. They have three children, aged seven, five and three.



'From the start, we both wanted our split to be amicable. Despite heightened emotions on both sides, we could see the most important thing was to put our children's needs first.'

We managed to negotiate between ourselves on money and parenting issues, and had two sessions with a mediator to finalise our financial agreement.

We both appreciated the difficulties the other was facing and worked hard to keep emotions out of it and avoid point-scoring.

It hasn't been easy. I needed James to give me time to get used to the changes, while he needed to adjust to being with the children without me. We had to build a new relationship that was still respectful of each other.

By taking ownership of our divorce, we haven't been left with any bitterness because neither of us has been forced into anything we didn't agree to.

We will always be in each other's lives and trust each other to do the best for our children.'

## HOW GRANDPARENTS CAN HELP

- When a couple gets divorced, it's common for grandparents to feel anxious about maintaining contact with their grandchildren, and how to manage contact with their son- or daughter-in-law.
- Grandparents don't have an automatic legal right to see their grandchildren. They can apply for rights to see them

under the Children Act 1989, provided they have leave from the courts. Before resentment builds, try mediation to help both parties work out how grandparents can continue to be involved.

- Grandparents can provide much-needed stability to children at this time. 'Their ongoing presence is a comfort,

and doing the things you normally do together will reinforce the idea that things will be okay,' says Katharine Hill, UK director of the charity Care For The Family. 'It may be difficult, but they should avoid taking sides, too.'

• Visit [familymediationcouncil.org.uk](http://familymediationcouncil.org.uk), [relate.org.uk](http://relate.org.uk), and [careforthefamily.org.uk](http://careforthefamily.org.uk).

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