

# COPING WITH FAMILY BREAK-UP



**Family break-ups are difficult for everyone involved and there is a lot of adjusting to do as relationships change. This can be a challenging time and bring up a mixture of emotions. These usually settle with time, but some young people find they don't get better and need help to deal with their feelings.**

## WHEN THE FAMILY BREAKS UP

With the divorce rate in Australia close to 50 per cent,<sup>1</sup> many young people go through the separation and/or divorce of their parents. Many find themselves part of a different type of family, such as a single parent family or a step-family.

Sometimes family break-ups happen after a long period of fighting and unhappiness. Sometimes they happen suddenly and it's hard to understand why there needs to

be change at all. Either way, there is a lot of adjusting to do and everyone in the family will have their own feelings about what is happening. People may feel anything from angry to upset to relieved – and often a mixture of all three.

Changes in family relationships can cause parents to become distracted. They may be arguing and fighting more often and this can interfere with their time with you. But whatever is happening between your mum and dad doesn't change the way they feel about you.

When parents separate, a decision needs to be made about which parent the children will live with. Sometimes the children's time is divided equally between the two parents. Or they live with one parent most of the time, and visit the other one a certain number of days per week, fortnight or month. If the two parents live a long distance apart, these visits may happen in school holidays. Sometimes the arrangements change, especially in the early days when things are being worked out. If there is continuing disagreement, the decision is often made with the help of the Family Court.

## COMMON REACTIONS

For most young people, living through their parents' separation or divorce is challenging. As well as the shock of the break-up, you may see less of either your mum or dad, need to move school or neighbourhood or have to learn to live in two households. There is no right or wrong way to feel. Common reactions include:

- anger at the person who decided that the family should split up
- helplessness at being affected by a situation you had no part in
- longing for your parents to make up
- grief about the separation from, or the loss of contact with, the parent you don't see as much
- fear that there will be no place for you in the new arrangements
- worrying about the future and how you, your brothers and sisters, and your parents will manage
- resentment about the involvement of a new step-parent in your family
- relief that there will be an end to fighting between your parents.

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## DEALING WITH NEW FAMILY ARRANGEMENTS

Adjusting to major changes in the family can take a long time and a lot of negotiation.

When you become part of a new step-family or family unit, you face a range of issues. For example, you might think you have to choose between two different families or divide your loyalties and love between your parents. This might make you feel guilty or upset. As well as adjusting to a parent's new partner, you may have to adjust to the partner's children and other members of their family.

Like any new relationship, working out your needs and expectations within the new family can be difficult. It can also be hard to accept and adjust to a new partner in your mum or dad's life.



### KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

#### It's helpful to:

- ask your parents to explain why they have decided to stop living together
- let your parents know who you would prefer to live with
- ask them not to talk to you about their problems with each other
- try to maintain your relationship with both of them separately
- talk to other family members about how you feel
- ask to talk to someone outside the situation, like a school counsellor or a family court counsellor.

#### It's not helpful to:

- use alcohol or drugs to dull your pain
- act out your frustration with risky behaviour (e.g. reckless driving)
- take out your anger on others
- experiment casually with sex to get close to someone
- hide your feelings to protect someone else.



## LOOK

for the signs of depression



## TALK

about what's going on



## LISTEN

to your friends' experiences



## SEEK HELP

together!

Sometimes it's easy to forget that your parents and their new partners might also be going through a difficult time coping with the changes.

Moving back and forth between your parents can be hard, as you have to spread your clothes, music and time between two places. It's not uncommon to want to stay in one place to catch up with friends or just to have the space you are used to.

As well as feeling a range of emotions, you might start believing that a happy family environment isn't possible. But having a new family doesn't mean you have to reject or forget your experiences with your original family. Be open with your family about your feelings and how you are coping. Talking to someone outside the situation can also help you to see things in perspective.

### KNOWING WHEN TO GET HELP

It's impossible to predict how long it will take to adjust to new family arrangements. Feelings come and go, but for most people time is a great healer. It may take weeks or months before you adjust to the changes in your life. If you continue to feel down after more than 12 months have passed, it may be that other things are affecting your mood. If you feel sad or miserable most of the time and have lost interest in things you used to enjoy, you may be experiencing depression and need to get some help.

### MORE INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

You can speak to trained counsellors by phoning these 24-hour telephone counselling services:

**Lifeline 13 11 14** (cost of a local call)

**Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800** (freecall)

Information and support is also available from the following websites:

**beyondblue** [www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com) or [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Information on depression, anxiety and how to help a friend

**headspace** [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au)  
Information, support and help near you

**ReachOut.com** [www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com)  
Information and support for young people going through tough times

**Relationships Australia**  
[www.relationships.com.au](http://www.relationships.com.au)  
**Phone 1300 364 277**  
Support for relationships

#### National LGBT Health Alliance

[www.lgbthealth.org.au](http://www.lgbthealth.org.au) Information and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other sexuality, sex and gender diverse people (LGBT)

The websites below can help you to find health services in your area. They list services that are either free of charge or low cost:

**Kids Help Line** [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au)

**Lifeline Service Finder**  
[www.lifeline.org.au/service\\_finder](http://www.lifeline.org.au/service_finder)

If you or a friend want to communicate with someone via email or online, Kids Help Line offers confidential, non-judgemental, emotional support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

#### SOURCES

- This fact sheet is based on information from:
- Australian Psychological Society (2007). Managing the impact of separation and divorce on children: Overview of the literature. Monograph in A. O'Hanlon, A. Patterson & J. Parham (Series Eds.), Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health in General Practice. Adelaide: Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health (Auseinet).
  - *beyondblue* [www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com) ■ *ReachOut.com* [www.reachout.com](http://www.reachout.com) ■ *Relationships Australia* (Victoria) & *Mensline Australia* (2003) *Men and Separation: Choices in Tough Times*.

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