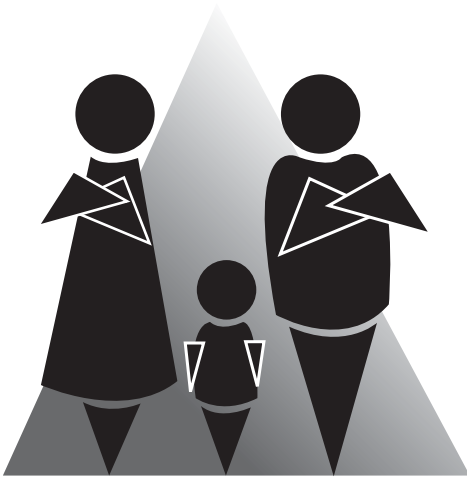


EXTENSION PROGRAMS

Agriculture and Forestry
Community Leadership
Economic Development
Environmental Sciences
Family and Consumer Sciences
4-H Youth Development
Natural Resources



Are Your Children in the **MIDDLE** of Your Conflict or Divorce?

Coping with Stress and Change

Marital separation and divorce can be two of the most difficult events in an adult's life. Much stress comes from three sources:

- the daily tasks and responsibilities that must be reorganized,
- the loss of significant relationships and possessions, and
- the need to establish a new identity as an individual.

For most couples with children, a divorce does not mean the end of a family. Instead, it means the family must restructure the way it handles household chores, family finances, personal and parenting roles, and relationships with extended family and friends. This reorganization can create much stress.

Household chores

Tasks such as cleaning, cooking and shopping must be managed. Each parent may have to assume tasks formerly shared by two adults, a situation that may feel overwhelming.

Family finances

Financial arrangements often must be reworked, adding considerably more stress and tension between parents. Finances may become a leading source of anger.

Parenting roles

If one parent is the main wage earner and the other the main caretaker, each may have to cover both roles after a divorce. Parents must answer various childcare questions: Who will stay home with a sick child? Who will leave work early to take a child to the dentist?

Relationships with extended family and friends

Interaction with extended family and friends must be reconsidered. Family members may take sides, disrupting relationships and removing potential sources of guidance and comfort.

Losing significant relationships, possessions and dreams

Everyone needs the love, security, closeness and belonging that come from relationships with others. Marriage is one of the most significant relationships. Its loss causes much of the stress and emotional turmoil of divorce. Not all individuals experience loss with the same intensity, in the same way, or at the same time. Some people experience loss of closeness when they realize the relationship is ending. For others, the idea of separation can be overwhelming, and they hang onto the hope that the relationship can be saved. Other losses resulting from separation and divorce undermine a person's sense of security and well-being. Although they do not realize it, many people become attached to a way of life, a home and possessions, pets and daily contact with children.

Changing identity

Divorce is a crisis that affects a person's identity. Individuals no longer occupy the role of husband or wife. At the same time, they must rethink changes in their roles as parents, workers and caretakers. People often are caught off guard by the need to reconsider questions such as "Who am I?" and "What do I want to do with my life?"





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Coping With Stress and Change

Detecting personal stress symptoms

Prolonged stress affects all of the following areas of your life. Some areas in your life will be more strongly affected than others.

- ▶ Physical
- ▶ Emotions
- ▶ Thoughts
- ▶ Relationships
- ▶ Behaviors

People develop patterns of thought, feeling and behavior that signal stress. If you are not aware of these patterns, you might ignore their signals. On the list below, check the responses you make to stressful situations.

Physical changes

- headaches
- appetite or weight changes
- feeling tired all the time
- changes in sleep habits
- having nightmares
- muscle aches
- getting sick often
- restlessness

Emotional changes

- anger
- sadness or crying spells
- irritability or short temper
- worry or anxiety
- discouragement
- trouble relaxing
- emptiness or loss of direction
- looking for magic solutions
- guilt
- depression
- anxiety
- tension
- irritability
- fear
- thinking you cannot cope
- worrying about everything, large or small
- feeling that you are about to fall apart
- having the same worrisome thought over and over
- having a negative view of yourself
- having a negative view of the world
- feeling helpless
- feeling hopeless
- feeling worthless
- feeling confused
- blaming yourself
- blaming others

Behavioral changes

- substance misuse (drugs, alcohol, tobacco, food)
- trouble concentrating
- avoiding decisions, feeling unable to make decisions
- low productivity
- forgetfulness
- boredom

Relationships

- intolerance of others
- few contacts with friends
- nagging
- loneliness
- resentment

Taking charge of your life

Everyone copes with stress differently. One way to reduce stress is to take charge of your life. We also need different coping tools at different times in the divorce process. Here are some tools or strategies to help prevent and reduce stress and to regain personal control.

Physical Strategies

- Get enough exercise.
- Eat a variety of nutritional foods on a regular schedule.
- Avoid food and drugs that impair body function.
- Use relaxation methods.
- Relax by sitting in a quiet place and thinking of nothing, listening to music and floating with the melody, and tensing and relaxing your muscles.

Self-talk and Emotional Strategies

- Express your feelings with someone who cares and will listen.
- Engage in "self-talk" where you consciously talk to yourself about your good and bad behaviors.
- Learn to re-frame events so you can focus on the good instead of the bad components of a situation. For example, viewing a problem as a challenge or an opportunity will help re-frame the event to help you focus on the positive rather than the negative aspects of a situation.
- Control your anger by telling someone how you feel before you lose control,
- Walk away from a situation until you cool off, doing something physical to work off pent-up energy.
- Respect another person's right to have a different opinion, and praise others more than criticizing them.

Lifestyle Strategies

- Practice taking responsibility for your choices, good and bad.
- Clarify your values and decide what is important to you personally. Follow through in the priorities you set and the decisions you make.
- Spend your time doing things that are important to you.
- Control your environment by scheduling activities so you don't have to rush.
- Set priorities and stick to them.



Are Your Children in the **MIDDLE** of your Conflict or Divorce?

Coping with Stress and Change

- Take on one task at a time.
- Take drugs only when a doctor prescribes them.
- Learn to say “no” to a request.
- Balance work and play.
- Slow down by eating slowly, walking slowly, talking slowly, listening until others are finished speaking.
- Start activities early, and get enough rest.

Interpersonal Strategies

- Find a small group of people who will provide support, listen, give you honest feedback and with whom you can be vulnerable.
- Work on developing assertiveness skills that will help you get your needs met with less conflict.
- Schedule recreation by going somewhere you enjoy with a friend or relative, playing your favorite sport, working on your favorite hobby and engaging in a relaxing activity.
- Understand yourself by talking over personal feelings and concerns with a trusted friend or relative, listing your good points and posting the list where you and others can see it, and building close relationships with people who make you feel important and appreciated.
- Remember, if your negative emotions begin to interfere with your role as a parent or employee, it may be helpful to seek support from a professional counselor or therapist.

Adjusting to divorce

Although individuals are different, most adults need two or three years to adapt to the changes separation and divorce bring. People who also encounter problems such as job loss or illness during this period need additional time for adjustment. For adults, this involves three basic steps.

Step 1: Accepting the divorce

Individuals must accept that the marriage is over and establish an identity that is not tied to their former spouse. For this to occur, the individual must be convinced there is no use investing further in this relationship. Former spouses must make peace with each other. This involves realizing that continued nastiness creates only more nastiness in return. Often this realization creates a more balanced view of the relationship. An individual able to forgive the former spouse for the marriage's end is able to appreciate what is good about that person. Individuals also must recognize their part in the breakup. They must stop blaming their former spouses and examine honestly their own roles in the relationships. Such self-examination includes remembering the reasons for originally choosing the mate and making necessary revisions in expectations for future mates, accepting individual contributions to the destructive patterns of behavior

within the marriage so these patterns are not repeated in future relationships, and exploring how individual experiences while growing up may play a role in marital struggles.

Step 2: Balancing being a single person and a single parent

Individuals must establish sources of support for each of these roles. They need to begin feeling competent as a single person and as a single parent.

Step 3: Establishing future-oriented instead of past-oriented goals

People who are adjusting well are ready to move on. They begin to have new hobbies or leisure activities or enter into new dating relationships. In contrast, those not ready to move on may need more time to mourn the loss of a spouse. These individuals may not have exhausted their efforts to rekindle the relationship. They may not realize the relationship is over.

Dealing with the stress and change from a separation or divorce is not easy. It helps to become familiar with your sources of stress and your style of coping. Take time to think about ways you can take charge of your life by controlling your environment and your anger with positive coping skills. Realize that adjusting to divorce takes time. Be sure to pat yourself on the back occasionally as you move forward in reestablishing your life. Baby steps toward adjustment can sometimes be as significant as giant steps. The important thing is to keep moving forward.

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Are Your Children in the MIDDLE of your Conflict or Divorce?

Coping With Stress and Change

If you are interested in more information on this and other related topics, please call your local LSU AgCenter parish office. Below is the list of topics in the "Are Your Children in the Middle of Your Conflict or Divorce?" series.

A Child's View of Divorce
The Business of Co-parenting
Coping with Stress and Change
Costs of Raising Children
Custody Issues Today
Dating Issues
Disciplining Children
Friendship and Support
Help! I Feel Overwhelmed
Loss of a Relationship
Managing Income and Expenses
Not Enough Hours in the Day
Separating Your Finances
Sharing Parenting
Talking with Your Children
Talking with Your Children About Money
Talking with Your Children -- Communicating
Within Your Family: Active Listening
Visitation Do's and Don'ts

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