

# EAP Educates: Emotional Stages of Divorce

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Divorce is not usually something that happens overnight. There will be various factors and emotions that come in to play long before the final decision is made. It is important to realise that these factors affect all the people concerned (the couple, the children and possibly the extended family) before any conscious decision is made.

## **THE THREAT OF SEPERATION**

The months leading to a separation are characterized by denial. That is, firstly, many deny to themselves that the relationship could ever end, and secondly, the denial is pseudo-indifference that partners use to mask their pain, hurt and fear. An Example of indifference is “I don’t need you, I have my own life!” Denying your attachment to one another makes it more painful when separation does occur.

The move towards separation begins as one partner loses the faculty for denial. The pain becomes more and more real. This partner begins to evaluate the relationship and how much pain one can endure. For some this evaluation takes many months, while for others it can be almost immediate.

## **THE DECISION TO DIVORCE**

When the decision to separate is made, both partners are severely affected with roughly equal amounts of emotional turmoil, whether from guilt and self-blame or anger and hurt. At this point each partner begins a recovery process of moving through the four key emotional stages of divorce:

### ***i. SEPARATION SHOCK:***

Immediately after the separation your first reaction can be relief, numbness or panic. This forms part of separation shock. Some common reactions to separation shock include:

- Sudden panic of abandonment (apprehensiveness or anxiety)
- Feeling physically and psychologically shaky
- Difficulty concentrating on any complex task
- Disturbance in sleep patterns
- A change in appetite
- Anger slips out of control

Separation shock can last anything from a few days to many months. Feelings of numbness and denial however offer some relief during this period. A key danger of separation shock however is getting stuck in this numbness or denial.

### ***ii. THE ROLLERCOASTER:***

During this phase you shoot from one emotion to another, one minute you are reduced to tears, the next by rage and then shame etc. Stress, which comes from change, a major factor in divorce causes this rollercoaster. The danger of this rollercoaster phase is the high stress, as one becomes prone to illness and accidents. It is during this time that many important decisions need to be made, a time in which you are least



equipped to make them! Your rollercoaster of emotions can cause you to have poor judgment. The best advice at this point is to consult with trusted family, friends and professionals. Also, don't do anything rashly!!

This rollercoaster stage is said to last between a few months and a year.

iii. **IDENTITY WORK:**

As the rollercoaster stage comes to an end, emotions become more stable and your pain decreases. You now pay more attention to your new life. There is a sense of future, of potential and possibilities.

The period of identity work is similar to that of adolescence in that you may become very shy and awkward in social situations, you may be preoccupied with yourself, how you look and how you sound. Added to this, many people will experiment with new interests and behaviours. You begin to see yourself as creating your new life and gain a sense of power, see yourself as a person who's growing. You can pursue things that interest you, and pleasure you while you let go of some old burdens. You also may begin dating again.

The danger of identity work is getting stuck in a second adolescence. This is getting hooked on the wild world of possibilities and never making a strong commitment to one person or activity.

iv. **THE RECENTRED SELF:**

Once you finish identity work you experience a sense of strength and accomplishment. This comes from having endured a very difficult process. This is a time of integrating what has happened to you. The past has mostly been put to rest, although you may still have feelings for your ex-spouse. The present is what matters now. By re-centering, you are sculpting your life to fit the person you are. The re-centered self is different from the married person you once were!

## **INCONCLUSION**

Everyone works through the process of divorce at a different pace. It is important to get emotional support during the divorce process as so many decisions and changes are being made. It is important to learn not to make decisions based on emotions. It is also very important not use ones children in the emotional divorce process. Sometimes this happens without consciously choosing to use them in the fight.

CONTACT THE EAP FOR MORE INFORMATION OR CONFIDENTIAL ASSISTANCE.