

# Separation and divorce



## TIPS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

**So, your parents have just separated or divorced. How are you meant to feel? Sad, relieved, guilty, angry, numb, anxious, torn, confused, worried, jealous, excited about your next social event... or all of the above?**

**There's no 'right' response to something like this and whatever you're feeling is okay.**

The important thing to remember is that feelings are like clouds in the sky – some drift past quickly and others seem to settle for a while. The key is to let yourself discover your feelings without clinging onto them. If you hold too tightly to a feeling like anger or guilt, it can start to take over your life.

## Dealing with the feelings

You may also feel lots of things at the same time and this can be overwhelming. Perhaps you're having trouble concentrating at school, or you might start feeling upset and not know why.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, remember to be kind to yourself, and try talking to someone you trust.

If you don't feel like talking to someone you care about (especially if you are now feeling like you can't trust the people you love) it can help to talk to a counsellor or wellbeing coordinator at school.

Imagine that you have a remote control and you can pause and rewind the different sensations, images, feelings and thoughts (Siegel, 2014) that you are having about your parents' divorce or separation.

Talking to somebody else can help fill in the pieces when your mind's movie feels like it's missing a few frames. If you are having trouble understanding the dialogue in your mind's movie, the listener can make a guess as to what it is you can't quite hear.

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**Remember: You have the remote control and can pause, rewind, fast-forward or stop sharing your mind's movie when you feel like you've had enough.**

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If your parents were fighting all the time and the house felt like a massive ball of tension, then it probably hasn't surprised you that your parents have decided to separate.

If you thought they had the perfect relationship it's more likely to be an epic shock.

Either way, it is pretty normal for children to grieve the break-up of their parents' relationship. If you find yourself crying into your pillow (or punching it) you are not alone.

Think about all the other young people in your position and what you would say to, or do for them. Then say or do that thing for yourself.

## Staying connected

If you have a sibling, they might feel differently about your parents' break-up and that's okay.

Become curious about what your sibling is feeling and let them know how you are feeling. The more connected you are to your siblings, friends, grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles and your parents, the better off you will be.

It might feel like a drag, but research shows that we humans do much better when we are clearly connected with the people we love (Gottman, 2011) even when they drive us nuts.

If you feel angry or frustrated, it's best not to communicate over text or messenger, as this can lead to miscommunications and make things harder.

However, you can still stay in touch by sending each other emojis, memes, videos or pictures, to maintain the connection even if you don't feel like talking.



*Relationships Australia*  
VICTORIA

## ! Coping tips

1. **Reconnect** with activities you like doing and people you like doing them with.
2. **Try joining an online support group** if you're feeling low in energy and motivation, or struggling to cope. Don't spend all your time on the internet though, as it's not a substitute for getting out of your house and connecting up with real people.
3. **Get lots of sleep – ideally 8-10 hours a night.** If you have difficulty with this, you need to get out during daylight hours and stay busy until you're really tired. Sun and exercise are both key to getting enough sleep.
4. **Breathe.** If you're feeling anxious and stressed when you turn out the lights, focus on your breathing. If your thoughts get stuck just be aware of them and watch them as you continue to focus on your breath. These free meditation, mindfulness and relaxation resources may help:



- **Smiling Mind app:** [smilingmind.com.au](https://smilingmind.com.au)
- **Beyond Blue – Relaxation exercises:** [beyondblue.org.au/get-support/staying-well/relaxation-exercises](https://beyondblue.org.au/get-support/staying-well/relaxation-exercises)
- **headspace – Sleeping well for a healthy headspace:** [headspace.org.au/young-people/sleeping-well-for-a-healthy-headspace](https://headspace.org.au/young-people/sleeping-well-for-a-healthy-headspace)
- **Dr Dan Siegel – Healthy Mind Platter:** [drdansiegel.com/healthy-mind-platter](https://drdansiegel.com/healthy-mind-platter)
- **Insight Timer app:** [insighttimer.com](https://insighttimer.com)
- **ReachOut Australia – Tools and Apps:** [au.reachout.com/tools-and-apps](https://au.reachout.com/tools-and-apps)

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It may not feel like it at the moment, but eventually you will adjust to the changes within your family.

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## Blame

**Some young people feel as though they are to blame for their parents' break up.**

**This is never true!**

Even if you have behaved in bizarrely challenging ways, your parents had a choice as to how they let this affect their own relationship.

You might feel like it is one particular parent's fault that the relationship is breaking up, for example, if one of them had an affair. In most situations, relationships are not simply the responsibility of one person. An affair happens when things are not okay in the relationship. It's not great, but it is human.

One of your parents might try and convince you that it's the other's fault. That's really, really not cool.

It's your right to have a relationship with both (or all) of your parents. If you focus on blaming this one or that one, you might temporarily feel like you have some understanding or control, but in the long run you may find that you lose a good relationship with one of the people who loves you most in the world.

## Understanding your parents' responses

**When parents separate they can be grieving the loss of their relationship as well.**

Lots of people who feel despair cover this up with anger. If you hear your parents criticising each other, it might be a reflection of the loss of the love they had for each other.

Most young people hate it when their parents criticise each other. Some young people feel like when one parent criticises the other, that they are themselves being criticised.

If this is the case, see if you can muster the courage to tell your parent that when they dump on each other, you feel as though they are also dumping on you. If you don't feel like you can do this directly, talk to a trusted adult such as your school counsellor, wellbeing coordinator or teacher.

Some young people find it helpful to attend family therapy with one of their parents after a change in their family such as a separation or divorce.

A good family therapist will be able to help you talk about difficult things without blaming anybody.

## High-conflict separations

If the conflict between your parents is really high, you may feel like you have to make a choice between them. You don't.

Your parents' conflict is like a cyclone that is taking place around you. It is scary and it's important for you to find a safe place for yourself. However, **the cyclone is what is happening between your parents – you taking sides will not help.**

Ideally your parents can reach an agreement without going to court.

They might choose to undertake mediation at a Family Relationship Centre where all the Family Dispute Resolution Practitioners place your best interest, as the child, first.

If your parents do end up in court, you still don't have to take sides. The court may even appoint an independent children's lawyer (ICL) whose role is to ensure that your best interests are served.

## Family violence

If you are affected by family violence, this is a particularly vicious 'cyclone' and **it's really important that you feel safe in your environment.**

**If you feel unsafe and need help right now, call emergency services on 000 (triple zero).**

**You can also talk to a teacher, welfare coordinator or counsellor at school, or contact Kids Helpline (24/7) on 1800 551 800.**

If you're not sure what family violence is, you can read our information sheet by visiting our website [www.rav.org.au/resources](http://www.rav.org.au/resources) and choosing 'Family violence' from the 'Resource topic' list.

## Will things get better?

A lot of young people eventually say that they feel relieved that their parents are no longer living together, particularly if there was lots of fighting in the house.

Other young people say that they like spending time with their parents separately because they are a lot happier now.

**Separation and divorce isn't the end of the world. It may not feel like it at the moment, but eventually you will adjust to the changes within your family.**

## Need more help?

**Remember that you don't have to deal with things on your own.**

If any of the information we've talked about here has concerned you, or you'd like to chat to someone about what's going on for you, help is available.

You can start by talking to a trusted adult such as a parent, carer, family member, teacher or school counsellor and telling them how you're feeling.

**If you feel unsafe at any time, call 000 (triple zero). For 24/7 support, call Lifeline on 13 11 14.**

To make an appointment to chat to one of our counsellors, visit [www.rav.org.au/counselling](http://www.rav.org.au/counselling)

To find other organisations that can help, visit [www.rav.org.au/resources/youth-services](http://www.rav.org.au/resources/youth-services)

## About us

Relationships Australia Victoria has over 70 years' experience providing family and relationship support services across Melbourne and Victoria.

We are committed to providing safe, inclusive and accessible services for all people.



We acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners of the lands and waterways of Australia and we support Aboriginal people's right to self-determination and culturally safe services.

We recognise the lifelong impacts of childhood trauma.

We recognise those who had children taken away from them.