

# *Coping with Separation Handbook*



December 2015



Legal  
Services  
Society

British Columbia  
[www.legalsaid.bc.ca](http://www.legalsaid.bc.ca)

© 2015 Legal Services Society, BC

First edition: December 2015

ISSN 2371-5219 (print)

ISSN 2369-887X (online)

### **Acknowledgements**

Writer: Shelina Neallani, RSW, LLB

Editor: Carol Herter

Designer and Illustrator: Brian Goncalves

This booklet may not be commercially reproduced, but copying for other purposes, with credit, is encouraged.

*Coping with Separation Handbook* is published by the Legal Services Society (LSS), a non-profit organization that provides legal aid to British Columbians. LSS is separate from the BC government, its primary funder. It also receives grants from the Law Foundation and the Notary Foundation (of BC).

The information in this booklet is up to date as of December 2015.

See the **back cover** for how to get free Legal Aid BC publications.

# Contents

## **1** *Understanding your emotions*

- 2 Loss and changes
- 3 Stress
- 4 Emotional stages of separation

## **5** *Coping with your emotions*

- 5 Reduce anxiety about the legal process
- 6 Reduce conflict with your spouse
- 8 Some tips

## **9** *Helping your children with their emotions*

- 10 Common signs of stress in children
- 11 Communication: Some do's and don'ts

## **14** *Life after separation*

- 14 Looking ahead
- 15 Getting support

## **16** *Where to get help*

- 16 For you and your spouse
- 18 For you and the other parent
- 19 For your children
- 19 Communication help



## You're not alone

One-third of Canadians, or 40 percent of people living in British Columbia, have separated from their spouses.

This handbook has suggestions from people who've experienced separation. It contains expert advice to help you get through a difficult time.

The main message from all these caring people is that your situation won't always be the way it is now — it *will* get better.

# Understanding your emotions

When you and your **spouse** (the person you're married to or live with in a marriage-like relationship) separate, you have to figure out the legal and financial parts of ending your relationship. You also have to deal with the difficult emotional parts.

Separating is stressful, overwhelming, and emotionally draining. It's an "up and down" process. You may feel better on some days than others.

You'll feel many different emotions as you go through your separation. Your feelings may be intense, mixed, and unpredictable. For example, you may feel happy and relieved, but also sensitive, anxious, and shaky, or perhaps angry, hurt, and betrayed.

Recognizing and managing your emotions can help you through the separation process. If you have children, be aware of the emotional rollercoaster that separation may cause.

Understanding the psychological and emotional issues involved will help you to:

- cope better with the changes to come,
- have fewer conflicts with your spouse,
- make better decisions for your future, and
- reduce costs.



## *Loss and changes*

Whether you and your spouse decided together to end your relationship, or one of you decided, separation can trigger powerful emotions of loss and grief.

The loss is at many levels — loss of the dreams and expectations you had for the relationship; loss of someone you may still care for deeply; and loss of your role and identity as a spouse.

Separation of a shared life can bring on many losses or changes to your:

- Personal routines and structure
- Family structure and perhaps your parenting role
- Friendships and family relationships, for example, in-laws
- Home or neighbourhood
- Sexual partner
- Social activities
- Finances, with sometimes a drop in income

These changes can be stressful. Research has shown that separation and divorce are the second-most stressful life events after the death of a loved one.



## Stress

You may feel overwhelmed by everything that's going on — having to tell your children, parents, friends, and co-workers about your separation; dealing with emotions and reactions; moving and dividing your property, possessions, debts, and bank accounts.



You may develop symptoms of stress. Read through this list and check off any that apply to you. This will help you recognize that what you're feeling may be stress.

- ☐ Insomnia
- ☐ Tiredness, low energy, can't concentrate or focus
- ☐ Hair loss (more than is normal for you)
- ☐ Forgetfulness (more than usual)
- ☐ Anxiety, panic attacks, or feel shaky
- ☐ Easily agitated, frustrated, and moody
- ☐ Feelings of loss of control or need to take control
- ☐ Difficulty in relaxing and quietening your mind
- ☐ Headaches and neck pain
- ☐ Upset stomach, including diarrhea, constipation, and nausea
- ☐ Aches, pains, and tense muscles
- ☐ Frequent colds and infections
- ☐ Clenched jaw and grinding teeth
- ☐ Skin problems, or increased skin sensitivity and irritability
- ☐ Increased use of drugs or alcohol

### ***Get professional help for yourself***

if you aren't coping well, or if your stress gets worse over time.

👁 See *Where to get help* (For you and your spouse) on **page 16**.

## Emotional stages of separation

Understanding the emotional stages of separation will help you cope with your emotions. Four stages are involved, similar to grieving the death of a loved one.

The different stages don't always happen in the order described here. Sometimes people repeat them again and again. Some people take longer than others to go through the emotional separation process.

**Recovery can take time — two to three years for some people.**

Keep in mind that you and your spouse may be at different stages at any time. Knowing that can help you work through your emotions.

### 4 emotional stages

#### *Shock and denial*

The first stage has been described as “shell shock.” When you're overwhelmed, your brain protects you by shutting down strong feelings. You may experience numbness, anxiety, or even nothing as you try to process what's happening.

#### *Anger*

After the numbness disappears, you may feel resentful, hostile, and unsettled. It's normal to feel angry, but anger can sometimes mask other, more difficult emotions. It can also slow down the grieving process and your healing.

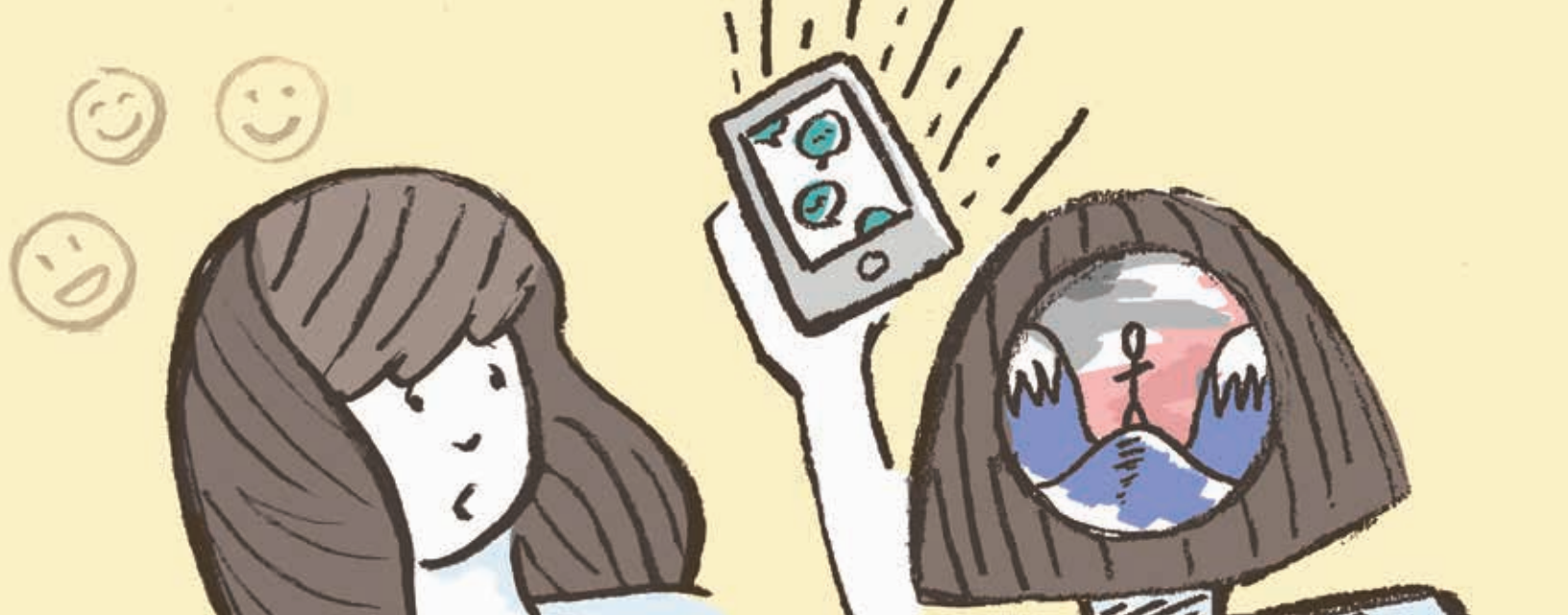
#### *Transition*

You may feel confused and have emotional ups-and-downs. You may be examining why your relationship ended. You may try to get back together with your spouse. You may feel like you don't care anymore. Or you may be open to talking to your spouse as you make the change from “couple” to “single” and from “we” to “I.”

#### *Acceptance*

At this stage, you'll have accepted your separation and the loss of your relationship. You're ready to move forward. You'll find that you can make decisions more easily.





## Coping with your emotions

The practical issues of separation and divorce can create anxiety and stress. That includes dealing with the legal process and communicating with your spouse to make decisions.

### ***Reduce anxiety about the legal process***

Understanding the laws about separation and divorce will help you feel more in control. If you can solve your family issues through mediation, or other dispute resolution process, you won't have to go to court. This could reduce your stress and conflict with your spouse.

But you may need to go to court. You may also have to represent yourself. Or there may be a breakdown in negotiations with your spouse. All these situations can add to your anxiety. To help you deal with these issues:

- Go to court and watch a family law case to get a sense of what it's like so you'll feel more comfortable at your own hearing. Ask a friend to go with you.
- Find videos and other materials to help you represent yourself.
- Get the support you need from an advocate, translator, online support group, or counsellor.
- If you haven't tried mediation, see if that may work for you now. Maybe you or your spouse weren't ready for that when you first separated.

👁 See *Where to get help (For you and your spouse – Legal help)* on **page 17**.

## ***Reduce conflict with your spouse***

Your spouse may want to meet with you to talk about the separation and get closure for the loss of the relationship. You may or may not be ready for that. Or you may not want to do that. Professionals, such as counsellors, can help you.

Parents often try to have a respectful separation as they know they'll be linked a long time. Even if you don't have children, you and your spouse may be linked through the same friends or work.

Everyone will benefit if you and your spouse are considerate with each other during the separation. Remember the times when you cared for each other to help with the difficult task of talking respectfully to each other now.

There are techniques and online tools to help you communicate with your spouse.

👁 See *Where to get help (Communication help)* on **page 19**.

---

## Abuse and family violence

### ***If you've been abused in your relationship***

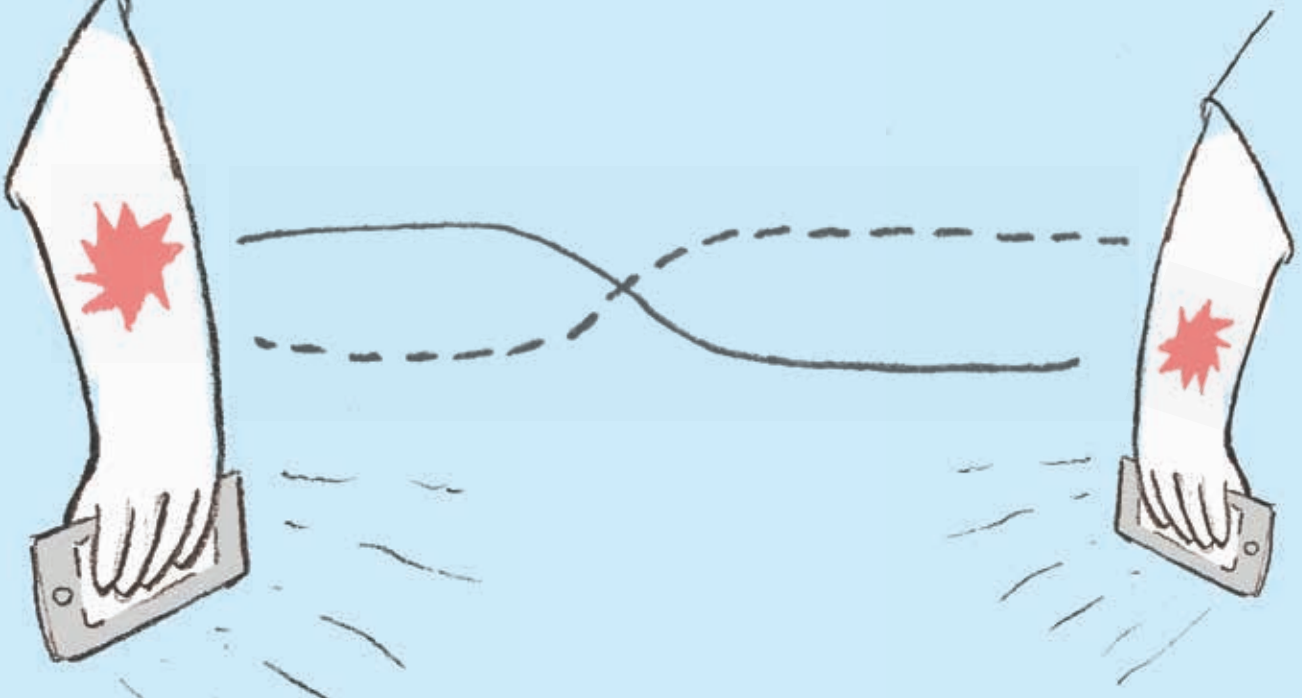
You may be experiencing trauma from abuse as well as the loss and emotions described in this handbook. The tips for self-care and recovery may apply to you, but you have to modify them. You have to make sure to stay safe when you communicate with your spouse. Get help and support for yourself and your children. That's an important step to your recovery.

👁 See *Where to get help (For you and your spouse – VictimLink BC)* on **page 16** for help with your emotional recovery.

### ***If you've been the abuser in your relationship***

Get help to change your behaviour. You'll have to deal with complicated emotional and legal issues. Anger and behaviour management control groups or counsellors who specialize in that area can help you.

👁 See *Where to get help (For you and your spouse)* on **page 16**.




### *Communication tips*

You and your spouse can try to reduce conflict and high emotion between yourselves if safety issues aren't a concern. Here are some tips to follow as you make decisions about finances, legal matters, or your children.

- Decide how you'll communicate with each other. If you find talking is difficult, email or text each other. Then you'll have more time to respond calmly and thoughtfully.
- If you decide to meet in person, choose a public place, such as a coffee shop.
- Be clear and specific about each issue. Try to be businesslike when you communicate.
- Be polite, even if you don't feel like it. This will set the tone for your communication.
- Avoid making each other angry or interrupting. Keep calm — don't let an issue trigger your emotions.
- Remember you're communicating to make decisions — don't get sidetracked from the topic.
- If you need help with certain issues, meet with a mediator. They can also help you and your spouse set communication rules and boundaries.

Emotional turmoil is natural and normal during separation. While you can't control how you feel, you can choose how you act. For example:

- If you know you feel angry or resentful, pause before you respond to a request from your spouse. For instance, wait 24 hours before you press "send" on your email reply.
- When you receive an angry email or text from your spouse, remember your spouse may also be experiencing similar emotions and stress. Choose to respond in a way that will help reduce the high emotion.



As you work through your separation, your needs may change. You may face new challenges and need help dealing with them.

The legal process may take longer than you expected.

Parenting challenges and emotional ups and downs may last for a longer time than you thought.

👁 Get the help you need from your friends, family, or professionals. See *Where to get help (For you and your spouse – Emotional help)* on **page 16**.

Remind yourself that your situation won't always be this way — it *will* get better.



## Some tips

Here are some general things you can do to help cope with the emotions of separation.

### Short term

- Be patient and kind with yourself as you adjust to and accept your situation.
- Make a list of friends and family you can call and keep it handy.
- Ask your family and friends for help with tasks that make you feel pressured.
- Get help with things you may not have done before, such as maintaining household appliances or making daily meals.
- Make a list of counsellors and others you can contact for professional help (see *Where to get help* on **page 16**).
- Get help to change negative thoughts into optimism for the future. Negative thoughts and emotions can be bad for your health and overall well-being.
- Keep a journal to write down how you're feeling.
- Take time to care for yourself so you can deal with your situation and heal.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Walk or exercise daily.

### Long term

- Acknowledge your loss.
- Express your sadness and grief over the end of your relationship.
- Join an exercise class, walking club, or exercise program at your community centre.
- Join a social club, such as bridge or climbing, do something you enjoyed in the past, or try something new.
- Read a new book, or join a book club at your library or community centre.
- Volunteer for one-day events, or for a longer time if you can.
- Volunteer for a service club or organization.
- Explore social media for support and help, while you keep in-person connections.



# Helping your children with their emotions

Your children will also experience a range of emotions when you and your spouse separate.

They can go through stages of grief similar to how people feel when a loved one dies. Your children may feel sad, angry, relieved, or guilty. Their emotions may confuse them. They may:

- blame themselves for your separation;
- worry that you and their other parent don't love them, or won't be in their lives; or
- feel relief that the conflict between you and their other parent will stop.

Your children may or may not understand the situation, or how to cope with it. That depends on their age and how mature they are.

Generally, children want to hear and know that:

- both parents love them, and it's okay to love both parents;
- both parents will always be in their lives;
- grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other family will continue to be in their lives; and
- your separation wasn't their fault.

Changes in your children's everyday lives can include:

- moving to a different neighbourhood and school, and having to make new friends,
- living part of the time with each parent in different homes,
- not living with their sisters or brothers, and
- possibly having less money for themselves as their parents support two households on the same income.

Your children may react strongly to these changes and emotions. This is normal and to be expected.

Tuning into your children's emotions and behaviours can help you guide and support them, including asking professionals to help.

If you and your children are feeling overwhelmed, get support and help for them and yourself.

👁 See *Where to get help* (For you and the other parent and For your children) on pages 18 – 19.



## ***Common signs of stress in children***

Stressed children may:

- Cry more than usual
- Burst out in anger
- Act irritable or moody
- Sleep poorly or too much or too little
- Eat too much or too little
- Cling to an adult or thing
- Not settle with the other parent after the usual adjustment time
- Go back to younger behaviour in sleeping, eating, talking, thumb sucking, or bed wetting

In addition, older children may also:

- Withdraw from activities they had enjoyed
- Withdraw from loved ones
- Get headaches and/or stomach aches
- Say negative things about themselves, such as “everyone hates me”
- Have difficulty at school
- Act more hostile toward parents than expected from normal teens

With your love and reassurance, over time your children should feel their situation improve.

If things don't improve or get worse after several months, your children may need extra support and professional help.

Certain behaviours in older children show they need help. For example, if they:

- Hurt or cut themselves
- Use drugs and alcohol
- Act out in unexpected ways

## Communication: Some do's and don'ts

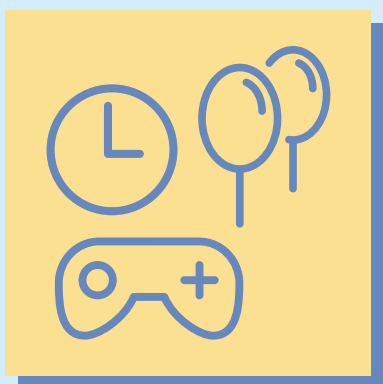
You and your spouse will need to decide about parenting responsibilities, time, and contact with your children. Think about what's best for them.

Encourage your spouse to do the same. If you both focus on your children's needs, health, and emotional well-being, you can make better decisions and reduce conflict.



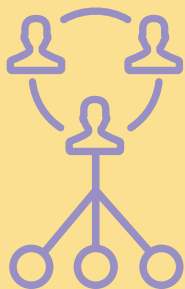
### Your children's viewpoint

- ✓ If your children are older, listen to what they have to say about what's being decided. They want to know their feelings matter.
- ✓ If your children are older, talk with them about where they might want to go for help to adjust to their new home; for example, a school counsellor, trusted family friend, or relative.
- ✗ Don't discuss the "adult stuff" with your children. Protect them as much as you can from details, such as the reasons your relationship with your spouse ended.
- ✗ Don't confide in your children. This will add to their emotional conflict. Save your confidences for a friend.



### Your children's activities

- ✓ Make changes slowly. Try to stick to routines and structure as the family reorganizes. For example, continue family rituals around holidays, birthdays, and other special occasions. The comfort of routines will help your children cope.
- ✓ Try to come up with a shared plan with your spouse so there's structure, stability, and consistency in both homes; for example, for your children's homework, chores, and house rules.
- ✗ Don't schedule activities during your spouse's parenting time.
- ✗ Don't criticize your children's activities with your spouse.



### ***Your children's network***

- ✓ Try to map out with your spouse the existing supports your children have, such as grandparents or other extended family, friends, trusted coaches, and after-school activities. Try to come up with a shared plan to keep your children connected to this support network.
- ✓ Going from a one-home family to a two-home family is a big change for everyone. Think about how it can be done so your children can manage the changes. For example, wait until the school year ends to move to a new home and school. Or move to a new home and let your children stay at their same school.
- ✓ You may want to tell your children's school counsellor that you've separated. Then you can make a plan with the counsellor to help your children cope.
- ✗ Don't use your children to deliver personal messages to your spouse, friends, or relatives.



### ***Your children's other parent***

- ✓ Treat your spouse politely and with respect, even if you may not feel like it. Treat them as your children's other parent, not your former spouse. Think of your spouse as a business partner in the business of raising your children.
- ✓ If your spouse asks for additional time to take your children to a special event, try to be flexible. Think of the benefit for your children. You can arrange to make up for the time you missed with your children.
- ✗ Don't say that one parent is the "good one" and the other is the "bad one," whatever the reason for your separation.
- ✗ Don't be negative about your spouse or insult them in front of your children. This will put your children in emotional conflict.



### *Other things you can do to help your children cope*

- ✓ Spend special time alone with your children. Give them love and hugs. Let them know they'll be taken good care of.
- ✓ Listen to what they have to say. Let them show their feelings, allow them to be honest, and recognize how they feel.
- ✓ Be patient — you may be the target of anger that isn't about you.
- ✓ Use services meant for children and teens to help them understand they're not alone in this situation, and they'll get through it, along with their parents.

Get professional help for your children if they're not coping well, or if their stress gets worse over time.

👁 See *Where to get help (For your children)* on **page 19**.

Get professional help for yourself if you need it, so you can better help your children cope.

👁 See *Where to get help (For you and your spouse)* on **page 16**.



# Life after separation

After your separation, you'll be creating a new normal for yourself.

You may make new friends, move to a different neighbourhood, and experience changes in your finances. These changes are opportunities to build your self-confidence and move forward.

Your life can be richer and more fulfilling than before you separated. You can choose how you want to live, your goals, and your dreams.

## *Looking ahead*

You'll need time to adjust to the many changes. But if you can look forward, you won't get caught up in the negative parts of the past, including your separation.

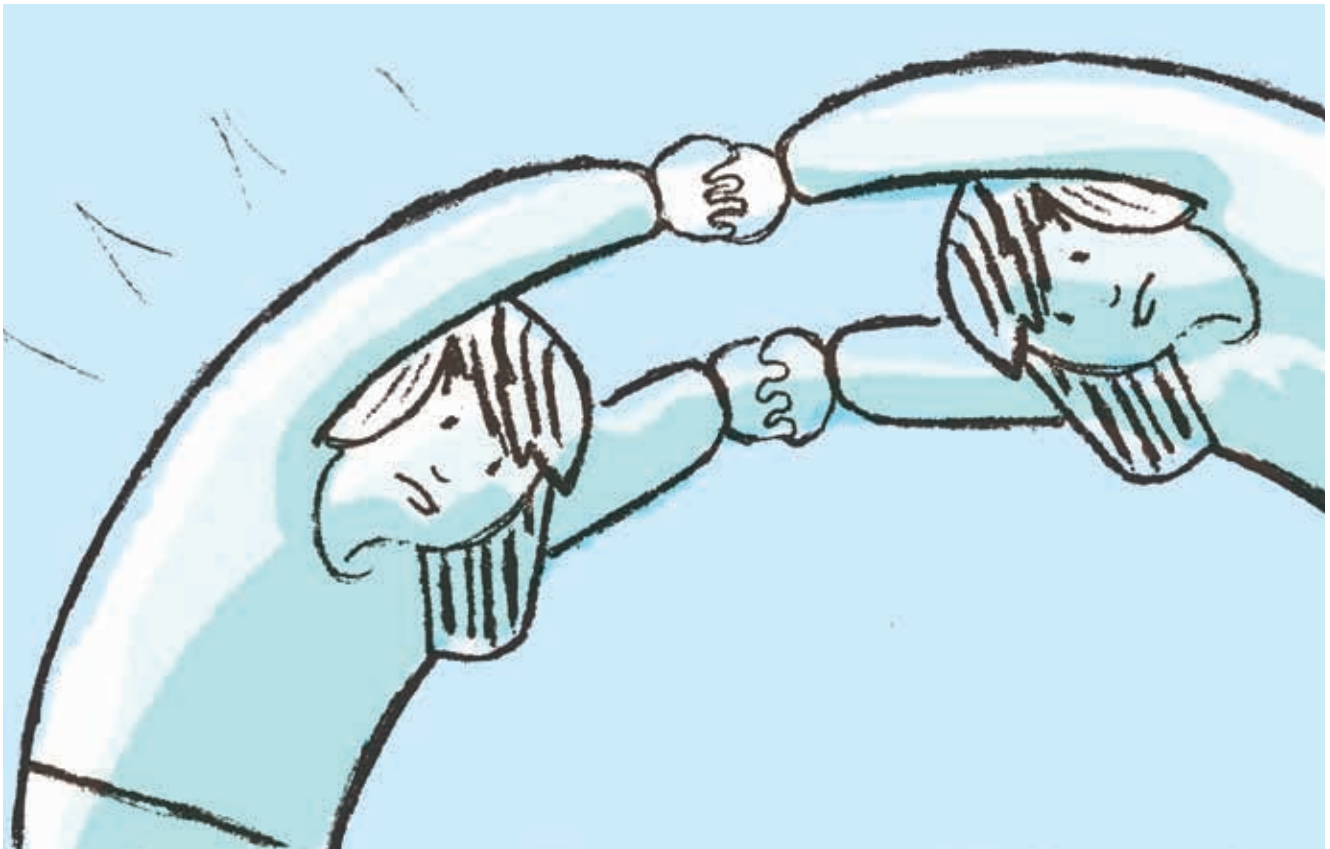
- Focus on your future.
- See your situation as an opportunity to make positive changes for yourself.
- Recognize your strengths, passions, hobbies, and career goals.
- Make a plan and set goals for personal growth.
- Develop new routines that will help you through the transition to life after you separate.
- Keep active and have a regular schedule to stay motivated.
- Participate in activities to meet new people. Get a sense of belonging with new groups through your community, neighbourhood, or church.
- Find new ways to get involved and connect with your community, such as joining a political party or cause.
- Mark milestones, such as one year since your separation, and recognize and celebrate them to help you on your way.

## Getting support

After you've completed your separation or divorce, you may want to continue getting support. Community resources offer seminars and support groups for people who've gone through divorce and want to learn about building healthy relationships.

👁 See *Where to get help (For you and your spouse)* on **page 16**.

Remember —  
your situation  
will get better.



# Where to get help

## *For you and your spouse*

### *Help in a crisis*

- **HealthLinkBC** ([healthlinkbc.ca](http://healthlinkbc.ca)) can connect you with mental health services in your community (phone **811**).
- **BC211** ([bc211.ca](http://bc211.ca)) has free helplines in the Lower Mainland and other areas in BC (phone **211**).
- **VictimLinkBC** ([victimlinkbc.ca](http://victimlinkbc.ca)) helps survivors of family violence (phone **1-800-563-0808**).

### *Emotional help*

- Many workplaces cover counselling services through extended medical benefits. Sometimes it may be free for a certain number of visits. Even if you only go for the free sessions because you can't afford more, it's still very helpful.
- **BC Association of Clinical Counsellors** ([bc-counsellors.org](http://bc-counsellors.org)) can help you find a counsellor in your area.
- **BC Association of Social Workers** ([bcasw.org](http://bcasw.org)) has a list of registered social workers in private practice who provide mental health services.
- Many churches provide group supports for people going through a separation or divorce.
- Many community organizations offer reduced-rate counselling and family counselling (and other supports). Some examples from the major centres in BC:
  - » **Sources Community Resources Centres** (across BC) ([sourcesbc.ca](http://sourcesbc.ca))
  - » **Family Services of Greater Vancouver** (Greater Vancouver) ([fsgv.ca](http://fsgv.ca))
  - » **Family Services of Greater Victoria** (Victoria) ([fsgv.org](http://fsgv.org))
  - » **Pacific Centre Family Services** (Vancouver Island) ([pacificcentrefamilyservices.org](http://pacificcentrefamilyservices.org))
  - » **BC Interior Community Services** (Kamloops, Merritt) ([interiorcommunityservices.bc.ca](http://interiorcommunityservices.bc.ca))
  - » **Kelowna Community Resources** (Kelowna/Okanagan) ([kcr.ca](http://kcr.ca))

- » **Terrace and District Community Services Society** (Northern BC) ([tdcss.ca](http://tdcss.ca))
- » **Nelson Community Services** (Nelson/Kootenays) ([servicesfyi.ca](http://servicesfyi.ca))
- » **Elizabeth Fry Society** (across BC, with programs for women, including support groups) ([caefs.ca/feature/local-societies](http://caefs.ca/feature/local-societies))
- **PovNet** ([povnet.org](http://povnet.org)) has a list of health supports and advocates across BC.
- These organizations provide cultural and other support programs:
  - » **MOSAIC** ([mosaicbc.org](http://mosaicbc.org)) — **family programs**
  - » **SUCCESS** ([successbc.ca](http://successbc.ca)) — **counselling**
  - » **CHIMO Community Services** ([www.himoservices.com](http://www.himoservices.com)) — **counselling**

### **Legal help**

- **Family Law in BC website** ([familylaw.lss.bc.ca](http://familylaw.lss.bc.ca)) has self-help information about:
  - » **How to represent yourself in a family law trial** (Supreme Court)
  - » **Divorce & separation**
  - » **Parenting, custody, & access**
  - » **Common-law relationships**
  - » **Staying out of court**
  - » **Videos about family law**
  - » **Who can help?** (emergency services; specially trained people, programs, and services; online resources; resources for youth; telephone services; where to get more information)
- **Mediate BC website** ([mediatebc.com](http://mediatebc.com)) has a directory of mediators who help with family-related matters.
- **MyLawBC website** ([mylawbc.com](http://mylawbc.com)) gives solutions to your particular legal issue, and includes:
  - » **Make a separation plan** pathway
  - » **Get family orders** pathway
  - » **I've been served with a court document** pathway
  - » **Dialogue Tool**
  - » **All About Mediation** infographic
  - » **How can we resolve our family law issues?** infographic
  - » **Negotiation tips**

## For you and the other parent

### Help with parenting

- **PovNet** ([povnet.org](http://povnet.org)) has a list of support programs for **children and youth**.
- **Parenting After Separation course** is very helpful for parents to get tools to work together after they separate and put their children first ([justiceeducation.ca/programs/pas](http://justiceeducation.ca/programs/pas)). See also the Family Law in BC website's **fact sheet**.
- **Aboriginal Parenting After Separation online program** has resources for Aboriginal families ([apasbc.ca](http://apasbc.ca)).
- **Families Change** ([familieschange.ca](http://familieschange.ca)) has guides to separation and divorce for parents and children and teens.
- **Hear the Child Society** ([hearthechild.ca](http://hearthechild.ca)) has a roster of people specially trained to advise about parenting plans, including reports for the court on what children want.
- **Parents Are Forever** is a 22-minute video made by high-school students to help them better understand parents' responsibilities ([lawlessons.ca/teaching-resources/parents-are-forever](http://lawlessons.ca/teaching-resources/parents-are-forever)).
- **Department of Justice guide** to parenting arrangements after they separate or divorce explains how children react at different ages and stages ([justice.gc.ca/eng/fl-df/parent/mp-fdp/p8.html](http://justice.gc.ca/eng/fl-df/parent/mp-fdp/p8.html)).



## *For your children*

### *Help in a crisis*

- **BC211** ([bc211.ca](http://bc211.ca)) has free helplines, including for youth, in the Lower Mainland and other areas in BC (phone **211**).
- **Elizabeth Fry Society** (across BC) ([caefs.ca/feature/local-societies](http://caefs.ca/feature/local-societies)) have programs in many areas for children who witness abuse.
- **Youth in BC** ([youthinbc.com](http://youthinbc.com)) has crisis lines and online support.
- **PovNet** ([povnet.org](http://povnet.org)) has a list of advocacy programs for **children and youth**.
- **Family Services of Greater Vancouver** (Vancouver) ([fsgv.ca](http://fsgv.ca)) has a counselling service for **children and youth**.
- **Family Services of Greater Victoria** (Victoria) ([fsgv.org](http://fsgv.org)) has a counselling service for **children and youth**.
- **Families Change** ([familieschange.ca](http://familieschange.ca)) has materials for children and teens, including an interactive game, to help them understand the changes happening in their family.

## *Communication help*

### *With your spouse*

- **BIFF** (brief, informative, friendly, firm) technique to communicate in high-conflict situations ([familylawfla.com/Articles](http://familylawfla.com/Articles))
- **Department of Justice guide** to email etiquette for separating and divorcing parents ([justice.gc.ca/eng/fl-df/parent/mp-fdp/8.html](http://justice.gc.ca/eng/fl-df/parent/mp-fdp/8.html))
- **High Conflict Institute** ([highconflictinstitute.com](http://highconflictinstitute.com)) for help to communicate with high-conflict people and includes **E.A.R.** (empathy, attention, respect) technique



Helps you understand the laws  
about separation and divorce

Answer questions about  
your situation. Learn  
about the law as you go.

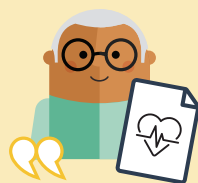
Get help specific to your situation



I made a **safety plan** for me and my children.



I made a **will**.



I made a **personal plan**.



I made a **foreclosure action plan**.



I got a **court order** for child support.

Find **your** solution



We negotiated a **separation agreement**.

## How to get free Legal Aid BC publications

Read: [mylawbc.com/pubs](http://mylawbc.com/pubs)

Order: [crownpub.bc.ca](http://crownpub.bc.ca)

(under Quick Links, click BC Public Legal Education & Information)

### Questions about ordering?

Phone: 604-601-6000

[distribution@lss.bc.ca](mailto:distribution@lss.bc.ca)

### Feedback on this publication?

[publications@lss.bc.ca](mailto:publications@lss.bc.ca)



@ legalaidbc