

# How Divorce Impacts Families

As a licensed mental health professional, I work with many individuals, couples, and families who are affected by divorce. I see the devastating effects that breakups can have and am dedicated to helping people develop the skills to cope with experiences like divorce.

## Major Disruptions

The decision to divorce causes major changes in the lives of all family members. Some upheaval is inevitable. The main trouble areas are:

1. **Financial:** Money becomes a huge problem for most people. The cost of a divorce is extremely high, and two households cost more than one.
2. **Career:** Being less focused at work and spending time away from the job for divorce-related appointments takes its toll.
3. **Logistics:** Running your home is more difficult because you no longer have a partner to help with daily chores.
4. **Emotional:** Most people have periods of depression, sadness, anger, and fatigue.

## Lots of Feelings

People who are experiencing the breakup of their marriage can expect to have a wide variety of feelings. Some call it “the crazy time” and there is even a book about divorce with this title. The following complaints are common:

- Poor concentration
- Nightmares
- Sleep problems
- Fatigue
- Mood swings
- Feeling tense
- Nausea
- Gaining/losing weight
- Feeling nervous
- Somatic complaints

Divorce profoundly affects children. In *Surviving the Breakup*, author Judith Wallerstein describes the experience of 60 divorcing families. She outlines the following key issues for children of divorcing families:

**Fear:** Divorce is frightening to children, and they often respond with feelings of anxiety. Children feel more vulnerable after a divorce because their world has become less reliable.

**Fear of abandonment:** One-third of the children in Wallerstein's study feared that their mother would abandon them.

**Confusion:** The children in divorcing families become confused about their relationships with their parents. They see their parents' relationship fall apart and sometimes conclude that their own relationship with one or both parents could dissolve, as well.

**Sadness and yearning:** More than half of the children in the Wallerstein study were openly tearful and sad in response to the losses they experienced. Two-thirds expressed yearning, for example: "We need a daddy. We don't have a daddy."

**Worry:** In Wallerstein's study, many children expressed concern about one or both of their parents' ability to cope with their lives. They wondered if their parents were emotionally stable and able to make it on their own.

Over half of the children expressed deep worries about their mothers. They witnessed their mothers' mood swings and emotional reactions to the events in the family. Some children worried about suicide and accidents.

**Feeling rejected:** Many children who experience a parent moving out of the home feel rejected by the parent. The parent is usually preoccupied with problems and pays less attention to the child than in the past. Many children take this personally and feel rejected and unlovable.

**Loneliness:** Since both parents are preoccupied with their problems during the divorce process, they are less able to fulfill their parenting roles with their children. The children may feel like their parents are slipping away from them. If the father has moved away and the mother has gone off to work, the children often feel profound loneliness.

**Divided loyalties:** The children may (accurately) perceive that the parents are in a battle with each other. The children feel pulled in both directions and may resolve the dilemma by siding with one parent against another.

**Anger:** Children in divorcing families experience more aggression and anger. It is often directed toward the parents, expressed in tantrums, irritability, resentment, and verbal attacks. Many children see the divorce as a selfish act and feel very resentful about the resulting destruction of their lives.

More than one-third of the children in Judith Wallerstein's study showed acute depressive symptoms such as sleeplessness, restlessness, difficulty in concentrating, deep sighing, feelings of emptiness, compulsive overeating, and various somatic complaints.

The symptoms that many children may have during the divorce process either moderate or disappear within 18 months after the breakup. Of the symptoms that remain, the most common are:

1. **Manipulative behavior** was reported by about 20% of the teachers of the children in Wallerstein's study.
2. **Depression** was diagnosed in 25% of the children and adolescents. The symptoms of depression in children include:
  - Low self-esteem
  - Inability to concentrate
  - Sadness
  - Mood swings

- Irritability
- Secretiveness
- Isolation
- Self-blame
- Eating disorders
- Behaving perfectly
- Being accident-prone
- Stealing
- Skipping school
- Underachieving at school
- Sexual acting out

You should consider finding a therapist to work with if most of the time you feel:

- Alone
- Depressed
- Numb
- Exhausted
- Isolated
- Hopeless
- Overwhelmed by your children
- Overwhelmed by your feelings
- You are sleeping too much or too little
- Worried
- Anxious
- Afraid

## Suggested Reading

William Bridges, *Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes*. New York, Addison-Wesley, 1980.

Marjorie Engel and Diana Gould, *The Divorce Decisions Workbook*. New York, McGraw Hill, 1992, page 109.

Abigail Trafford, *Crazy Time: Surviving Divorce and Building A New Life*. New York, HarperCollins, 1992.

Judith Wallerstein and Joan Berlin Kelly, *Surviving The Breakup: How Children and Parents Cope With Divorce*. New York, Basic Books, 1980.

---