

# **The Emotional Journey of Divorce: Phases, Psychological Responses and Coping Strategies**

By

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## **Introduction**

Divorce represents one of the most emotionally disruptive life events an individual can experience, rivaling bereavement and serious illness in psychological impact.

The legal process is accompanied by a complex **emotional process** involving grief, identity reconstruction, and psychological adaptation.

Research demonstrates that individuals tend to experience divorce through recognizable emotional phases, though not necessary in a linear or uniform manner (Amato, 2010; Bohannan, 1970).

Understanding these phases—and the coping strategies most effective at each stage—can foster emotional resilience, psychological well-being, and post-divorce growth.

## **Five Emotional Phases of Divorce**

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### **1. Pre-Separation Phase: Emotional Dissonance and Anticipatory Stress**

**Primary emotions that occur:** anxiety, ambivalence, confusion, emotional fatigue

Before separation occurs, many individuals experience prolonged emotional tension marked by uncertainty and internal conflict. This phase often includes attempts to preserve the marriage alongside growing awareness of relational dissatisfaction. Cognitive dissonance—holding conflicting beliefs about the relationship’s viability—commonly contributes to emotional exhaustion (Festinger, 1957). Often shock, surprise, and shame are experienced. On occasion, even denial or refusal to accept the situation appears in one of the parties.

From an attachment perspective, early distress reflects fear of attachment rupture and anticipated loss of security and high levels of feeling vulnerable. (Bowlby, 1980). Individuals may experience somatic symptoms such as insomnia, irritability, and difficulty concentrating.

#### **Coping Strategies:**

- Reflective journaling to clarify values and emotional patterns
- Individual or couples therapy to explore relational dynamics
- Mindfulness-based stress reduction to manage anticipatory anxiety (Kabat-Zinn, 2003)

## 2. Separation and Shock: Acute Emotional Disruption

**Primary emotions:** shock, numbness, disbelief, emotional flooding

The formal initiation of divorce often produces an acute stress response. Individuals may report feeling detached, disoriented, or emotionally numb. This reaction is consistent with trauma-response patterns in which the nervous system prioritizes survival over emotional integration (van der Kolk, 2014).

During this phase, executive functioning may be impaired, complicating decision-making during legal or logistical transitions.

**Coping strategies:**

- Grounding techniques (e.g., controlled breathing, sensory awareness)
- Establishing immediate stability regarding housing, finances, and childcare
- Leaning on social support networks to reduce isolation (Thoits, 2011)

## 3. Acute Grief Phase: Loss, Anger, and Emotional Volatility

**Primary emotions:** grief, sadness, anger, guilt, bargaining

Divorce activates grief processes similar to bereavement, though the loss is ambiguous because the former spouse remains psychologically and socially present (Boss, 1999). Individuals grieve not only the partner but also shared dreams, identity roles, and anticipated futures.

Anger often emerges as a secondary emotion, serving a protective function against vulnerability (Lazarus, 1991). Guilt and self-blame may accompany rumination over perceived failures or missed opportunities.

**Coping strategies:**

- Grief-focused counseling or divorce recovery groups
- Expressive writing to process unresolved emotions (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011)
- Healthy anger expression through physical activity or assertive communication

## 4. Adjustment and Identity Disruption Phase

**Primary emotions:** insecurity, fear, diminished self-worth, loneliness

As the permanence of divorce becomes clear, individuals often face identity destabilization. Marital roles shape self-concept, and their loss can result in feelings of inadequacy or purposelessness (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Financial stress, changes in social networks, and parenting adjustments may exacerbate anxiety.

This phase reflects what Bohannon (1970) described as *psychological divorce*—the process of redefining the self outside the marital bond.

**Coping strategies:**

- Cognitive restructuring to challenge negative self-beliefs (Beck, 2011)
- Exploration of new roles, interests, and competencies
- Career or life coaching to support future-oriented identity reconstruction

**5. Acceptance and Reintegration Phase: Growth and Renewal**

**Primary emotions:** acceptance, hope, emotional stability, empowerment

With time and intentional effort, most individuals reach a phase of emotional integration characterized by acceptance rather than resignation. Emotional reactivity decreases, and the divorce becomes part of one’s life narrative rather than its defining feature.

Post-traumatic growth research suggests that individuals who actively process adversity may experience increased self-awareness, emotional strength, and relational clarity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

**Coping strategies:**

- Goal-setting aligned with personal values
- Meaning-making through reflection on lessons learned
- Gradual re-engagement in intimacy and community involvement

**Summary of Evidence-Based Coping Tools by Phase**

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Helpful Interventions</b>
Pre-Separation	Couples therapy, mindfulness, reflective journaling
Shock & Numbness	Grounding, safety planning, social support
Acute Grief	Expressive writing, grief counseling, supportive groups
Identity Loss	Cognitive reframing, self-exploration, coaching
Acceptance/Rebuilding	Goal setting, community engagement, meaning-making

## **Cross-Cutting Emotional Themes**

### **Nonlinear Progression**

Emotional recovery from divorce rarely follows a predictable sequence. Individuals may revisit earlier emotions during anniversaries, legal milestones, or new relationships (Amato, 2010).

### **Physiological–Emotional Interaction**

Chronic stress during divorce affects sleep, immune functioning, and emotional regulation, reinforcing the need for holistic self-care (McEwen, 2007).

### **Parental Considerations**

For parents, guilt and fear regarding children’s well-being are prominent. Research shows that children adjust better when parents maintain cooperative co-parenting and emotional availability (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

## **Children’s Emotional Phases During and After Divorce**

Children experience divorce not as a single event but as an ongoing emotional process shaped by developmental stage, parental conflict, and post-divorce family functioning. Research consistently shows that children’s adjustment depends less on the divorce itself and more on the emotional climate surrounding it, particularly parental behavior and stability (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

Although children’s responses vary, several **common emotional phases** have been identified across developmental psychology and family systems research.

### **1. Awareness and Confusion Phase**

**Primary emotions:** confusion, anxiety, fear, uncertainty

Children often sense relational tension long before divorce is explained to them. Younger children may not understand the concept of divorce but experience emotional insecurity due to changes in routine and parental availability. Older children may grasp the reality but lack emotional tools to process it.

This phase is characterized by heightened vigilance and anxiety, as children attempt to interpret ambiguous cues in their environment (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

#### **Supportive strategies:**

- Provide **clear, age-appropriate explanations** about what is happening
- Reassure children that the divorce is **not their fault**
- Maintain predictable routines to reinforce emotional safety

## 2. Emotional Distress and Loss Phase

**Primary emotions:** sadness, anger, grief, guilt

As the reality of divorce becomes concrete—such as one parent moving out—children often experience grief similar to attachment loss. Younger children may display regression (e.g., bedwetting, clinginess), while adolescents may exhibit anger, withdrawal, or risk-taking behaviors (Amato & Keith, 1991).

Children frequently engage in **self-blame**, believing their behavior caused the separation, especially in high-conflict households.

**Supportive strategies:**

- Encourage emotional expression through conversation, play, or art
  - Validate feelings without attempting to “fix” or minimize them
  - Avoid involving children in adult conflict or legal matters
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## 3. Loyalty Conflict and Divided Attachment Phase

**Primary emotions:** guilt, internal conflict, emotional pressure

Children often feel torn between parents, particularly when conflict is ongoing. Loyalty conflicts can lead children to suppress emotions, align with one parent, or assume caregiving roles beyond their developmental capacity—a phenomenon known as *parentification* (Jurkovic, 1997).

These internal conflicts are associated with long-term emotional distress if unresolved.

**Supportive strategies:**

- Explicitly affirm that children are free to love both parents
- Avoid disparaging the other parent in the child’s presence
- Establish cooperative co-parenting boundaries

## 4. Adjustment and Adaptation Phase

**Primary emotions:** emotional stabilization, cautious optimism

With consistent support, most children gradually adapt to new family structures. This phase includes acceptance of new routines, living arrangements, and parental roles. Research

indicates that children’s emotional functioning improves significantly within one to two years post-divorce when conflict is low and parenting remains consistent (Hetherington, 2003).

**Supportive strategies:**

- Maintain consistent discipline and expectations across households
- Foster secure attachment through availability and responsiveness
- Encourage peer relationships and extracurricular involvement

**5. Integration and Long-Term Meaning Phase**

**Primary emotions:** acceptance, resilience, emotional maturity

Over time, many children integrate the divorce into their life narrative. Longitudinal studies suggest that children who experience supportive post-divorce environments often develop strong coping skills, adaptability, and emotional insight (Amato, 2010).

However, unresolved parental conflict or instability can result in lingering difficulties with trust, intimacy, or emotional regulation in adulthood.

**Supportive strategies:**

- Model healthy relationships and conflict resolution
- Offer counseling when emotional distress persists
- Reinforce the child’s strengths and sense of competence

**Key Protective Factors for Children**

Across all phases, research identifies several factors that significantly improve child outcomes:

- Low interparental conflict
- Emotionally available and responsive parenting
- Stable routines and living arrangements
- Access to counseling or school-based support services

Children do not need perfect parents—they need **emotionally regulated, cooperative adults** who prioritize their psychological safety (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

**Final Insights: Healing as Transformation**

Divorce is both an ending and a profound psychological transition. While emotionally taxing, it can also serve as a catalyst for personal growth, resilience, and renewed purpose. By recognizing the emotional phases of divorce and applying evidence-based coping strategies at each stage,

individuals can navigate loss with compassion and rebuild their lives with intention. Healing does not entail forgetting the past but integrating it into a broader narrative of self-understanding and growth.

Divorce is not only an ending but also a profound growth opportunity. People who intentionally engage with their emotional phases often report:

- Greater self-awareness
- Stronger emotional resilience
- More authentic future relationships
- Clarity about personal values

Healing is not erasing the past, but *rediscovering the self* with compassion and strength.

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