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TAILORED MENTAL HEALTHCARE

VULNERABLE CLIENTS SURVIVAL GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

When people separate, some conflict is likely no matter how amicable the circumstances were when the relationship ended. Even the friendliest of separations will have a profound, lasting effect on your wellbeing. Mental distress is normal in any relationship breakdown and does not necessarily mean you need a discussion with a doctor, a visit to a psychiatrist etc.

Any form of separation can be a challenging and emotionally charged journey and can take its toll on couples, especially when intertwined with hostile conflict; contested litigation; positional stances and just outright unacceptable behaviour from your former partner. If the conflict doesn't subside for some time, this can have an extreme effect on all those involved.

This is a guide for helping to deal with conflicts that arise when a relationship breaks down and provides examples of problematic behaviours you may experience; provides practical guidance on putting in place boundaries; explains how to practise positive communication and contains tips on managing the stresses that often occur during this period. It is important to understand when help is needed and where to reach out for that help.

In order to understand how those we once loved can turn into combative, argumentative people it is important that we delve into the intricate emotions, cognitive shifts, and dynamics that couples undergo during a relationship breakdown. Separation affects everyone differently and everyone will therefore deal with the experience differently, but this guide aims to explain the fear; shock; hurt; pain; overwhelm; anger; grief and a whole array of other human emotions which may be felt, and which can feel all consuming.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SEPARATION

Denial and Acceptance:

The start of a formal separation invariably triggers a whole range of emotional reactions within couples. Denial often serves as the initial defence mechanism, protecting individuals from the stark reality of the impending separation and the fears that run alongside – Will I be alone for the rest of my life? Where will I live? Why has this happened? Will I ever feel love again?

Rooted in the desire to keep the attachment with their former partner and, also, a fear of the unknown, denial provides a temporary haven. This phase, however, is often short-lived. As the separation continues the feelings of denial erode, making space for the emergence of acceptance.

During this phase, couples deal with the daunting task of reconciling their aspirations; hopes and wishes with the impending dissolution of their union. Feelings of betrayal, abandonment, and disappointment may grow as they drive through this psychological crossroad. The process of acceptance is akin to a psychological vessel, reshaping and creating profound shifts in their self-concepts as they need to rediscover who they are as an individual rather than who they were as part of a couple.

Anguish and Hostility:

As the process intensifies, the emotional spectrum widens, revealing anguish and hostility. Anguish appears in the form of mourning - a kind of sorrow for the loss of shared dreams, a shared life and shared aspirations.

Grief seeps through the psychological landscape, manifesting as sadness, loss, and an overwhelming feeling of loneliness and isolation. Couples are almost forced to confront the void left by the ending of the relationship.

However, alongside anguish, comes hostility. The inability to resolve matters and move on often leads to more acrimony. Contested battles over property, the children, maintenance, and other financial matters can produce further resentment, culminating in bitter and hurtful exchanges.

Hostility, a coping mechanism, may mask deeper vulnerabilities and pain, leading to a long, drawn-out cycle of conflict and emotional attrition.

Identity Reconstruction and the Quest for Closure:

As the issues narrow and everyone inches towards resolution, there is often a voyage of "identity reconstruction". The ending of a relationship necessitates a reconfiguration of self-concept, making individuals grapple with questions of self-worth, autonomy, and purpose.

A kind of forced, obligatory reinvention of who they are now or who they want to be. There is a need and longing for this to end so we can move on and heal. For it to halt, end, close, finish and stop.

Amidst the separation process, individuals often seek refuge in positive new hobbies, social circles, and personal growth, helping them form a new post-separation identity.

However, some seek more extreme sources of relief that can be detrimental to their mental health. There are often warning signs of more distressing behaviours where emergency intervention is required. If there are more serious behaviours at play such as drug or alcohol addiction; violence or threats of violence, specialist help is out there. What are these behaviours and how do we spot them?

PROBLAMATIC BEHAVIOURS

Recognising problematic behaviours and poor mental health in yourself is important during this painful time. It is often difficult to self-assess so sometimes a family member or a friend will be the first to notice a shift in behaviour. It is important to surround yourself with a strong support group, but you must be prepared to listen to them if they spot problematic behaviours in you. Here are some signs they may pick up (or even ones you may well recognise in yourself) which could indicate that you are struggling with poor mental health:

Changes in Mood and Emotion: If you are experiencing frequent and extreme mood swings, persistent sadness, irritability, or anger that affects your daily life.

Withdrawal and Isolation: If you start withdrawing from social activities, family events, or from spending time with friends.

Changes in Sleep Patterns: Insomnia, oversleeping, or other disruptions in sleep patterns.

Appetite and Weight Changes: Significant changes in eating habits, such as sudden weight loss or excessive weight gain.

Lack of Interest and Enthusiasm: If you begin to lose interest in activities you once enjoyed or if you seem to lack motivation.

Physical Symptoms: Unexplained headaches, stomach aches, and other physical symptoms, without a clear medical cause.

An Increased Alcohol Intake or Substance Abuse: Increased or excessive use of alcohol, drugs, or other substances can occur during periods of increased stress and worry. In some cases, it can start to impact on behaviour, judgement, and physical and mental health.

Difficulty Concentrating: Problems with focus, memory, decision-making, or problem-solving.
Irrational Fears or Paranoia: If you start exhibiting irrational fears, excessive worrying, or paranoia.

Emotional Outbursts: Frequent or intense emotional outbursts that seem out of proportion to the situation.

Neglecting Responsibilities: If you are struggling to fulfil your daily responsibilities at work, home, or with family.

Suicidal Thoughts or Self-Harm: Expressions of hopelessness, talking about self-harm, or mentioning suicidal thoughts require immediate attention and professional help.

It's important to approach this topic with sensitivity and empathy. If you have been displaying these behaviours, you might find a friend or family member will try to have an open and non-judgmental conversation with you. They may encourage you to seek professional help from a therapist, counsellor, or other medical professional. Full details can be accessed through Montrose Health Group.

Remember all they will be doing is trying to provide you with support and encouragement throughout your journey during this difficult time. They will be doing this with the best intentions, not to upset you or cause you further anxiety.

As hard as it may be to hear, it is important to listen to what is being said and to act on the advice of those closest to you.

Sometimes, however, just the mere mention of your former partner's name or a text from them can trigger a whole catalogue of emotions. Here are some useful strategies for communicating in a healthier way.

BOUNDARIES AND POSITIVE COMMUNICATION

Setting boundaries and implementing positive communication during a separation can be challenging, but it's crucial for maintaining your well-being and managing the process as smoothly as possible. Here are some steps to help you achieve this:

Self-Reflection: Take time to reflect on your own needs, feelings, and triggers. Understand what boundaries you need to set to protect your emotional and mental well-being.

Clear Communication: Clearly express your boundaries to your former partner in a calm and respectful manner. Use "I" statements to avoid blaming or accusing language. For example, say, "I would prefer if we could communicate through email" instead of "You always make me upset when you call."
Consistency: Once you've established boundaries, stick to them consistently. This will help create a sense of predictability and stability for both you and your former partner.

Choose the Right Medium: Decide on a communication method that works best for both of you. This could be emails, text messages, or a co-parenting app. Use a method that allows you to communicate effectively without unnecessary emotional escalation.

Time and Place: When discussing important matters, choose an appropriate time and place where you can have a focused conversation. Avoid bringing up sensitive topics in front of children or during high-stress moments.

Set Limits: Determine the frequency and duration of communication. For instance, you might agree to communicate only once a day or during specific hours.
Stay Focused: Keep your communication focused on the topic at hand. Avoid bringing up past issues or engaging in personal attacks. Stick to the present and the matter that needs to be discussed.

Use Neutral Language: Keep your language neutral and business-like. Avoid emotionally charged words or phrases that could lead to misunderstandings.

Consider Professional Help: If communication becomes consistently difficult, consider involving a mediator, therapist, or divorce coach. These professionals can help facilitate discussions and provide guidance on effective communication.

Practice Empathy: Try to understand your former partner's perspective and emotions, even if you don't agree. Empathy can help reduce tension and make communication more productive.

Focus on Co-Parenting: If you have children, prioritise their well-being. Maintain open communication about parenting matters and make joint decisions that are in the best interests of your children. If you struggle, consider mediation to help with these matters as you need to be able to co-parent the children until they are adults.

Take Breaks: If a conversation becomes too heated or unproductive, give yourselves permission to take a break. Step away and revisit the conversation when emotions have cooled down.

Keep Legal Channels Open: While positive communication is essential, remember that some matters might need to be addressed through legal channels. Consult your legal representative when necessary.

Practice Self-Care: Any separation can be emotionally draining. Take care of yourself by practising self-care, seeking support from friends and family, and considering therapy if needed.

Remember that setting boundaries and implementing positive communication may take time and effort from both parties. It's a process and being patient and consistent can lead to healthier interactions during this challenging time.

However, just sometimes getting through each day can be a challenge in itself. There are a number of strategies you can adopt to help you cope with the feelings of stress.

PRACTICAL TIPS ON MANAGING STRESS

Managing Stress through Diet/Nutrition

This can be an effective strategy to support your mental and emotional well-being. Often eating is the last thing you may want to do when you may feel as low you do, but it is essential to feed and fuel your body. Equally excessive drinking is sometimes the first thing that you may want at the end of another long and arduous day. Whilst food alone cannot eliminate stress nor can alcohol entirely numb the pain, a balanced diet can help provide the nutrients your body needs to cope with stress better. Here are some tips on how to use food and nutrition to manage stress better:

Stay Hydrated: Dehydration can worsen stress and anxiety. Drink plenty of water throughout the day to stay hydrated. Herbal teas and infused water can also be soothing.

Eat a Balanced Diet: Focus on consuming a variety of nutrient-rich foods from all food groups. This includes whole grains, lean proteins, healthy fats, fruits, and vegetables. A balanced diet provides essential vitamins and minerals.

Include Complex Carbohydrates: Complex carbs, such as whole grains (brown rice, quinoa, whole wheat), help blood sugar levels and promote a steady release of energy. This can prevent mood swings and energy crashes.

Increase Omega-3 Fatty Acids: Omega-3 fatty acids found in fatty fish (salmon, mackerel, sardines), flaxseeds, chia seeds, and walnuts have been linked to reduced anxiety and improved mood.

Consume Lean Proteins: Protein-rich foods (chicken, turkey, beans, lentils, tofu) contain amino acids that play a role in the production of neurotransmitters like serotonin, which can influence mood and emotions.

Limit Processed Foods and Sugar: Highly processed foods and excessive sugar consumption can lead to energy crashes and mood swings. Opt for whole, minimally processed foods instead.

Moderate Caffeine Intake: While caffeine can provide a temporary energy boost, excessive consumption can increase feelings of anxiety and restlessness. Monitor your caffeine intake and consider switching to herbal teas or decaffeinated options.

Incorporate Mood-Boosting Foods: Some foods are known to have mood-enhancing properties. For example, dark chocolate (in moderation), berries, nuts, and seeds contain compounds that may positively influence mood.

Practice Mindful Eating: Pay attention to your body's hunger and fullness cues. Mindful eating can help you connect with your body and reduce emotional eating.

Stay Consistent: Maintain regular mealtimes and avoid skipping meals. Skipping meals can lead to blood sugar fluctuations and exacerbate stress.

Stay Cautious with Alcohol: While some people turn to alcohol to cope with stress, excessive alcohol consumption can worsen emotional well-being. If you choose to drink, do so in moderation.

Stay Hygienic: During stressful times, it's important to maintain proper food hygiene to prevent illness, which can further add to stress.

As with anything, what initially appears like a healthy habit can be taken to the extreme until it actually has a detrimental impact on our wellbeing. Take nutrition; managing your calorie intake can initially promote good health, but when these rules become too rigid they can soon escalate into an obsessional and disordered relationship with our bodies. The key to implementing these tips and tricks is psychological flexibility. This is the ability to pursue a value (e.g. health and wellbeing), whilst being adaptive enough to adjust the behaviour depending on the situation (e.g. I will enjoy this cake on my son's birthday). If you find that you experience significant anxiety when not adhering to health values, it may be an indicator that the rule has become too rigid and is unintentionally having an inverse effect on your quality of life.

PRACTICAL TIPS ON MANAGING STRESS

Managing Stress through Exercise:

This can be incredibly beneficial for your physical and mental well-being. Here are some steps and tips to help you effectively manage stress through exercise during this challenging time:

Consult a Professional: Before beginning any exercise routine, especially if you have any medical conditions or concerns, consult your healthcare provider. They can help you tailor a safe and effective exercise plan.

Choose Enjoyable Activities: Engage in physical activities that you enjoy. Whether it's jogging, swimming, cycling, yoga, dancing, or playing a sport, doing something you like will make it easier to stick to your routine.

Set Realistic Goals: Set achievable fitness goals that are focused on overall well-being rather than just weight loss or muscle gain. Your goals could include improving your mood, reducing stress, increasing energy, or getting better sleep.

Consistency is Key: Aim for regular exercise sessions. Consistency helps build a routine that can provide a stable outlet for stress relief and may ensure you stick to the exercise.

Mind-Body Activities: Consider mindfulness activities such as yoga or tai chi. These practices can help you connect your mind and body, promoting relaxation and reducing stress.

Outdoor Activities: Spend time outdoors when possible. Nature and fresh air can have a positive impact on your mood and stress levels.

Social Support: Engage in group activities or classes to connect with others. Social interactions can provide a sense of community and support during difficult times and can often make you accountable and therefore more likely to turn up. Sometimes a dedicated exercise buddy helps you to feel motivated.

Set a Schedule: Plan your exercise sessions ahead of time. Having a schedule can make it easier to prioritise and stick to your routine. Put them in your diary and stick to them – as you would if it was a dental appointment or a meal out with friends.

Start Slowly: If you're new to exercise or getting back into it, start with a manageable intensity and duration. Gradually increase the intensity and duration as your fitness level improves. You will soon see the benefits.

Use Exercise as a Break: When you're feeling overwhelmed or stressed, take a break, and engage in a short exercise session. Even a 10-15 minute walk can help clear your mind.

Focus on the Positive: Use exercise as an opportunity to shift your focus away from the stressors of the separation. Concentrate on the positive effects it has on your body and mood. Use it as a time to zone out and focus on nothing but the exercise.

Stay Hydrated and Eat Well: Maintain a balanced diet and stay hydrated to support your body's recovery and performance during exercise.

Listen to Your Body: Pay attention to your body's signals. If you're feeling fatigued or in pain, it's okay to rest and modify your exercise routine as needed.

Track Your Progress: Keep a journal or use a fitness app to track your workouts, mood changes, and any improvements you notice over time. This can be motivating and help you see the positive impact of your efforts.

PRACTICAL TIPS ON MANAGING STRESS

Managing Stress through Meditation/Breathing/Relaxation/Mindfulness:

Meditation and other mindful techniques can be valuable tools for managing stress during a relationship breakdown. They can help you find inner peace, reduce anxiety, and improve emotional well-being. Here are some tips to help you effectively during this challenging time:

Choose a Quiet Space: Find a quiet and comfortable space where you won't be disturbed. This could be a dedicated room, a quiet corner of your home, or even a peaceful outdoor spot.

Set a Regular Schedule: Establish a consistent routine. This can help you create a sense of stability and routine during a period of change. Aim for a few minutes each day and gradually increase the duration as you become more comfortable.

Start with Basics: Begin with simple techniques, such as focused breathing or body scan. These techniques can help you stay present and reduce the impact of negative thoughts and emotions.

Mindfulness Meditation: Mindfulness meditation involves observing your thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations without judgment. This can help you develop a greater awareness of your inner experiences and reduce reactivity.

Guided Meditation: Use guided meditation apps, videos, or recordings. These resources can provide you with step-by-step instructions and soothing guidance, making it easier to stay focused.

Deep Breathing: Deep breathing exercises, such as the 4-7-8 technique or diaphragmatic breathing, can help activate your body's relaxation response and reduce stress.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation: This technique involves tensing and then relaxing different muscle groups to release physical tension and promote relaxation.

Visualisation: Visualise a peaceful and calming place, such as a beach or a forest, to create a mental escape from stress and anxiety.

Stay Patient: These techniques take time to develop. Be patient with yourself and don't get discouraged if your mind wanders. Gently bring your focus back to your chosen calming technique.

Self-Compassion: Treat yourself with kindness and compassion during this challenging time. Self-compassion can help you cultivate a sense of warmth and understanding toward yourself.

Practice Gratitude: Incorporate gratitude into your routine. Focus on the positive aspects of your life, even amid difficult circumstances.

Stay Open to Emotions: Allow yourself to feel your emotions. It's okay to experience sadness, anger, or frustration. The goal is to observe these emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them.

Seek Support: Consider joining a class or group. Connecting with others who share similar goals can provide a sense of community and support.

Combine with Other Techniques: Engage in other stress-reducing activities, such as exercise, journaling, talking to a therapist, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

Remember that it is a personal journey, and there's no one-size-fits-all approach. Explore different techniques and find what works best for you. Over time, you will find the way that works best for you to help you navigate your challenges with greater resilience and inner calm.

It is always worth remembering there is so much help out there and you are not alone, despite those feelings that you are. It is important to get the support you need in a way that works and to get the help you need for the issues you are having.

WAYS TO GET HELP AND WHAT HELP IS OUT THERE

There are many self-help groups that can offer support, to help people going through a separation. You may need a professional team to help with the process for example a specialist family solicitor; a financial planner; an accountant. You may also want a support team of your best friend; a relative; a work colleague. You may need more specialist help from a group to provide a safe and understanding environment to deal with the challenges of a relationship breakdown and/or addiction and/or mental health conditions:

12 Step Meetings: These are support group gatherings that follow a structured programme for individuals struggling with addiction or various behavioural and mental health issues. The most well-known and widely practised is Alcoholics Anonymous, but there are many other groups such as Narcotics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous and Cocaine Anonymous that use similar principles for different types of addiction or issues.

Co-Dependents Anonymous: This is a fellowship of people who share their experience, strength, and hope to develop healthy relationships. While not exclusively focused on issues arising out of a relationship breakdown, it addresses issues related to co-dependency, which can be relevant to those separating.

Al-Anon: Al-Anon is a support group organisation that provides help and fellowship for people whose lives have been affected by someone else's drinking or substance abuse. It is primarily designed to support the family members, friends, and loved ones of individuals who have alcohol or substance use disorders, but it can also be helpful for individuals struggling with their own addiction issues.

SMART Recovery: This offers a programme for family and friends of individuals struggling with addiction. Although not solely focused on separation issues it provides tools for coping with the challenges associated with addiction and can be beneficial for those facing a separation from an alcoholic partner.

Therapy or Counselling: This can help you navigate the emotional and practical challenges of separating from someone. A therapist can provide personalised guidance and support tailored to your situation.

Separation and Divorce Coach: Appointing a coach can help with the practical and emotional aspects of the separation. A coach will provide techniques and strategies for managing emotions; communication; letting go and how to move forward with your life.

Domestic Violence Agencies: Anyone can be the victim of domestic violence irrespective of gender; ethnicity; socio-economic status. There are a number of agencies that can help. Domestic Abuse takes many forms – physical violence; coercive control; emotional abuse to name but a few. There are also organisations that can help if you are the abuser.

Residential Treatment: Provides a structured and supervised treatment programme designed to help individuals overcome addictions and other problematic behaviours. It provides a supportive and therapeutic environment for people to achieve and maintain sobriety. These typically include a range of services and therapies tailored to the individual's specific needs and the severity of their issues.

Healing Retreats: Taking time out to relax and reflect is an incredibly important part of healing and self-care. Sometimes, we can find quiet in our days or a weekend break with friends. However, sometimes we need to take a more structured approach to self-help and seek professional support.

999: If you are in immediate danger, call 999 and ask for the Police. If you cannot talk on the phone respond to the questions by coughing or tapping the phone. If you are calling from a mobile and cannot speak press 55 to have your call transferred to the Police.

Mental Health Charities: Several registered charities can assist 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. A good resource which can help you to find an organisation which offers the support you need is at <https://www.helplines.org/helplines>



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