

## Parents supporting parents after separation

### Content warning

In the following reflections from other parents there are some references to family violence, and to strong emotions and responses to the experience of separation.

If reading this resource brings up any difficult feelings for you, please talk to your health practitioner or contact one of the support services listed at the end of the resource.

When parents separate it can be hard on everyone in the family, but there are things you can do to support your children's wellbeing and your own.

Reading about the experiences and learnings of other parents who have navigated separation can spark ideas for things that might help you and your family.

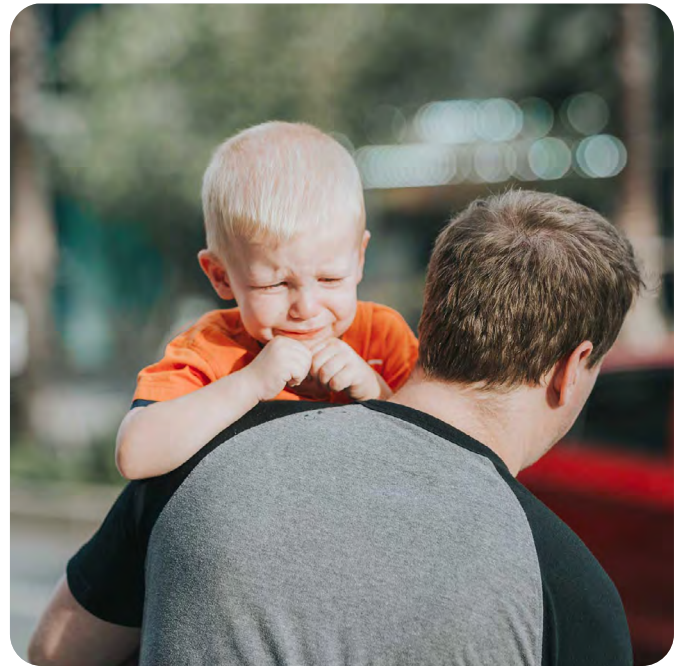
Before reading any further, take a moment to think about:

- What are you already doing to look after yourself? For example, going for a walk every day or using a meditation app.
- What is working for your family that you will keep doing or could build on? For example, making arrangements so that children can still do the sport or activities they enjoy.
- Who can you get support from? It might be your own parent, a trusted friend or someone at work who's been through separation.

As you read, you might like to think about:

- Which of these stories or strategies can you relate to?
- Are there any ideas that might be helpful for you and your family?

While reading this resource remember that you know best what might work for you and your family. Everyone's experience is different, so some of these suggestions may not be right for you.



### Learnings from parents who have navigated separation

This resource was developed by a group of parents in rural South Australia who experienced separation. They wanted to share the skills and strategies they used to take care of themselves and be the best parents they could be during that difficult time.

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**These are our words, our thoughts, our feelings. We hope this document will help others going through similar situations.**

### Give yourself permission

Many of us have found that different processes of healing are available after separation. It's OK to:

- have feelings of anger, grief, frustration, inadequacy, emptiness, vengeance;
- feel unwanted, betrayed and cry our eyes out;
- feel sick, to dry-retch, to stop eating; and
- throw ourselves into other things.

We have to give ourselves permission to have these feelings because relationship separation is like the grief of losing a loved one, except that the other person continues to live.

### **Skills of positive self-talk and remembering what's good**

Some of us have developed skills of positive self-talk that have been useful in responding to the negative, degrading and abusive messages given to us by our partners. These degrading messages are like a freeway to feeling bad about ourselves. Positive self-talk and remembering our good qualities helps us get off this freeway and onto another freeway that is headed towards feeling stronger.

Among us there are a number of these skills:

- One of us wrote a list of those things she appreciates about herself and displayed it on the fridge where she will see it often and remember.
- Another regularly tells herself that she is not a bad person and is not stupid. Remembering positive things about herself, such as something she did that was smart, or a difficult situation that she overcame in the past gives the self-talk more power.

### **Why defiance is better than revenge**

Some in the group spoke about the feelings of wanting revenge following relationship separation and how at times these feelings can be very strong, almost overwhelming. Because these are not nice feelings to have, feelings of guilt can follow.

We talked about knowing that if we take revenge, we can lose something important. We have discovered that defiance is better than revenge because defiance enables us to still make choices about the kind of person we want to be.



We spoke about the importance of finding safe ways to express ourselves, as these help us gain a clearer sense of who we are and what is important to us.

Some experiences we found helpful are:

- Writing down all of our feelings, such as in the form of a never-to-be-sent letter. Then tying the note to a balloon and releasing the balloon to the wind.
- Beginning work and study, which is a way of defying the control experienced in the relationship and taking back control for ourselves.
- Doing things for ourselves – not out of revenge, because revenge can lead to regret.
- One group member spoke of her experience of walking to a playground in the middle of a cold and rainy night, and swinging on the swing for a long, long time. She spoke of how the cold and the rain made her feel alive again because she was feeling something other than hurt and anger.

### **Knowledge about bad days**

Many of us found that there are good days and bad days.

Among us there are a number of skills we have drawn on during the bad days:

- One of us found that it has been important to focus on what she does have – not just in terms of possessions, but on good things that she knows about herself as a person.
- Another reminds herself that she doesn't have to worry about her partner's abuse and violence any longer, and that she can now enjoy safety and freedom rather than fear.
- Another asks herself 'Am I in a better place?' and she knows the answer is 'Yes' before she even asks the question.
- Another has found that deep breathing is helpful – she said that she can 'breathe my way through anything'.

### **Knowing our hopes for our children**

Many of us found that reminding ourselves what we really want for our children is important.

One of us spoke of realising that she wants to teach her daughter to be a strong woman. That she has rights: to protect herself, to be treated equally and with respect. And she wants her daughter to know these things through the example she sets.

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**Another one of us spoke of realising that she wants her son to learn that it is important to respect women.**

For a number of us, knowing these things and that we did not want our children to continue to suffer motivated us to leave our relationships.

### **Recognising control in relationships**

Many of us have developed skills in recognising controlling and abusive behaviour in relationships. We have learnt that violence, abuse and control can start with niggling and put-downs and can include emotional, mental, sexual, financial and spiritual abuse. It is more than physical hitting. And it also includes isolation – being kept from family, friends, neighbours, people we work with – in fact all the ways that put daily life on hold.

We have learnt that we do not have to take any of that crap and that there is a better life out there.

One of us drew a brick on her calendar each day, and eventually she built a wall, brick by brick. This wall protected her. She named each brick as a reminder of the abuse she had left behind and of the life that lay ahead for herself and her sons.

### **Skills in responding to shame**

Some of us found that experiences of shame and self-blame come along after separation. Shame and self-blame have us asking ourselves ‘What did I do wrong?’ and ‘What if I had done something differently?’

A few of us said that it is important to put the shame away where it belongs, by reminding ourselves that the abuse was not our fault and was out of our control.

One of us has found it helpful to remind herself that the abuse happened to her, not because of her.

### **Support and connection**

Many group members have found that it is difficult to have abusive relationships on your own. We have learnt the importance of having some kind of support through a friend or family member. This support can help you take the first couple of steps. One of us spoke of it being important not to keep the abuse a secret, because secrecy allows it to keep going and the excuses to continue.



Another group member spoke of how she received acknowledgement through friends that she was a good person, a decent person. A number of us have realised it is important to listen to people when they say that they think you are in an abusive relationship. Others spoke of the importance of drawing on spiritual support and the support available from community health services.

### **Unhelpful behaviours**

We have found it is common for people to seek ‘good feelings’ through self-medicating with intimacy/sex, alcohol, prescription and/or non-prescription drugs, gambling or sleeping. These things may have felt good in the beginning but left us feeling lost and hollow.

Because we have experienced these feelings, we understand why others may also struggle with these ‘feel good’ activities. We have found that our supports and connections helped us the most.

### **Further information and resources**

If you have experienced domestic or family violence you can [contact 1800 RESPECT](#) – call 1800 737 732 (24 hours per day, 7 days a week) or [chat online](#).

For a confidential chat about parenting and help with parent-child relationships, contact one of these [parent support helplines and hotlines](#).

[Call Lifeline on 13 11 14](#), text 0477 131 114 or [chat with a trained crisis supporter online](#).