

# Coping with Stress

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## What stresses are normal when parents separate?

Separation and Family Law cases include many stress factors. These can include (and this is in no way an exhaustive list):

- grieving and guilt over the demise of your relationship and a sense of failure
- worrying whether your children will live with you or not
- not knowing how often you will be allowed to see your children
- being concerned and hurt over allegations
- feeling excluded from important decisions about your children's lives
- worrying about your finances
- feeling lonely
- feeling you have little control over what is going to happen
- having to arrange new accommodation.

Feelings of stress arise when situations feel outside our control. Being stressed in these circumstances is entirely natural and appropriate to the situation.

## How can I cope with these stresses?

If you find everything is getting too much, sit down with a close family member or a counsellor and prioritise what you need to do. You may decide that work will have to suffer and perhaps you need some time off for stress. Speak to your GP.



Again, use telephone help lines if you need to - it's what they're there for. They are staffed by caring people. The Samaritans operate 24 hours a day. They may have other advice on what you can do to help reduce some of your stress. While you cannot remove yourself from this situation, you do have to get through it, so try to make it manageable. Their telephone number is 08457 90 90 90.

If you find yourself venting at your solicitor, remember it costs upwards of £150 an hour to talk to them, while a counsellor costs £35 an hour and is better qualified to help you cope emotionally. You can find a local private counsellor by contacting the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy or by being referred by your General Practitioner. You can

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also find a counsellor from:

**[www.counselling-directory.org.uk](http://www.counselling-directory.org.uk)**

Accept that you are only human, and don't be embarrassed by asking for help.

## **My work is suffering and my employer is unsupportive, what can I do?**

In some ways, it's better to take time out, rather than struggle on at work when you're not hitting targets or reaching the required level of performance. Your health is important for both yourself and your children.

Ensure your employer is aware of the difficulties you are experiencing. Speak to your General Practitioner and consider being signed off work due to stress.

If you have been suffering from stress for more than twelve months, legally this could count as a disability, further strengthening your legal rights. Contact the Disability Rights Commission who will be able to advise you.

## **My ex-partner keeps trying to start an argument, what should I do?**

If anything contentious comes up while talking to your ex-partner, refuse to discuss it immediately by saying you want to think about what they have said. Agree to write to them, or ask them to write to you. This gives you time to consider what you say, and have someone else check your reply. Ideally, have your solicitor

read, edit, and then send the letter on your behalf.

Arguments with your ex-partner won't make the situation better, and are likely to put you in a much weaker position.

## **What if I want the Court to see how badly my ex-partner has behaved?**

The Court will respect you if you keep your concerns objective while the case is proceeding (and afterwards) and will take note of your behaviour. Keep statements to the Court unemotional and factual, and concentrate on concerns about your children and their relationship with you.

## **What if I want my children to know I'm not the 'bad' party?**

Disparaging your ex-partner to your children will cause them emotional harm. By all means speak to a close family member about how dreadful your ex-partner is if you need to, but it isn't appropriate to say this to your children.

Be aware that discussing the details of the case with friends is not allowed in law (see our guide on courts and confidentiality). To help you to cope with the emotional stresses of the Court Case, the law allows you to discuss details of the case with a close family member or a counsellor.

Your children will make up their own minds and who is at fault matters less than how your children are cared for. Be a loving and capable

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parent and this will be how they perceive you to be.

## What else can I do?

Humour and laughter help to relieve stress so see the irony in situations where you can. Letting out pent-up emotion reduces feelings of stress, so don't be afraid to cry. Find places where you can let out emotions safely, and with people who will be supportive.

Try to have some activities that take you away from the situation. Don't feel guilty about going out with friends and having some fun if you feel able to.

Stress can take its toll on you physically, so ensure you eat healthily and get plenty of sleep. Taking part in sport will also help since exercise stimulates the production of endorphins and natural opiates that help to create a sense of well-being. Sport can also help with self-esteem and act as a distraction from the Court case.

## Are there things I shouldn't do?

Don't turn to drink and cut down on the caffeine in your diet. Both of these can increase feelings of anxiety.

## Will everyone understand my stress?

Not necessarily. You need to consider how you are perceived.

- If you lose your temper with an assessor, Social Services, CAFCASS, or in front of the Judge, you may be accused of being an "aggressive character".
- If you appear overly emotional, you may be accused of being an anxious person.
- If you lose your temper with your ex-partner, you may be accused of domestic violence (which includes emotional / psychological and physical abuse).

Don't expect people to make allowances for you. Consider your behaviour in front of anyone who may report back to the Court.

Remember what is at stake, and take the steps you need to help you to cope. Your children need you to be balanced, stable, and healthy. They also need you to get through this in one piece, and you need to not only *be* a reasonable person, but you need to be *seen to be* a reasonable person.