

SOS Détresse

And now? The period after the separation

Separations are transitional phases. We describe as transitions life events that are particularly acute and decisive. Everyone has to go through a number of such phases in the course of their lives. Transition means chaos and uncertainty but also looking to make a new start. We put an end, definitively, to a period of our lives. We are faced with uncertainty, we are still undecided, the new structure is not yet established. Transitions are therefore destabilising but they also bring the hope that a new order will soon be established; moreover we have the possibility to influence these transitional phases.

After a separation, the couple and everything they shared no longer exist. We are faced with a new phase, a new challenge. We leave the home we shared. We may have to move to another area. Our daily life has to be reorganised. There are many matters to be settled: shared bank accounts, the search for a new home or perhaps a new job, the administrative details of the divorce, probably a change of school for the children and the responsibility for their education henceforth falling on only one of the parents, managing visiting rights, and so on. It is absolutely normal and understandable that we feel overwhelmed. We may sink into periods of sadness, which make the situation we have to deal with even more difficult. But there will also be times when we see that things have improved, when we glimpse new prospects and regain confidence.

We will still often feel uncertainty, doubts and fear before we succeed in reorganising our lives and establishing a degree of stability. It is important to be able to count on close friends to support us during these trying times. Practical, material support is equally necessary. Everyone going through an experience as difficult as a separation needs people in whom they can confide, to whom they can complain, with whom they can cry and free themselves of the aggression that accumulates every day. However, we need to be aware that relations with mutual friends and with our family also change. There is often great uncertainty surrounding these relations for both partners and a wide range of reactions may be observed. Some acquaintances, or even friends, withdraw and avoid contact with the two ex-partners, others offer help, others take sides or become hostile towards one or other partner. These attitudes may often increase the discord between the partners. So it is important to choose one's contacts carefully: it is necessary to be cautious and to reveal anxieties, worries, disappointment and anger solely within a circle of well-intentioned, trustworthy people. It is important not to become isolated, to reach out to friends, even if they seem to be avoiding us. If we had a good understanding with them in the past, then

providing more information and explanations will certainly help to ease the situation.

It can also be useful to have discussions with people who have had similar experiences or who are not mutual acquaintances. Sometimes new friendships are born: people we knew superficially suddenly become very close because they share our experience.

It is also possible to talk on the telephone to one of the SOS-Détresse staff.

My personal situation

In this transitional phase some personal changes will need to be addressed. At first we feel great emptiness inside us. Without the love of our partner we may perhaps think that we have no value, that we are unworthy to be loved. So we will need to recover our self-esteem and develop a kindly sensitivity towards ourselves. This process takes a long time. Be realistic and patient with yourself!

Following the separation, contact with the partner is broken and we become aware of our solitude. We feel an inner emptiness, which must be filled. Many people take no account of this feeling and throw themselves immediately into a new relationship in order to console or calm themselves. However, this feeling of emptiness shows us that we had lost the ability to esteem and to love ourselves. Our inner need to be loved was satisfied exclusively by our partner. We didn't take enough care of ourselves. So the time has come to focus more on ourselves, to take ourselves seriously and to pay attention to ourselves as a person. This may involve taking up former leisure activities which were abandoned because of the relationship, getting together more often with friends and nurturing contacts which provide comfort and support. Some people feel better if they devote themselves to professional or voluntary activities which they find fulfilling, but not of course to the point of exhaustion. It is particularly important in the separation phase to be kind to ourselves, for example by saying to ourselves: "I am fine as I am." A person's value remains, with or without a partner. It may also be useful to be reconciled with one's childhood before launching into these changes. This will make it easier to form a new relationship despite being hurt.

In order to live life fully again after a separation, it is essential to decide one day to draw a clear line under our emotions. For as long as we continue to blame our ex-partner and make them responsible for our feelings, we will not really have completed the separation. It is also important to find a fair and appropriate solution to practical matters, without maintaining feelings of rancour and anger. Quarrels about money or custody of the children are often another way of continuing the conflicts which led to the separation. Ultimately, these disputes are a futile prolongation of the life we had together and they cause suffering to all concerned. They prevent the process of grieving and of starting afresh. When we are generous enough loyally to draw a line under our relationship, we open the way to a positive future. This means we can separate in such a way as to acknowledge the loss, while retaining the best of our life together as a couple. This shared period will thus not be lost; we will be able to value it and it will continue to be present in our future life.

