

# THE 6 EMOTIONAL STAGES OF SEPARATING

**(Credit: Psychology Today)**



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## Key Points

- Separations and divorce are about grief and real-life transitions; most people move through emotional stages.
- Once the initial shock wears off, many feel shell-shocked for many weeks. It takes about 6-12 months to feel more grounded.
- Through this time, there are often periods of anxiety and depression but also optimism about new opportunities.

## Stage 1 : The Shock

Even if you've been alluding to or openly discussing separation or divorce for months, or one partner suddenly moves out after reaching a bottom-line argument, the actual leaving or formally moving into separation is a jolt. For the person initiating the split—the leaver—there is often a sense of relief of finally being free from tension and indecision. For the other partner—the leftee—it's usually a punch in the gut. Reality sinks in.

## Stage 2 : The Three-Week Blur

The leaver feels good about finally moving forward but is now navigating this new life—if doing an in-house separation, not really being part of the house; if adjusting to a new apartment, trying to work out furnishing it. If there's someone they're attracted to or already have started a relationship with, this makes the change easier—new possibilities, a feeling that they should have done this sooner.

For the leftee, that initial jolt has worn off but they're still shell-shocked; everyday life is a blur. They have difficulty focusing, have no energy, feel angry or depressed, and don't quite know what to say to family or friends. What they're most aware of is how they're obsessing—replaying the past days, months, and years, their minds are constantly running, seemingly out of their control—trying to connect the dots between their view of the past and present, and develop a narrative that explains how they got to this place. Once the story solidifies in their minds, their thoughts calm down.

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### **Stage 3 : Three Months In**

While there's probably still an undertow of depression and loneliness for the leftee, the fog is clearing; they're functioning better at their job and even have good days where they feel like they're more in control of their lives, or where they go out with friends after work and actually have a good time. They're still worrying about kids, though, or wondering about the next steps—legal action, moving.

If the leaver is not dating or has not thrown themselves into work, there are some lonely weekends. If dating, life is good, though they're back to feeling like a 16-year-old. The initial glow may wear off if they have entered a rebound relationship. While initially attracted to an inversion of their partner—someone who doesn't do what most bothered them about their ex—their fog is clearing; this new person is more complex and has their own issues; they've had some arguments.

### **Stage 4 : Six Months to One Year**

These can be both better and worse times. Here, there may be attempts to reconcile or arguments about kids and custody. Legal proceedings may begin, and there is the need to come up with a separation agreement, a process that can be smooth or bloody. Friends and families begin to fall into camps, siding with one partner and pulling away from the other. Or close friends or parents do their best to support both—because they don't want to lose their connection to them or because they are concerned about the children.

New partners may be on the scene—showing up for holidays or weekend meet-ups—and everyone feels awkward. One child likes the new person while the other hates them; a child may struggle, and there's therapy or trips to the guidance office. There are moves to new houses, maybe even a change of jobs. Depression is better or worsening, and there's medication, therapy, or leaning too heavily on family.

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## **Stage 5 : One Year Out**

The emotional dust is settling. Even if they've not quite turned a corner, everyone has gotten their sea legs. The kids may still be holding out hope for a miracle where the parents reconcile, but overall, they've adjusted in their own ways to the new normal—the moving between houses, liking, tolerating, or not tolerating new partners—and hopefully, the parents can coordinate well enough around parenting. But sometimes, the battles continue—arguments over the phone or text, court action threats, and little communication. Or one partner is still struggling, unable to shake their depression, or is isolated.

## **Stage 6 : Two Years Out**

A feeling that a new chapter has started after all, whatever that chapter holds. The leaver has remarried or is living together with someone; the leftee has settled. But regardless of where they each are, how they feel when they look back on the divorce depends on their present state; the past will continue to be a moving target for years to come because we constantly look at our pasts through the filter of the ever-changing present. If they are doing well, they will think the divorce was a good decision and probably should have been done sooner. If, on the other hand, they're miserable, depressed, and lonely, they may wish they had put more effort into making it work.

Each couple will move through this transition in their own way based on their history, childhood wounds, and overall mental and physical health, but starting over is always a process that tends to follow certain patterns. You need support from family, friends, and maybe professionals, but the key to moving through it is realizing that all this, too, shall pass.

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