

Section 7

Step 7. Carrying Out Your Decision to Separate

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I've chosen to make *separation day* a step by itself, because stress, anxiety and threat of conflict all increase when one parent leaves the home. Anxiety, sadness, feelings of abandonment and rejection, past trauma and anger can all be triggered. This may be especially so for children, whether they have been prepared or not. Unless you are in a situation in which there is violence or abuse and immediate action is called for, it is best to resist the impulse to separate without a plan. Couples often struggle to cooperate on making a transition from living together to living apart. By having a plan to work with, couples and individuals can map out where they might be in the process and see what's ahead.

Some people choose to involve their children in the move, while others choose to move when the children are not around. Some have found it helpful to have both parents visit the new living quarters with the children. Again, what a couple decides to do will depend on how well separating partners manage conflict, communicate and cooperate (Steps 1 and 2). This involves how well each parent has coped and accepted the separation thus far, the type of separation, and whether it offers any hope for reconciliation.

Step 7 assumes that some progress has been made in the first six steps and that couples are ready to put their separation into action and move deeper into the change process, be these separations in-house and psychological or out of the home and physical, or both. If there is at least the spirit of cooperation the chance is that separation day will involve less conflict. Children will often model what they see in their parents. If there is no plan or cooperation, expect surprises and poor communication with increased chances for conflict. The first few Steps of Separation Management must continue to be priorities throughout the process. If conflict is not controlled and communication is not at least stabilized, ongoing stress and pain often use up the available energy. As I have seen separations work in people's lives, I have gained great respect for conflict and crisis as a predecessor of change. Because relationship separations affect us at the core of ourselves as human beings, separations can often provide us with an opportunity for growth. Steps 1 through 7 allow you to create a structure to help you manage the direct fallout and emotional shock of separation. I often find that individuals and couples do the most work on themselves once they've separated. Whether learning to grieve a loss, be alone, accept differences, mend a broken heart, communicate more openly, experiment with new behavior or a new lifestyle, or anything else, this is the step that gets you past the initial crisis and into those underlying issues that may have followed you around your entire life, issues which, I believe, the separation may be intended to stimulate and uncover in the first place.

Helping Children after the Move

Consistency is often kids' number one concern. Some children do best with a posted weekly schedule so they can get a concrete idea of what will take place from Monday through Sunday of each week. Others will be fine with just a basic schedule, for example, "You'll be with your dad Wednesday nights and weekends for the next three months."

In summary, one of the key tasks of managing a separation is dealing well with children - Step 6 emphasized the things parents can do to help their children:

- Reduce or stop the destructive conflict that your children are exposed to.
- Agree to set up or strengthen the boundary between your conflicts with your partner and your children.
- Agree to support the relationship between the children and your spouse regardless of how you feel about each other (this excludes abuse of any kind).
- Understand that children have fears and may blame themselves for their parents' separations.
- Be aware of and acknowledge your children's fears of being abandoned and blamed.

- Reassure, comfort, and correct faulty assumptions and beliefs that your children may have about parental separations. Children are never at fault.
- Give your children accurate information about what will happen to them and each parent during and after the separation process.
- Stay involved and spend time with your children throughout and after the separation. Maintaining and improving a relationship with a child during separation and dealing with questions and fears is the best insurance a parent can provide to help a child cope with this major life event.
- Remember that children need both of their parents. Children's relationships with their parents are different than partner's relationship with each other. Parents have to be able to look at separation through their children's eyes. Attempt to experience how children are dealing with relationship problems. Observe them, talk to them and ask others how they are doing (teachers, child caretakers, grandparents, etc.) From here a parent will know more about a child's inner thinking and feelings and be better able to reassure, comfort and provide information.

Step 7 Exercise: Decide on a Specific Plan for the Day of Separation. You can do these exercises alone or with a partner.

If you are planning a separation or already are separated:

1. Have you planned for separation day?
2. If you already separated, how well do you think it was planned?
3. Do you believe you have enough of a structure in place to handle the stress of a physical separation?
4. Was it (or will it be) cooperative?
5. What do you think separation day will be like for you? What might you feel? If it already happened, how did it feel?
6. How are you talking with your children about separation day? If it has already happened, how do you think the children are doing? Evaluate how well you think you and/or your partner are doing in dealing with the children.