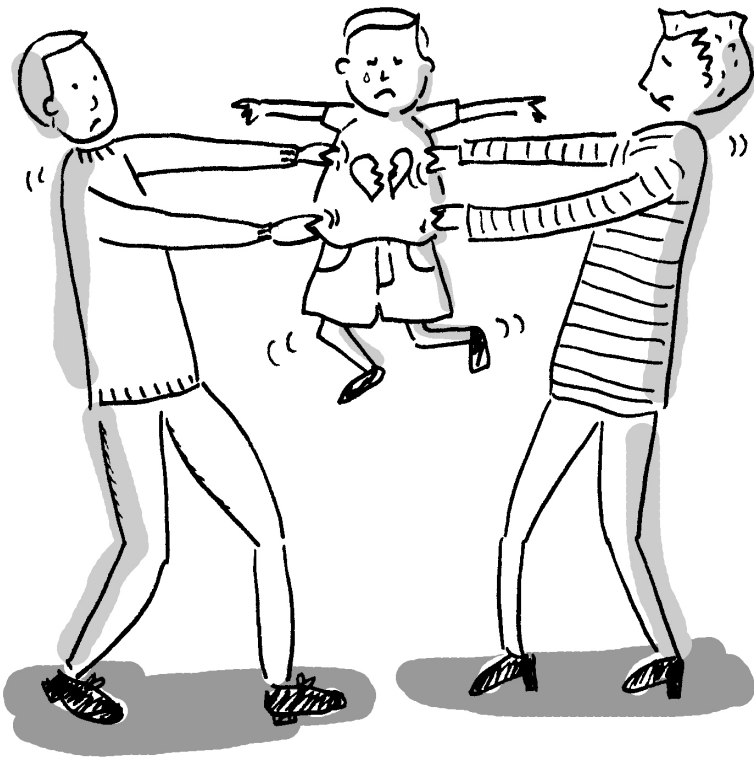


CHAPTER 5

DIVORCE OR PERMANENT SEPARATION – WITH KIDS

*“When there are kids involved, there’s
no such thing as divorce.”*

Carl Whitaker



Divorce or permanent separation - with kids

A divorce without children is a complicated matter and inevitably delivers turmoil to both partners. The presumption in this chapter is that you have read the preceding chapter on Divorce or permanent separation – without kids.

A divorce *with* children – especially minor children - is a minefield, juggling concerns of immediate emotional needs as well as the long-term welfare of the children.

Even the most amicable divorces have moments of extreme stress and if you had different parental styles and values causing friction whilst you were together, then be prepared for further angst now you are parenting in a manner that no longer involves compromise.

Telling the kids

One of the first questions that will be raised is how to tell the children. This is particularly hard if you are not the one to instigate the split. How you prepare to do this isn't something you are likely to pre-plan but no doubt you will have advice from a counsellor or through reading online as to how to best approach this difficult conversation.

It's often helpful for divorcing parents to come up with a plan and present it to their children together, while always keeping the lines of communication open. Kids benefit from having honest, age appropriate conversations about the changes their family is experiencing.

That said, sudden change can be hard on children. If appropriate, give them a few weeks' notice before moving them to a new home, or before one spouse moves out. It can be helpful to minimise changes as much as possible in the months and years following a divorce. However financial realities may not make this possible - keeping things similar in furnishings and surroundings was something that

helped my children. They also keep a photo of our family before the divorce in their room.

Parenting Arrangements

Children have less mental health issues when they maintain close contact with both parents. Research suggests that kids who have a poor relationship with one or both parents may have a harder time dealing with family upheaval and their own relationships as adults. Below are three types of parenting relationships following a relationship breakdown.

1. Co Parenting Amicably

Life is less complicated in making decisions concerning your children when you can co parent amicably. Should you be able to reach an agreement it is advised to have this reviewed by a family lawyer however it is not a mandatory requirement in obtaining parenting orders.

The Family Court of Australia website www.familycourt.gov.au is regularly updated and it is recommended to use this resource to assist in drafting a parenting plan and consent orders.

What is a parenting plan?

A parenting plan is a written agreement that sets out parenting arrangements for child/ren. The plan is worked out and agreed jointly, you and your former partner do not need to go to court.

Unless a court orders otherwise, you and your former partner can agree to change a parenting order by entering a parenting plan.

A parenting plan is not a legally enforceable agreement. It is different from a parenting order, which is made by a court.

For more information, see the Parenting Plan information on Family Relationships online.

<http://www.familyrelationships.gov.au/BrochuresandPublications/Pages/parenting-plans.aspx>

What are consent orders?

A consent order is a written agreement that is approved by a court. A consent order can cover parenting arrangements for children as well as financial arrangements such as property and maintenance. Any person concerned with the care, welfare and development of a child can apply for parenting orders.

Consent orders have the same legal effect as if they had been made by a judicial officer after a court hearing. The Court must be satisfied that the orders you ask for are in the best interest of the child.

You can read more about the best interests of a child in the following link:-

<http://www.familycourt.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/fcoaweb/family-law-matters/family-law-in-australia/parenting-cases-the-best-interests-of-the-child>

For step-by-step details on how to file consent orders, see the following information:

- Applying to the court for orders fact sheet - <http://www.familycourt.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/fcoaweb/reports-and-publications/publications/court-orders/applying-to-the-court-for-orders>
- How do I – Apply for consent orders - <http://www.familycourt.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/fcoaweb/how-do-i/apps-orders/consent-orders/applying-consent-orders>

I completed our parenting plan and consent orders using the links above with discussions from my children's father and despite them coming back from the Court a few times for adjustment we got them through without the need for spending thousands in legal fees. I had a one-hour meeting with a great lawyer from Barkus Doolan who helped answer my questions and made some suggested changes and then I lodged them personally with the Family Court. Clients

and friends however have not been so fortunate with hundreds of thousands in legal fees and years of uncertainty ensuring an amicable co-parenting relationship was not a viable option.

2. *Sole Custody*

Sole custody is where a sole parent has both sole parental responsibility to make all the decisions impacting the child(ren) without having to consult the other parent *and* the child(ren) live with one parent only.

The court will grant sole parental responsibility if it is in the children's best interests. The most obvious cases are where one parent lacks mental capacity because of, for example, a mental illness. Another is where the parent is incarcerated, or where there is evidence of the parent making decisions that put the children at risk of harm, e.g. repeated driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or exposing the children to violence or physical or psychological harm.

In these circumstances even where a parent has abandoned their child/ren it is advised to seek the advice of a family lawyer.

3. *Parallel Parenting*

Co-parenting amicably depends on two rational parents putting their children's needs first though, given the back log of Family Law cases, unfortunately this rarely happens. It is incredibly difficult to see children being subjected to this form of emotional abuse; whilst research has been conducted on long term detrimental effects, there is currently nothing to prevent this from occurring.

If a high conflict separation has occurred then the reality is co-parenting is often not an option, as trying to agree on parenting decisions is just not possible. In these situations, parallel parenting provides minimal contact between the parents to minimise any potential for conflict. Parallel parenting with low contact between conflicting parents is preferable to shared parenting between parents who simply cannot agree.

In this situation, the parenting plan and consent orders should be as detailed and specific as possible to provide for clear guidelines and expectations. Whilst this reduces flexibility and communication between what goes on in the 'other' home it is better than maintaining an emotionally negative relationship for all concerned.

Potential areas for conflict include the following: -

Diet - Where one parent likes convenience food and the other likes homemade, organic meals. The courts or mediators won't enter into this level of detail. If you are the amazing organic chef, then be prepared to accept that the kids are eating food with their other parent that you'd prefer they don't consume.

Religion – Do you both agree on the religion in which you want your children to be raised? If you want them to go to a religious school, will you both endeavour to meet the commitments involved on the weekends that you have the children?

Education – What schooling system would you both like for you children and in the event of a split who is going to pay and in what proportions? Regarding school trips, excursions or overseas tours, who will be responsible for the payment?

Holiday locations – Are there countries that one parent considers dangerous, and if so how will you agree on holiday travel? Travel overseas provides so many benefits to children such as knowledge of history, language, culture and geography. And yet *both* parents need to agree to have the children leave the country. If one doesn't agree for reasons of, say, jealousy, then barring the cost of a court case, the kids are the ones who miss out on these experiences.

Discipline – What kind of discipline do you believe is appropriate? Children are adaptable and so will quickly learn whether they can play the parents off against each other or whether you still show a united front. Raising children is different for

everyone. My view is I want my children to be ethical, moral, educated, polite and happy adults who contribute to the world. This has never meant they get away with rudeness at any age. I am fortunate that my ex agrees and to this day they know if they get in trouble at one parent's house, the other person will know and back that punishment. In fact, the biggest complaint they have is that they get joint birthday and Christmas presents still!

Having seen a parallel parenting arrangement where there is absolutely no discipline at the mother's home, it is then also difficult to instigate in the father's home. But good manners are consistently encouraged, and I am sure over time children will learn the benefits of polite behaviour.

Risk and safety – Is one parent adventurous and one conservative? How will you decide on activities for the children such as motor bike riding, skiing, sky diving etc? Do you agree to disagree, compromise, and educate the children or accept you can't control what happens in the other parent's care?

Activities – What activities will your children take on outside school? Regarding the logistics and payment, who will take them to the activities and how will payment be agreed upon?

Technology – At what age do you agree your children should be on digital tablets and mobile phones? How will these devices be paid for ... and by whom?

Social media – At what age do you agree for your children to use social media applications such as Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram?

Other family members – Are there any family members or friends about whom you feel concerned with your children being in their care?

Public transport – At what age are you both comfortable that is safe for your children to travel alone on public transport? This

includes bus, train, taxi and Uber. Do you agree to obtain public transport cards outside a travel zone even if you don't see your child at your out of zone residence?

Introducing new partners – Do you have an agreed time frame you should be seeing a new partner before introducing them to your children. What about social media posts of your new partner with the children? What about a new partner's children? There is a whole book that can be written on the do's and don'ts here unfortunately though new love isn't always rational!

Clothing and personal items – Are clothing and personal effects those of the child and are free to go with them between houses or are they linked to the respective homes and so, effectively, they have two sets?

Personal grooming – Expenses, especially for teenage girls, can vary in terms of "necessity" To have the discussion around waxing, haircuts, ear piercing, laser hair removal are topics that can be fraught with issues as to who pays and at what age.

Medical – With young children, if something happens to one parent, the other will generally need to step into help. So, in my experience, this has been the hardest one to deal with. For all intents and purposes, we remain a "family", dependent on each other in the event of a medical emergency where one of the parents is not able to look after a sick child.

However, there are important tax, family benefit considerations that need to be taken into consideration, if you are separated. Who will pay the private medical insurance and who can make a claim on behalf of the children.

Consider a separate Medicare card for each parent with the dependants listed, relevant hospital cover and the need to discuss who pays for the children's cover, together with care logistics in the event they are unwell and not able to attend day care or school.

Dental – the need for dental alignment in young teens is one which should be agreed upon. Most families make this decision based on the capacity to pay and the degree of aesthetic need vs actual dental issues that are being resolved between parents. Unfortunately, in a high conflict parenting situation, this can become yet another battle ground.

Bed time – Unfortunately until you experience getting children to sleep you can never imagine how much of a drama it can become. Some try meditation, music, a book, comforter, (or lay there until they get to sleep), co-sleeping, and other methods involving ‘threat or bribery’.

If you disagree on the when and how of bed time while you are together, then the extremes of your views will creep in when you are co-parenting.

I hear many stories of children coming home from the other parent’s tired and cranky because they were allowed to put themselves to sleep.

In an amicable co-parenting arrangement, this could be discussed with a view to getting them to sleep sooner.

In a high conflict parenting arrangement, this is simply another way of antagonising each other.

Unfortunately, you can’t control what happens at the other parent’s home, so just do the best you can when they are in your care and encourage them to set their own sleep routines for implementing at both parents’ homes.

Conception or adoption information – given children are now often conceived with the assistance with advances in science, how do you agree on letting the children know. Was there IVF, a surrogate donor or other means of conception that occurred that whilst at the time was agreed but in the event of an acrimonious split left waiting explosively in the side lines ready to blow a child’s self-belief apart.

Sex education – Schools prepare children in some areas; however, unless you are having conversations with your children before this time frame you may find the topics discussed in one home before you are ready in your own.

Change over procedures – Parents who co-parent amicably will just make arrangements that over time start to get into a new routine that works best for the children. They may include dropping off bags of clothes and personal items for the children, access to a home or garage to drop items, picking up from school or day care or many other configurations that fit in with your day to day living arrangements.

Parents in a high conflict divorce find the changeover procedure can become another interaction that is just used to try and hurt an ex-partner.

I have heard of the following procedures:

1. Meeting in a McDonalds car park
2. Texting from one end of a train station to someone on the other side while the children walk out unattended as the parents can't stand the sight of each other
3. Having children take their clothes and shoes off at the door way before going to the other parent's home (surely a form of emotional abuse)
4. Parents being the ones to move out and leaving the kids in the family home

Communication – When I was newly separated, I received some advice from a dear friend who died of cancer in the last couple of years. He sat down with his ex-wife and they agreed on a piece of paper how they would raise their only son. And that is what they adhered to. The mother had him during the working week and the father on weekends. This was so he

could take him to compulsory school sports and spend a Sunday enjoying quality time. This worked for their family.

My ex and I communicate regularly, the kids know if they get into trouble with one of us the other parent will know and back up the other parent. That consistency is maintained but it was made easier because we had very similar parenting styles and values to begin with.

Should you have vastly different values when you are married, and ideas around parenting, then those differences become amplified when divorced. When you are together you try and reach ‘middle ground’; when you separate, you may go to the extremes because the truth is, you can; you are no longer in a relationship with your ex.

Yet your children are. And you need to always think about them first. If this is hard at first, especially if you have been cheated on, it will be a case of fake it until you make it. One day you will communicate with little emotional attachment and over time apparently, you may even become friends.

However, should communication not be an option, consider the many software applications available, or an old-fashioned text book, in which you record information that is necessary for the care of the children.

Living locations – given the separation of your financial assets, you may find circumstances change either around affordability or employment opportunities, whereby one or both of you want to change location. Courts can make orders in terms of a parent with most of custody not being able to move outside a certain distance. Given the huge potential for conflict it is best to firstly talk any potential move through with your co-parent where this is possible. If communication has totally broken down, seek legal advice.

Financial Arrangements

Your personal income and asset levels will largely determine the financial arrangements you will reach in raising your children together as co parents. Being open and transparent about your finances as a family whilst together will help enormously in the event you do divorce.

Should one spouse believe the other is hiding assets or income as they were of the opinion during the marriage they were better off financially than in fact they were, this will cause conflict.

Should you be in dispute in regard to child maintenance it is recommended to contact Department of Human Services or advice and assistance whilst waiting on the court orders.

Do you have the following documentation?	Yes or No	Action to take	By when?
Agreed asset allocation and worst case scenario plan			
Prenuptial Agreement (if not likely to be under duress)			
Information on the joint family assets and income			
Agreement on parenting style, religion and education			

Key take-away:

When children are involved, addressing divorce issues can be like walking a tightrope – best to tread very carefully and to have a plan ‘to get to the other side’ of the many issues involved. Professional input may be invaluable in more ways than one.

10 Questions for an Expert

Family Lawyer Melinda Winning from Barkus Doolan

- 1) Am I able to take my children overseas without the other parent needing to know for a holiday or family visit? If no how do I get approval where it is for valid urgent family reasons?**

Not if there are proceedings on foot or if there are any Orders in place – if either of these things apply you will need the written consent of the other parent and this needs to be by way of a statutory declaration.

- 2) Do I have to continue to pay spousal maintenance if my ex remarries?**

Spouse maintenance will end upon your former spouse re-marrying.

- 3) If we can't agree to co parent what are our other options as I no longer want to communicate at all with my ex?**

If shared parenting or equal time is to succeed, you need excellent communication. If this is not there, you will be looking at an arrangement that involves significant or substantial time which usually looks like alternate weekends and possibly a night or afternoon during the school week, subject of course to the ages of the children and there being no risk factors or family violence.

- 4) How do we make decisions on schooling and activities for our children if we disagree on everything?**

Family therapy or counselling may assist – some people meet with counsellors every term or so to try and agree on such matters. If these matters are not the subject of agreement the Court will have to decide.

5) What is parental alienation and how do I prevent this occurring if it looks like I will be the one instigating the leaving of our relationship?

This involves one parent undermining and devaluing the other parent to such an extent (by words or actions or both) that the children become aligned with that parent and may then be reluctant to have relationship with the other parent. This may ultimately result in the children having no relationship with the alienated parent. There is no way to prevent this, but keep your eyes and ears open and make sure any initial signs of this are stomped on early. Don't let it get to the point of no return.

6) Have you heard of a couple that were able to maintain an amicable relationship for the sake of the children and how did they achieve this outcome whilst going through the court process?

The court process and litigation are very destructive. Family therapy and counselling is a good place to start. And always focus on the kids, because if that is genuinely the priority for both parties they can often continue their relationship as parents.

7) Am I able to prepare my legal documentation without a lawyer if we both agree on custody?

Yes, but legal advice is always recommended (and not because I am a lawyer!)

8) What should I do to prevent my ex-spouse not paying child maintenance or the agreed shared amount of the children's expenses?

You will need an Assessment to issue and you can ask for this by calling the Department of Human Services (Child Support).

You can then ask the Department to collect on your behalf. For an Agreement to be enforceable you will need Binding Child Support agreement (you will need a lawyer to prepare and advise on this document for it to be binding).

9) I absolutely hate my ex, but I know I need to communicate with them as our children are only minors. Is there any way to do this without having to email or call them?

There are several Apps now for divorced parents to communicate, but it is better to have a record of all communication, so texts and emails are not a bad idea. Remember they can be used as evidence so keep all communications cordial and business like – put the hate to one side and focus on the kids.

10) Emotionally, I find it hard around family holidays to not be in the company of my children as the split was not my decision. How do I come to accept the current situation so that I am not depressed on these occasions? i.e. are there any good counselling books things you have seen people implement that help not end up in such a high conflict situation

Counselling is an excellent way forward. You will need to come up with strategies to cope with those difficult times which can be lonely following divorce.

Wisdom from an Expert Philipa Thornton Executive Director of the Resource Therapy Institute of Australia

Family breakup, separation or divorce is difficult for everyone. There's grief for all in this situation and it's when we need to be helping our children the most. It is most difficult for a child, who has no say in what is happening. It can have negative consequences, such that our children are at risk of poor school performance, dropping out of school earlier, behavioural issues, anxiety and depression. These risks are increased if there is antagonism between parents and if one parent speaks negatively about the other around the children. The good news is that if parents are supportive, most children do not have these problems.

Good ideas to support your child cope with family break up:

- Keep to your usual routine as much as possible – bed times, school runs etc.
- Maintain a respectful relationship with your co parent, as the father or mother of your children
- Help your child keep in touch with both parents (Providing there are no child safety risks)
- It is advised generally for children under 4 to avoid overnight separations from the main carer. Follow your child's cues as to where they feel comfortable
- Don't argue in front of your child; save difficult topics for when you can discuss them in private.
- Don't be disparaging of your co-parent with negative comments or body language. Remember your children are 50% you and 50% your co-parent. When they hear negative comments, they can take this to heart.
- It's natural for a child to be distressed and angry sometimes. Take care to listen to ensure they feel comfortable and understood. Allow expression of feelings. Sometimes children will

regress to younger behaviour for a time and may need more nurturing.

- Reassure your continued loving care and parenting will continue. If they are older, make sure they know the breakup is not their fault.
- Put your child's needs above your own hurt, anxiety or angry feelings. Attend to your own self-care and need for support, by reaching out and connecting with your social networks or a counsellor.

<https://www.aaimhi.org/> for more information on infant mental health. For older children see parenting and child health at www.cyh.com

Self-help suggestions to help you feel better. 5 preventive measures you can take to reduce the likelihood of mental illness occurring

1. Find your tribe.

There are a wide variety of therapeutic modalities available, aside from medications, which have been shown to be effective in addressing mental health issues. Traditional talk therapies, body oriented approaches, (such as mindfulness, relaxation training etc.), and exercise/lifestyle approaches, are all part of a solid and effective, non-medication based approach, to ameliorating mental health problems.

It is well known that social connections are crucial for a person who is experiencing depression. Social isolation is one of the hallmarks of a depressed person as they withdraw from social connections. An Australian study's findings (Cruwy's et al., 2014) demonstrate that those who not only joined a local group (some did yoga, art, sports or sewing) but also identified with their group, had lower depression scores after three months' follow-up.

Professor Alexander Haslam (Cruwy's et al., 2014), a co-author, said:

We were able to find clear evidence that joining groups, and coming to identify with them, can alleviate depression. "Our work shows that the 'group' aspect of social interaction is critical ... a group has to matter psychologically to be beneficial for depression – simply "showing up" without commitment or engagement is unlikely to be sufficient.

The authors conclude that their study suggests...

...that tackling the challenge of depression involves not just putting the person back into the group, but also putting the group back into the person.

It seems finding your tribe, mob or community is important to healing depression. It's vital this group is a place where you can feel a connection. It could be taking up a hobby, acting classes, Yoga, community classes, Laughter Yoga, dancing, sports, it could even be online.

I was on a talkback radio show for ABC 702 with Radio host Philip Clarke and Professor Katina Michael from the University of Wollongong, where we were pondering is 'Facebook making us sad.' A lady called in and said Facebook had helped her recover from depression and its isolation. She told us that when a relative put up a profile for her, at first, she was unnerved but as she found her friends and family coming out to support her she felt connected. How wonderful.

So, find your support network to gain connection and healing in the long term. We all need a cheer squad at times to send us love, validation and affirmation.

2. The power of pets

Another other option is to start up your own tribe. I had a car accident where I was rear ended, leading to an injury and my

beautiful car being written off. Very sad loss of course. Certainly, an unexpected and tough break, to say the least! This event turned out to be a turning point in my life. My days spent on the bus travelling 90 minutes each way to go to work got rather tedious. I decided to go full time in my private practice Marriage Works, and have never looked back.

Another light that shone at this time was a friend suggesting I get a pet, which I did. Taneisha (a cat) was 12 years of age when she came to live with me from a breeder. She was well loved but ready to retire as she could no longer have kittens. I joke: I rescued her from sex slavery – she was a champion Burmese breeding feline. I always had animals for most of my young life, raising lambs, fish, chickens, budgies, a duck and cats.

Taneisha is a beautiful chocolate Burmese (low allergy too!) and spectacularly loving. She has a sixth sense for knowing when a person is down or upset. One day, I was seeing a family member and was surprised when my cat went straight up to a girl who was agitated and upset ... and jumped up into her lap. Naturally the child started to stroke her as she gradually settled down. Taneisha did a lot to help soothe her.

Pets such as dogs, cats, birds - or any animal you personally connect with - can become a wonderful and devoted part your life. The benefits are profound. The unconditional loving of an animal cannot be overestimated. I have seen people care for their pets so tenderly, taking them for walks, feeding, talking to and cuddling them – all incredibly healing for anyone.

There is scientific evidence from studies of therapy animals visiting nursing homes; hospital units and so forth are helping to heal and bringing cheer to all. Only the other day I heard the ‘baa’ of a goat. Now I live in metropolitan Sydney, so this is an unusual sound to hear when it’s not coming from the TV. None of my neighbours has a goat in their yard. I look across my balcony to see the ‘baaing’ was

coming from the nursing home across the road. Evidently there was a petting zoo there for residents to touch and physically connect. What joy I felt as I could see the residents outside in the fresh air enjoying their interactions.

3. *You are what you eat.*

It is long known that a healthy diet plays an important part in a person's overall well-being and ability to handle stress. In a large study of 15,093 people who were followed over 10 years, the traditional Mediterranean diet, which includes eating nuts, fruits and vegetables, legumes, fish/seafood, cereals, and monounsaturated oils, had a protective effect and lowered the risk of depression (Sánchez-Villegas et al., 2015). There is a body of thinking from scientists that depression could be partly due to a lack of essential nutrients. There is an added benefit to eating healthily: food is fuel, and if we fill our 'tank' with nutrient-rich and healthy foods, our system is likely to feel the benefits. This is something we can control in our lives. Luckily fresh vegetables are relatively cheap and easy to come by.

There is also tentative research into the role inflammation may play in depression. <https://www.healthyplace.com/other-info/mental-health-newsletter/could-depression-be-caused-by-inflammation-in-the-body/> so review you're eating and plan for a healthy start.

4. *Movement Counts*

Now to our bodies. We are movement machines and much research has been done to demonstrate the effectiveness of exercise on our mind and our bodies. We release endorphins, which are neurotransmitters and powerful brain chemicals, to lower stress. Research also suggests that the benefits of exercise may be long lasting. Depressed adults who took part in a fitness program displayed significant improvements over depression, anxiety, and self-esteem (Craft and Perna, 2004)

The endorphins are our body's natural pain relief substances and provide positive feelings, like those given by morphine. Perhaps you have heard of the 'runner's high' where a person feels euphoric and energised after a workout. (Craft and Perna, 2004)

Exercise has many positive benefits these include

- Lowering stress
- Improving self- esteem
- Reducing anxiety
- Depression relief
- Better sleeping
- Improves heart health
- Boosts energy levels
- Lowers blood pressure
- Increases strengthen and tones muscles
- Strengthens bones
- Helps reduce fat

And it is *free*. Start small at first. A walk around the block is a beginning, and then progressively add a bit more. Great if you can access a park or a nature reserve. There is something special about being in nature for us humans. Get your green on. The beach is another wonderful place; take a dip in the ocean and get your dose of positive ions for free. I find there is something very cleansing and incredibly healing about being in water.

5. Nourish your Spirit

Today in Australia and most of the western world we live in a highly materialistic world, overflowing with technology. The pressure to compete and maintain expensive lifestyles may be draining our spirit. It is thought that a sense of spiritual impoverishment is a contributor in modern societies ever increasing epidemic of depression and

anxiety. Perhaps we are undernourished spiritually, leading us to feel a deeper sense of dissatisfaction, disconnection and distress.

In talking about spirituality, I am referring to the belief system that informs and guides your life towards its highest good. Spirituality is uniquely personal and can be connected to nature, animals or those beliefs espoused by organized religions. Faith can be very healing. Perhaps you grew up in a religious system – Judaism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam or Hinduism to name a few. You may want to revisit your local church, synagogue, temple or mosque to reconnect.

If this isn't your thing, you can find spiritual support in many forms. Music offers many people relief and has long been available for spiritual nurturance.

Joining a choir offers a powerful spiritual expression, support of a group and brain growth. It's hard to be unhappy for long at a sing-along. I enjoy Salsa as a dance and the music is cheerful and uplifting. I have a Buddhist friend who loves singing in an Anglican choir, so there are many possibilities.

Songs are often intimate and celebratory, offering you harmony (sorry for the pun). Singing lifts your spirits in all senses emotionally and physically. Your brain releases endorphins and oxytocin, powerful mood enhancers and it alleviates stress. Music is soul food.

6. *The Power of the Pen.*

Writing a journal, whether on paper or digitally, has been a form of catharsis for centuries. There is something incredibly potent in putting pen to paper that aids in release and reflection. Oprah swears by a daily gratitude list as a supportive practice. Affirmations can be amazingly influential especially when written. I especially like Sondra Ray's books how to write affirmations, although slightly dated, as they are from the 1970's. Think about it, our negative thoughts are merely negative affirmations we repeat. What if

we were to swap them out for good? I particularly like Emile Coue's simple affirmative sentence – "*Every day in every way I am getting better and better.*" Write and say it out loud and with conviction 20 times a day for 31 days for an experiment. Let us know how it works.

Many a novel takes us on a journey of enquiry, curiosity and fulfilment. For some it may be the Bible or Kabala, or something in a fictional book we can connect with. A personal heroine of mine is Rachel Naomi Remen; her books are full of stories that heal (see Resources). I also enjoy a fantasy novel occasionally, as usually it involves the underdog rising and completing a quest, involving their personal growth and triumph for the good guys.

We are so lucky to have access to the written word, whether it is on paper or in our kindle; your local library is full of them, so join up for free. While there you might even look around for a book club to join and discuss the emotional journey an author has taken you on.

Personal blogs are like online diaries, which offer a form of connection. There are blogs on every interest out there – cooking, parenting, fitness, fishing, you name it. Often people can authentically share their perils and success in an honest and intimate manner. Google and find your online community.

7. Meditation

Naturally I must mention meditation as a means of spiritual nourishment. Eastern traditions have been using meditation for many centuries both sitting still and in the form of movement. Mindfulness meditation has been taken up by mental health professionals. You can find many groups, self-help books and online forums, to access mindful meditation. (See the resources section).

Yoga, Tai Chi and martial arts offer some form of spiritual practice to explore, as well as the added benefit of physical movement in a group environment.

If you want to go for ‘an intensive’ and have 10 days spare, then I would suggest a vipassana retreat. The word vipassana means “to see things as they really are” and help you to a greater self-understanding and reboot your emotions and priorities. I attended the International Centre for Mediation in Morisset, a Buddhist group from the Burmese tradition headed by Mother Sayamagyi in her life. It was both challenging and divine and all for \$50 a day with the healthiest and yummiest food. Yoga weekends away can be a wonderful escape and time out from the world.

8. Touch and Connection

We are tactile creatures; the touch of massage is supportively intimate with a trusted professional. It can put you in touch with your humanity. Both giving and receiving massage can bring connection and energy to one’s spirit. Many of us do not have another to caress or hold us; massage can give you a safe place to feel nurtured.

I hope you found some help and inspiration in reading this. You are certainly not alone and there is help out there. Please have the courage to reach out. I say this with a heavy heart as last week, dear friends of mine lost their son to suicide and are heartbrokenly devastated. With the right help, this too shall pass.