

Divorce or Loss of a Long-Term Relationship

How can you protect your recovery during a divorce or the loss of a long-term relationship?

When you were suffering from active addiction, you were probably incapable of functioning in healthy relationships. This doesn't mean that you were incapable of love. But the pain and shame of loving the same people that you hurt may have led you to continue your addictive behavior, which in turn only hurt your relationships more. As a result, you may be experiencing such strain in your relationships that you are contemplating divorce or are actually going through a divorce.

If you are thinking about getting a divorce, you may want to consider marital counseling first, if you haven't already. Now that you are sober, you may be able to repair some of the damage in your marriage without having to end it. Staying with the relationship will take perseverance and hard work on your part and your spouse's part; you and your spouse will need to find new ways of relating now that you are sober. While you are going through marital counseling, it will be especially important to take steps to maintain your sobriety.

If there is no way to repair your marriage and divorce is your only option, remember to work the Steps, increase contact with your sponsor and sober support network, and also increase the number of meetings you attend. These actions will help you develop and maintain a healthy view of your life and recovery and maintain consistent serenity, even in the midst of this difficult situation.

Make a clear decision

If you are facing a divorce or the end of a long-term partnership while you are in recovery, you are facing the fact that for whatever reasons, one partner is no longer willing to be in the relationship.

You can respond to this by ending the relationship, trying to convince your partner to stay in the relationship, becoming withdrawn or depressed and bitter about your partner's decision or your own decision to end the relationship, or choosing to wait and try to work things out.

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Take care of yourself

Whatever your response is to your deteriorating relationship, the best thing you can do is to take care of yourself. There is no greater gift you can give to yourself and your relationship than being as healthy as you can be. Right now your focus is on staying clean and sober, going to meetings, and working the Steps. But as you progress in recovery, you'll want to focus more and more on improving your physical health. Nutritional therapy and exercise can help you heal your body and rebalance your brain chemistry, making you feel better, which will reduce your risk of relapse or an eventual return to use.

Don't look back

When you know the relationship is over or when you choose it to be over, keep your focus on today. That means simply living one day at a time. There will, of course, be times of grieving and an examination of your past choices and behaviors that played a role in the loss of the relationship. But it is important not to focus on the past because nothing in the past can be changed. Focusing on the past leads to blaming, resentments, and anger, which are the greatest destroyers of serenity and sobriety. Continue your daily walk of recovery.

If your divorce is amicable, you may be tempted to try to be “friends” right away, having coffee or meeting for lunch. But if you are still emotionally attached, even periodic contact will likely cause you pain and regret and will limit your ability to move into a place of peace and serenity. After enough time has passed, you may choose to develop a friendship with this person, but not right away.

Avoid isolation

When you are feeling the pain and rejection of divorce or the ending of a long-term partnership, you may be tempted to isolate from friends and family and neglect your own self-care. But this will only hurt you and compromise your recovery. The more unhealthy you become, the less you have to give to new and existing relationships with all the people you love in life, including family, friends, and children.

Change bad habits

During our active addiction, many of us developed self-defeating behaviors—such as blaming, carrying resentments, and communicating with anger—that

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get in the way of developing healthy relationships. To be happy and improve our relationships now, we need to identify our self-defeating behaviors and construct a practical plan that includes taking action to change and asking others to give us feedback on our progress.

Recovery Action Step

You'll need to work hard on your personal development in order to change self-defeating behaviors. Begin by assessing habits you want to change or develop.

1. Write down a list of bad habits that you want to stop.
2. Write down a list of good habits that you want to start.

Share your answers with your sponsor, recovery group, and friends and family who support your recovery. Ask them to give you feedback and hold you accountable for the changes you commit to make.

Work Your Recovery Program

The stress of losing a relationship can threaten your recovery. Follow these guidelines to protect yourself from a relapse or eventual return to use:

- Stay away from triggers and slippery situations (bars, parties, using friends, stressful situations).
- Be aware of habits that harm you and your relationships (lying, blaming, rationalizing, carrying resentments, communicating with anger).
- Work the Twelve Steps.
- Take care of yourself: go to meetings, meditate, pray, exercise, and talk with your sponsor.
- Remember that you are important—celebrate the good things in your life with sober friends.
- Refuse to be your own worst enemy. You can be as happy as you choose to be.

Let others help you. Talk with your sponsor, sober friends, and supportive family members. They will need your support and help someday as well. You don't need to go through the pain of divorce or loss of a long-term relationship alone.

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Put the children first

If you are going through a divorce and there are children involved, the best thing you can do for them is to put them first. This means avoid fighting with your spouse in front of the children, don't use your children as tools to get back at your spouse, and make sure you spend time with them. Often your children will blame themselves for the end of your relationship, so it is important that you let them know that the divorce isn't their fault. It is also important for them to know that even though your marriage is ending, their source of security is not. Take steps to be just as actively involved in your children's lives as you can, in spite of the divorce.