

Emotional rescue - coping with emotions as a single parent

For most people, becoming a single parent was not their choice. Therefore when it happens they're left feeling overwhelmed by emotions, wondering if what they are going through is normal.

The reason for any overwhelming emotion is because one of the following deep needs is crying out to be met:

- A sense of destiny - my life is significant, I make a difference.
- A sense of dignity - I'm a person of value, I matter.

- A sense of intimacy - to love and be loved, to be missed by people.
- A sense of security - I feel safe and protected.

Here are some emotional issues single parents face and tips on how to grow through them.

Anger

Anger is said to be the most confusing of all human emotions. It can also be the most dangerous. When we are angry, our bodies automatically react in different ways. Internally, adrenaline and sugar are secreted into our bloodstream as our blood pressure rises. We feel our hearts beating faster. Looking in a mirror we see our pupils dilate. Externally, we can become highly agitated and ready for action.

Anger can arise due to any number of factors. Threats to our physical or emotional state and frustration are just two ways – there are many more.

When anger takes hold and is left untamed, we can become irrational, even dangerous. But when kept in check, anger will help us deal with the situations we face.

Betrayed by a friend

It all began with a friendship between two families. Mine with three children, and another local couple with two children. We partied together, went to church together, and my wife went to work for him. One evening after a party at 'his' house, (which was bigger than mine, he being an older businessman of moderate success) I recall saying to my wife, "I believe he fancies you". She denied it, and I thought little of it.

Life had settled down the way I expected - long hours at the office, tiredness, a gradual erosion of relationship, unnoticed at the time. Once, a friend suggested "You should woo your wife". "What for?" I thought, "She's my WIFE for goodness sake!" Things deteriorated at home. A new and threatening atmosphere prevailed - a sense of detachment by my wife. I became worried and asked 'him' if there was someone in the office causing difficulties for my wife. His reply, "I hope you don't think it's anything to do with me!"

But it was very much to do with him, as I soon found out. He proposed a deal: he would have my wife during the week; I

could have her at the weekends. My response was "No way!"

I'm still not sure why they survived. I hadn't intended that they should. Was it cowardice, or self-control, or a providence I didn't then believe in? Looking back over so many years, I don't believe revenge is sweet - it's more stressful, than satisfying. Yet there was a perverse satisfaction in imagining what should happen to the betrayer, a self-satisfaction in the pain inflicted for the pain received.

I followed them that evening, in my company car. They met in a motel car park on the edge of town. They kissed as she got into his car and they drove off. I sat there for hours in anguish and increasing rage with all sorts of vengeful thoughts running through my head. "Torch his house! But what about his wife and children?" "Expose his adultery to his business partners?" "Report him to the church leaders?" And so it went on. My mind totally preoccupied. I felt frustrated, useless, powerless, and out of control. Then his familiar blue Jaguar turned in through the entrance.

I can still see the scene now. As they walk, arm in arm, to her car, I start my engine, engage the gears and drive the car straight at them. I gain speed. There is fury within me; a white-hot rage, a surging, crashing of waves over a rocky coast, a carelessness of the consequences, a driven-ness which alarmed me. I accelerate. Headlights swinging towards them - timing is critical. They are almost at the front bumper. Brakes screeching! Fear and surprise are etched in their faces. At the last minute I turn away.

I drove home. Nothing was ever said to me about the incident. I had plumbed the depths of despair, powerlessness and rage. I sought revenge, and only very slowly came to see that nothing would satisfy that thirst. I had my children to consider; life needed to go on for their sakes.

These events happened a long time ago. Since then I have

Anger continued from page 1

rebuilt my life. I became a Christian and remarried. My ex-wife and I have exchanged just a few words, each of us expressing a deep sadness for the past. Through the pain of loss and betrayal, I have learned that pain passes; redemption and forgiveness are possible and that hope returns.

As an emotion it's ok to 'feel' anger but the only healthy way to express it is *without hurting others or yourself*.

Some steps to help

1. Acknowledge and accept your anger
2. Identify the reason - am I feeling hurt, frustrated or threatened?
3. Take steps to deal with the cause or get help to talk about it
4. Decide on a strategy to stay in control for when your anger is triggered
5. Find a 'safe' outlet for your anger such as 'kneading' bread or smashing glass jars at the bottle bank
6. Talk to a trusted friend or get some counselling
7. When you are ready, forgive the people who hurt you.

Forgiveness

For us to be able to move on and get rid of our anger we need to forgive those who hurt us or who are the cause of our anger or rejection. It is for our own good to avoid resentment building in our lives. Here are some thoughts on forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not:

- giving people the right to continue hurting you
- accepting them back until you see a change in their behaviour
- necessarily trusting the person again
- pretending it doesn't matter
- trivialising the hurt or wrongdoing

Forgiveness is:

- giving up one's right to revenge and bitterness
- releasing the person from their debt
- letting God deal with it

If I don't forgive:

- I'm the one who will suffer
- I'm bound to *whoever I'm angry with*
- I can't move on

Rejection

Whether it is being turned down for a job or not being picked for a team game at school, rejection happens to us all. The pain of rejection can take on many different forms. Perhaps, as a child, you felt a sister or brother was more loved and valued than you. Maybe as a teenager you were bullied for not having the right clothes or 'street cred'. Or in a workplace situation you are excluded from conversations and 'in-jokes' between colleagues.

We tend to think that rejection happens when drastic changes take place in our lives. In some cases it starts in childhood; in others it starts in later life.

Unprepared for rejection

In marriage, my feelings of rejection started when little or no conversation took place. It seemed he preferred watching his favourite TV programme, and hobbies gave him more pleasure than quality time together. He preferred to do anything rather than give time to the intimate side of our relationship, which had disappeared in the busyness of life.

Nothing, though, prepared me for being left for another woman. I used to think of the old TV advert and compare myself with 'the fish that John West rejects'. Looking at myself in the mirror, I saw an ugly, skinnylegged, straggly-haired woman of no worth.

Some rejections you can disguise so no one knows the hurt you carry; but with a marriage break-up it's in the open. "It's like having your dirty washing on show for all to see".

I suffered mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually. My thoughts took on new dimensions, thinking of how to get back at my 'ex' in ways I shudder to think of now.

There were times when I would cry for hours. My health suffered, tonsillitis visited me many times, my weight plummeted, and being vulnerable meant I would often make wrong decisions.

Healing for me, came four years later when I had a picture of myself climbing a very high mountain; looking forward I saw blue skies, and looking back was darkness and pain. I felt God tell me "go forward, leave your past, you will still have the valleys (low times) as well as the mountain tops (good times) but I am with you".



Yes, I still get rejected in many ways because that's life. But with God's help I'm learning to deal with it. When you are overwhelmed by rejection it's easy to make a decision that no one will ever hurt you again. Some people withdraw from society. Another person might appear to be ok on the surface, but they won't let anyone emotionally close so that when people walk away, they say, "You see, I'm not worth loving - they all leave me in the end."

Hiding away physically or emotionally only helps for a while. It can cover up the pain and help you get on with other more immediate things. But long-term feelings of rejection need healing. You will need faithful support and care, perhaps even counselling to reassure you that rejection is not your fault.

Loneliness

Loneliness is a condition where we can only depend on ourselves for strength or mental nourishment. It's a period when we may be completely alone or, although we are with others, we may feel alienated from them and unable to share our unique experiences with any other person at that specific moment. Rejection and loneliness often go hand in hand.

Lonely parenting

Have you seen the film called 'The Loneliness of the Long-distance Runner'? Single-parenting can seem a bit like that: the loneliness of having no partner to share with, the loneliness when the children are away, the loneliness because the children live elsewhere, the loneliness inside ourselves, the loneliness on a long race we did not choose. No one has run our race before because each one of us is unique, but some company along the way does make a difference.

Maybe you're into exercise; running, swimming or visiting the gym. I'm not, but I know that if I could do these things with a friend, I might be encouraged to join in. Even with walking, which I do enjoy, I prefer to take the dog with me!

It has been said that loneliness is the greatest disease of our society. So many people now live alone, and generally there is little sense of belonging to a community. Loneliness is often part of the 'single-parent journey'. We can be surrounded by children and yet still feel lonely. Have you ever sat on a crowded beach on your own, or just with your children? It can seem the loneliest place on earth and yet you're surrounded by people. Spending Christmas Day or New Year alone is probably the loneliest time of all.

So loneliness is more than an absence of people, though there are times when we desperately want to be with others. Perhaps it is a need in each one of us to love and be loved, to matter to someone, to belong?

There are no easy answers. Good friends and family do make such a difference. But that's not always enough. Here are some of the coping strategies which we hope will help you.

And here's a fact: even if you are the nicest person in the world - there will always be some who, for whatever reason, just don't like you. It's their choice, and nothing to do with you as a person.

Some steps to help

- Not everyone will treat you like the person who hurt you
- Look at the situation: it could be that what you are saying/doing is what is being rejected, not you!
- Healing is possible, and you can move on to greater, deeper friendships.

Sue

Things to do

- Get involved in someone else's life - visit a friend or invite one round. Include sharing meals together.
- Examine how your state of loneliness started: then ask yourself, 'Have I chosen to live in a way that encourages loneliness?' If so, recognise that you are free to make changes.
- Invite another single parent with their children and have a sleepover.
- Visit others who are in need; someone elderly, sick or handicapped.
- Take up a hobby, like bread-making - which is good for kneading out aggressive feelings!
- Don't run from your problems through using drugs, alcohol, overeating or oversleeping. These can have a harmful affect on your recovery process.
- Make a decision to talk or write to someone and then contact them (see 'Extra Help').
- Keep a 'Joy' box of mementoes, photos, letters, cards, etc. To remind you of happy times and events.
- Cultivate a positive mental attitude: be optimistic; appreciate yourself; love yourself.
- Have an encouraging book, music or Scripture near your bed for those lonely times in the middle of the night.
- Celebrate your victories and achievements, no matter how small and trivial they may seem.
- Acknowledge and admit feelings, and do something for yourself - comfort food, chocolate, bubble bath, candles and wine are popular. All in moderation, of course!
- Live one day at a time.
- Learn to trust again.

Loneliness is something that can affect us at different stages of our lives. But we can take steps to help us move on, so that even though we may be alone we are not lonely.

Christine

How you can help single parents - things that will, and will not, help

DO	DON'T
...listen. Most people just want to know someone cares.	...judge. You have no way of knowing the pain they are experiencing.
...tell them you don't know what they're going through, but you'd like to be able to understand.	...be offended if they don't seem grateful for your help. It may take time for them to recognise this.
...invite the family over for a meal. Or arrange a night out for the parent.	...say you know what they're going through unless you're been there yourself.
...be aware they are hurting from deep wounds which are not healed overnight.	...assume because you are helping that you have the right to voice your opinions.
...be prepared for a long haul, it may take some years to recover.	...criticise their ex-partner. It's not your place to do so.
...remember their birthdays and wedding anniversaries which may be very painful times for them.	...expect them to 'get over it' in a few weeks or months. It may take some longer than others.
...help them put up Christmas decorations and take the children shopping to buy a present for their parent.	...give advice unless they ask.
...invite them to church and church events, arrange babysitters if necessary.	...assume you know how they or the children are feeling.
...allow them time to grieve.	...try to fix them up with someone else.
...help church members to understand their pain. Many churches ostracise people when they divorce, even if it wasn't their fault.	...share their situation with others, even for prayer!
...give them time. They may need to talk about the same things over and over again.	..question the children for information/gossip.
...be a friend to their children - they are hurting too. The parent will appreciate a good role model for their children.	...assume that all single parents are inevitably victims; many cope very well. Recognise this and encourage them in an appropriate way.
...if you offer something, act on it. Many are left with empty promises.	...forget to tell them often what a fantastic job they are doing.
...remember no two single parent family situations are the same. Treat each one with respect and love.	...condemn them. We all make mistakes. Remember the tremendous effort they make in parenting alone.
...make a meal for the family if the parent is ill.	...forget. You will be investing in helping someone to reach their full potential.
...tell them frequently what a great job they are doing.	...forget to pray and encourage them.

Remember single parents are unique and it is a privilege to know them.

Extra help

If you are struggling with any of these emotions you may find it beneficial to seek further help.

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Web: www.careforthefamily.org.uk

Association of Christian Counsellors

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Bookshelf

Emotions - can you trust them?

by Dr James Dobson
Focus on the Family, ISBN 0830732403

Make Anger Your Ally by Neil Clark Warren Ph.D
Focus on the Family, ISBN 1561797073

The Path of Loneliness: Finding Your Way Through the Wilderness to God by Elizabeth Elliot
Revell, ISBN 080074994X