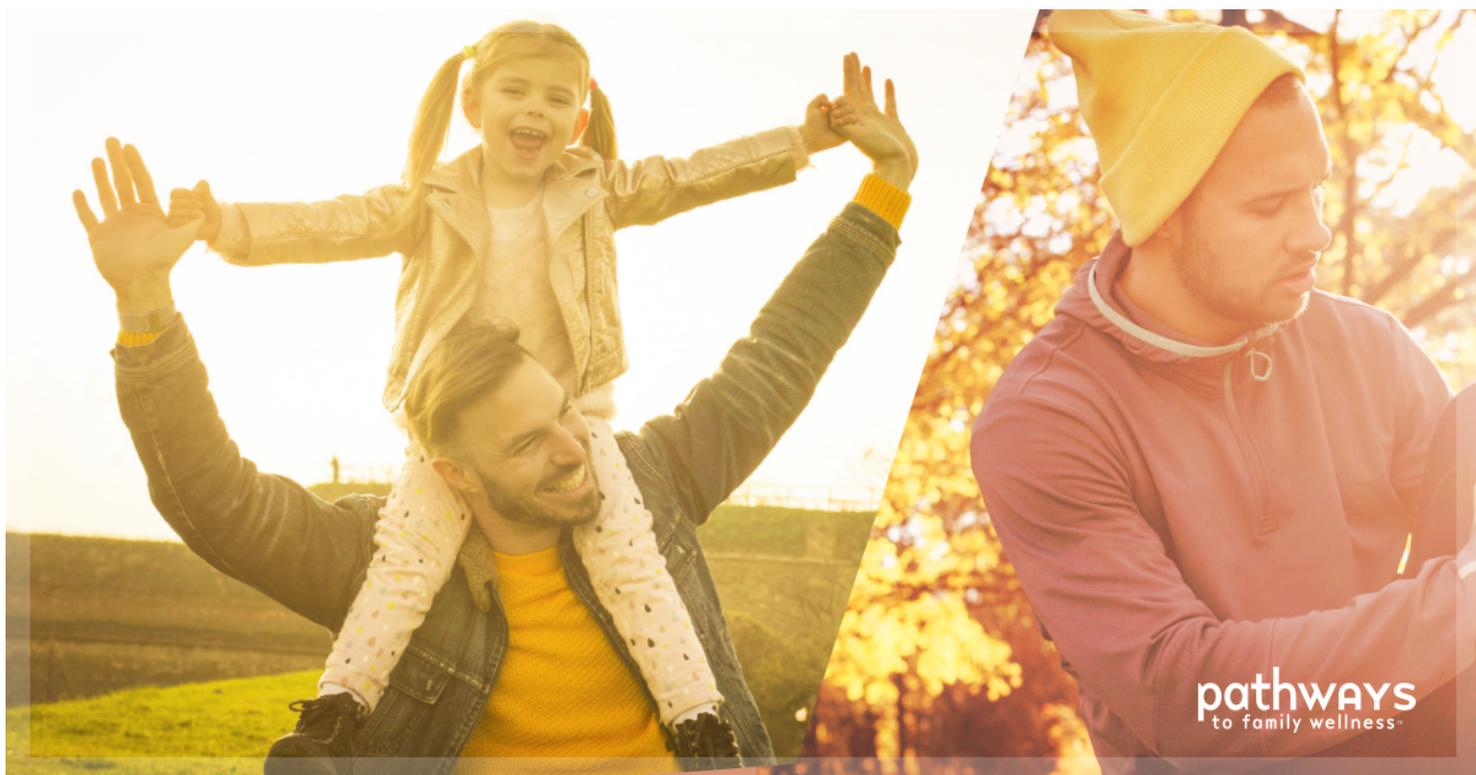


Having a Positive Divorce is Up to You...But if You Have Kids, You'll Have to Heal on Two Levels at Once

Divorce hits every aspect of your life. There is no escaping the waves of disbelief mixed with relief and terror and joy. It's a very confusing time for everyone. If you have children, you should know that there are two levels to how you'll heal—as an individual, and as a parent.

The challenge is separating the two levels and addressing them independently. In my case, I got them all mixed up. I let my confusion around being alone again bleed into my overwhelming joy at seeing my kids after a week away. I could've used some better separation of the two states of being. As I wended my way through the next five years, I began to understand the two sides of the divorce puzzle. Everything in your life has changed. It's time to pick up the pieces and go for an even happier life. The process won't be easy, but it is entirely up to you to take care of your own crap and get your life back together.



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After the Break-Up

Written by John McElhenney

Saturday, 01 September 2018 00:00 - Last Updated Monday, 28 January 2019 13:46

You deserve a happy life. And your happy life will inform and support your kids' happy lives.

The Newly Single You

The first process is reimagining your life as a single human being. Single happiness. Re-finding yourself and what you like to do, regardless of what anyone else needs or wants, is the first step toward finding your new cadence. It can be a hard step to let go of others' expectations and follow your desires and needs. The pull to take care of the kids will be strong, even when they are not around. But your new task is to learn to be an independent and joyful human again. Not a mom or dad, or a partner. You have to reconnect with the single person coming to grips with all the wins and failures thus far in your life.

During the early stages of divorce you might crater a bit. I spent a lot of time binge-watching TV shows and going to bed early. But as you come out of the state of shock, it's important to set some parameters around your living and health. Here's what I determined to be essential to getting my life back on track.

Eat well. (Less fast food, more veggies. I tried to simplify my diet.)

Exercise as often as you can. (Walking in the neighborhood and along the local nature trail was my physical therapy.)

Drink plenty of water. (I never had a problem with alcohol, but I know it's a depressant, so it wasn't good for me, personally.)

Get the appropriate amount of sleep. (Too much and you'll be woozy; not enough and you'll be edgy and ragged.)

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Entertainment is good. Laughter can be medicine. Video games might just release your sad brain from its prison. Whatever it takes. Find joy. Find something that makes you smile.

Self-care starts with ending all negative self-talk. (It might be hard to find positive things to say to yourself, but you need your inner coach to be on your team, and not a tyrant or complainer. The negative complaining might be part of what we're trying to leave behind.)

Whenever possible, say yes to friends and opportunities to be with other people.

Reset and restart every single day.

It doesn't matter how much queso you ate the night before. Rejoin and recommit to your recovery and health program each morning, regardless of how you feel. Your consistency and continuous commitments can keep you heading in the right direction: up and out of the pit of despair.

Relearning How to Be a Whole Parent

The second level of divorce recovery with kids is learning how to be a single parent.

When you were married, when you decided to have children, when you raised your kids from mere pups, you and your partner built a system of parenting that no longer exists. The things you might not have learned how to do, the things you distinctly recall asking your partner to take over, and the things you haven't even thought of—all of these parenting things are now yours and yours alone. When you are the on-duty parent, you have the responsibility to parent at 100 percent. The parts of your parenting skills that have atrophied need to be dusted off and beefed up.

For me, one of those lost skills was cooking and cleaning for the family. I was fine when the kids were away. I could resort to crappy habits—fast food, popcorn for dinner— behavior that would be frowned upon in a parent. After divorce, there were times when I craved McDonald's fries. I

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went through extended periods when I never thought about what to cook for dinner. All of that changed each week when my daughter and son would arrive.

I didn't have the rhythm. I didn't have the ideas for what to cook. And I was out of practice with planning ahead, so at first we had to go to the grocery store every night they were with me. "Hey kids, what do we want for dinner tonight?" Getting everyone excited to go to the supermarket is asking a lot.

When you're alone, you can let your eating and cleaning slip. But when your kids are around, you need to step up your game. I tried to tidy up the house before "my weekend." Some weekends I was more successful than others.

Time with the Kids

Learn again what your kids like to do. If they don't know (and often that's what they will say: "I don't know") keep asking, keep trying new things. It might be easier to give up and let everyone watch TV or tune into their iPads/iPhones. But don't detach when you have opportunities to stay close to them. This is a hard time for everyone. But you can demonstrate healthy behavior by engaging them in healthy activities and giving them healthy food to eat.

Take the time to be alone with each of your kids. It is easier not to talk about stuff, especially divorce. But given the time and openings, your kids may reveal some of what's going on in their lives and what they are thinking about. By keeping a positive attitude about the divorce ("It was better for all of us. We're happier now") and engaging with them as little humans, you demonstrate for them that your love and support is unwavering. That's key.

Be consistent. Be as joyful and engaged as you can. There will be times when the screens come up for all of you. That's okay. But try to set connection and closeness as the default relationship mode.

Time Without the Kids

For a long time, I was barely surviving between kid visits. I was so lost without them, and

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without the closeness of a primary relationship, that I isolated and got depressed. I didn't do anything on my list of healthy activities. I didn't return phone calls. I made it through, but I didn't have to be so lonely about it.

The day my kids would return to me, I became Dad again. I lit up like a different person. I knew this was not healthy. I knew that my happiness had become too entwined with theirs. And it was my task to get on with my life, get on with my fitness and wellness programs, and most importantly, get on with my own mental recovery.

I knew I needed help and I tried several different talky therapists before I found someone who could push and nurture me at the same time. I didn't need someone to coddle me and collude with my depression and divorce sadness. I needed someone who would push me to challenge my own feelings of helplessness. That was my issue: learned helplessness. There were parts of me, when I was alone, that wanted to give up. That wanted to curl up in a tiny ball and vanish. And while it was metaphorical, the suicidal fantasies were like some angry form of giving up.

You Are Not Helpless. You Are Not a Victim.

What you do with your life as a newly single person— that is the real challenge. Start with the health and recovery list above. Find your rhythm. Find the things that light up your soul. (Care of the Soul by Thomas Moore is a good resource.) Do more of those things.

Keeping in Touch

Stay in touch with your kids as much as you can, but don't hang on their responsiveness and involvement. It's weird for them that you're gone. But from their perspective, it was almost as if I had just gone off on an extended business trip. They stayed in the same house. They had the same routine. The main difference for them was that I was not there. Our nightly phone calls often went like this.

“Hey, how's it going?”

“Fine.”

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“Anything you want to tell me about? Did anything cool happen at school?”

“No.”

“Okay, well, let me talk to your brother. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

At my house, on my own, everything was new. As a family unit we had to learn new routines. We had to find new processes for doing chores; for instance, I didn't have a dishwasher in my first post-divorce house. Allow yourself and your kids time to adjust to things being weird and different. They are resilient. By staying positive and reaching out to them, even when they are with the other parent, you are showing them how important they are in your life. You are making sure your “I love you” is getting in there, even when you can't say it in person.

The main thing for me, in the off times, was to make contact every night, even if it was just to say goodnight. I rallied from dark moments each night to perk up and call them. The calls were mostly brief and unfulfilling. But that consistent contact, that “I'm here” reassurance, was important to me and to them. I was saying that although I was gone, I was not out of their lives. It's a small thing, but it's the best thing you've got. And sometimes, just the process of putting on my game voice for them would cheer me up. Do what you need to do during your off parent days. Take care of your mental and physical health. And in the times when you have your kids, be the best parent you can be: always looking forward, always positive.

Your kids are learning about life from how you behave, not how you tell them to behave. So behave honorably. Be respectful of your former partner. Love your kids with all your heart when they are with you, and learn to recapture your own self-love when they are not. By staying focused on both aspects of the divorce, you will have a better chance of recovering your happiness and beginning the next chapter of your life.

Stay positive. Love your kids. Respect your ex.

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This article appeared in [Pathways to Family Wellness](#) magazine, Issue #59.

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