



EXTENSION

FCS-2255

Re-adjusting after divorce: Stress, health risks and coping tools

July 2025

Divorce is a life-altering event affecting millions of families nationwide. The legal and emotional impact of divorce is widely discussed. However, the physical effects of divorce are just as important to understand. Divorce increases stress, weakens the immune system and causes a range of health problems. Learning how divorce affects your body through stress creates an opportunity to learn ways to lessen stress and its impacts on long-term well-being.

How divorce impacts health

Divorce activates a prolonged stress response that can wear on the body and mind. In the short term, stress activates the body's fight-or-flight system, releasing hormones that speed up the heart rate, increase blood pressure and tighten muscles (Chu et al., 2024). When stress goes untreated, it becomes chronic and can affect the immune system, digestion and emotional regulation.

Mental health risks

Divorce increases the likelihood of depression and anxiety. Recent research suggests divorced individuals have two to nine times higher depression rates than the general population (Hald et al., 2020). These mental health challenges arise from feelings of loss, disrupted routines, loneliness and financial strain. Anxiety also becomes more common in uncertainty and change, and this can lead to sleep disturbances and negative thinking patterns.

Physical health risks

Long-term stress from divorce can damage the cardiovascular system. Elevated stress hormones increase inflammation and blood pressure, which results in a higher risk of heart disease (Kiecolt-Glaser, 2018). In some cases, those who are divorced are 30% more likely to have an earlier death than married or single individuals (Sbarra et al., 2015). The combination of weakened social support, poor sleep and long-term emotional distress contributes to this elevated health risk. Men may also be at a higher risk for early death, but gender differences get smaller as people get older (Sbarra et al., 2017). Together, this all shows the importance of building healthy coping habits after experiencing a divorce.

Coping tools

As stated above, families and couples worldwide experience divorce, which is a transition and adjustment period for both the divorcing individuals and their children. It is also an exceptionally challenging life event that raises several challenges, such as the loss of social and financial support, which causes stress to build. Focusing on the emotions that arise with divorce can take a toll on well-being, so using skills to lessen these feelings can aid in achieving a healthier well-being post-divorce (Kołodziej-Zaleska & Przybyła-Basista, 2016). Coping skills can be described as behaviors that you use to lessen feelings of stress (Czabała & Miedziun, 2016). They also help you manage the emotions that come with stressful daily occurrences or stressful life events. Below are six techniques that can be used to cope with acute or chronic stress (Czabała & Miedziun, 2016):

- Physical activity: joining a gym, yoga studio, etc., walking/running with friends, neighbors, pets or children.
- Listening to music, meeting with friends, reading, writing and other creative activities.
- Gaining distance from stress: creating a new social network separate from the one you had with your spouse, creating new personal routines, such as self-care, social outings and work.

- Solving the problem (if it is solvable).
- Finding support, such as friends, family, support groups or professional support.
 - OSU Extension offers tons of helpful resources to navigate this transition, such as the Co-Parenting for Resilience Program, the Strong Dads Fatherhood Program and the Check and Balance program, which is a great financial resource.
- Getting enough sleep: a few tips for falling asleep when stressed are a regular sleep schedule, mindfulness activities before bed and less screen time before turning out the lights.

The list above is a great place to start to manage emotions (and changes in your body), and there are many other things you can do to handle stress. These techniques will complete the stress response cycle and will lessen the impact stress has on the body. These can be helpful for anyone, but they are especially important for those going through a divorce.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President for Agricultural Programs and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of 20 cents per copy. July 2025 SM.