

Friends and family guide to separation

When a friend or family member separates from their partner, it can be hard to know what to say or do. No separation is the same but it can be tempting to project our own experiences, as well as to give our own opinions or advice. Misplaced advice can have an unhelpful effect on someone's ability to adapt to a breakup to adapt to the breakup and may also negatively impact their wellbeing.

How we approach a conversation about separation, the advice we give, and the environment we create can shape whether a couple separate amicably and build positive futures apart, or go through an acrimonious separation. This kind of separation could negatively impact them, their children and their wider family or social group.

It's hard to know what to say and it's not something we usually talk about. So, in this guide, we'll look at the tools available that can help you support a friend or family member going through separation, divorce or parenting apart.

Are they safe?

The most important thing to consider is the safety of your friend or relative who's going through a separation.

Are there any signs indicating that they should seek specialist advice straight away? For example, violence or abuse towards themselves or others. Especially concerning the wellbeing of any children involved.

Domestic abuse involves a pattern of behaviours that are controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading or violent. If your friend or family member confides in you that this is going on, it's important to listen to them and acknowledge what they're experiencing and to signpost them to organisations that can help. Telling your friend or family member to leave or giving other advice can put them in significant danger.

Organisations who can help:



A domestic abuse organisation supporting women and children in the UK

[Go to website](#)

A free helpline for male victims of domestic abuse

[Go to website](#)



A charity specialising in economic and financial abuse

[Go to website](#)

There are other forms of abuse including around money and resources. Listen to [this podcast episode about financial abuse](#) to understand the signs that might mean a friend or family member is being financially abused, and how you can help support them.

If you suspect your friend or family member is being abused, but they haven't told you directly, you should contact the above organisations for guidance.

Are you concerned about their mental health?

When someone goes through a separation, their emotional resources can be depleted. If you're concerned about your separating friend or family member's mental health, these organisations can help.

-  [Mind](#) - a mental health charity
-  [Samaritans](#) - dial 116 123 or text SHOUT to 85258
-  Is their life in immediate danger? - dial 999

Is it over, should I leave?

Friends and family are often the people we turn to when we want to talk about our relationships, especially when we're going through a 'bad patch'. If you're asked for relationship advice, there are a few tools you can use to help.

Tip 1.

Listen without interrupting:

This seems obvious, but listening without interrupting can give your friend or family member space to process how they're feeling out loud. Being an objective sounding board without giving your opinion can help them to work through their present thoughts.

Tip 2.

Avoid offering immediate solutions:

Instead of solving their problems, focus on providing emotional support. Sometimes people just need someone to listen to them without judgment. Let them know that you're there for them and that you'll support them in seeking appropriate help if necessary.

Tip 3.

Express concern and support:

Respond by expressing your concern for their wellbeing. Let them know that you care about them and that you're there to support them. Assure them that it's okay to share each and every one of their feelings and that you are there to listen.

Tip 4.

Use open-ended questions:

Encourage your friend to open up by asking open-ended questions. Rather than feeling pressured to offer a solution, try responding with questions which can help them process their feelings. Some examples of this could be:

-  What's made you feel this way?
-  How long have you been feeling this way?
-  What sorts of things have you tried together?
-  Have you thought about talking to a therapist or couples counsellor?

Tip 5.

Don't make the decision for them:

The only person who can make this decision for them is them. You can help them work through their feelings in a constructive and productive way. However, the choice is theirs and trying to make a decision for them will only put unnecessary pressure on you. Instead, you can signpost them to therapeutic professionals or [advice pages](#) or [podcasts](#).

"We're separating": the basics and what to say

Or more importantly, what not to say when you're first told that your friend or family member is separating from their partner

1. Be a good listener:

Give them your full attention and actively listen to what they have to say. Avoid interrupting or jumping to conclusions. Let them express their thoughts and emotions without judgment.

2. Validate their feelings:

Show empathy and acknowledge their emotions. Let them know that their feelings are understandable and that they are not alone. Avoid minimising or dismissing their experiences, even if you don't fully understand or relate to them. Stay with their emotion - for example you could say, "it sounds like you are feeling really hurt", rather than commenting on what the other person has done.

3. Don't be tempted to share 'battle stories': empathise instead of projecting

If you've been separated or divorced and it was acrimonious or difficult, sharing your own experiences or the stories of others isn't helpful to your friend. No one separation is the same and shoe-horning your own experiences to try and relate to theirs isn't productive.

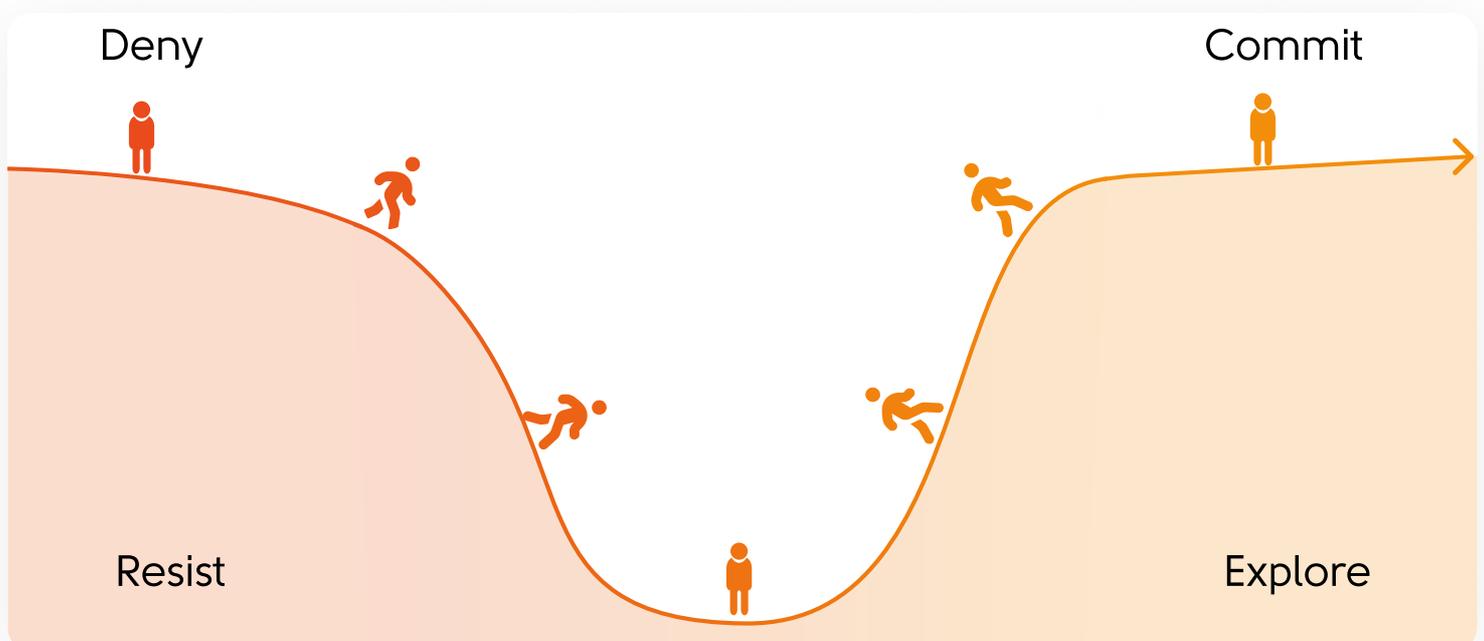
4. Respect their boundaries

Remember that not everyone may be ready to open up about the details of their separation. Respect your friend's, or family member's boundaries, and don't pressure them to share more than they're comfortable with. Reassure them that you're available whenever they're ready to talk.

5. Don't fall into the trap of bad-mouthing their partner

This is particularly important if there are children involved. Your friend or family member doesn't need to know that you 'never really liked their ex' or that you've heard 'x, y and z about them'. This isn't helpful, or supportive.

Understanding the emotional journey of your friend or family member can also be useful as you support them moving forwards



If they ask for help with the legal process:

There are many routes a person can take to legally end their marriage or civil partnership, as well as to formalise financial agreements or to organise arrangements for any children.

The important thing from a friend or family member's perspective is not to get overly involved in the logistics. Telling your friend or relative that you 'know a great lawyer who will take their ex to the cleaners,' or talking to them about your other friend's 'train-wreck divorce' isn't helpful.

Normally, phrases like this come from a place of care. However, giving advice can create tension and conflict, which in turn can impact a parent's ability to co-parent and sort out things like how to divide money and property. Where possible, couples should try and find routes that don't lead to expensive 'court battles', or one parent not being able to see their child.

There are many conflict-free options available, including negotiation support, mediation and collaborative approaches. Every experience is unique and people's individual circumstances will dictate what they can afford and how amicable their separation can be.

-  If in doubt, amicable offers [free 15-minute advice calls](#) and will outline all the options available. They can also use our 'emotional readiness quiz' to find out how ready they are to start the legal process.

Practical ways you can help

1. Stay connected and follow up

Make time to stay connected in-person or virtually. Continue to check in on your friend regularly, even after the initial conversation. Show that you care by sending supportive messages, inviting them to activities, or simply spending time together. Small gestures can make a big difference in letting them know that they're not alone.

2. Recognise that "I'm fine" doesn't always mean that I'm actually fine

When you follow up with your friend or family member, don't accept the first "I'm fine". If you check in with them and ask 'How are you?', most people will give this same response. Pausing and following up this question with "No, how are you really?" can give them the time and space to reflect and ask themselves "How am I actually?"

3. Offer practical support

Offering to help in more practical ways can alleviate some of the stress they may be feeling. This could include:

- + Offering to pick the kids up after school
- + Asking them if they'd like to come over for dinner
- + Looking after their pets whilst they're at work or so that they can get some free-time for themselves

4. Remember children should be the priority

Protecting children when their parents separate is crucial. As a family member or friend, this can mean communicating positively about both parents and not engaging in negative commentary or gossip.

5. Make a pledge as a social group to support the separated couple

As a friendship group or family, make a pledge that you will continue to support both people as much as you can. Making the time to talk to both people and avoiding gender lines is a great way to help.

Listen to this episode of The Divorce Podcast on [Conscious uncoupling with Katherine Woodward Thomas](#). It's full of tips for friends and family members.

What if their separation isn't amicable?

If a separation turns sour for whatever reason, remember it's unlikely to be within your control to change or fix it. Instead, try role-modelling behaviours which promote collaboration. Try creating an open environment where you don't 'take sides' or tolerate poor behaviour like bad-mouthing an ex or alienating someone from a social group.

"Do you feel okay?"

We know that when we hear about people separating in a friendship circle, or family members divorcing, it can be unsettling. It can hold up a mirror to our own relationships and can often make us overthink things.

It's important to check in with yourself and ask how you feel in the context of their separation. If it's impacting you, there are many places to go for professional help including a therapist, a counsellor, or your employer. Put clear boundaries in place to protect yourself and prioritise your own well-being. At amicable, we like to say "remember to put your own oxygen mask on first, before helping others".

THE
DIVORCE
PODCAST



With Kate Daly

Episode #12: Friends and family

[Play Episode](#)

We hope you've found this guide and the resources within it useful and that as a society, we are able to create an environment where everybody is able to end relationships in a kinder and better way.