

something like “you must be feeling awful” and try to listen without giving advice or passing judgment.

If you know a couple who’s separated, try to be a friend to both people without taking sides, says one counsellor. “And in relationships where one partner has left the other, don’t assume it’s only the person left behind who needs your support, “ she adds. “The chances are the other person needs someone to talk to as well.”

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it’s often men who hurt the most**

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NSW HEALTH
DEPARTMENT

When marriages break down, it's often men who hurt the most

One advantage of being a woman is that when something goes wrong in her life it's often easier for her to turn to friends for support. Many men, on the other hand, find it difficult to confide in others - partly because men are often brought up believing they must always appear strong, and that asking for help is a sign of inadequacy. Another reason is that although a man may have friends with whom he works, socialises or plays sport, they're not always the kind of relationships in which he feels he can confide his deepest feelings.

The fact that men often have less emotional support is a major reason why, when marriages break up, many men develop emotional problems which can eventually affect their health. Each year in Australia there are around 52,000 divorces and 70,000 separations - a figure which includes couples living in long term de facto relationships. According to Geoff Price, of the NSW Men's Health and Wellbeing Association, an organisation which aims to improve the health and wellbeing of men and boys in the community, this adds up to large numbers of men who aren't coping with the aftermath of separation. According to research by the Family Court of Australia, many men are still struggling with problems related to separation ten years after the event.

This doesn't mean men have a worse experience than women, he's quick to add. But their experience is different. Many men are also unprepared for the break up of their relationship.

After separation, it's normal for partners to feel many emotions including loneliness, confusion, guilt, anger, or feeling worthless. But whereas women can often unburden their feelings by talking to friends, many men keep their emotions locked inside,

says Geoff who works as a counsellor specialising in men's relationship issues.

"It takes courage for men to speak out about their feelings. But it's better if they can - when we hide our pain it affects our mental and physical wellbeing," he says, explaining that instead of expressing their grief openly, men often cope with separation or divorce in ways that can affect their health. Some men withdraw from their friends or spend too much time at work, for instance; others cope with grief by abusing alcohol or other drugs, while some become violent. Sometimes this violence is turned upon their former partner, and sometimes it's turned upon themselves - for every female suicide associated with separation, there are 12 male suicides.

But there's also evidence that men who are able to talk about their feelings

at the time of separation cope better than those who don't. Besides friends and family, there are other people men can turn to, including GPs, bi-lingual counsellors at some community health centres, ministers of religion or some community associations. Organisations providing counselling for people affected by separation and divorce include the Anglican Counselling Centre (02) 9799 9311; Unifam-Marriage-Family Counselling (02) 9891 1628; Relationships Australia, (02) 9418 8800 or 1800 801 578 for callers outside Sydney. For 24 hour telephone counselling there is also Lifeline on 131 114.

But we all have an important role to play here as well. If you know someone who is going through the process of separation or divorce, give them opportunities to talk about how they feel. Even if they seem to be coping, the chances are they'll benefit from being able to talk. But don't say "call me if you need me" - they probably won't. It's better to take the initiative and phone them, visit them, or invite them to your home for a meal. Say