

Contents

Introduction.	1
Step 1 Managing the Crises or Conflict	9
Step 2 Communicating with Your Self and Your Partner.	33
Step 3 Defining the Initial Goals and Purposes of Your Separation.	73
Step 4 Choosing the Type of Separation That's Right for You.	96
Step 5 Deciding on the Terms of Your Separation	127
Step 6 Talking and Dealing with Children During Separation.	152
Step 7 Carry Out Your Decision to Separate	181
Step 8 Developing, Clarifying, and Changing Goals— for Yourself and Your Relationship	205
Step 9 Evaluating Your Goals.	239
Step 10 Making Decisions	273
Conclusion.	307
Appendix 1 Reaching an Agreement: A Negotiation Exercise	309
Appendix 2 Relaxation–Meditation Exercise.	315
Bibliography.	313
Suggested Reading	318
Resources	320
About the Author	321

Introduction

Separations occur throughout the life cycle and are necessary to human development: at birth we separate from our mothers; at two years old we assert our independence and want to do everything ourselves; separation and independence describe the crises and risks of our teen years; and separations often continue through our adult years. In marriage or relationships, however, we consider the taking of space or separation as a sign of trouble with a capital *D* for “Divorce.” In fact, temporary separations in a marriage can often be exactly what couples need in order to grow, develop, and renew their commitment to each other and themselves.

It has been my experience that people often choose divorce because they believe their marriages have become unbearable, they are desperate for change, and they don’t know of any viable alternative. As I will show through stories and situations in this book, managed separation can be a viable alternative, offering a path that increases the chances of keeping your marriage together and your family intact. Separations, as defined in this book, are about taking both physical space and psychological space. I will show you how useful, healthy, and necessary such separations can be, and how you can make them work for you.

If your relationship is in crisis, a well-managed separation can help you regain much-needed balance and boundaries, and help you avoid a hasty move to divorce. This is a book about how best to figure out what you and your partner really want and whether the relationship can provide it.

This is not to suggest that separations are ever easy. They often stretch us way beyond our comfort zones and force us to find different ways of viewing life, but the self-growth we experience during the process of separation almost always leaves us better off.

In over thirty-five years of relationship, marriage, and divorce counseling, I have helped hundreds of couples sort through their conflicts and come to decisions about their relationships. Some did not want to work on their relationships, or for one reason or another simply didn't put in the effort. Others stayed together but continued to feel dissatisfied. Seeing so many couples in crisis, I began to realize that there are times in our lives when self-growth is more important than a relationship. Often we can't change, grow, and become satisfied in our relationships without periods of separation during which we have space to grow as individuals.

Thoughts of separating often pop up early in a relationship, shortly after the romance period. As a couple begins to settle into a routine and they come to know each other's "edges," they often fear they might be falling out of love. As they are adjusting to life together, they may start to feel disillusioned and disappointed. For this reason this period is often referred to as the disillusionment–compromise stage of the relationship. The couple is not falling out of love so much as reclaiming their original selves and shifting their expectations of each other.

This is a perfectly natural stage in any relationship, but it can be extremely traumatic. People often begin to show parts of themselves that their partners have not seen. It is about growing and separating into your *self*, learning to take care of your self, and meeting your wants in the relationship. But without realizing that separation can be a healthy thing, people often tend to fear that their marriage was a mistake. As you'll discover in this book such fears can be lessened by clarifying your wants and negotiating differences.

Another stage when thoughts of separation might come into a relationship is when women find themselves burnt out from performing the multiple duties of wage earner, mother, wife, and keeper of the household. Feeling unappreciated and unsupported, some women will begin to question where all the fun and romance have gone, and

may even begin to question the solidity of their relationship with their partner. A temporary separation can be extremely useful at such times, helping both women and men evaluate the patterns that have developed in the marriage and how these patterns might need changing.

Perhaps the most familiar catalyst for separation is the midlife crisis, which can occur at any age. Usually, one partner starts to question his or her values, lifestyle, and direction, and the health of the relationship. These changes are normal and even predictable, but most couples lack a way of dealing with them.

Because people do not usually have a structure to follow during these challenging times, the conflict can become so difficult to manage that separation becomes a necessity simply to ease tension and survive.

I developed ten steps that provide individuals and couples with a starting point and a “map” to guide them. My approach essentially allows you to hit the pause button, which will give you an opportunity to develop yourself and learn more about your own patterns of relating to others. Even when relationships cannot be resurrected, this process helps people start new relationships on better footing.

There’s simply no reason that a decision as major as whether to stay together or not—one that would permanently affect you, your children, and so many others—should be undertaken without the benefit of good information and the insight, knowledge, and experience gained by others who’ve already been through the process.

I wrote this book to share with you some of the ideas and methods I have used successfully with clients, and to share their experiences with taking space from each other. Whether you are considering a psychological separation (without a physical move) or a physical separation, my ten steps can help you gain control of the conflict, your feelings, and your self. Once you’ve given yourself that space or time, you will find that you are in a much better position to consider your full range of options. It is important to do this with great care because *how* you separate will have a lot to do with how easily and well the process goes, especially for your children, if you have any.

What people have found particularly useful about my approach is that it is not dependent on two people. Many of my clients have

successfully used this approach even without any cooperation from their partners. That's because it is essentially about helping individuals face their fears and ask themselves such difficult and confusing questions as the following:

- Am I unhappy with myself or my spouse?
- Can I learn to be alone and deal with my feelings of rejection?
- What if the grass isn't greener on the other side?
- Can I fall in love again with the same partner?
- What's the difference between loving my partner and being in love with my partner?
- How do childhood losses and divorce affect my current conflict and separation?
- Am I depressed? What does my depression have to do with my relationship?
- What are my contributions to my relationship patterns?

I truly respect the power and resilience of the human spirit, and it is my hope that you will find in this book a path to guide you through your difficult time and the companionship and wisdom of others who have made the journey.

Take a quick look at the ten steps of Separation Management:

1. Managing the Crisis or Conflict You will learn how to answer questions such as the following: Is your conflict routine or are you in a crisis? Is your conflict aggressive and explosive, or passive and avoidant as in a cold war? You will also learn things you can do to control your anger and ease your pain.

2. Communicating in the Midst of Crisis You will look at how you currently communicate with your partner and yourself—if you communicate at all—and learn how to develop ways to communicate even during a crisis, with an emphasis on learning to communicate with your self.

3. Defining the Initial Goals of Separation (Both Yours and Your Spouse/Partner's) and Determining if Separation Is the Answer

4. Choosing the Type of Separation That Is Right for You

5. Deciding on Terms and Conditions, the Time Frames, and Ground Rules of Your Separation

Steps 3, 4, and 5 will help you determine whether separation is for you and what kind of separation might be best. You'll ask yourself why you (or your partner) are considering a change. This is probably the most important question you can ask. Determining *why* will give your separation the definition and purpose it needs.

Of course, things change. Sometimes people separate for one reason and then discover other reasons for separating. That's where the stories and examples that accompany each step become so valuable. They provide a kind of menu of different types of separations that have worked for different couples. Examples of different separation agreements will help you look closely at the various issues and problems couples wrestle with because of and during the separation.

These three steps will help you clarify your goals, motivations, investments, and commitments. You will also try to determine whether or not you and your partner should seek counseling, either together or separately.

6. Minimizing the Impact on Your Children You will learn the best ways to talk to your kids and minimize the impact of the separation.

7. Carrying Out Your Decision Here's where the rubber hits the road. How do you get started? What does an in-house separation mean in reality? How about an out-of-the-house separation? Numerous couples share their experiences.

8. Developing, Clarifying, and Changing Your Goals as the Separation Progresses After the crisis or conflict has eased, you may find your goals for yourself and your relationship changing. During a separation, with a bit of space and breathing room, many people find themselves asking big questions about what's important to them and who they are. Separation affects people at the very essence of their

existence and many times the crisis becomes an opportunity, albeit often a painful one, to grow and stretch well beyond where we thought we could go. Some individuals and couples even go so far as to say that their separation was a spiritual journey that allowed them to develop deeper love and compassion for themselves and others. Often in the wounded heart one finds the courage to know, heal, and love oneself and others again.

9. Evaluating Whether Your Goals Are Being Met As important as it can be to separate, it is crucial to have ways to determine whether it's working. This step will help you evaluate your separation and changes and make new decisions and adjustments as necessary.

10. Determining What's Next: Getting Back Together, Staying Apart, or Getting a Divorce It's decision time. Sooner or later the separation will end. Do you need a trial union? More physical space? More time to work on the issues of separation? Is it time to file for a divorce, or time to make a renewed commitment? These and many other choices are presented through discussion and the experiences of other couples.

As you can see, this approach is circular. Each step is a building block that will help you move to the next step. For example, suppose your immediate crisis was that your spouse was having an affair. You successfully managed the conflict (Step 1) by having your partner agree to stop seeing his lover. Now you're working on your joint goal of reviving the romance in your relationship only to find a lot of old resentments surfacing. Every time there is a backslide into nonproductive conflict, you must once again gain control over yourself and the immediate conflict (Step 1).

This flexible structure and format also allows you to address the deeper goals, issues, and questions of separation, such as what you want and if the relationship will provide it. It will help you determine where your and your partner's responsibilities lie for the difficulties in your relationship, and your role in your own unhappiness and lack of fulfillment in the relationship.

I have found that insight and understanding into your self and your relationship often becomes overpowered by the intense feelings and conflict of change and separation. Your work, therefore, begins when you decide to control conflict for yourself and/or your partner and reestablish some basic communication. If you then decide to separate, either physically or psychologically, I give you a safe container for exploring your individual and relationship goals—one that allows you to use the separation to go as deep as you want to into understanding your self, your partner, and your relationship.

If I have one goal, it's to empower you so that you will be able to decide how things will go for you, whether you are the one initiating the change or the change is being forced on you. Each of the ten steps will be explored, in turn, in the following steps. For each step I offer you the coping skills, exercises, and methods that have been successful with my clients. Remember, however, that no two situations are alike. Even if you find yourself identifying with a particular situation, you may very well choose a different type of separation or make different decisions. The cases are not prescriptions, but they can be very good models when the going gets rough.

In these ten steps you'll find insights, knowledge, and coping strategies that my separating clients have used with success. From there, it's up to you.

Begin by looking at your conflict or crisis and see where to go from there. I wish you much luck and success on this separation journey.