

**G**ood relationships with parents make children happy, whatever family structure they live in. Today's families comprise of a variety of shapes and sizes. The "typical" household made up of 2 parents. You may be raising your children on your own. Being a single parent can be challenging. It can also be very rewarding.

A single parent is a parent responsible for all financial, material, and emotional needs of his/her child. Sometimes, one finds themselves in a single-parent family structure that has arisen due to death of the partner, intentional artificial insemination, or unplanned pregnancy. Historically, the death of a partner was a major cause of single parenting. Single parenting can also result from the breakup or divorce of coupled parents who leave and choose to not co-parent, thus leaving one parent to raise and support the child on their own. Many people confuse single parenting with co-parenting.

The demographics of single parenting show a general increase worldwide in children living in single parent

homes. Having a support network of friends or family that can help you with this and can provide support for you and your children can hopefully make the whole process less painful. Single parents and their children often develop closer relationships because they are forced co-depend upon each other. Children often learn to take more responsibility for themselves and for others through this process.

Single parenting is a lot of work. It is certainly good to have someone who can share the burden and the load with you. Ideally, if divorce happens, the channel of communication should stay open between both the parents regarding their children. Involvement in endless legal tangles regarding custody and visitation should be avoided. This will only put more stress on the children as well as the parents.

Single parents go through multiple stressors which could include visitation and custody problems, the effects of continuing conflict between the parents, less opportunity for parents and children to spend time together, effects of the breakup on children's



## **SINGLE PARENTING**

### **A Role With Immense Amount of Responsibilities**

school performance and peer relations, disruptions of extended family relationships, problems caused by the parents' dating and entering new relationships to name a few.

#### **Mental health of single mothers:**

❑ It has been statistically proven that the lack of social support for single mothers causes them to spiral into depression.

❑ Single mothers are likely to have mental health issues, financial hardships, live in a low income area and receive low levels of social support. All of these factors are taken into consideration when evaluating the mental health of single mothers. The occurrence of moderate to severe mental disability was more pronounced among single mothers at 28.7% compared to partnered mothers at 15.7%.

❑ These mental disabilities include but are not limited to anxiety and depression. Financial hardships also have an impact on the mental health of single mothers. Women, aged 15–24, were more likely to live in a low social economic area, have one child, and not to have completed their senior year of high school. These women reported to be in the two lowest income areas, and their mental health was much poorer than those in higher income areas.



❑ Statistically, never married, and separated / divorced mothers had the highest regularities of drug abuse, personality disorder and PTSD. The family structure can become a trigger for mental health issues in single mothers. They are especially at risk for having higher levels of depressive symptoms.

#### **Children and divorce :**

❑ After a certain "crisis period," most children resume normal development; however, their future relationships are often affected, as they lack a model upon which to base a healthy long term relationship. Nonetheless, as adults, the children of divorcees cope better with change.

❑ Children are affected by divorce in many different ways, varying by the circumstances and age of the child. Young children aged two to six are generally the most fearful of parental separation, and often feel abandoned or confused. Both boys and girls have the same amount of trouble coping, but often show this in different ways. Nonetheless this age group adapts best to their situations, as they are often too young to remember their non-custodial parent vividly.

Children aged seven to twelve are much better at expressing emotions and accepting parental breakup, but often distrust their parents, rely on outside help and support for encouragement, and



may manifest social and academic problems. Adolescents cope the worst with divorce; they often struggle most with the change, and may even turn away from their family entirely, dealing with their situation on their own. They often have problems expressing feelings, similar to far younger children, and may have adjustment issues with long-term relationships due to these feelings.

Keeping in touch with both parents and having a healthy relationship with both mother and father appears to have the most effect on a child's behaviour; which leads to an easier time coping with the divorce as well as development through the child's life.

Children will do better with their parents' divorce if they have a smooth adjustment period. One way to make this adjustment easier on children is to let them "remain in the same neighbourhood and school following the divorce.

#### Ways to Reduce Single-parent Stress :

❑ **Get a handle on finances:** Raising a family on one income, or relying on an ex-spouse for child support, can be one of the hardest aspects of parenting alone.

That's why it's important to take steps to budget your money, learn about long-term investments, plan for college and retirement, and, if possible, enhance earning power by going back to school or getting additional job training.

❑ **Set up a support system:** All single parents need help—whether it's someone to watch the kids while you run out to do errands or simply someone to talk to when you feel overwhelmed. While it's tempting to try to handle everything alone, ask friends and family members

for help. You could join a single-parent support group, or, if finances allow, hire a trusted sitter to help out with the kids or someone to assist with the housework.

❑ **Maintenance a daily schedule:** Try to schedule meals, chores, bedtimes and other family functions at regular hours so that your child knows exactly what to expect each day. A consistent routine will help your child feel more secure and help you be more organized.

❑ **Be consistent with discipline:** Children thrive when they know which behaviours are expected of them and which rules they need to follow. If you are divorced or separated, work with your spouse to create and observe consistent rules and methods of discipline (there's nothing more stressful than having one parent undermine the other). If your child has other caregivers, talk to them about how you expect your child to be disciplined.

❑ **Honestly is the Key:** Inevitably, questions will come up about the changes in your family, or about the absence of one parent. Answer your child's

questions in an open, honest, and age-appropriate way. Make sure that your child gets the help and support he needs to deal with difficult emotions.

❑ **Treat kids like kids:** With the absence of a partner, it's sometimes tempting to rely too heavily on children for comfort, companionship, or sympathy. But children have neither the emotional capacity nor the life experience to act as substitute adult partners. If you find yourself depending on your kids too much, or expressing your frustrations to them too often, seek out adult friends and family members to talk to. Or seek counselling if necessary.

❑ **Abolish "guilt" from your vocabulary:** It's always easy for single parents to feel guilty about the time they don't have or the things they can't do or provide for their children. But for your own sense of well-being, it's better to focus on all the things you do accomplish on a daily basis and on all the things you do provide and don't forget about all the love, attention, and comfort you're responsible for! (If you ever question your day-to-day achievements, just make a list.) If you're feeling guilty about a divorce or other disruption in your home life, think about joining a support group for other divorced parents. Focus on helping your child (and yourself) get the help you need.

❑ **Take time for your children:** Even though the piles of laundry and dirty dishes may beckon, set aside time each day to enjoy with your kids. (After all, isn't that what parenting is all about?) Spend time playing, reading, going for a walk, or simply listening.

❑ **To music together.** And most important, focus on the love between you and on your relationship as a family.

❑ **Take time for yourself:** Likewise, it's important to schedule time for yourself. Even if it's something as simple as reading a book, taking a warm bath, or having a chat with a friend, setting aside a little personal time will give you a chance to refuel.

❑ **Stay positive:** It's easy to become overwhelmed by all the responsibilities and demands of single parenthood. On top of that, you may be experiencing the pain of divorce or the death of a spouse. Despite all of your own feelings, though, it's important to maintain a positive attitude, since your children are affected by your mood. The best way to deal with stress is to exercise regularly, maintain a proper diet, get enough rest, and seek balance in your life. If you're feeling sad, it's okay to share some of your sentiments with your children, but let them know that they are not the cause of the problems and that good times lie ahead for all of you.





### Therapy for Parenting Issues :

❑ Counselling and therapy can help parents in various ways. Some parents may become stressed by a particular parenting challenge, be it a one-time event or recurring situation. When a child faces a mental health concern or behavioural issue, a parent may find help for the child but leave their own emotions and feelings unaddressed. This can be harmful in some cases, as stress may accumulate and leave the parent feeling overwhelmed. In therapy, a parent can address their feelings about a certain issue, find support and guidance, and seek professional help for parenting issues and concerns.

❑ Parents may seek out a therapist that specializes in child development or behavioural health concerns or a family therapist to address issues affecting the whole family. Family therapy may be helpful because each member of the family can bring up individual concerns that connect to the family dynamic, and parents can become aware of issues that need to be resolved.

❑ Individual therapy can also be helpful, and some parents may find couples counselling can strengthen

their parenting skills, as strengthening their partnership may help couples become better able to resolve disagreements about child-rearing or family life.

❑ When parenting issues lead to stress, this stress may manifest itself through worry, depression, irritability, or anger. Some situations, such as the loss of a child or partner, may lead to grief, depression, or post-traumatic stress. When these conditions go untreated, the well-being of any other children may be affected.

Therapy can help address and treat these issues. A therapist or other mental health professional is also likely to encourage parents to make time for themselves whenever possible and maintain a self-care routine.



#### **Bhavna Bharmi**

*Sr Clinical Psychologist,  
Fortis Escorts Hospital, Okhla, NEW DELHI  
She is also Cofounder PsyCare Hospital,  
NEW DELHI.*

*E-mail ID: bhavs2001@yahoo.com*