



Divided Loyalties

You've eaten, holidayed, laughed and cried with them. So, asks **Gillian Harvey**, how do we deal with the dilemmas when friends separate?

BE REALISTIC

Generally, our initial instinct after a divorce is to try to remain friends with both parties, but this may not be a realistic objective in all situations.

'Usually within a couple, there will be one person we feel closer to,' advises Dr Sandra Wheatley, a social psychologist with over two decades' experience. 'It's important to realise we may not remain in contact with both people, even if the divorce turns out to be fairly amicable.'

This is a view shared by Julie, 51, from Whitstable, Kent, who has experienced several friends' divorces over the years, and dealt with the fallout from each.

'It's a sad fact of life that when couples split up, it isn't always just with one another – it's often

with their friends, too,' says Julie. 'In the past few years, several of our friends' marriages have ended and so have the friendships we had with all parties. My husband and I have found it next to impossible to stay neutral and so we have

'We found it tough when one of our friends met someone new and invited us around – it felt like betrayal'

ended up taking sides. No matter how hard we tried to avoid it, there was always one partner in the break-up we've ended up losing contact with.'

This doesn't mean we have to be hostile to either party – quite the opposite. In fact, as with many experiences in life, it's often better to let things develop

organically, rather than try to force the issue on people.

'Being upfront about your feelings is important, but it's equally important to allow things to happen naturally,' adds Dr Wheatley. 'Expect some ups and downs as the two people

whom you have known as a couple take on their own individual identities and adapt to living a single life.'

MOVING ON

Even for those who manage to retain a relationship with both parties, the future may hold unforeseen new problems. For

example, it's likely that at least one of your friends will move on to form a new relationship with someone else. Even if this new person was not a factor in the divorce, coming to terms with a newly formed couple can be extremely testing at times.

'We were friends with Chris and Jill for years,' says Jane, 62, from Bedford. 'When they split up, the divorce was fairly amicable and we somehow managed to remain friendly with both of them. However, we found it very awkward when Chris found a new partner and invited us around to meet her. It felt like a betrayal of Jill, so we were very torn over what to do.'

Once again, honesty is the best policy, says Dr Wheatley. 'Tell your friend that you feel a little bit uncomfortable about the

situation before you go around – this may help in the long-run. And try not to have too many expectations – you may find that you really enjoy spending time with this new couple.'

HOSTILE TERRITORY

It's a sad fact of life that many divorces are far from amicable. There is often blame, can be arguments, and sometimes one or the other party will try to encourage you to take sides in a very personal battle.

'When my close friends Liz and Ian split acrimoniously a few years ago, both demanded me as a friend,' explains Ros, 50, from Hertfordshire. 'I felt I had to choose between them, so I ended up picking Liz. But the bitterness between them poisoned both friendships and I am no longer in touch with either, which is a real shame.'

According to Dr Wheatley, it's best to be direct and refuse to

take sides. 'Reassure your friends that you are there for them,' she says. 'But that you don't want to become part of this very personal conflict.'

CHANGE IS CERTAIN

Even if we maintain a close friendship after a couple have split, it may be that our friendship won't endure for other, more personal, reasons. Dr Wheatley says that friends we may only have known as part of a couple are likely to undergo many changes when establishing their identity as a single person. It may even be that the person with whom we felt a strong connection with will be almost unrecognisable as they explore new avenues and begin to flourish as an individual.

'Change is about the only thing you can rely on in this situation,' she says. 'The best thing to do is to try to see how things pan out. Don't have expectations about your friend, or their situation. Simply see how things go: you may end up closer than ever as friends, or may drift apart.'

AVOID AVOIDANCE

It is also important that we don't allow awkward feelings to destroy a friendship – many people find divorce between

close friends uncomfortable, and this can cause them to avoid the situation altogether. This is very unhelpful for the divorcee, who may feel unsupported.

'Both my partner and I experienced awkwardness when we split three years ago,' explains Kate, 46, from London. 'But the most surprising part was the deathly silence from so many of our mutual friends – I think people feel very

who chooses to move on and cease contact. There can be many reasons for this, so, if you lose contact, try not to take it personally – the reason is very unlikely to be anything you've actually done yourself.'

For example, Sharon, 57, from Hertfordshire says, 'When my husband and I split over 15 years ago, I was concerned as there were issues regarding the custody of my daughter. Although I'd been close to many members of his family and friends, I felt it was too difficult to get in touch. Now, years later, I'm back in touch with some friends and family members – they've missed me as much as I've missed them!'

TESTING TIMES

However well a divorce is managed by a couple, life will change and people will get hurt; friendships will develop or be lost, and you may experience some unforeseen emotions or circumstances.

It's important to remember that there is no 'right way' to cope with the changes such a split brings, as the emotions and complications will be as diverse and varied as the relationship itself. If you face the situation with an open mind, and communicate directly and openly with the friend or friends in question, you should have the best chance of creating a situation in which a friendship can remain and flourish.

TOP TIPS FOR COPING WHEN FRIENDS DIVORCE

- * Provide support, but don't be drawn in to any potential conflict
- * Be honest about your feelings
- * Be realistic – you may not remain friends with both parties
- * Expect change – your friend needs to adjust to being single, and your relationship may change
- * Remember the importance of communication – it's better to be upfront

uncomfortable for their own personal reasons. Divorce can be a lonely experience – I'm still struggling with that now.'

DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY

Of course, the decision on whether to remain friends may be taken away from you entirely – sometimes it's the divorcee