

Dr. Elaine Collins, MFT, LPCC

DrElaineCollins.com

Planning for a Smooth Transition

It is hard to wrap your head around that fact that your new goal is to untangle yourself from your spouse. When you first started out, the visions of your future did not include leaving your partner to stop the emotional pain and scaring. You never thought you would be starting over, and needing to figure out how to create a successful, happy fulfilling life for yourself.

Divorce is about loss. Divorce is about coping with the death of a dream, following the same stages of grief of a person who has lost a loved one to physical death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. It is a process that one must go through to come out whole on the other side. Timing is different for everyone. Some will go through the stages quickly other will take a lot of time. How the timing of the process differs will depend on whether you are the one leaving or the one being left.

Following are a few guidelines and recommendations as you move through the divorce process.

- Find Your Support Team

During the process of having to hold your emotional self together, taking care of the family and going to work all takes its toll on you. The unknown future is terrifying, trying to answer questions. Where will I live? How will I live? Going through a divorce is one of the most stressful events you will go through in life. You may feel your life is a puzzle that has been scattered on the floor. Feeling piece by piece, you must begin to put the puzzle together again to feel some sense that you are back in control.

The first item on the list to reduce the stress is to develop a support team for you and your family. The team can include family members, friends, kid's coaches or church family to name a few possibilities. However, this support team is there to be empathetic through the process by giving you encouragement, babysitting when you need to meet with your lawyer or mediator, dropping your kid's off from practice, or helping to give you a night out to dinner to clear your head and get your mind off the divorce.

Your support team is there to help you with your day-to-day activities and give you encouragement. Your support team is not there to watch you self-destruct by crying, having angry outburst, or dumping your issues on them for hours on end. It won't be long before each one backs away because they don't know how to help you, and you will wear them out quickly. If you find yourself doing this, it may be time to search for a therapist that specializes in the divorce process. A therapist can work with the strong emotions you are having, as well as teach you how to relax.

- Work with a Therapist

Because this is one of the most stressful events you will go through in your life it is wise to find a good therapist you like and trust. They can help you through the emotional stages of the divorce process, and teach you stress-reducing and relaxation techniques. They can work with you to start over by helping redefine and plan the next chapter of your life.

When I talk about the divorce process, I like to use the metaphor of peeling back the layers of an onion. Taking each emotion, with all the feelings that come up, and exploring it. Then, moving to the next layer or emotion and doing the same thing until we get down to the core. Exploring and analyzing each emotion so the healing process can begin. Some of the common emotions around divorce are the following.

- Anger (Feelings of being betrayed, feeling need for revenge, having failed, being naïve)
- Guilt (Not being able to keep the marriage together, for causing breakup)
- Shame (My actions don't fit my belief system, caused the pain)
- Sadness (Loss of familiar family structure, loss of identity, who will be there for me?)
- Fear (What do I do now? Where will I go? Who am I now?)

Communicating with your Spouse

One of the most difficult things to do during the divorce process is having to talk face-to-face or correspond with your spouse. Conversations can start out to be civil and quickly turn to chaos by a snarky comment. This can result in a volleying of insults that escalates to pulling every transgression that ever took place between you. Trying to cause your spouse as much pain, grief and anxiety is not a good strategy.

Even though you are emotionally charged, it's time to use your relaxation techniques and remember that the person you want revenge on is also a parent to your children. Look for some middle ground by communicating only facts, and keeping the emotions it stirs up for your therapist.

Following is a list of strategies for effective communication with your spouse during the divorce process:

- Think about your children first! It will help you think/react rationally.
- Keep communication short and factual.
- Communicate with "I" statements: I feel, I need, I see etc. Do not use "You" statements, stay away from: You always, You never. "You" statements are accusations and are "heard" as you are attacking them which can lead to arguments and conversations that spiral out of control.
- Use email—no emotional digs, stick to topic and facts—reread before you hit send for tone!
- Avoid texting—emotions come through and hard to set tone—use texting for notification of arrival for children's pick up or to confirm a time only.
- Never respond when you are angry—wait several hours then write a reply or let your legal team respond if a legal matter.
- Keep a calendar of events and times and deadlines you both need to know—cuts down on interaction.
- Keep all your documents together in file folders in banker's boxes—easily transportable if you need to take them with you to your lawyer or mediator's office or court.
- Be proactive—Work with your legal team to know what to expect— know how things will work until your divorce is final—especially issues around your children's visitation and schedules.

Helping your Children

Telling your children about the divorce is a difficult time for both spouses. If there was ever a time to be united on being civil and respectful it is when you tell the children that you are divorcing. Children, depending on their age, will react and respond in different ways. This may be a good time to talk with your therapist to be emotionally prepared on how to approach the topic. A therapist can help you, depending on age of your children, be prepared to respond to questions they may have. How you prepare for and handle this family meeting will set the stage for future discussions. If they feel safe they will be open to sharing their thoughts and feelings with you.

Following are some guidelines for having the discussion based on age group:

- Zero to Three Years Old

Babies and very young children cannot process what the meaning of a divorce is. At this time, they are beginning to form attachments so it is important to spend time with both parents so they can properly form attachments. This age group will pick up on emotions of anger and fear, so staying united and calm, and minimize any changes or disruptions to their lives is critical.

- Three to Five Years Old

This age group just wants to know they are loved by both of you. Give them unconditional love and attention as they get used to any new routines. Don't be surprised if you see them take a step back in maturing and become clingier. This is their way of soothing emotions they are having a hard time identifying.

This age group tends to blame themselves for your divorce; if only I behaved better, if I only would have picked up my toys. Answer any questions they have as honestly as you can without details. Minimalize the chaos and they will have an easier time adjusting to what you are asking them to do, especially when it comes to going between two homes, as your divorce plans unfold.

They will pick up on emotions of anger and fear, so stay united and calm and stick to talking about things that will affect their world. Let them know they will be staying with Grandma tonight, or Aunt Janice will pick you up from pre-school. No surprises, let them know when their routine will change.

- Five to Ten Years Old

This age group is beginning to understand that divorce will change and disrupt their world. They are now exposed to relationships outside the home and are beginning to form friendships. They may feel that they have the ability to stop their parents from divorcing. When they are unsuccessful it distresses them, and will bring up emotions of anger, which can lead them to acting out at home and at school. At the end of this section I have listed danger signs to watch out for with your children.

Parents with children in this age group should work together to develop a consistent, predictable schedule for them both at home and school. Now is the time to find out what interests your child has, get them involved in extracurricular activities where they can release tension, and build new friendships.

- Ten to Twelve Years Old

Children ten to twelve probably know more than they let on by being observant. Even if you think your children have never seen or heard your fighting, assume that they know you and your spouse do not get along, and will not stay together. This is the age of growing into adolescence, and being very consciences of every conversation and event that is happening around them, especially within their peer group. They are developmentally starting to have opinions and beliefs of their own based on their peer group.

Be honest with your adolescent about what is happening without giving every specific detail. Most important with this group is to let them know what will change in their world, such as after school pick-up schedules, sports practices, sporting events and weekend rituals. Keep as much the same in their lives as possible. Let them know that they are the main consideration in any decision you and your spouse make.

This group may ask a lot of questions, trying to figure out how to emotionally navigate this new uncharted territory of mom and dad not staying together. Don't be surprised if they also have some opinions and feelings of anger, by lashing out at the spouse that they believe is causing the family this pain. Warning signs may be depression, isolation from friends, or perfectionism as an attempt to control their world.

- Young Adult-Thirteen to Fifteen Years Old

The young adult ages thirteen to fifteen are very observant and understand what is going on. They may be relieved that you finally are discussing it, and no longer must pretend. They also may become quite vocal as to their views and opinions. Developmentally, they are differentiating from you and having their own views of the world that may be quite different from how you raised them. They are trying on a lot of hats right now. They are searching for what fits with the values and beliefs they are holding, leaving them sometimes insecure and self-conscious.

Answer their question honestly and to the best of your ability. Depending on their beliefs they are forming, a breakup due to infidelity may leave them angry and confused at the parent that has strayed. You may need to give them some space to consider the situation. Let them know you are there to answer every question when they are ready, and that you love them unconditionally.

If they show signs of having angry outbursts or retreat into themselves and stay silent and sulky, get them into counseling. It will provide a safe haven to discuss their feelings and learn important stress reduction techniques.

Danger signs with this group may include excessive anger, difficulty at school, alcohol/drug use, or sexually acting out.

- Young Adult-Sixteen to Eighteen Years Old

This age group is the most aware of what is going on and may have known the divorce has been coming for quite some time. If discussions have not taken place before the official announcement of divorce, they will be relieved that they can now have an open discussion with both parents.

They are now learning to be independent from their parents and have a social network outside the home, but they still need support and household rules.

Answer their questions honestly with as much detail that you feel is appropriate for their age. Lying to them will be ferreted out and will cause them not to trust you in all areas of your interaction.

Depending on their beliefs, they may have strong opinions especially if the divorce involves infidelity. Be prepared for them to blame and punish the parent that has strayed or believe to have caused the divorce. Respect your older teen as you would any other adult; give them space to consider the situation. You can ask for a sit down to discuss their feelings, or attend a session with your therapist, to help you both communicate effectively.

New Rules of Engagement

As you and your spouse make difficult decisions around the family and on new routines, it is imperative that you stay emotion free and upbeat around the children. Sit down and make a written pact that you will put the kids first. Compose a written plan of how you will communicate and rules you both agree to.

Following is a list of considerations to include:

- Do not fight in front of the children. Even to teenagers, parents screaming, calling names, slamming doors, throwing things or fighting in general is frightening. Intense fighting can lead to police being called that could complicate your life.
- When alone with your children, do not say unkind things or attack the actions of the absent spouse. Remember they still love you equally and identify as a family. If you “hate” your spouse, your children will worry that you can hate them as well.
- Be careful when they are with you and what you say to family members, friends or neighbors when you think the kids are out of ear shot. Don’t say anything you couldn’t say in front of them. Assume your house has ears. It’s not worth the emotional pain you cause them, and potentially cause a fire storm if they go home and tell the other parent what was overheard.

Techniques for the Switching Hour

What is the switching hour? It’s that time at pre-determined intervals that each parent has agreed they will move the children from one parent’s resident to the other parent’s resident. This can take place at the child’s residence, local restaurant parking lot, or even the police station or any agreed to place to exchange the children.

This switching hour can be a stressful time for children. Even if they want to go with the parent that is picking them up, they are concerned that they are abandoning the other parent left behind. Young children have a hard time dealing with this feeling and will tend to blame themselves for the situation.

Following are some guidelines to make the switching hour less chaotic:

- On the day that is planned for the children to spend time with the other parent, let them know all the things you will do while they are away. Stay upbeat and enthusiastic even if you must pretend. Having the children seeing you depressed or crying will only increase their anxiety as they prepare to go to the other parent’s house. Arrange a call at a pre-determined time you have set with your spouse to talk with the children. This will give them something to look forward to, and will also relieve any anxiety or guilt they have leaving you. Make sure you and your spouse keep the time agreed for the children’s call.

- Many times, the switching hour includes school nights as well as weekends. Staying organized is critical to reduce stress for yourself as well as the children. Purchase a laundry basket or a tub with handles for each child. Put all school books, toys, favorite blankets, a change of clothes, cell phones, electronic devices and games. Set agreed to boundaries that once they are done with the device, book, or homework, it goes back into the basket or tub. This keeps the stress of forgotten books, shoes, or favorite game, requiring an emergency trip back across town.
- Have a manila folder with a calendar of each child's games, practices and school events that both of you are invited to or need to attend. The folder should be put on top of the children's basket or tub each trip. It is very important that you do not make your children be responsible for letting either of you know when they need to be picked up or attend a school event. That is your responsibility to know the children's schedules. Having the calendar is the best way to decrease the amount of time you need to interact with one another. It will cut down on arguments that can arise when one spouse feels they were not told about an event.

What to be prepared for:

- Young children usually don't want to initially go with the other spouse because they feel the one left behind will miss them and be lonely. You need to make the switching hour a positive time and share with them what you will be doing while they are with the other parent. This usually stops after they get accustomed to the new schedule and the previous visits have gone smoothly.
- If older children are reluctant to go to visit or stay overnight with one parent, listen to what their reasons are and help solve the issue. If it is related to them being active in school events that are after hours, and causes the child great stress to meet the agreed to visit, figure out an alternate time for the parent to see the older child. Maybe a Saturday lunch alone with the parent instead of coming on Wednesday night with other siblings. Forcing an older child to do anything without their input can be met with much resistance.
- If older children are reluctant to visit with the other parent and anger is the main reason, it would be a good time to get them into a therapist to have a safe place to sort out their feelings.
- Watch for the following danger signs that your child may need to see a therapist to explore their feelings and learn coping techniques:
 - Intense Sadness and Crying
 - Not Eating or Sleeping
 - Outbursts of Anger
 - Drop in Grades at School
 - Getting in Trouble with Law or at School
 - Change in Personality

I hope the recommendations and guidelines listed will allow you to take a step back and plan for how this will affect you and your children emotionally, and the best way to make it a child centered divorce and the process less stressful for the entire family.

Please Contact me at 714-267-8523 or go to www.serenityworkshops.com or www.drelainecollins.com for more free downloads and information on my Child Centered Divorce Support Workshop.