



UNDERSTANDING DIVORCE COACHING

What is a Divorce Coach?

A Collaborative Divorce Coach is a licensed mental health professional who has experience in issues related to separation, divorce and remarriage. The coach has training and expertise in family dynamics, communication skills, mediation, and the collaborative law process. This background enables the coach to help one or both members of a divorcing couple deal with the emotional and psychological challenges of their divorce. Although the coach uses therapeutic skills, the coach does not function as a therapist in this role.

Why Use a Coach?

Divorce is more than a legal process:

Divorce is usually thought of as only a legal process in which couples hire lawyers, may go to court, and come out with some paperwork that officially ends the marriage in the eyes of the law. However, collaborative team professionals understand that separation or divorce is much more than just a legal process. It is an emotional, spiritual, and financial journey that includes a legal event as one step along the way. Just as marriage is much more than a “piece of paper,” the process of divorce is far more than simply “signing the final agreement.” The emotional journey of divorce involves letting go of old ways of relating (as spouses) and learning new ways of acting including how to be co-parents if the couple has children.

Strong feelings can get in the way:

Research has shown that divorce is one of the most stressful life events a person can face. It is a major life transition and can be a very disorienting experience. For most people, getting divorced involves loss on many levels. These can include loss of control, loss of a dream, loss of trust, loss of stability, loss of a best friend, loss of financial security, loss of connection to shared friends and community, and loss of identity as a married person, among others.

Given this level of life disruption, powerful feelings of anger and grief about the end of the marriage are common. So are anxious thoughts about the future such as “Will I be okay?” These thoughts and feelings are normal as divorcing couples go through this

transition. Nonetheless, they can and often do hinder the divorce process. For example, one spouse's anger at the other spouse may prompt acting out in an effort to retaliate. Fear of the unknown may cause them to stall the process. Grief about what has been lost may hamper their ability to visualize and move toward a different future. Many people feel ruled by their emotions at this time that can keep them from making sound decisions.

Communication can be difficult:

Often spouses are in different stages of acceptance about the end of their marriage or partnership. One may be in denial that the divorce is even happening while the other may want a quick resolution. They may blame each other. They may differ in how well they assert themselves and in their tolerance for conflict. They may compete over who is the better parent. Any of these tendencies can cause friction and undermine their ability to act in the best interests of their (redefined) family moving forward.

What can a Coach Do for Me?

Personal issues - A coach can help you...

- honor your feelings of grief and anger over the many losses that result from your divorce.
- find appropriate sources of emotional support to replace ones you have lost.
- learn how to reduce your anxiety and stress as you make decisions about your future.
- manage the strong emotions that are a natural part of this process.
- understand the other partners outlook on an issue even if you don't agree with it.
- identify what each of you does that triggers the other to react negatively.

Legal process issues - A coach can help you...

- figure out where you may be stuck emotionally and what may be causing you to prolong the legal process.
- clarify and articulate to your spouse and attorney the personal goals and values you want reflected in the divorce settlement.
- stay accountable to the goals you have set for your future and that of your children.
- stay focused on working toward win-win solutions, both short and long term.

Co-parent issues - A coach can help you...

- learn how to communicate with your co-parent in the best interests of your children.
- create a foundation for co-parenting that enables you to act in the best interests of your children.
- negotiate terms of your co-parenting plan both during the divorce and in later years as needs change.

How Will a Coach Work With Me?

There are two options for using a coach in the collaborative process. In the allied coach model of practice, each spouse has a coach to support and guide them through the divorce. In the one-coach model, the couple shares a coach who supports each of them and acts as a neutral in shepherding them through the process. The following pages explain how these coaching models differ.

The Role of a Neutral Coach (One-coach Model)

As an integral member of the collaborative team, the neutral coach facilitates communication among all participants in a couple's divorce process. The coach addresses any emotional obstacles that keep either member of the couple from effective functioning. The neutral coach has three main tasks:

- 1) Help the couple move through this process, wherever they are emotionally;
- 2) Help the team work together effectively; and
- 3) Handle the logistics of the process, such as making sure meetings are scheduled.

How it works:

- The coach meets with the couple, both together and individually, to gather information and understand the dynamics and stress points of their particular situation.
- The coach talks about each person's readiness for divorce, and works with the couple to identify where and when communication breaks down between them.
- The coach helps each member of the couple learn what they do that triggers their partner negatively and why that is not in their self-interest long-term. The coach may teach them how they can calm themselves when they become overwhelmed with emotion in order to be more present in the discussion.
- The coach supports the neutral child specialist in teaching the couple healthy co-parenting skills and may assist in the development of a parenting plan.
- The coach honors collaborative principles and will share with the team pertinent information from the couple that could help or hinder the couple achieve their goals.
- The coach facilitates all joint meetings. The coach encourages communication among participants, sets expectations for behavior, monitors the participants' verbal and non-verbal communication and helps manage the unexpected that may be present in the room.
- The coach as a neutral helps provide a voice that is not considered an advocate for either spouse/party. The attorneys are advocates for their clients, and even though

they are committed to a collaborative process, their words may be seen by the other spouse/party as aiding the person they are advocating for. The neutral voice can help move things along and also elicit more honest and candid answers to difficult questions.

- The coach encourages and facilitates effective communication between professional members of the team, both in and between joint meetings. Team members may not realize how they affect the process and this can impede progress. The coach provides another set of eyes and ears that are trained to work to make effective work together easier.
- The coach may make referrals to other professionals when more support is needed.

The Role of the Allied Coach (Two-coach Model)

In the two-coach model, each member of the couple has a coach who serves as an ally to them while still keeping the interests of the whole family in mind. This can allow the parties to get extra support in this process. Having two coaches on the team allows each coach to focus more attention on the needs and challenges of just one member of the couple. As an integral member of the collaborative team, the allied coach supports and holds accountable the individual clients. Each coach helps their client advocate for themselves.

One difference between the neutral coach and the allied coach is that each allied coach works with his/her individual client usually outside of the attorney joint meetings. In one-on-one meetings, the allied coach helps the client identify the client's needs and interests and helps the client communicate those needs and interests so as to be better heard by their partner. In periodic 4-way meetings, the allied coaches meet together with their respective clients to facilitate communication between the couple and address issues that are causing problems between them. In the joint meetings with attorneys, clients, coaches, and possibly other professionals, the allied coaches help their clients function to achieve the best possible outcome.

How it works:

- The allied coaches meet with their member of the couple to help them identify where they are in the process and how they can communicate their concerns in this process.
- The allied coaches help clients manage strong emotion so that they can think clearly.
- The allied coaches help highlight their clients' unique strengths that can be used productively in the process.
- The allied coaches listen for their clients' unique challenges and help develop plans to manage these challenges.

- The allied coaches, in coordination with a neutral child specialist, assist their clients in developing effective communication and co-parenting skills in the best interests of the children.
- The allied coaches help clients formulate a vision for their individual futures.
- The allied coaches provide guidance and direction to help their clients find outside resources if needed.
- The allied coaches may assist the neutral child specialist and the parents in creating a parenting plan.

The one-coach model works extremely well in most cases. However, where conflict is particularly high, a two-coach model may be more appropriate.