

Divorce and Co-Parent Coaching

By Elizabeth A. Dalton

Consider all the months a couple spends planning their “perfect” wedding. Often the couple uses the services of a wedding planner, a caterer, a photographer and other professionals to design a wedding day that is beyond their “fairy tale” dreams. It should be of no surprise that couples are choosing to hire professionals to assist them design a “good” divorce when the time comes to uncouple.

The American Bar Association is recognizing divorce coaching as a new profession to support divorcing couples. The ABA Section of Dispute Resolution defines divorce coaching as “a flexible, goal-oriented process designed to support, motivate, and guide people going through divorce to help them make the best possible decisions for their future, based on their particular interests, needs and concerns.”

Divorce coaches come from a variety of professional backgrounds. Clients select a divorce coach based on their specific needs. For example, some divorce coaches are certified financial and tax planners. Others are mental health professionals, lawyers, or mediators with specialized training in assisting clients learn how to “consciously uncouple” in an emotionally healthy manner. If a couple has children, a co-parent coach can provide training in successful communication and problem-solving to assist them raise their children together.

Acting as a divorce coach is distinctly different than acting in the role of a family law attorney and advocate. An attorney is an expert in all aspects of family law and is an essential advisor in protecting individual legal rights, interpreting the law, litigating disputes, and drafting stipulations and proposed court orders. A divorce attorney is not trained to “hand hold” a client through a divorce. A divorce coach is a support person who fills in the gaps. The coach explains the legal process in a patient manner and helps the client understand the backroom subtleties of how settlements come together.

A divorce coach is an educator. A divorce coach guides clients in how to calm their emotions and focus on workable solutions. Co-parent coaching can transform a parental dynamic from “high conflict” to “cooperative.” A co-parent coach trains parents in specific skills that deescalate conflict, improve communication and build trust. Then, the parents practice new skills and behavior while being accountable to their coach.

As you may know from your personal experience, a divorce is messy. A couple has to split up everything in their life—their house, money, children, pets, and all of their stuff. A romantic break-up ignites a roller coaster of emotions—betrayal, anger, disillusionment, second-guessing, and waves of sadness.

Divorce coaches are experts in assisting clients manage and resolve their emotional challenges so that they can objectively design a successful divorce settlement. A divorce coach can work with both spouses in a neutral and impartial manner. The coach’s focus is on redesigning the dynamics of the relationship and assisting the couple move forward in a positive manner.

Considering the trend toward shared parenting plans, co-parent coaching can assist a couple design a new and healthier co-parenting relationship.

Divorce coaching promotes the collaborative practice of family law. Having a divorce coach as a team-player in a collaborative law process ensures that settlement meetings are successful and not derailed by emotions. In a collaborative law model, the divorce coach meets one on one with clients prior to settlement meetings and assists them prepare emotionally and realistically for settlement negotiations. During settlement meetings, the divorce coach assists the clients remain calm so that they and their attorneys can negotiate efficiently.

A divorce coach is also helpful in providing “client management” in traditional litigation. In this manner, a divorce coach becomes a trusted “sounding board” for the client to vent to. The coach provides emotional support and infuses realistic expectations during protracted litigation. In this context, the divorce coach rather than the attorney is the one who deals with the frantic texts and phone calls when family conflict inevitably arises.

Sometimes, a divorce coach ends up facilitating a marriage reconciliation. When a couple starts practicing new relationship skills, their paradigm shifts. An experienced divorce coach candidly educates clients on the realities of divorce. When a couple peers over the metaphorical cliff of divorce, sometimes they get “scared straight” and suddenly find new motivation to salvage their marriage. In these circumstances, the possibility of rescuing a couple’s marriage becomes real despite previous unsuccessful efforts in marriage counseling.

If a couple is thinking about hiring a divorce coach, here are the areas that coaching is best suited for:

1. Pre-Divorce Planning—Many clients contact divorce coaches before they seek formal legal advice. Clients use divorce coaches to deescalate conflict, assist them sort through their emotions and define their goals. Divorce coaches can help clients design a structured separation plan. A coach assists a client calm down and not panic.
2. Hand-Holding— Divorce clients will lean on family and friends but often find that their supporters push them to be adversarial or vindictive. A divorce coach is a “thinking partner” who is willing to patiently walk alongside their clients as they brainstorm and consider possible resolutions. Coaching is not mental health therapy but guidance that is psychoeducational in nature.
3. Organizing-- In complex cases, a divorce coach is invaluable in assisting clients organize their financial affairs. Certified divorce planners help clients analyze fair approaches to alimony, property settlements, and mutually advantageous tax planning. Financial coaches educate clients about budgeting. Divorce coaches often collaborate with estate planning attorneys who assist clients redesign their estate planning and asset protection strategies in view of their divorce settlement.

4. Supporting a Collaborative Settlement Process—If a couple has challenging legal issues, a divorce coach will recommend that they each retain an attorney trained in collaborative family law principles to assist them resolve their issues. Their divorce coach will provide emotional support during a collaborative settlement process. A divorce coach typically attends all settlement meetings and provides coaching during the process. Because the cost of a divorce coach averages between \$100 - \$200 per hour, venting to a divorce coach about one's frustrations and concerns is more cost effective than venting to an attorney.
5. Parent Coordination—Co-parent coaches believe that empathy is a teachable skill. They specialize in assisting parents learn empathy for each other and their children. They teach co-parents how to communicate and problem-solve. They assist in designing a detailed parenting plan or modification that is realistic and workable in meeting the needs and best interests of the children.
6. Kids Coaching—Parents going through a divorce are often distracted by their emotions and experience difficulty focusing on the needs of their children. A kids coach is a specialized mental health professional, family educator or coach who provides mentorship and education to children as they learn how to navigate the challenges of a parental separation or a divorce. A kids coach provides valuable feed-back and parent education to both parents.

Divorce coaching emerged in the 2000's after the wave of life coaches emerged on the scene in the 1990's. Nevertheless, divorce coaching is still in its infancy as a new profession. There is a spectrum of divorce coaches with varying backgrounds, including those who have simply recovered from their own divorce to professionals who are certified and trained. It is important for clients to investigate the training and experience of a potential divorce coach and feel comfortable with their coach's background.

Divorce coaching provides clients the guidance and resources to meet many critical needs along their divorce journey. Divorce coaching is about creating an emotionally safe, supportive, non-judgmental, and educational experience for clients. It significantly expedites the settlement process by efficiently addressing and resolving emotional barriers. A family law attorney is wise to use the new resource of divorce and co-parent coaching to expedite the resolution of divorce and paternity cases.

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