

Divorce Coaches in the Collaborative Divorce Process
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One of the values of collaborative divorce is that it employs a specially trained interdisciplinary team to address the legal, emotional, and financial aspects of this important and complex life transition. While everyone recognizes that divorce is often driven by intense and often highly conflictual emotions, the collaborative method is unique in the way it uses mental health professionals, working as coaches, to aid family members in the management of their emotions, the conflicts and the divorce process.

Divorce Coaches are professionals with a background in mental health who have special training in guiding people through the emotional bottlenecks that often slow down progress towards agreements about finances, parenting and the division of assets. Divorce Coaching differs from psychotherapy in that it is future focused and goal oriented with the emphasis on moving the client from where they are now to where they want to be rather than working to heal past emotional wounds. Divorce Coaching helps people clarify their feelings and needs so that they can participate more constructively in negotiations to create a mutually acceptable settlement agreement. This often saves time and money, as well as reducing the unproductive and hurtful emotional struggles that many couples get caught up in when they are going through a divorce.

In the full team model, each spouse works with a divorce coach. Coaches typically ask their client open-ended questions that help identify their interpersonal and emotional goals for their divorce. Coaching helps people to express and represent their feelings and needs as they craft their financial and parenting agreements. Coaches help the client to avoid getting stuck in inflexible positions by helping them identify what they really need from their divorce agreements. They redirect their clients from focusing on blame to focusing on solutions. During the process, coaches may communicate with the lawyers, child specialist and the financial neutral to

facilitate the work of the team on the common goal of arriving at agreements that meets the needs of both parties, as well as the children.

Divorce Coaches are trained to spot interpersonal dynamics that lawyers are not. For example, rather than jumping in to advocate for a client's demand as some lawyers are trained to do in the traditional divorce process, a coach may see that a spouse who is insisting on a specific parenting schedule may actually be looking for a way to protect their feeling of being important and needed by their children. Once this need is identified and acknowledged, the coach may be able to help the client generate several different ways to meet this need and the demand for a particular number of days may no longer feel so urgent. In this way, a prolonged and bitter struggle may be avoided, and a creative and more satisfying solution may supplant what in a traditional adversarial process is often a mechanical and unsatisfying compromise.

Sometimes coaches are brought in after disruptive emotional conflicts stall the process. However, coaches can be most helpful in the collaborative process when they are brought in at the beginning. People rarely begin the complex divorce process with clarity about their emotional needs and interests for their settlement and parenting agreements. Being there from the start allows coaches to help educate their clients in how to frame their discussions in terms of their needs and interests rather than in terms of bargaining positions. The sooner in the process this begins to happen, the smoother the process is likely to be, and the more the final agreements will reflect the needs of the clients rather than the outcomes of mutual misunderstandings and power struggles.

Divorce Coaches contribute to the success of the Collaborative Divorce process by helping their clients focus on future goals while managing the strain and pain of this difficult family transition.