



SULLIVAN LAW  
& ASSOCIATES

# MINIMIZING TURMOIL DURING YOUR DIVORCE

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**D**issolution of marriage is one of life's most stressful experiences. Only the death of a spouse is generally reported to be more stressful than divorce; separation and divorce are consistently rated more stressful than going to jail, losing a job, personal injury, illness, and mortgage foreclosure.

Divorce is a time of upheaval. Emotions run high, finances may be strained, and living situations and routines disrupted. You may face changes in many aspects of your life including your self-perceptions, standard of living, residence, friends, employment status, and parenting responsibilities.

Minimizing the turmoil caused by divorce has many benefits. It will (1) shorten the time and expense of your divorce; (2) prevent damage to your mental and physical health; (3) protect your children from emotional suffering and psychological injury; and (4) improve the chances that you and your ex-spouse will be able to work together as parents after the divorce.

# THE EMOTIONAL TURMOIL OF DIVORCE

Emotional turmoil during divorce is a natural consequence of grieving the loss of your marriage. Grief is a process that has several stages. Psychologists have typically defined its stages as:

- **Shock:** You want a divorce? Where did this come from?
- **Denial:** This can't be happening. She isn't serious; she'll come to her senses.
- **Anger:** How could you do this to me? You are going to pay for it.
- **Bargaining:** If you'll give me one more chance, I promise I'll change.
- **Depression:** I don't care, do whatever you want. Take whatever you want.
- **Acceptance:** I understand that it's over. It's time I made a new life for myself.

You will pass through the grief process at your own pace. You cannot speed up the process by simply willing yourself through it. Until you are fully recovered, you will probably shift back and forth through the various stages several times. The only cure for grief is time.

Your spouse will also be passing through the grief process during the break up of your marriage. Chances are you both will not be at the same stage at the same time, which often makes communication between you contentious and settlement negotiations difficult.

Even when you are both at the same stage, often that stage is anger. Anger is the most pervasive stage of grief in a divorce. Anger is a common response to chaos, frustration, and uncertainty. When one spouse is angry, the other often becomes angry in response. When both spouses are angry, little constructive can be accomplished.

# MINIMIZING TURMOIL IN DEALING WITH YOUR SPOUSE

Opportunities to fight will arise frequently during your divorce. When anger during a divorce is a problem, the best response is often no response. Most people find that while it may be incredibly difficult not to defend themselves or respond in kind, this approach works.

You can engage and turn your divorce into a series of major battles, or you can try some of the following techniques to disengage, reduce the anger, and thereby reduce the length and expense of your divorce:

1. **Resolve to change the way you communicate with your spouse.** The old methods have obviously not worked well.
2. **Think beforehand about what you want to accomplish and what you want to say to reach your goal.** Maybe even write down the key phrases you want to use in discussing the issue. Use neutral words that are solution-oriented.
3. **Employ calming techniques before speaking.** Use whatever works best for you: 3 deep breaths, count to 5, uncross your arms, ask yourself if this is a big enough issue to get angry over, try to see the issue from your spouse's perspective, or question whether two years from now you will care about this.
4. **Fight fair.** Focus on the issue and its solutions, not the person.
5. **Listen.** Before you jump to conclusions, ask questions to make sure you are hearing correctly.
6. **Do not interrupt.** Allow your spouse to completely finish a thought before you begin to speak.
7. **Empathize before responding.** "I can see why that would upset you."
8. **Admit your share of the problem and tell your spouse you'd rather be part of the solution.** "I am certainly guilty of making this matter worse and want to correct that."
9. **Restate your spouse's complaint in your own words so your spouse knows you listened and heard.** "So what you want is. ..."
10. **Sandwich your response between two positive statements.** Begin by acknowledging some assistance your spouse has provided, state your request, and finish with a thank you. "First I want to say that I really appreciate you. ..."

11. **Hedge.** Use softening introductory phrases like “Perhaps you could...” or “Maybe if we tried. ...”
12. **Reverse.** If your spouse starts speaking louder and quicker, instead of matching the volume and speed, you should speak more quietly and slowly.
13. **Apologize.** This works wonders. Even if you are not at fault, say you are sorry. Much can be accomplished if one spouse is big enough to apologize first.
14. **Offer to compromise.** Trade one favor for another. “Yes, I can do that if you can. ...”
15. **Suggest multiple solutions.** “An alternate possibility might be to \_\_\_\_\_.”
16. **Set the issue aside.** “That’s a big one. Can we take 24 hours to come up with some possible solutions and then select one?”

# MINIMIZING TURMOIL IN YOUR LIFE

When you divorce, you tear up the rule book by which you lived your life. Without the rules of married life, you may find yourself acting out of character or reverting to the lifestyle of your single days. You may be tempted to involve yourself in risky or self-destructive activities. You could also find yourself embroiled in questionable romantic relations.

Here are some guidelines to help you protect yourself during this risky time:

1. **Take care of yourself.** Do your best to eat a healthy diet and do not skip meals. Keep to your normal routine. Exercise, go out with friends, keep up household chores, and spend time with your children. Get professional help if you feel overwhelmed.
2. **Don't make any major changes for a year.** People often react to a divorce by deciding that since their marriage is ending, everything has to be changed. They change jobs, residences, cash in retirement accounts, or join a commune. You have enough changes in your life right now. If something in your life doesn't absolutely have to be changed, leave it alone.
3. **Give yourself time.** You are going through a lot, and it is going to take some time to recover from it. Don't let anybody tell you to just get over it. You'll get over it in your own time. Most people start to recover in about a year or so. Some people require a lot longer. If you find yourself stuck or can't function at your job or as a parent, it is time to get help.
4. **Protect your job.** Your job is more important than it ever has been; don't do anything to jeopardize it. Tell your employer what is going on, and make up time if you have to. If you are unhappy with your job, be extremely careful. The unhappiness could be a reaction to the divorce more than anything else. If after a year you are still unhappy, begin a systematic search for a new position. Do it right: give proper notice and don't burn any bridges on your way out.
5. **Stay out of personal relationships for at least a year.** You are at your most vulnerable right now. You are also seeking to redefine the new you. You will likely be a very different person in a year than you are right now, and odds are you will not ultimately fit with anyone you become involved with now. Any relationship you enter into right now will be based on panic, need, or simply grief. These are bad ways to start a relationship.
6. **Keep your friends.** Some of your friends will feel awkward associating with you since your separation. Some will not and will be supportive. Keep them close. Friends can help in tough times. However, be very careful about taking any advice they might give you. You can listen to them, but before you make any decisions, get professional advice.

7. **Keep your family.** Members of your family can be your greatest allies. Don't alienate them. Any unhappiness you may feel toward them right now may simply be a reflection of how you feel about the divorce process. It's possible that your family will want to defend you at all costs. Be very careful; letting them defend you at all costs may not be the best approach. Any advice they give you, or actions they want you to take, may not be in your best interests or what is best for your children. Talk it over with the experts you've hired before acting on any advice family members give you.
  
8. **Take care of your finances.** Don't spend money on luxuries. Make the note payment on your car. You can't get to work if you don't have a car. Make the payment on the house if you can. If you can't, make sure your spouse knows about it; then whether or not the house can be protected will be a joint problem. The same goes for your other bills. However, the necessities of life for you and your children come first. Any money you have goes to protect people first, then assets, and finally, your credit rating. For example, if it comes down to buying food or paying off a credit card, the choice should be obvious.

# MINIMIZING TURMOIL IN YOUR CHILDREN'S LIVES

Divorce is a difficult time for children. They fear losing the love of one or both parents and the security of their home and established routine. Younger children sometimes feel that they are to blame for the divorce, particularly if they are the subject of a custody fight. Older children may demand to know which parent is responsible. By pointing a finger, one parent can seriously damage the child's image of the other parent causing a lasting rift in the relationship.

Studies show the most damaging aspect of divorce for children is parental conflict. For children to thrive during and after your divorce, you must do everything you can to reduce the conflict.

Here are some tips for helping your children feel safe, secure, and loved during your divorce:

1. **Think of your children's well-being before acting.** If this is difficult because of your own feelings, needs, and emotions, get professional help.
2. **Keep your composure around the children at all times.** Set aside time to mourn and be sad each day, when the children are asleep or not at home.
3. **Assure your children that they are not to blame for the break-up and that they are not being rejected or abandoned.**
4. **Try not to upset the children's routine too abruptly.** Children need a sense of continuity and it is disturbing to them if they must cope with too many changes all at once.
5. **Be direct and simple in telling children what is happening and why, and in a way a child can understand and digest.** The worst course is to try to hush things up. If the child asks questions, explanations should be brief, prompt, direct, and honest.
6. **Don't let the guilt you may feel about the marriage breakdown interfere with disciplining the children.** Children need and want to know what is expected of them. Parents must be ready to say "NO" when necessary.
7. **Offer the children the opportunity to see a counselor for professional assistance.**
8. **Watch your body language, and tone of voice, as well as what you say.** Continuing anger or bitterness toward your former partner can injure your children far more than the dissolution itself. The feelings you show are more important than the words you use.

9. **Do not criticize the other parent in front of the children.** For a child's healthy development, it is important for him to respect both parents and believe both parents respect each other, even if that is not the truth.
10. **Do not force or encourage your children to take sides.** To do so encourages frustration, guilt and resentment. Allow your children to be children. Do not confide in them, whatever their age.
11. **Do not discuss finances with the children.** Never mention payment or non-payment of support.
12. **Remember that doing the right thing often is not immediately rewarded.** However, doing the right thing will have a positive and lasting impact upon your children, and only serve to enhance your relationship with them, and the love they feel for you as they mature and grow.