

## Why Use a Divorce Coach in the Collaborative Process

**Question: "We are using the collaborative model to preserve our funds. We already have a marital therapist. Do we really need to hire a divorce coach?"**

A coach might seem like a luxury in a divorce that is already way too expensive. Most divorces, even when there is a great deal of good will between the parties involve intense emotions over core issues such as when you will each have time with the kids, whether you will receive or pay child support and who will keep the home you lived in together. When people experience highly charged emotions (anger, fear and guilt and deep sadness are most common in divorce situations) or feel extremely threatened, they tend to act impulsively without thought and make decisions they regret later. They also say things in our collaborative meetings that detract from the process and can even lead to major problems in going forward. While your attorney makes sure your legal rights get protected, I help make sure everything is being done to help the process go well so that we can be as successful as possible, as quickly as possible. For example, sometimes one parent focuses more from a logical perspective, while the other focuses more on the emotional aspects of the divorce. This can be like one parent talking Spanish and the other French. I can serve as a translator of sorts, making sure the communication among all of us is going well and is clear and at the right pace.

**Question: "What is the role of the divorce coach? We already have a marital therapist."**

The role of the coach is to help manage and contain intense feelings as they arise in the process of divorce so they don't interfere with making decisions that may impact your children for many years to come. The unique role of coach is different from that of a therapist in that a coach doesn't delve into *understanding* why a person feels as they do, they simply help *manage* the feelings. You could look at it in the following way: *a therapist is someone to whom you bring your baggage and she or he helps you open it up, unpack and decipher the contents. A divorce coach is someone to whom you bring your baggage and, without opening it, he or she helps you carefully carry it across the street.*

The coaches also help deal with the personality factors that get in the way of settling the divorce - clients and even the attorneys. The coaches are experts in helping keep emotions and personalities from derailing the collaborative process.

Another important function coaches can provide is help with keeping lines of communication open between spouses, or creating ones where they did not exist. By modeling healthier ways of problem solving, talking and listening to one another, the coaches often prove vital to facilitate the divorcing couple's difficult conversations, discussions and negotiations.

**Question: "Won't a Coach Drive Up the Costs? This is already expensive enough."**

Ironically, although there is another paid professional working in the case, a coach usually saves the client money because, unknowingly, and all too often, clients treat their attorneys as their emotional and mental sounding boards. They talk to their lawyer about their challenges and the dynamics with their spouse and, while some of this is pertinent to the outcome of the case, at \$300 and up an hour, this is incredibly expensive support! Not only that, your lawyer, while sensitive to your emotions, is not trained to deal with them. If you were thinking about renovating your home, would you ask the electrician to also check to make sure the plumbing was OK? Probably not.

In many collaborative cases a two coach model is used, where each person has his/her own coach to work with. We also work with a single coach model, where I serve as a process facilitator to the entire team.

### **The Long-lasting Impact of Collaborative Divorce Coaches**

Collaborative divorces are not magic carpets that carry couples painlessly through their family transitions. They can actually be harder to endure than traditional divorces or mediation because they challenge each person to operate from a much more mature level of functioning. As a result of going through this challenging process, the benefits can be immense and long lasting as parents and children benefit from better communication and hopefully far less acrimony, conflict and hostility. Members of the divorcing couple often begin implementing the tools the coaches have taught them and modeled for them to work with each other, by talking through their difficulties, solving problems, making joint decisions and compromising instead of acting out in some way.

Couples can actually learn healthier ways to communicate with one another, co-parent and get through difficult situations. Peggy Thomson, PhD and attorney Pauline Tesler, co-authors of [Collaborative Divorce](#), note that “about one in ten of our couples decide to get back together because they’ve learned some basic problem-solving and communication skills.” Whether you reconcile or not, these tools, once learned, are beneficial going forward, far beyond when the children turn 18.

### **The Potential Downsides of Using a Divorce Coach**

An obvious drawback to having a coach is that it adds another bill to pay. In general, the Collaborative process can initially appear to have higher fees initially than the mediation alternative. This can make clients apprehensive and feel more overwhelmed until they learn more about the role of the coaches. However, when mediation is not desired or successful the costs of the entire process can be far greater.

When it is perceived as an extra, nonessential or optional part of the process, husbands and wives won’t necessarily be on the same page on the value of coaches. In some situations, one spouse may want a coach and the other might not. When this is resolved by using one coach or no coach at all, it sets up a different kind of problems. One or the other of the divorcing spouses may feel disempowered. Either the person who doesn’t have a coach may feel disempowered and/or the person who wanted a coach and didn’t hire one, may feel disempowered. An alternative can be to go to a one-coach model, where the coach (like the financial professional) is a neutral who works with both parties.

Finally, it’s more cumbersome to have another set of professionals in the mix when trying to schedule meetings. It is common for husbands and wives to meet separately with their coaches but when there are five, six, or seven way sessions (two attorneys, two coaches, the financial and child specialists and the divorcing couple), scheduling can get zany.

### **How Not to Use Divorce Coaches**

Every once in a while, there are clients who say they want to see how the divorce goes before they decide if they want to hire divorce coaches. In theory, this makes great sense, but in practice, this is a recipe for disaster. This is like having a bad headache and waiting hours before taking a painkiller. The headache may be too intense at that point and not even respond to the painkiller. All too often in these cases, the coaches are called in only after the tensions have risen to levels that are off the charts and counsel are afraid the case will “tank” because the divorcing couple is usually so distraught, hurt or distrustful of one another that the Collaborative modality may not withstand the pressure. The coaches then have the task of trying to clean up the

wreckage and get the case back on track. However, when coaches are brought in late in the process and the case continues to deteriorate, the clients' skepticism of the benefit of coaches can then seem well-founded. Coaches can't stop a case from going south late in the game any more easily than brakes can stop a train that has built up speed and momentum. These cases might have had a very different outcome if coaches had been used from the start.

### **The Ultimate Up-side to Using Divorce Coaches**

Undoubtedly, the Collaborative divorce process may seem more complicated and require more maturity and stamina than other marital dissolution processes, but for those who can endure it, there are many long-lasting and meaningful benefits. Coaches are generally very beneficial to divorcing couples during their divorce. They help calm the waters and keep the divorce on track by containing heated emotions.

Going forward into their post divorce lives, the skills that have been learned in coaching are invaluable. These couples often sustain better communication, problem-solving skills and compassion between them. For families in transition, the children reap the benefits of having parents who can apply their communication and problem solving skills learned in coaching to their ongoing parenting relationship. And, as one little boy said to his parents after their divorce, "I'm so glad you guys are friends again." Children need the war to stop. Coaches can help.

*Adapted, (author unknown)*