

THE DIVORCE

THIRD
EDITION

YOUR STEP-BY-STEP
GUIDE TO SUCCESSFULLY
CLIMB OUT OF YOUR
DIVORCE

RECOVERY

LADDER

BY:

*Susan
Shofer*

YOUR DIVORCE &
CUSTODY ALLY

About the Author

Susan Shofer is a Certified Divorce Coach®, agency licensed private investigator, author and public speaker, including a TEDx speaker. Susan has many stories to draw upon and brings a quick wit and humor to her presentations alongside a positive outlook for any situation no matter how bleak it may seem.

Much of Susan's work has included consultations with hundreds of women and men to help them navigate the troubled waters of family breakup by sharing her own organized and pragmatic approach to divorce. More importantly, Susan's focus is not on what has been lost. Rather what may be learned and gained from divorce.

Susan holds a master's degree in Business from Johns Hopkins University and a bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland. She has over twenty years' experience as an agency licensed private investigator. As a divorce coach, Susan's specialty area is Parental Alienation; how to recognize it and mitigate it before it begins, and families are lost forever.

Susan successfully overcame her own highly contentious divorce and post-divorce battle and was triumphant in her fight against Parental Alienation. She can say that life does get better after divorce and families can heal. Susan has an amicable relationship with her ex-husband.

The Divorce Recovery Ladder

Your Step-by-Step Guide to Successfully Climb Out of Your Divorce

**Susan Shofer, CDC®, MBA, Private Investigator
Your Divorce & Custody Ally**

Disclaimer: Susan is not an attorney or a therapist. The information she provides should not be used in lieu of legal counsel and therapeutic treatment. However, it may be used in conjunction with those professional services.

Names and identifying characteristics of individuals mentioned in this book have been changed to preserve anonymity.

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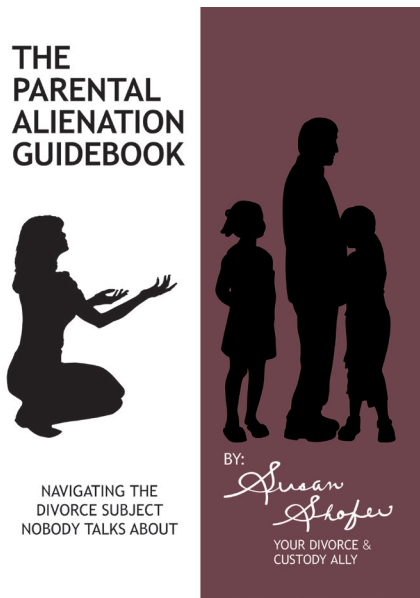
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For more information or to contact the author, visit <https://www.susanshofer.com>.

For a downloadable copy of the Worksheets, visit
<https://www.susanshofer.com/WS-PDF>.



Coming Soon in 2020



Parental Alienation Guidebook

- Does your once beloved child no longer want to be with you?
- Is your child belligerent and disrespectful beyond the normal child angst behaviors?
- Is your child spewing inaccurate accusations about you?

If any of the above behaviors are taking place, and you are either going through a contentious or high-conflict divorce or have already divorced, your child's other parent may be engaging in Parental Alienation.

Susan has professional insight and personal experience with why and how Parental Alienation takes place and how to navigate and around it without escalating the contention. Her unique approach in addressing alienating behaviors will help you diffuse the toxicity to regain your relationship with your child(ren). This is a must-read for anyone on the receiving end of Parental Alienation.

Thanks

Divorce is a frightening and isolating time, one that cannot be experienced alone. I am very fortunate to have supportive people with whose love, support and devotion, have helped me survive and thrive throughout my long standing contentious divorce.

Rita - For no longer being surprised at anything - ever.

Lois and Howard – For being “true family.”

Scott Kover – You always make me laugh, no matter what. You are priceless.

Alan Garten, T Bruce Hanley and Sean Klein - You kept our family of three together.

Ms. Jean Waller Brune - An angel on earth who knew when to jump and take a stance when things looked hopeless.

Amy Schultz Rice - For always being an advocate on the right side of the law.

Robin and Mark – For loving my kids.

And... all the friends, teachers and family who stood by us during some of our darkest hours.

With love to Mom and Dad who have left his Earth. I miss you everyday.

AND MOSTLY

My precious children for their strength and resilience even when life presented them with challenges beyond their control. You have shown incredible fortitude and grace that I learn from every day. I love you with all my heart and will always be your greatest fan.

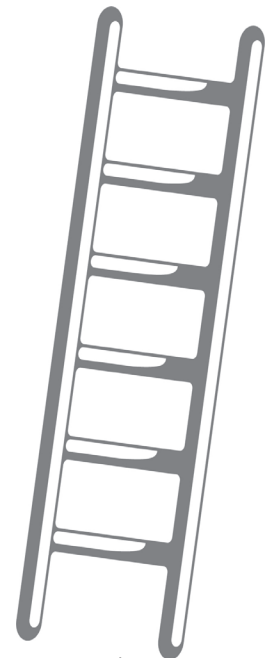


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Foreword

As a Certified Divorce Coach® and licensed private investigator, I've heard my share of nightmare stories when it comes to divorces. Just when I thought I'd witnessed the most outrageous behavior in one case, another case would appear that made the previous outrageous one serene by comparison. I am always at a loss to explain how people who once vowed to love and honor the other until death do they part, could be so evil and cruel to each other.

Many years ago, while working at my first job out of college, a colleague of mine was abandoned by her husband, leaving her with two children under the age of four. Prior to his leaving, she was a devoted wife and a stay-at-home mother. His sudden exit from the marriage turned her world upside down. Each day she faced the challenge of single motherhood, which caused her physical and emotional exhaustion. While she worked fifty hours a week, took care of two small children and a house, her husband set up an exciting life in Europe with his new love interest. Before he left the country, he planned his getaway strategy so well, all under the radar screen, that his actions completely blindsided my colleague. He had emptied out all jointly held bank accounts, leaving her not only abandoned but also broke. At the time, I was in my mid-twenties, with limited life experience under my belt. Despite my lack of life lessons, my opinion towards this situation was fierce. I could not rationalize how someone could leave his family, in a blink of an eye — just like that. I thought that she must have done something to precipitate his leaving. Don't get me wrong. I didn't blame her for her misfortune. To say she was a lovely woman is an understatement. I just couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that someone could act as her husband did without a valid reason. So, I assumed that there must have been something lurking in the background. Newly married myself, I was confident that I was immune to a similar circumstance.

How naïve I was.

No one should chastise my colleague's husband for falling out of love with her. No one would expect him to stay married if he was no longer happy in the marriage. Doing so would have led to a wretched existence for the couple and a poisonous one for the children. What I had a hard time wrapping my mind around was the way in which he left his family. It was cruel and dismissive. He not only made a unilateral decision to end the relationship, but chose to leave his children, too. He took all the money, of which half belonged to his wife, money to feed and care for their children. His behavior was contentious at its very core.

About a year later, my co-worker left the company. We lost touch, so I don't know how well she was able to navigate around her circumstances. I have solace knowing that her parents lived nearby and were an integral support system for her.

Two decades later, my story is very similar, less the permanent Europe relocation by my spouse. While these stories sound outrageous, unfortunately they happen with a great deal of frequency. In fact, it's almost cliché: the husband leaves the wife and kids because he's bored. He falls in love with someone younger. As he exits, he makes sure to take all the money because he believes it belongs to him. If his wife was a stay-at-home, he feels even more justified. His thinking is more like, "let her get a job." He walks away and doesn't let the door hit him on the way out.

THE DIVORCE RECOVERY LADDER

Throughout my personal journey, many people have availed themselves to provide me with unsolicited advice. As kindhearted as their intent was, none of them experienced anything close to what I was going through, so how on earth could they present a platter of advice to me? The best advice, in almost any circumstance, should come from someone who has been through the same experience.

While I am neither an attorney nor a therapist, and don't give legal or therapeutic advice in this guide, I do have professional and personal experience with divorce. Throughout my divorce, I learned what was worth fighting for and what to walk away from. Most importantly, I learned that you can't change another person's behavior. You can only change how you respond to it. This guide is not about your spouse, ex-spouse, or former partner. I wrote this guide for YOU, so that you may climb the ladder to the best life you can imagine. The information I present draws from a compilation of my experiences and those of others who have gone through contentious divorces, all different but equally challenging.

Why This Guide?

During my divorce, the chaos that surrounded me was so overwhelming that I clambered each day to find some semblance of order in my life. My energies were pulled in so many different directions that I didn't know where to turn. I felt inundated with demands and responsibilities and became ineffective at everything I did as I tried to work, maintain our family home, and meet the needs of my two very traumatized children.

I felt like an island unto myself, knowing my children and I would suffer if I were unable to organize our lives. To get on task, I purchased a binder, notebook paper and pack of dividers so I could compartmentalize each area of my divorce process: financial information, attorney file, children, emails, texts, and self-care. The more organized I became, even if only from a surface stance, the more my overall perspective shifted from despair to hope. Don't get me wrong: despite being organized, I still had a huge mountain to climb. However, putting things into some kind of order enabled me to tackle the issues, head-on, as methodically and rationally as possible.

My life was no longer the same and my future was uncertain. My ex-husband threw a huge curve ball when he walked out on the children and me with checkbook in hand. However, I knew that as long as I had a systematic way to approach everything, I could handle the challenges that came my way. I have written this guide to help you structure your life so that you do not cave from the perils of divorce.

The Divorce Recovery Ladder is the program from which I would have benefitted while journeying through my own divorce. From the very beginning of my journey, I envisioned myself climbing a ladder, starting at the bottom rung where I stood alone, bare, raw, and exposed. As I traveled up the ladder, step by step, I found myself at the top — strong and confident. This imagery, along with the actual work, made me triumphant. This is the process I want to share with you.

The Divorce Recovery Ladder Guide is divided into two sections. The first section defines divorce and its key components. The second section is comprehensive and interactive, with checklists and charts to help you better organize your life so that you may maintain physical, emotional and financial balance. Many seemingly subtle suggestions that I make throughout the guide can help restore your life to a place of comfort and solace. I purposefully developed the guide as a tool, short yet comprehensive, so that you are not bogged down with more work. In addition, the brevity of this guidebook will enable you to provide information to your counsel, when the time arrives. Organized clients translate into those who cases process more efficiently without mounting legal expense. Please use this guidebook to organize your files so that you are prepared for your counsel. My goal is to help lift you out of the chaos of divorce to a calmer, more effective life. So, let's get started!

Please visit www.susanshofer.com/ws-pdf to download a current copy of the worksheets to print for yourself or fill in on your device.

PART ONE – A Narrative; My Experience

One early morning, several months after my husband left the children and me, I took notice of the slanted sunshine that splayed through the half-opened blinds of my bedroom window. Except for the birds that chirped outside, this particular morning was quiet. It had been a long time since I did not have to dash out of the house for carpool or make an early morning school committee commitment, business meeting, take a child to a birthday party or some other social or extra-curricular activity. I tiptoed from my bed to my children's bedrooms to find them sleeping peacefully. This quiet morning followed a chaotic day full of fear and tears. Despite what we had gone through, the hope of a new day gave me solace that things would be okay, all would work out and we would be fine.

How naive was I. Little did I know what was in store for the children and me.

Each day, I told myself that things HAD to get better. Unfortunately, things only got worse. Each lawyer I employed was confident that they could help me, only to find that my unrelenting contentious divorce was more than they were able to handle. My legal fees continued to mount long after my divorce was filed with the courts.

Many years later, I still wonder how I became involved in a horrendous, longstanding, contentious and toxic divorce. If I had a dime for every time someone – police officer, attorney, therapist, prosecutor, family member and/or friend – told me that my situation (pre-, during and post-divorce) was one of the worst cases they had ever seen or heard of, I would be a rich lady by now. Okay, maybe not rich, but I'd have quite a few dimes.

No one can ever prepare you for a divorce, whether it is amicable or contentious. I never expected to be divorced after two decades of marriage, nor did I foresee a toxic divorce in my future. I became what courts labeled the "disadvantaged spouse," the one without the money. This scenario, in and of itself, sets the stage for the perfect toxic divorce. Am I bitter? Not in the least. My ex-husband is doing well, has remarried, and I wish only the best for him. My kids have survived and are now wonderful young adults. I am the happiest I have been in a long time.

Divorce in General

Divorce occurs with relative frequency in the United States. These days, it is not unusual to find families fractured and reconfigured to include stepparents and stepsiblings. When marriages dissolve, there is almost always upheaval in the lives of those individuals involved, primarily the spouses and children. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins may also find their lives affected, because they may lose touch with people with whom they interacted on a frequent basis. Usually divorcing adults try to maintain some level of civility, especially if there are children involved. Children don't have a voice about their change in circumstances, and rarely would they want to live apart from either of their parents. Divorce turns their lives upside down, leaving it to the grown-ups involved to help everyone make the transition from an intact family to a broken one, in the healthiest way possible.

Whether amicable or contentious, divorce impacts children in many different ways. Even in the best of situations, the children have an altered sense of security. However, a toxic divorce is horrendous for children. While most people prefer to make their divorces as drama-free as possible, sadly there are times when one of the parties chooses to be contentious. Toxic divorces wreak havoc with everyone's lives. They notoriously drag on for years, even well after the divorce becomes final legally. They cost tens, if not hundreds of thousands of dollars to litigate. The children are often used as pawns between warring parents. This causes incredible stress for them that may result in poor academic performance, increased alcohol and drug use, eating disorders, as well as a wide array of other anxious behaviors and health problems. A toxic divorce environment sets the stage for children to struggle with interpersonal relationships due to insecurities, lack of trust and fear of intimacy. Toxic divorces teach children that the people closest to them are not to be trusted, a burden that they carry into their adult lives.

Without a healthy approach to divorce, the situation may turn into a breeding ground to shatter the financial stability of one or both adults involved, damage children emotionally, and ruin careers. With the knowledge in hand of how damaging a toxic divorce is, people should try to be as cooperative and collaborative as possible. Escalating contention serves no purpose other than to cause pain and suffering to all the individuals involved. Again, one must learn very early in the process that they cannot control the other person's behavior. They may only control their own actions.

Why Are Some Divorces Able to Escalate?

My hope is that your divorce is a civil one. My heart always warms when I hear stories of people who work very diligently to be nice to one another while they divorce. I am not joking when I say I have met people who are fabulous as ex-spouses. I have even talked to people who still take vacations, as a family, even though they are divorced. In these amicable situations, the children ALWAYS do much better in every facet of their lives.

Unfortunately, I hear more about contentious and sometimes downright vicious divorces than I hear of the amicable ones.

If you saw the 1989 movie, *The War of the Roses*, with Kathleen Turner and Michael Douglas, you have a good idea what a toxic divorce is all about. While some of the antics in the movie seemed to be extreme, the level of contention in real life can be outrageous. Bizarre behaviors are committed by people who have never exhibited strange or unusual actions. So how does this happen? While I don't want to dwell on a contentious divorce and its components, I do want to make you familiar with what a high conflict divorce looks like. I call the person who consistently creates ill-will the "**Arrow**." The recipient, or receiver of the Arrow's nastiness I call the "**Target**"

I believe there are two components at the core of the high-conflict divorce. First, the Arrow cannot let go of their Target, for whatever reason(s). Don't mistake the act of not letting go for wanting the Target back — or still being in love with them, although that could be the case. The Arrow's actions are all about controlling the Target. In some way, the Arrow feels that the Target needs to "pay" for the target's real or perceived actions. At the fundamental core of the contention is the Arrow's inability to allow their former partner to lead a new life without them. So "pay" is what the Target will do, by having their world turned upside down by the Arrow. That payment can be anything from the Arrow's refusal to pay child support, non-compliance of a custody arrangement, or non-release of property as agreed in the divorce decree. The Arrow may stalk and harass the Target with vicious emails, texts and verbal and physical threats.

Now let's look at the repercussions of the Arrow's pursuit of the Target. Is it okay for the Arrow to drag the divorce out for years and bankrupt the Target by immersing them in legal fees? Is it okay for the children to be consistently dragged into court because they are used as pawns between the parents? Is it okay that the Target is unable to begin a new post-divorce life since the Arrow cannot stop the consistent, unrelenting contention? The answer: absolutely not.

This brings me to the second component of a high conflict divorce — the dynamics of the family have changed. Once upon a time, divorce was not a financially rewarding field of law. Most attorneys scoffed at practicing family law because there was no money in it for them. Back in the day when most women were housewives with no appreciable income of their own, defending a disadvantaged wife was no way for an attorney to make a living. Since women have become wage earners there can be more at stake.

Times have changed. Divorce has become big business for some attorneys — not all. There are some wonderful attorneys out there and I have met many. However, because divorce has become complex, attorneys want to be assured that they will get paid. It is common for an attorney to ask a prospective client to bring a net worth statement to their initial consultation so that the attorney may determine if they even want to take the case! Yes, you read this correctly. Attorneys often want an accounting of a potential client's bank accounts, available open lines of credit and the market value of any owned property such as real estate, jewelry, cars, and boats. The valuation of

WHY ARE SOME DIVORCES ABLE TO ESCALATE?

property gives the attorney an idea of what a potential client is able to pay. A client with the ability to borrow \$400,000 against their home is a lot more attractive to lawyers than someone who has an already mortgaged home. Consequently, it is not unusual to find high-conflict divorces that drag on for years. Sadly, these cases can go on as long as the purse will allow. By no means am I accusing all attorneys of going after the financial jugular vein. I am stating that divorce is now a big business that can create financial devastation if the parties involved allow the divorce to become contentious and out of control. Strikingly, the person who continues the contention complains most about the legal expenses. Go figure.

A few years ago, I had lunch with a woman named Anna. A middle-aged woman, Anna expected her personal circumstances to be very different than what they were. She never dreamed her marriage would unravel and leave her financially devastated. Her lawyer dragged her divorce out for six long, arduous years. She maxed out her credit cards to \$40,000 and sold her mortgage-free home for \$350,000 to pay her legal fees. During those six grueling years, Anna's life spiraled out of control, through no fault of her own. Prior to that, Anna was a successful orthodontist with a thriving practice, a board member for many local organizations, and always found time to volunteer at her daughter's school. In other words, she was a pillar in her community. Yet, here she was at age 51, broken down emotionally and financially bankrupt. This is a story I hear all too often. This is a story that could not take place, with such frequency, if divorce was not such a high profit commodity.

◆ One Big Rule to Learn to Move Forward - Make this your mantra ◆

One cannot change how another person behaves.

We do have control over our own behaviors. This needs to be your mantra.
It is how YOU behave that will have the most impact on the outcome of your case.

The Divorce Process

Your divorce should take no more than two years, depending on court schedules, attorney schedules, and the complexities involving children, property, and other aspects of the settlement. Although some divorces may drag on for years, the average divorce proceeding typically takes anywhere from six to eighteen months. We all know people who have been involved in divorces that take longer to finalize than it does to earn a college degree. When a divorce drags on, it's because one or two things are happening. Either one or both parties relish in the constant contention, or one or both are unable to agree to a custody and/or property settlement.

Think about it this way: if you really want to end a marriage, why on Earth would you continue to send emails, texts, etc. to your soon-to-be ex-spouse about petty issues? Yet, it happens all the time, and often for years! Another reason? The parties are unable to resolve their issues and may not really want to be divorced.

Let's take this to square one. What exactly is the divorce process, and what does it entail? All divorces are not the same. When the parties decide to divorce, they have a few approaches from which to choose. The three most common are mediation, settling out of court, and settling in court. All divorces begin by filing their case in the court jurisdiction where the couple lives. Because marriage is a legal civil contract, it must be documented into the court. The final document will be called a *Divorce Absolute*.

Mediation may take place when two people forgo obtaining attorneys in order to collaborate on a usually amicable solution. They use a mediator and may make this request at the time that they petition the courts for divorce. Mediation is more casual than a court appearance in front of a judge. The mediator will guide the couple through the process and address issues that include child custody, child support, alimony, and dissolution of property. A plan for settlement may be developed during mediation. The mediator may meet with the couple several times throughout the process until all are comfortable with the settlement and child custody arrangements. Once agreed upon, the final settlement is written into the divorce decree and placed into the court records. Obviously, this is the less expensive route. More importantly, it is the least contentious, always better for the couple and children involved. When there is property involved, an attorney may be called up but, only to address the property issues.

Many court jurisdictions require that all divorcing parties attend mediation, even if they have their own counsel. This is done to iron out potential areas of conflict in a non-threatening arena. This is also a place where only the two parties attend and sit face to face with the mediator. All discussions during mediation are completely confidential meaning whatever happens in mediation stays in mediation. This gives people the ability to speak more candidly than under the watchful eyes of their attorneys. While that is good in some respects, in others it may not be. If one or both parties say or do anything that would be considered egregious, it cannot be brought forth, at any time, as evidence. As you can see, mediation has its merits and drawbacks.

Most divorces take place under the guidance of legal counsel. In this instance, both parties acquire their own attorneys. One of the attorneys will file for the divorce. After they file, there will be interrogatories. Interrogatories are questions that each "side" asks of the other "side." For example, if the wife files for divorce, her attorney will draw up a list of interrogatories. Those questions are to be answered by her husband, under the supervision of his attorney. Simultaneously, the husband's attorney will draw up a list of questions to be answered by the wife.

THE DIVORCE PROCESS

The questions can be as few as ten or as many as one hundred. The number is determined by the complexity of the case, years of marriage, the number of children, and if there was infidelity by either party, to name a few issues that may be addressed. Because attorneys charge hourly for time spent on a case, interrogatories are one of the costly parts of divorce. It is a time intensive endeavor to develop the questions as well as to answer those received by the “other side.” After the interrogatories are complete, the attorneys will begin the process of settlement. In order to develop a settlement that satisfies both parties, there may be several settlement conferences. This is when both parties, along with their attorneys, address issues of child support, alimony (financial maintenance by one party to the other), child custody and visitation/vacation schedules, and the dissolution of property such as homes, cars, boats, art, jewelry, china, furniture, family heirlooms and retirement accounts. Settlement conferences also serve as arenas to address assignment of financial responsibilities such as medical, dental, education, college tuition, and other expenses specific to their case. Decisions may be made rapidly, or it may take several meetings.

Once a settlement is made that satisfies both parties, a hearing date will be set in a judge’s chambers or before a judge in a courtroom. During this hearing, the settlement will be confirmed by both parties, recorded, and become part of the Divorce Absolute and divorce decree. This decree is a guide of how parties are to live as a divorced couple, co-parenting of children, as well as the payment of alimony and child support and other responsibilities. Violations of the decree, by either party, may result in contempt charges enforceable by law.

When a couple becomes contentious and unable to settle their case out of court, the case will be presented before a judge to determine the settlement. It is almost always better for a couple, along with their attorneys, to settle a case. When a judge does so, the ruling may not satisfy either party. If the judge has to make the decision, both parties are forced to live with the judge’s ruling, and there is no turning back. All rulings, except for child support and custody, are non-modifiable. This means if you forget anything in the final settlement, you cannot petition to the court to reopen the case. You can only change child support payment amounts (job loss or illness) and custody arrangements. Again, compromise is always better than having a decision determined that neither party will be satisfied with.

Clearly, mediation is less expensive, less time-intensive, and shorter in duration. Mediation works best for couples who may have been married a short period of time, acquired little or no property together and do not have children. Once a couple acquires legal counsel, there will be legal fees. Those fees can escalate into the tens of thousands of dollars — and do so rather quickly. It is always in the couple’s best interest to keep expenses in mind as they try to settle their case. One of the main complaints people have about divorce is the expense. Divorce is an expensive proposition. However, the couple may regulate legal expenses by being more cooperative with each other and work toward compromise rather than escalating contention.

THE DIVORCE RECOVERY LADDER

The Guide

Metaphorically, I envision recovery from a divorce as a ladder on which a person begins the climb at the bottom rung and works to the top, where a new and better life awaits. I now turn the focus of this guide on **YOU**. The Divorce Recovery Ladder program is a proactive playbook of strategies that will help you navigate through your divorce. The guide is interactive, concise, and comprehensive, with a smattering of anecdotal stories you may relate to. The program consists of an excellent blend of subtle suggestions to help with each area of your divorce, without overwhelming you with details. I like to call it short, sweet, and very effective.

Let's get started on the first rung of the Ladder and one step closer to your new, happier, healthy life.

Please visit www.susanshofer.com/ws-pdf to download a current copy of the worksheets to print out or fill in on your device.



PART TWO - The Guide

CAN YOU CLIMB OUT OF A DIVORCE WITHOUT A LOT OF SCARS?

The short answer? *Yes, you can!*

However, climbing out of a divorce comes with a caveat: it will be challenging. I wish I could tell you that you will travel a linear divorce path from Point A to Point B and all will be well. If you are very lucky, that could happen. Most of the time, it does not work that way. However, there are some very specific things you can do to shield yourself from contention and high conflict, if your spouse creates chaos.

I am not minimizing your raw emotions, such as fear, anger, and possible sense of helplessness. Ending a marriage is similar to a death and you need time to grieve. Don't let these emotions define you and know that what you may feel is normal. The power lies within you to change your life into your best life. Will your life ever be the same post-divorce? Of course, it won't, but it can be better as you dig out of the ashes, recognize any contention, if there is any, and successfully navigate around it.

Many times, people tell me that their divorce would be so much easier if their spouse would follow the rules and comply with specific requests. I hear, "If only they'd do something a certain way or comply with agreements." It would be wonderful if divorce life worked that way. However, it often doesn't. People going through divorce are often sad, angry and feel helpless, which is all very normal but, raw emotions can lead to irrational actions. My mantra has always been...

One cannot change how another person behaves.

We do have control over our own behaviors. It is how YOU behave that will have the most impact on the outcome of your case.

I. Realization is the First Step on the Ladder – How to Heal After Divorce

In order to heal, it helps to emotionally distance yourself from your spouse. Your spouse may no longer be the person you thought they were. You are now on a new playing field as a single person; one who has been used to being part of a couple. Your mother's advice that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" holds true with divorce. Now is the time to care for yourself.

Adjusting your life to one without your spouse is the only way to heal and move on with your life. If you have children, you have no other option than to carve out a new family dynamic so that they have stability. This may seem like an impossible task, since you and your spouse have a history together, maybe one that lasted for decades. Your spouse was your other half, the other parent of your children, your best friend, and your lover. You may have referred to your spouse as your "soul mate," the person with whom you felt destined to be for the rest of your life. The severing of ties with the person you built a life with, may feel like a death. Even if your marriage was over well before the actual split, your spouse's absence has left a void in your life. The house is a lot quieter now, even with children bustling about.

The lack of adult companionship in your immediate sphere more than likely has left you feeling lonely, even if you were the one to initiate the divorce. You may spend time fantasizing that your spouse is alone, feeling pathetically miserable without you, remorseful that they left you, if they were the one who left the marriage. If you left the marriage, you may dream that your spouse is at home alone, eating a frozen dinner in front of the television. You may imagine a reconciliation where you extend forgiveness, if pleaded for, and both of you end up with the life you have always dreamed of. Please note that reconciliations do happen, but they do so organically. All too often, I have observed people become stuck in the fantasy that their spouses will reunite with them. This thinking leaves them unable to take the appropriate steps to navigate through their divorce, which in turn leads to bad settlements, disappointments, and the inability to move on with their lives.

THE REALIZATION of what happened can feel like brutal step in the healing process. Fantasizing about "would-a, should-a, could-a" is not going to serve you well. The fear of the unknown is frightening and can leave you feeling paralyzed about what to do next. This is a normal part of divorce. Remember, you are going through a huge life change. Feeling unstable does not mean that you are unstable. It takes some time to get back to a solid emotional footing. Give yourself permission to go through the emotions you are feeling.

How to Stop Thinking About your (Ex)spouse - Part 1

Try to use your alone time for reflection. Your life is now on a different path. You may ask yourself how on Earth are you going to go forward. How can you muster up the strength to begin your different life?

We humans love To Do lists. We do them for just about everything from our work responsibilities to our children and even our leisure time. For this exercise, I begin with the list of “Don’ts” first, because human nature seems to lead us down the dark road to do things that don’t serve us well, allowing us to further wallow in our pain. I use the words DO and DON’T with tongue-in-cheek because I don’t want to come off as though I am preaching. On the other hand, having done this work for a while, I feel confident that these are very effective tactics based on the experience of others as well as my own.

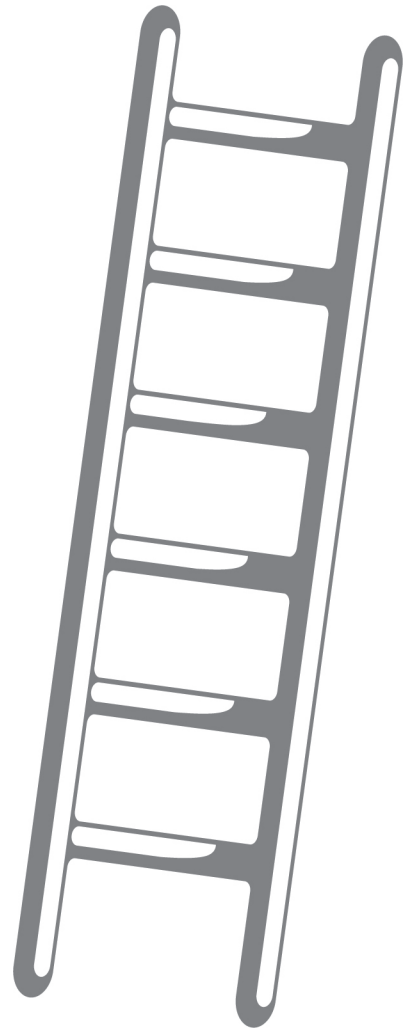
The Do Nots :

1. **Do not** visit places or restaurants where you and your spouse frequented. Doing so only serves to keep you stuck in the past instead of moving forward with your life. There are plenty of restaurants to visit, so don’t exacerbate your pain by going to the ones you went to with your spouse.
2. **Do not** listen to “your” song(s) day after day. Listening to “your” songs only prolongs your pain and interferes with your healing. I suggest you take one day, preferably during a weekend, to listen to the songs and have a good cry. After that, avoid those melancholy melodies.
3. **Do not** call your spouse’s friends or family to find out how he/she is doing. What is the point of doing that? Does it serve any positive purpose for you? Contacting people in your spouse’s “camp” places those individuals in an awkward situation, especially if they still love you both. If any of your spouse’s family or friends have developed a strong allegiance with your spouse, the information you receive may only serve to upset you more. The last thing you need to hear right now is that your soon-to-be ex-spouse is dating someone else or they appear to have moved on faster than you have.
4. **Do not** call your spouse’s new partner, if there is one, to “inform” them what kind of “monster” your spouse is. Your spouse may be a lying, cheating snake and if so, keep it to yourself. If you are the bearer of that information to the new partner’s attention, you look like a bitter jealous loser. Anything negative your spouse may be telling their newfound love, about you, will be confirmed by your behavior. Do absolutely nothing where the new love interest is concerned. Trust me, if your spouse is a lying, cheating snake, the new love interest will find out soon enough. They need no prompting from you.
5. **Do not** make a habit of driving by your spouse’s new residence or their new partner’s home. Definitely do **NOT** show up at their work - **EVER**. If you have children together and need to make exchanges for visitation, do so in a public place, if possible. This keeps your spouse out of your “sandbox” and you out of theirs.
6. **Do not** write your spouse letters, emails, send texts or leave messages on voicemail that you don’t want anyone else to see or hear. Always remember that all written, recorded messages or letters you send to your spouse, may – or shall I say, **WILL** – end up in the hands of your spouse’s attorney. Worse yet, they could end up in the hands of a judge. I promise you that EVERYTHING

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you say, write, text, or email WILL be misinterpreted by “the other side,” and not in your favor. When you communicate with your spouse, make sure you use phraseology that leaves no room for interpretation other than the literal statement. Instead of saying something such as, “If you are not too busy having sex with your skank girlfriend, try to remember to pick Jason up from school on time Tuesday instead of being late like you always are,” go with, “Don’t forget that it is your turn to fetch Jason from school on Tuesday at 3:30 p.m.” If you feel you need to vent, write the nastiest letter you want. Write it to yourself and make sure no one ever sees it.

7. **Do not** use any social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, to say anything negative about your spouse, their love interest or family. The last thing you want to do is make a public display of issues you have with your spouse. Discretion is always the better part of valor. Remember, you cannot un-write anything that you put on social media, and people cannot un-see what they have read. Be on the safe side and STAY OFF FACEBOOK, or any other social media, if you feel you can’t refrain from writing something for which you will be sorry in the future. Most attorneys now ask for all emails, texts, Twitter, Facebook, or other social media posts. Assure that there are no negative social media posts from you.



How to Stop Thinking About your (Ex)spouse - Part 2

Now that you have read quite a few DONT'S on how you can stop thinking about your spouse, and are aware of behaviors to be cautious of, let's look at some positive things to drive your life onto a new and healthy path. Below is a quick example of how you may chart your activities. I have included a blank tear-out chart for you to jot down hobbies you may have, ideas for refreshing your living space, and plans to spend priceless time with family and friends. Do this on a monthly basis so that you can see where you have been proactive in changing your circumstances. Noting them down enables you to see whether or not you are making progress. Your goal is to substitute new things in place of your spouse. No matter what happens, keep your self-care at the forefront. You will need it to gather strength and a healthy perspective through the divorce process. Being mired in divorce "stuff" is overwhelming, can cloud your judgement and lead to compromised decision making. Being engaged in positive activities that do not include your spouse will enhance your life and help you make clearer decisions regarding your divorce.

HOBBY	REFRESH MY SPACE	FUN TIME WITH FAMILY/FRIENDS
9/1 took a knitting class	9/16 Bought new kitchen towels and oven mitts	9/9 Had lunch with Allison
9/12 went to art museum lecture	9/22 got throw pillows for the living room sofa	9/19 Dinner at Melissa's house
9/19 attended an animal rights rally	9/27 purchased new bed sheets	9/30 Had Amy and Beth over for dinner

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Activities to Help You Stop Thinking About Your Spouse

In the boxes below, write activities for each category in which you want to engage. Include dates to help you keep and stay on track.

HOBBY	REFRESH MY SPACE	FUN TIME WITH FAMILY/FRIENDS

Please visit www.susanshofer.com/ws-pdf to download a current copy of the worksheets to print for yourself or fill in on your device.



How to Stop Thinking About Your (Ex)Spouse - Part 3

1. Whenever you begin to think about your spouse, stop and do something else. At first, this step will be difficult. Eventually, you will find that the stretches of time between thoughts about him/her will be longer and longer, until they disappear from your daily thoughts. Find things to take care of you. Use the space below to record some alternate activities. Some ideas may include a manicure, pedicure, massage, jog around the neighborhood each day after work, haircut/color, day spa treatment, or take a cooking class, a Zumba class or kickboxing. The possibilities are endless!

2. Find a hobby — anything. Maybe you always wanted to take an art or dance class or join an organization as a volunteer. These are great ways to get out of the house, expand your interests and meet people. Pick something, sign up and do it right away. There are so many organizations that always welcome volunteers. You can find them in community newspapers and the Internet. List a few hobbies, in the allotted space below, and then do them:

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3. Refresh your living space, room by room. You don't have to do anything drastic or undergo major renovations. Pick up some new throw pillows for your sofa, change the color scheme in bathrooms with some new towels, or buy some new dishes for the kitchen. Splashing your kitchen or bedroom walls with new color is always uplifting. Clean out closets and cupboards to get rid of things you don't need. Simplifying your physical space will become analogous to simplifying your emotional space. There is something nice to be said for simplicity; now is the time to simplify your life as much as you can. I have made a list of some ideas, and created space for you to write some of your own.

- ☐ Buy some new bathroom towels
- ☐ Put flowers in bathroom
- ☐ Set out decorative soaps for bathroom
- ☐ Buy new kitchen towels
- ☐ Replace kitchen flatware or dishes
- ☐ Purchase a new welcome mat for your front door
- ☐ New throw pillows for living room sofa — always give a room a new look
- ☐ Frame new photos
- ☐ Place candles around the house
- ☐ Paint your bedroom
- ☐ Plant flowers in your garden
- ☐ Replace that “old” toaster or purchase the juicer you always wanted
- ☐ Buy new bed linens for your bedroom

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Enter some of your own ideas for refreshing your space

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4. Take down all the happy pictures of you and your (ex)spouse that are littered throughout your house. Leaving out photos of the two of you together, during happier times, may only deepen your despair and inhibit you from moving into a new frame of mind. You don't have to throw the photos away. Store them until you know that viewing them won't throw you into a sad funk.

5. Plan a trip with your children, friends, or a travel group. This is a wonderful way to expand your horizons and move into a new life without your (ex)spouse. Jot down daytrips, small weekend getaways or longer fantasy trips you want to take. There are many travel groups for people with like interests, which you can learn about by researching on the Internet or through local community centers.

By taking the steps towards a new life, eventually yours will be full on its own merit and you won't feel the void of not having your (ex)spouse.

Take a Step Towards Self Care

Divorce is a stressful event, one that can suck the life out of you and drain your emotional resources. It is relentless and can seem never-ending. According to the well-known **Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale** (found on the following page), divorce is the second highest stressor next to death of a spouse.

It is no surprise that a prolonged period of unrelenting contention can wreak havoc with your health, resulting in anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, thyroid conditions, gastrointestinal illnesses, muscle pain and autoimmune diseases.

You **MUST** take care of yourself during a divorce. Please find something, **ANYTHING** that will get your body moving to rid it of stress. You don't have to run marathons, rock climb, or become a body builder. However, it is imperative that you create a consistent exercise regime, even if that means walking around your neighborhood every day for twenty minutes. Exercise releases endorphins, hormones that promote the feeling of wellbeing. You may join a gym or take classes at a dance or yoga studio. Most gyms have dance classes, boxing, yoga, Zumba, Pilates, and spin classes. Joining a gym does not have to be expensive. The YMCA has wonderful facilities all over the country for a fraction of the cost of most private gyms. Many community centers have exercise classes for nominal fees.

Make a chart to keep on top of your fitness. Below is an example of a very basic exercise regime that helps manage a routine. A chart is provided for your own schedule. Make several copies so you can track your progress. Make notes of how a particular activity made you feel, so that you can see what works better for you, as well as keeps you engaged in the process.

Day of the Week	Type of Exercise	Duration	Notes
Monday	Walk	One hour	Sore toe but walked through it
Tuesday	Zumba	One hour	Felt great afterwards
Wednesday	Walk	Half an hour	Rain interrupted
Thursday	Yoga	One hour	Feel completely stretched out
Friday	Walk	Twenty minutes	Just what I needed!!!
Saturday	Walk	One hour	Gave me time to think
Sunday	Aerobics Video	One hour	Got a great sweat!!!

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The Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale

To measure stress according to the Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale, the number of "Life Change Units" that apply to events in the past year of an individual's life are added and the final score will give a rough estimate of how stress affects health.

Life Event	Life Change Units
Death of a spouse	100
Divorce	73
Marital separation	65
Imprisonment	63
Death of a close family member	63
Personal injury or illness	53
Marriage	50
Dismissal from work	47
Marital reconciliation	45
Retirement	45
Change in health of family member	44
Pregnancy	40
Sexual difficulties	39
Gain a new family member	39
Business readjustment	39
Change in financial state	38
Death of a close friend	37
Change to different line of work	36
Change in frequency of arguments	35
Major mortgage	32
Foreclosure of mortgage or loan	30
Change in responsibilities at work	29

Life Event	Life Change Units
Child leaving home	29
Trouble with in-laws	29
Outstanding personal achievement	28
Spouse starts or starts work	26
Beginning or end of school	26
Change in living conditions	25
Revision of personal habits	24
Trouble with boss	23
Change in working hours or conditions	20
Change in residence	20
Change in schools	20
Change in recreation	19
Change in church activities	19
Change in social activities	18
Minor mortgage or loan	17
Change in sleeping habits	16
Change in number of family reunions	15
Change in eating habits	15
Vacation	13
Major holiday	12
Minor violation of law	11

Score of 300+: At risk of illness.
 Score of 150-299: Risk of illness is moderate (reduced by 30% from the above risk).
 Score <150: Only have a slight risk of illness



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Fitness & Wellness Chart

Here is a blank chart for you to chart your fitness. Make copies so that you can keep weekly logs until you have a routine workout schedule.

Day of the Week	Type of Exercise	Duration	Notes
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

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Diet

It is important to maintain a healthful diet while you go through a divorce. Stress can and will deplete your nutritional reserves. During times of high stress, the release of the hormones cortisol and adrenaline can initiate weight gain. Skipping meals, or eating processed and “junk” foods, will add to that weight gain and compromise your health. Make sure you drink lots of water and that your diet consists of fruits, vegetables, and lean meats. Take a multivitamin to assure that you receive your minimum requirement of vitamins and minerals.

Rest

Proper rest is imperative in dealing with any high-conflict situation. If you have always needed eight hours of sleep, trying to function on five is not going to be healthy for you. It will only negatively impact your overall health, judgement and decision-making. Make sure you get the amount of rest you need to maintain your optimal health.

Alcohol and Drugs

It goes without saying that any alcohol consumption should be limited. Recreational drug use is an absolute deal breaker when it comes to divorce. If you are recklessly using alcohol or drugs, your spouse may use this information against you. While I usually don't make claims as to how judges will rule individually or collectively on most situations, I can confidently say that judges have little tolerance when it comes to drug and alcohol use/abuse, especially if there are children involved. Misusing substances could be the culprit to losing custody of your children and/or relegating you to supervised visitation. With supervised visitation, the court allows you to see your children only with a social worker present, at a determined time and location. Supervised visitation will limit the freedom you have with your children.

If you believe you have a problem with alcohol or drugs, please locate a rehabilitation program ASAP. A judge will be much more forgiving if you take the initiative to get help, rather than having the judge make the decision for you. Usually, once a judge makes a decision based on substantial evidence that your spouse has rallied a campaign against you, not only do the stakes become higher, but your credibility has become reduced in the eyes of the judge and the court. Even if your spouse has been a stalker, creeper, or crazy lunatic, their position becomes elevated by your alleged bad behavior.

I make absolutely no judgement when it comes to anyone battling the disease of alcoholism or drug addiction. Several of my close friends are in recovery, and I respect and honor the huge strides they make to achieve and maintain a sober life. The purpose of my statements is to provide you with the truth about how any substance or alcohol abuse/misuse may undermine you in a divorce and your ability to maintain a fluid custody arrangement with your (ex)spouse.

Emotional Support from Family & Friends

A therapist once told me that the divorce experience would show me who my real friends are. No truer words were ever spoken. Divorce often creates a division in friendships. Some of your joint friends may align themselves with you, and others with your spouse. This is the natural turn of events. Please don't take it personally.

You don't need a cavalcade of people to support you. At the onset of your divorce, you may have a large group of family and friends who rally around you. Your support system will wane after some time. This has nothing to do with you personally, nor does it reflect people's love for and devotion to you. It has more to do with short attention spans. It is not dissimilar to how people, on a whole, respond to tragic world events. Think of earthquakes, plane crashes, floods, school shootings and fires. These stories play all over the news for days — and then disappear as fast as they came. It is human nature to decide when people have had enough, and the story becomes, well, no longer a story. It is not that people don't care about you. They do. It's just that they move on. Critical for your recovery is a nurturing and loving support system; you should only surround yourself with supportive loving people. That can be as few as one or two. You don't need a large crowd of supporters.

If your divorce is contentious, the first line of defense is to keep you and your children safe.

How to Develop a Support System

1. Choose one or two close people to whom you can confide regarding your situation.

My confidants are: _____

2. Make a pact to check-in each day, with one specific person, if you have an abusive (ex)spouse.

I check-in with _____ every day at _____ AM/PM.

3. Dismiss those people who are not supportive of you.

Move on from _____,

Don't waste any time trying to convince people to believe you if you feel that you have been wronged. Only you know your truth.

Please visit www.susanshofer.com/ws-pdf to download a current copy of the worksheets to print for yourself or fill in on your device.



TAKE A STEP TOWARD SELF CARE

Make an appointment to see your physician

Inform your physician that you are going through a divorce. Most internists are familiar with stress-related illnesses, and your doctor can monitor your health while you go through this journey. It will behoove you to have a full physical, complete with a blood panel. Talk with your physician about possible ways to stay healthy during the divorce process. If you have any pre-existing conditions, find out how stress impacts your ability to stay well. There are additional practices and forms of exercise to boost your immune system and help you relax, such as meditation, massage therapy, yoga, tai chi, or acupuncture.

Counseling/Therapy

It would be advantageous to find a good therapist, one who specializes in family dynamics and divorce, to emotionally guide you through the process. If your divorce is high-conflict, you may be exhausted due to the unrelenting emotional assaults from your spouse. An experienced couples or divorce therapist will help you learn how not to internalize your spouse's vendetta, and keep yourself emotionally well-balanced during the process. If you have never been treated by a therapist, ask your physician for a referral. You may ask friends if they know of a good therapist, too. There are also divorce support groups that meet on a regular basis — possibly a good way for you to meet other people going through the same experience. Many people flock to Facebook and chat groups to find like-minded people with similar experiences and interests. They can be very comforting, especially when you are home alone and feel isolated.

The Police

If your spouse has physically threatened or harmed you, make a police report each and every time that happens. Toxic divorces usually have stalking and harassment components to them. These behaviors, if not thwarted, tend to escalate. As I mentioned earlier, in this guide, if your precinct has a Domestic Violence Coordinator (and most do), please make an appointment to inform them of your situation. Many jurisdictions have access to domestic violence workshops and support groups, all extremely helpful for battered and abused spouses. Most are free of charge.

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Getaway Plans

If your (ex)spouse has been physically abusive and there has been domestic (interpersonal) violence, you may need to flee your residence to find a safer environment. Coercion or threats made to you by your spouse, may put you in real fear. If you feel you have nowhere to turn you may call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1.800.799.SAFE. The agents can help you determine if you are experiencing domestic violence and where to find safety in your area as well as provide resources to help keep you safe.

The following are items, aside from your registration and insurance information, to carry in your car at all times in the event that you have to leave your home:

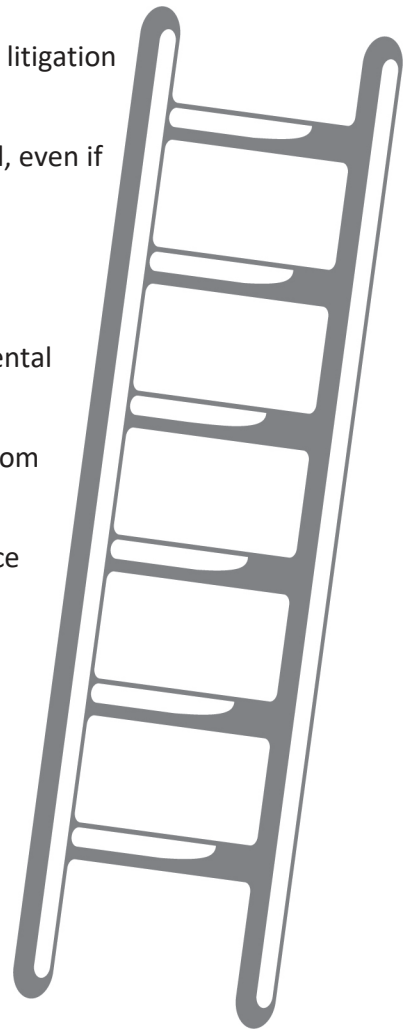
- ☐ Always keep your gas tank half full, or more, in the event that your (ex)spouse become threatening and you must flee. You don't want to run out of gas while trying to get to a safer location.
- ☐ Pack an overnight bag for you and your children. Each bag should include three days' worth of clothes, toiletries, and all necessary medications.
- ☐ Keep all passports in a safe place.
- ☐ Have a plan for pets should you need to flee to safety.
- ☐ \$200 available cash.
- ☐ Credit or debit card with between \$500 and \$1,000 available on one or both.
- ☐ A jug of fresh water, flares, and blankets.
- ☐ Nonperishable snacks for the children.

II. Stride to Find the Best Attorney

One of the biggest complaints I hear from people about their attorney, come from the lack of communication between client and counsel. The outcome of your divorce will only be as good as your attorney's ability to represent you. The most skilled practitioners win and obtain the best settlements for their clients, and diffuse any contention if it surfaces. All attorneys are not alike, so it is imperative that you find an excellent one who understands your case and your objectives. When it comes to acquiring the correct attorney for your case, ask as many questions as there are possible scenarios. Your divorce may begin very amicably, and that is commendable. However, if your spouse becomes contentious, will your attorney be able to switch gears should the complexion of your divorce change?

You want to be the best client, so shopping for an ideal attorney takes as much effort, if not more, than the search for the perfect car or home. You want to find an attorney that can be with you from start to finish. The act of switching attorneys several times during the divorce process is unfortunate and also common. Divorce is a very intimate, difficult and complex process. They can start out amicably, but turn into a battle zone due to jealousy. Your attorney needs to be able to switch gears at any point and represent you to their best ability. Ask a prospective attorney how they will best represent you under the following circumstances.

- ☐ Your spouse has more money than you, and can keep the litigation going if they choose to become vindictive.
- ☐ Your spouse won't agree with reasonable negotiations and, even if they do, will violate any negotiations or settlements even after they sign an agreement.
- ☐ How can you pay your legal fees with a limited income?
- ☐ Does the attorney understand the complexities of Parental Alienation?
- ☐ Does the attorney understand how to stop the divorce from becoming a never-ending saga?
- ☐ Does the attorney know how to address ongoing post-divorce issues and any decree contempt?



What to Ask a Prospective Attorney during an Interview

As someone who had the unfortunate experience of having five attorneys spread over four years, during and after my divorce, it's advantageous to find the best attorney and stay with them from the beginning to the end of the divorce. Even though many of my private investigator clients were attorneys, family law attorneys speak an entirely different language than did my clients. I learned what to expect and what not to accept — the hard way.

As you go through the interview process, remember that ***the attorney you hire works for you***. Too often, the attorney-client relationship becomes similar to that of parent-child. Your attorney carries the legal knowledge, but you are still the "client." Don't sign on with an attorney unless you feel they are ideal for you and your situation. If anything makes you feel uncomfortable early on, it will magnify as your case progresses. Stay true to yourself.

Your attorney is your best ally during your divorce. To find the best attorney, you have to do your homework.

I have devised ten questions to ask, along with the answers to receive, before you sign on with an attorney to represent you through your divorce. I called this the ten-for-ten, to have before you sign a contract with them.

◆ Remember ◆

Your divorce will only be as good as the attorney who represents you.

We do have control over our own behaviors. It is how YOU behave that will have the most impact on the outcome of your case.

10 Questions to Ask During the Interview

1. **What is the attorney's specialty area?**

I am a firm believer in finding a family law or divorce attorney. While that sounds like a no-brainer, there are many attorneys who wear different hats that range from accident cases to worker's compensation cases, lead poisoning cases and divorce -- all clumped into a „one stop shop“ mentality. While I would never say that these attorneys are not competent, I firmly believe (and this is my personal belief that I impart to you based on my and my clients' experiences) that an attorney who specializes in divorce is your best bet.

Let me give you an analogy for my thinking. If you have a cold or flu, you go to your General Doctor for treatment. If your doctor finds that you have something suspicious with your heart they will send you to a cardiologist who is a heart specialist. That seems pretty reasonable doesn't it? Well, the same thinking should be applied to attorneys. Many attorneys will have specialties. It would stand to reason that you would hire a divorce attorney for your case. Make sense?

During your initial consultation with a prospective attorney, share an overview of your situation. Ask the attorney which strategies they would use in your case. Make inquiries about how they handle it when the other side is contentious, agrees to nothing and violates all agreements. It's one thing to set up a nicely laid divorce decree, but what happens if the divorce becomes contentious before and beyond the dissolution of the marriage? How will the attorney handle your spouse if they violate the divorce decree? Does the attorney understand domestic violence and high conflict personalities, should either present during the divorce process?

2. **Will the attorney hire an historical analyst?**

Family law attorneys are hired to help their client legally dismantle their marriage contract, which involves dividing assets and liabilities. The use of a historical analysis levels the playing field. The historical analyst is a financial expert, trained in the financial dissolution of marriage, and hired as an unbiased individual to help both parties divide marital assets fairly as well as assign liabilities in an equally equitable manner. Most often, an attorney may be able to help their clients divide up the assets. However, when there is a stalemate, a third party such as a historical analyst may be the answer.

3. **After your initial consultation, what is your attorney's plan for your case from beginning until end?**

The prospective attorney should have a general plan for you. After you discuss your situation during the consult, have them provide you with an overview of what they believe will be the best course of action for your case, using a broad outline. Take some notes so that you may think of any questions or objectives you may have prior to hiring them.

4. **When does the attorney believe your divorce will be final?**

Divorces that drag on for years will drain your emotional and financial resources. While no attorney can give you a specific divorce date, they know certain benchmarks throughout the divorce process. They also know where their specific court jurisdiction is as far as backlog of court dates. The attorney should have a general idea of when you can expect your divorce to be finalized. The normal range for a divorce proceeding falls roughly between six to twenty-four months.

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5. **If there are children involved, does your attorney understand Parental Alienation (PA)?**

Parental Alienation can rear its ugly head during divorce. Sadly, some of the worst custody battles I have seen did not start out with nasty divorces. I have met people who never dreamed that their spouse would try to turn the children against them. PA can occur very quickly, before you know what happened. Ask the attorney if they know what Parental Alienation is, and how they mitigate it when it begins to surface.

Discuss with the attorney how a custody arrangement would be set up with your spouse, and what happens if your spouse does not follow the co-parenting rules. Ask the attorney what the sanctions will be if your spouse brings the children home either hours or days late.

For minor children, ask the attorney if they will motion the court for a Best Interest Attorney (BIA), also known as a *Guardian Ad Litem*. This is a court-appointed attorney for the children. That person represents neither you nor your spouse. The BIA will interview the children and assess what is in their best interest, as far as custody arrangements and reunification therapy, if either parent is on the road to being alienated.

Will the attorney motion the court for a Parent Coordinator? A Parent Coordinator works with the family after the divorce, helping them co-parent the children in a collaborative way. Part of the Parent Coordinator's role is to recognize when a parent may be engaging in Parental Alienation or interfering with visitation. They may work with parents individually, together and/or with the children involved. The Parent Coordinator acts as a liaison between the parents and the courts. They may petition the court to change custody status for any parent who consistently violates visitation or custody arrangements or does not comply with the divorce decree where parenting is concerned.

6. **Communication between you and the attorney.**

It is imperative to find out, at the onset of any attorney-client relationship, how the attorney plans to communicate with you. Every time you talk to your attorney, you will be billed for the conversation. You need to communicate efficiently with your counsel, so that the lines of communication are open without draining your pocketbook. Always remember that your attorney is your legal counsel, not your therapist. Doubly remember that every time they talk to you, the clock is ticking. You are paying for that time, so streamline it. At the same token, you have to be kept abreast of your case. To eliminate confusion, by either one of you, discuss a communication plan from the onset of the relationship.

7. **Is the attorney willing to appear in front of a judge?**

The final divorce is often heard before a judge in a courtroom, if not a judge's chambers or mediation conference room. Judges prefer that people make decisions for their own futures and not ask the judge to make life changing decisions that they may ultimately not be happy with. It is your attorney's job to assure that you get the best settlement possible. That settlement will require compromise on your part as well as your spouse's. Skilled attorneys know how to make that happen. The last thing you want is for a judge, instead of you, to decide alimony amount, division of property and child visitation. I have observed judges reassign a new court date so that the parties can come up with a settlement rather than reach a decision from the bench. If a judge decides, the ruling(s) will be final — no turning back. Unfortunately, sometimes a deadlock arises, because one partner is purposely holding up the divorce process. Your attorney needs to be savvy to this tactic and willing to get you in front of a judge who will encourage you and your spouse to come up with an equitable decision.

STRIDE TO FIND THE BEST ATTORNEY

8. Is the attorney willing to ask for a court appointment judge assigned to your case?

Some states, such as Texas, assign a judge to a case no matter how many times the case appears before the bench. This is a wonderful way to maintain some consistency with delicate divorce cases. It enables the judge to get to know the parties, the strengths and weakness of each party, to determine who is causing the contention (if there is any) and rule more favorably on a case than a judge is unfamiliar with the case.

In the states where a new judge is assigned to a case each and every time it comes to court, it is possible for the attorney to petition the court to assign a judge to a case. This is done when a case becomes contentious and seemingly never-ending. A court appointed judge is paramount for a case in which one or both parties find themselves frequently in contempt — violating the divorce decree either by violating custody or visitation, or they don't meet financial obligations. High-conflict divorces are chocked full of post-divorce violations. For these reasons, it is imperative that you have a court appointed judge, one who can familiarize themselves with the issues at hand and address them appropriately. If you don't have a judge assigned to your case, more than likely you will have a new judge every time you appear in court. The new judge's ruling may result in a devastating outcome, as opposed to a judge familiar with your case who would have ruled more appropriately. You may never need to go this route and that would be great. However, if you do, knowing you hired an attorney willing to have a court appointed judge assigned to your case, gives strength to the attorney being a viable choice.

EXAMPLE OF WHAT CAN HAPPEN IF YOU DON'T HAVE YOUR OWN JUDGE

Adam's ex-wife took him to court 32 times in a two-year period. Each time, the presiding judge made a quick decision; usually, the rulings were relatively fair and in Adam's favor. His cases appeared before judges who had become familiar with the dynamics of his family. On one occasion, Adam took his ex-wife to court for an incident in which she hit him in the back with a broom, in front of his children. On the hearing day, the assigned judge was not familiar with Adam's case, although the judge noted that this battle had been going on for a long time. The judge ruled that neither party could stand on each other's property, and *dropped* the assault and battery charges that Adam filed against his ex-wife! Had there been a judge assigned to this case, he/she would be familiar with the 10 other times that Adam's wife assaulted him, including an incident two years prior in which he needed 15 stitches in his head when she hit him with a broom. Most likely, a judge familiar with this long-standing contentious case would have ruled differently.

9. Talk about money.

More than likely, your attorney will ask for a retainer. A retainer is a specified amount of money (\$5,000, \$10,000, etc.) that you must pay when you hire the attorney. As your attorney works on your case, he/she will take their fees out of the retainer instead of billing you for each and every thing they do. All attorneys keep an accounting of their time spent on your case and will ask you to replenish the retainer as it becomes depleted. The retainer will be used very quickly during the early part of the divorce process when filings, interrogatories and depositions are taken. Rising legal expenses can happen very quickly. Talk with the attorney about asking the courts for your spouse to pay your legal fees, especially if you were a stay-at-home parent.

THE DIVORCE RECOVERY LADDER

Divorce has become a time-intensive proposition, which means a money-intensive situation. Prospective attorneys may ask for a net worth statement. They will want to know how much equity you have in your home, your credit card borrowing power, your savings account balances, and ready cash. If they feel, at any time during your divorce, that you can no longer pay your legal fees, they have the right to withdraw from your case. This will leave you high and dry without legal representation.

Time is money. You are paying your attorney for their time, so maximize their talents during the time you pay and minimize wasted time.

Examples of Attorney's Fees:

Attorney Statement Sample

Statement of Account

\$250 per hour rate

Month 1
Account No: 00052

Opening Balance		\$0.00
Deposit		10,000.00
Filing	2 hrs	-500.00
Call to other attorney	10 min	-42.00
Draw up interrogatories	4 hrs	-1,000.00
Total for Month		1,542.00
Retainer Balance		\$8,458.00

Attorney Statement Sample

Statement of Account

Month 2
Account No: 00052

Opening Balance		\$8,458.00
Prepare for deposition	4 hrs	-1,000.00
Deposition	3 hrs	-750.00
Total for Month		-1,750.00
Retainer Balance		\$6,708.00

STRIDE TO FIND THE BEST ATTORNEY

Attorney Statement Sample

Statement of Account

Month 3
Account No: 00052

Opening Balance		\$6,708.00
Answers to interrogatories	7 hrs	-1,750.00
from other side		
Attorney conference	2 hrs	-500.00
Letter to other side	1 hr	-250.00
Total for Month		-2500.00
Retainer Balance		\$4,208.00

EXAMPLE OF NOT HAVING THE FINANCIALLY ADVANTAGED SPOUSE PAY LEGAL FEES FOR THE TARGETED SPOUSE:

Kim's husband earned \$3 million per year. Yes, you read that correctly: three million dollars!!! Kim, a pediatrician, earned \$180,000 a year. When Kim's husband left her and their three small children, his hefty salary went with him. While Kim's \$180,000 a year salary was not shabby, it was not enough to support the household her husband left behind. Immediately, Kim was faced with financial responsibilities beyond her financial reach. Her attorney thought her "great" salary would be able to sustain her lifestyle until the divorce was final — *if* she could reduce some of the household expenses, which Kim did.

At the time Kim filed, she was unaware she could ask the courts to have her husband pay her legal fees. She was what the courts call, "the disadvantaged spouse," with a much lower salary than the other. Kim's legal fees continued to mount as her husband took exception to every issue addressed during the divorce process. After three years, her legal fees were over \$300,000. To support her household, Kim sold all of her jewelry and her small art collection from before her marriage, thus not considered marital assets. Her home fell into disrepair and she could no longer keep her three children in their private schools.

Given other circumstances, Kim's impressive salary could surely have made it affordable for her to raise her three children. However, to be expected to take over household expenses in line with a \$3 million salary was an impossible task to ask of her. The legal expenses were excessive and she could not pay them. Eventually, her attorney withdrew from her case due to non-payment of legal fees. Unable to pay the high expenses of her marital home, Kim moved from her town. She found work in the neighboring community, where she earned half of her previous salary. She enrolled her children in public school and rented a townhome for the four of them.

Five years later, Kim was still not divorced. Her ex-husband filed bankruptcy, but Kim was certain sure he hid cash assets. Now he pays nominal child support. While I can't say for certain what the outcome would have been had her attorney asked for legal fees, I believe that her circumstances would not have been as grave as they

THE DIVORCE RECOVERY LADDER

became. Knowing that he was responsible for paying her legal expenses, her husband, more than likely, would have been more judicious in dragging out the case as long as he did.

10. **What if things don't work out?**

Address some of the worst-case outcomes you could encounter with your case. Attorneys can sell a great outcome when they want your business. The truth, though, is that things do go wrong. Discuss other options or an alternative plan if proceedings do not turn out as intended. Be wary of any attorney who tells you not to worry “because nothing will go wrong”. No attorney can predict, with any certainty, what will or will not happen — nor how a judge will rule.

◆ Remember ◆

The attorney works for you. They need to clearly outline how they will help you.

Attorney Comparison Guide

Take this chart to your attorney meetings. Then use it to compare attorneys.

Name	Phone Number/email	Strengths	Weaknesses

Please visit www.susanshofer.com/ws-pdf to download a current copy of the worksheets to print for yourself or fill in on your device.



THE DIVORCE RECOVERY LADDER

Document, Document, Document

I sincerely hope you have a relatively low-conflict divorce. However, if you don't, I cannot stress enough the importance of documentation. Let me say it again : **document, document, document** every contentious act of your spouse, whether it is writing you nasty emails, sending you unsavory texts, or not paying child support or other financial obligations set in a pre-divorce agreement or post-divorce decree/court order. If the contention extends to family and friends that have elected to side with your spouse and choose to jump on the nasty communication gravy train, make sure you maintain those correspondences also. Letters from teachers, school report cards, notices from the pediatrician – anything that can add value to your case – must be kept for easy retrieval. Maintain dates and times for all the offenses, along with any supporting documents as evidence.

Divorces are complex, as I have stated in other parts of this guidebook. Contentious divorces are even moreso, and have the propensity to seem like a never-ending downward spiral, making documentation even more critical. Most of us are unable to recall what we had for lunch last Tuesday, let alone the details of an event that happened six months ago. In my line of work as a private investigator, one thing we always know is that memories fade. Any time we needed to obtain a statement from a plaintiff or defendant, we knew it was critical to our case to always interview our subjects as close to the incident as possible. Why? Because, after a few months, the details of the incident become inaccurate, thus rendering some crucial evidence inadmissible.

It is imperative that you are prepared when you appear before a judge. If you don't have your facts straight and your notes organized, you may lose your case. Judges are busy people and don't have time for disorganized litigants. The judge doesn't want to HEAR about the email your spouse sent you that said he wasn't going to bring the children home on time. The judge wants to SEE the email. Remember, judges make rulings not only on the facts that they have presented in front of them, but also by a litigant's body language and behavior. I am always astounded when litigants have excellent arguments in their favor, but lose their case because they did not have evidence, or were very disorganized in their behavior.

******DON'T DAMAGE YOUR STRONG CASE BY NOT HAVING THE EVIDENCE******

Here is an example of how to document any offenses. Note the date, the type of offense and the details of that offense.

Offense Date	Offense Type	Details
April 3, 2016	Visitation Violation	Children were supposed to be returned Sunday, April 3, 2016 at 6:00 p.m. They were not returned until 10:30 p.m. No notice was given to me. Made report with the police for record keeping purposes only. Spoke with Officer John Smith, badge number, #5555, on April 3, 2016 at 9:45 p.m., report number #1234567.

DOCUMENT, DOCUMENT, DOCUMENT

Here is an example of how to document offenses when there is evidence, such as an email or text, to support them. In this example, one spouse sent a threatening email. Always print out emails or texts and place them in your binder. Please save documents to another computer, a flash drive, or another form of backup so that you don't lose the evidence should something happen to your computer.

Offense Date	Offense Type	Details
April 15, 2016 at 4:43 p.m.	Threatening email	My (ex)spouse sent me an email with the threat to call my employer and tell him lies about me. (Attached email).

Please visit www.susanshofer.com/ws-pdf to download a current copy of the worksheets to print for yourself or fill in on your device.



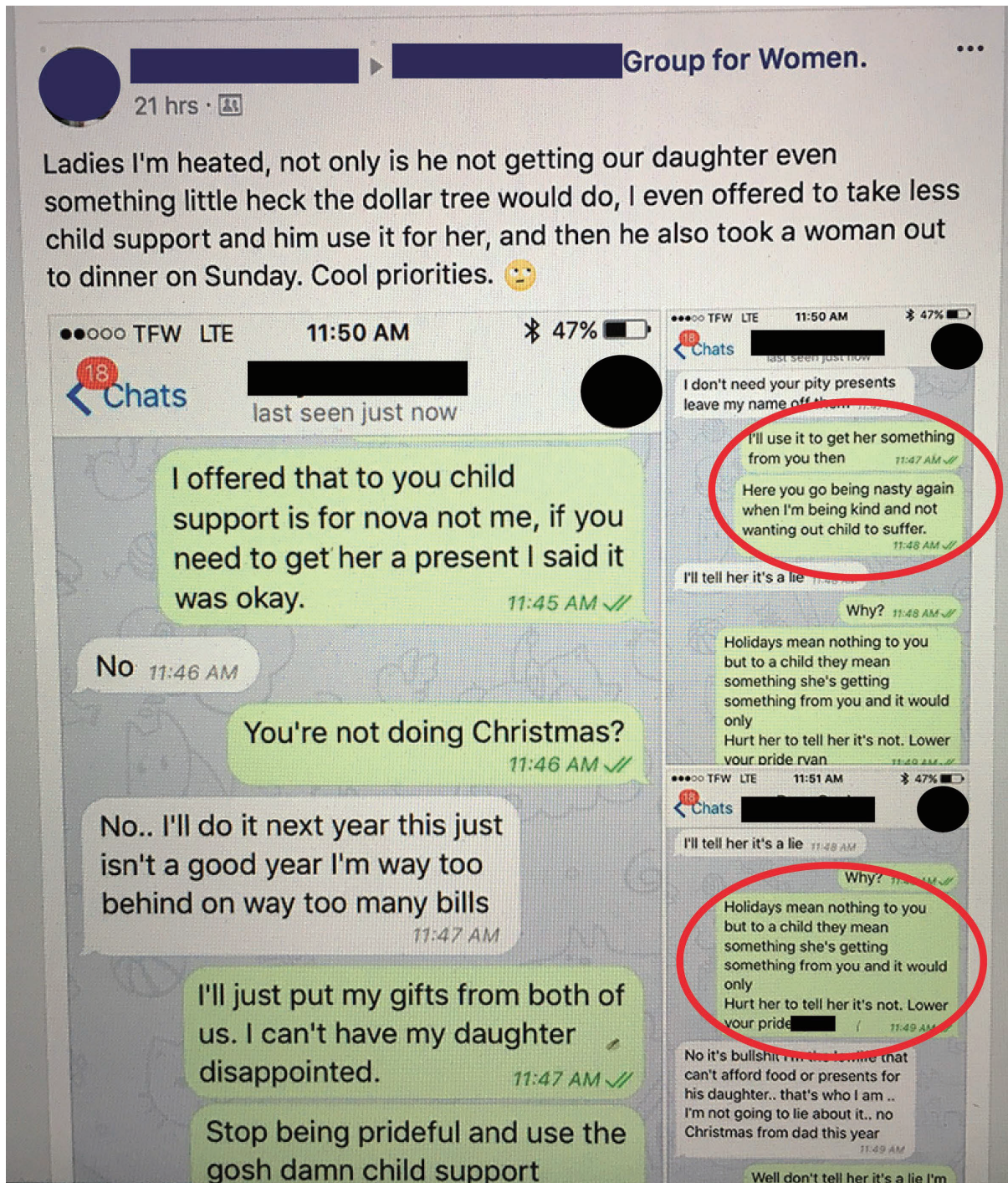
Social Media

My advice is to keep all discussion of your divorce, the children, custody, in-laws, court hearings off **ALL** social media. However, in the real world, I know this is unrealistic. The problem is that too many people overshare. Unfortunately, the oversharing sometimes harms one's case beyond repair. Social media has become such an integral part of our lives that we lose sight of the fact that the medium is actually a town crier. It is not as intimate and personal as you may think. Once you send the post, text or message, it is "out there" forever. It can be reproduced and appear in places you don't want it to appear — including a courtroom.

Here are a few examples of relatively common actual texts (names have been blocked out to protect the parties involved) that have appeared on various Facebook Groups and Communities. With each media item, I address the potential problems it creates.

THE DIVORCE RECOVERY LADDER

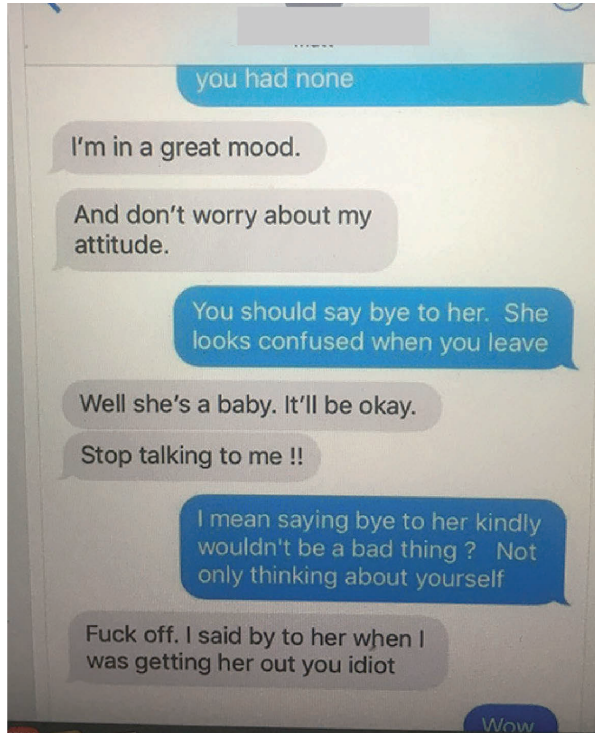
Example 1



This is a perfect example of someone who refuses to co-parent in a cooperative way. She admits that she is “heated” because her child’s father is unable to purchase a gift, stating that he is “way behind on too many bills.” If she were willing to co-parent, she would suggest they buy a small gift from both of them. Instead, she goes into a rant that holidays mean nothing to him and everything to a child. In addition, she praises her parenting skills while putting the other parent’s down. This discourse would show the courts her inability to co-parent cooperatively.

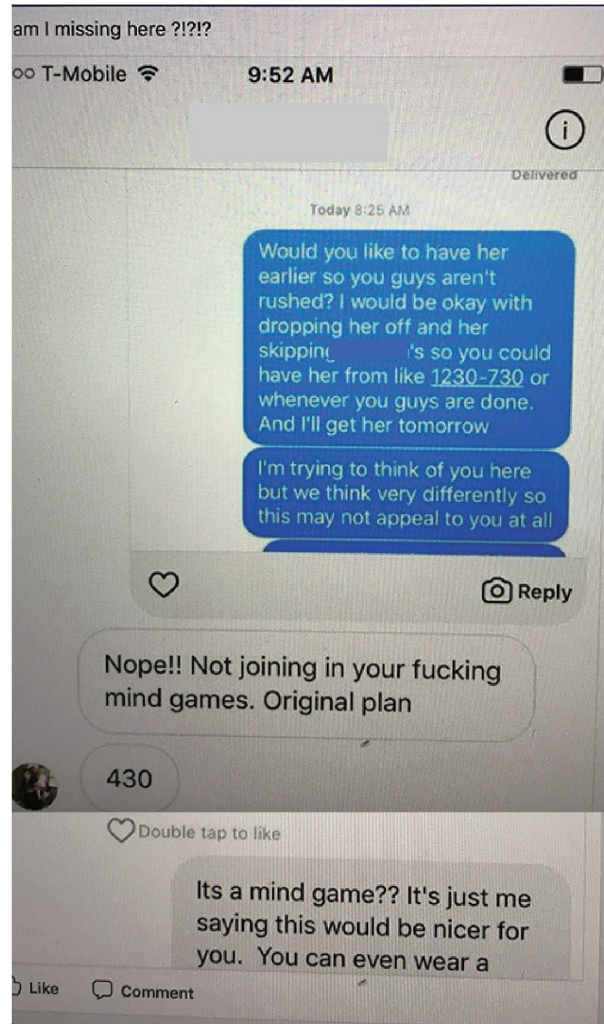
SOCIAL MEDIA

Example 2



This is another example of uncooperative co-parenting. One parent tells the other what they should have done and adds that the child was confused. We learn quickly that the child is an infant and could not determine whether or not a parent said "good bye."

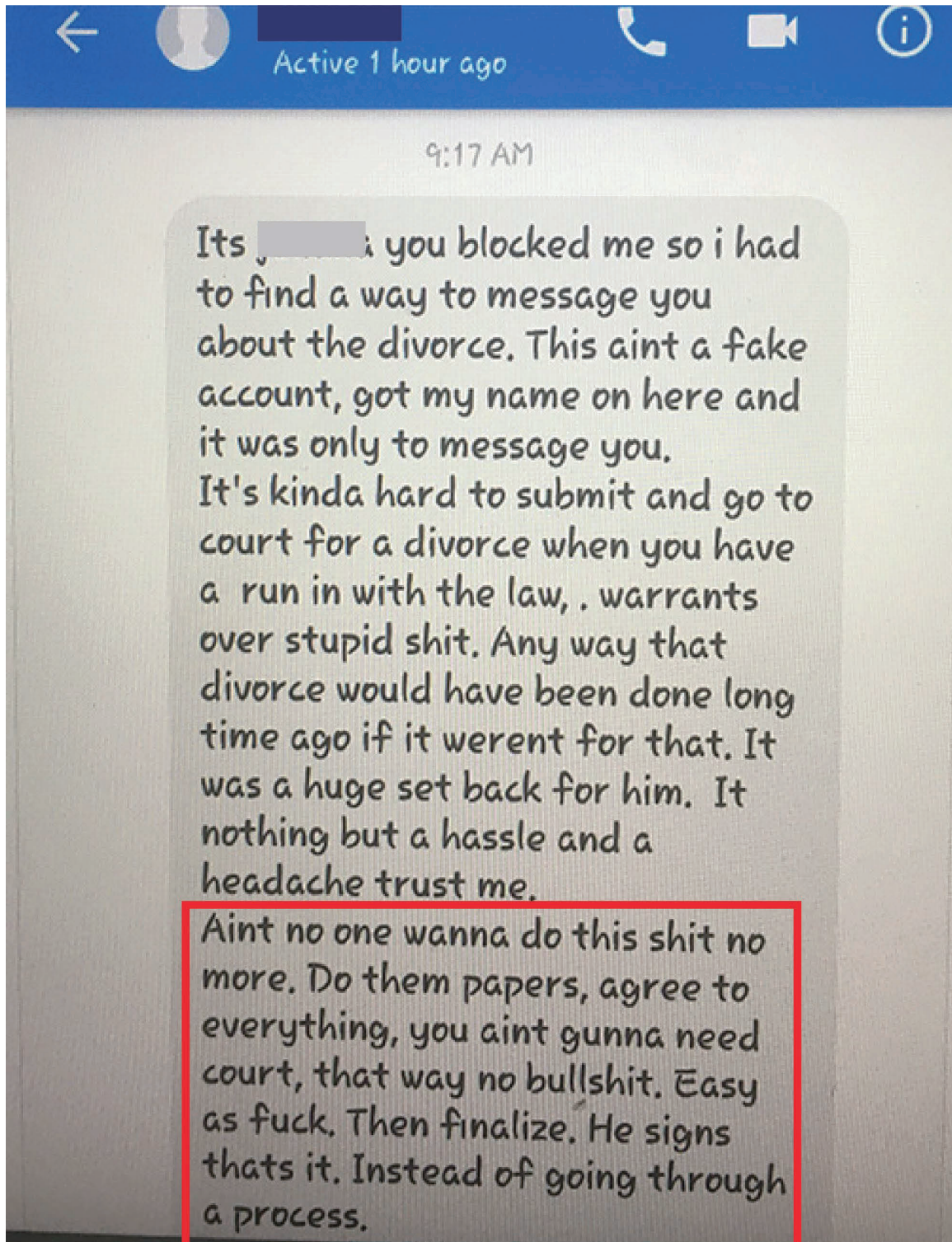
Example 3



Here, one parent being accommodating by offering suggestions to make it easier for the other parent. The immediate response of "Nope!!! Not joining in your fucking mind games" is not exactly appropriate. The response shows the recipient's surprise.

Keep in mind, we are not privy to what the dynamics are between the two parties. However, a judge will see this text at face value and the person with the "not joining in your fucking mind games" will appear to be contentious and may end up with supervised visitation.

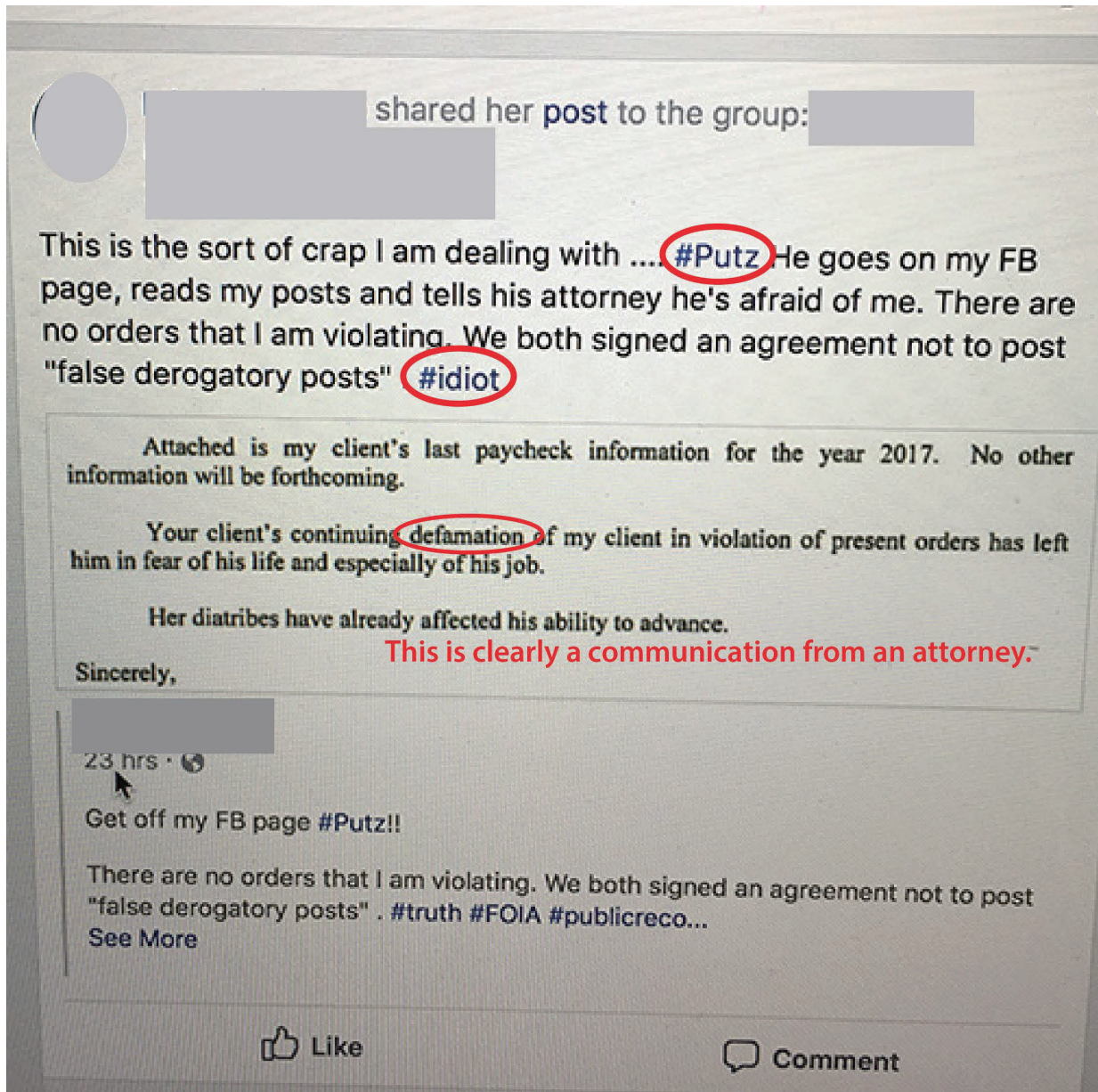
Example 4



This text is full of threats and demands. This appears to be a person who will not cooperate on any level. A judge may view this person as a bully.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Example 5

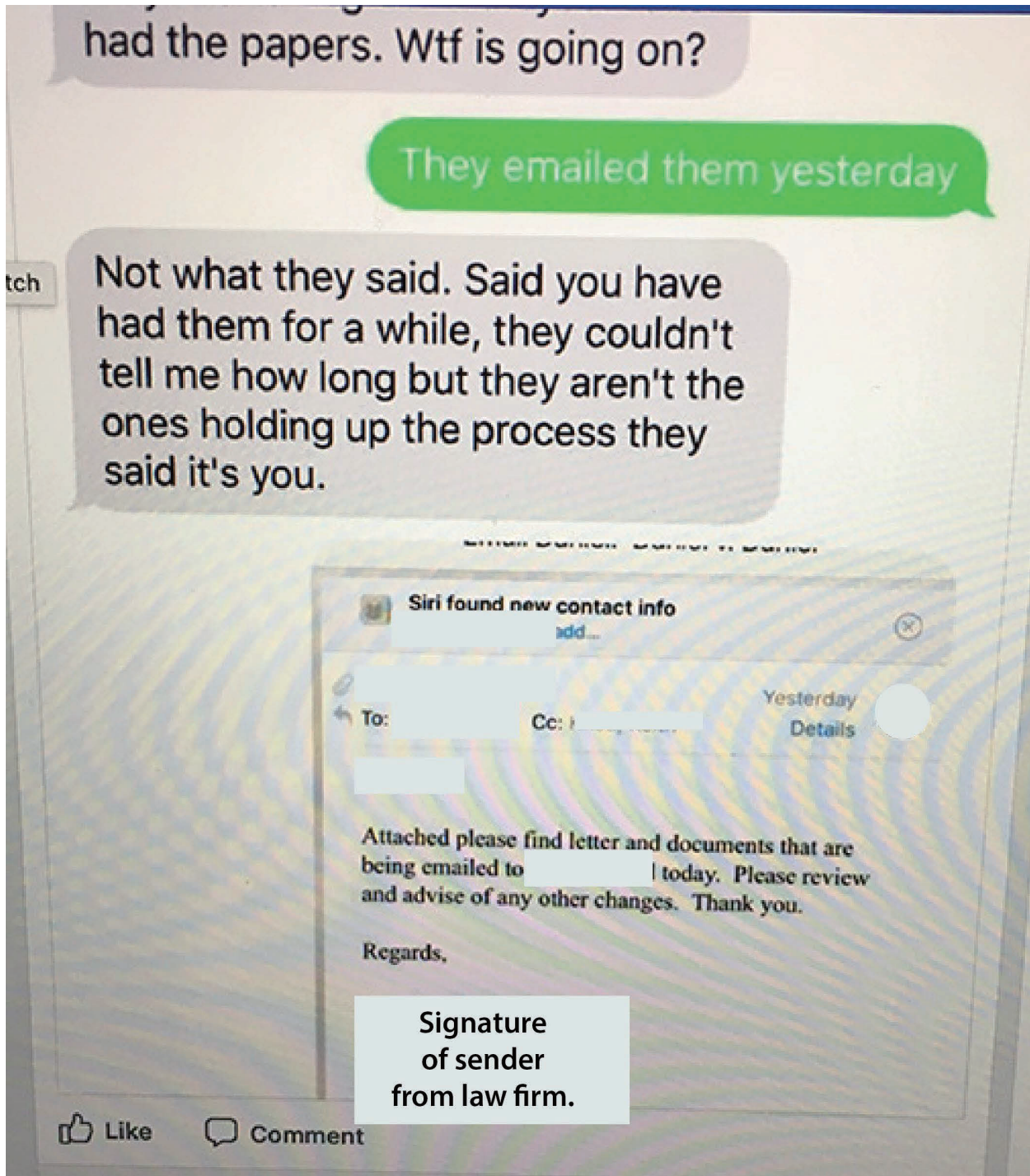


This post is very disturbing on many levels. It's obvious that both parties have been given orders to not post anything derogatory about each other. However, this person felt the need to not only post this, but also used two derogatory hashtags, towards their spouse --- #Putz and #idiot.

More disturbing is the inclusion of what is obviously a communication from the attorney telling the parties that the client continues to use derogatory language, resulting in defamation of her spouse. He now fears for his life and possible loss of his job. Furthermore, the wife's antics have already affected the husband's ability to advance at his job.

Clearly, the primary poster will no longer follow court instruction. This behavior is the precursor for losing custody (if there are children) and possible protective orders against the poster. Judges do not like people who don't follow instructions. This post will surely find its way into the courtroom via her husband's counsel.

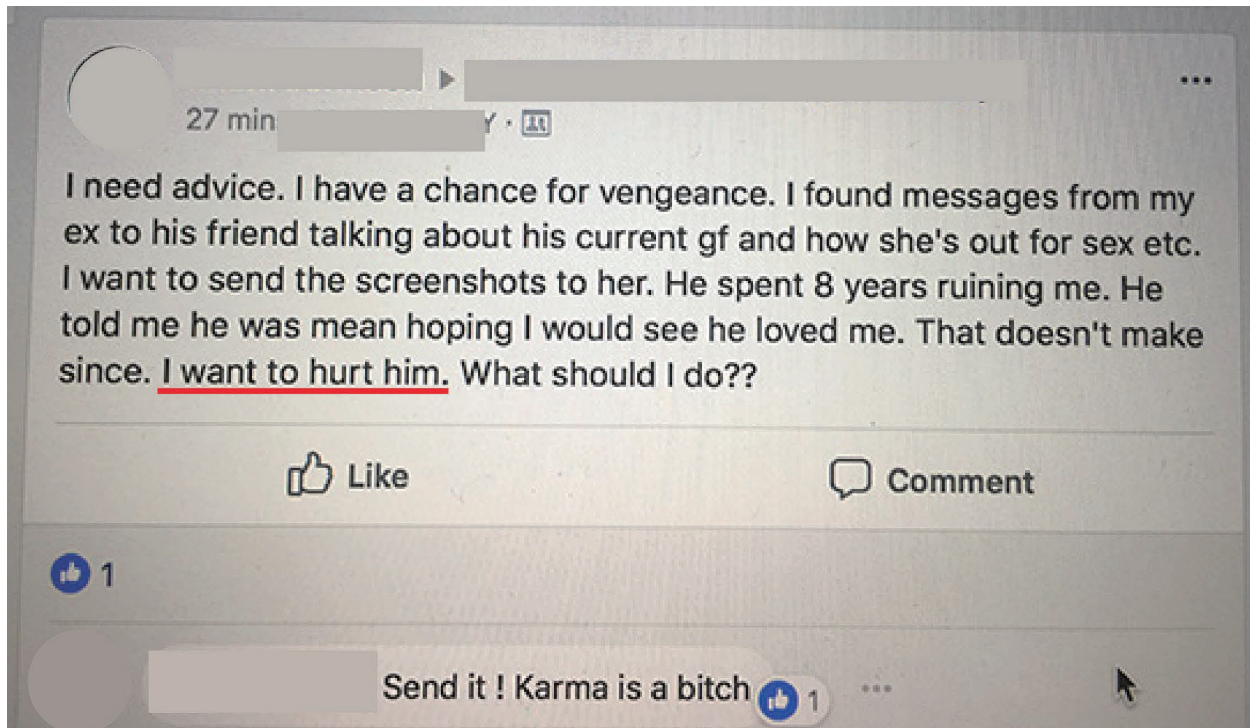
Example 6



Most attorneys have agreements with their clients to not reproduce any correspondence between the law office and the client. This means no emails or social media. Not only does this person identify themselves, but they also expose the counsel. Furthermore, if a contract was signed to not reproduce or share any correspondence from the attorney's office, this posting could result in her attorney's withdrawal from her case.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Example 7

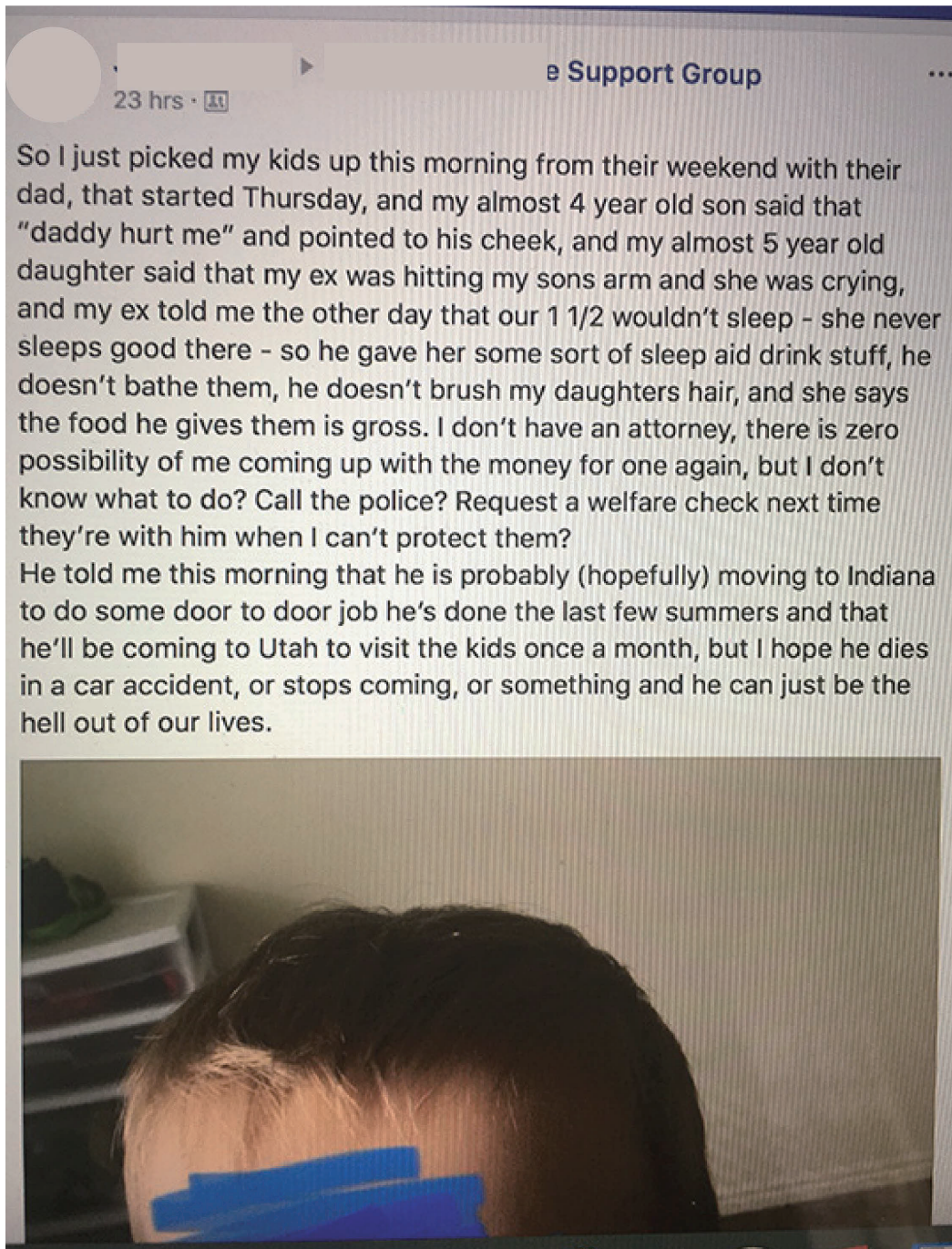


How else do I say "WOW" to this one. A cry out for vengeance. She is willing to ask for ideas on how to "hurt him."

Notice how quickly someone responded with, "Send it. Karma is a bitch." The advice is about as bad as it gets! If anything happens to this guy, we know who will be a suspect. If there is any doubt of whether this woman is a threat, her post confirms that she is.

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Example 8



Many women feel EXACTLY like the woman who posted this message. The problem is that she put her feelings out there with language like, "I hope he dies in a car accident, or stops coming, or something and he can just be the hell out of our lives." She is claiming that her children's father is abusive to them. Her claims are substantial and disturbing, BUT, are they valid? Could she have overinflated the dad's ills to feed her already ill feelings towards him? If he is truly abusive to her children, she does not need an attorney. She needs the police. Taking the law into her own hands and keeping the children from their dad is not an option. If the police suspect any abuse, they will contact Child Protective Services in her jurisdiction for further investigation.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Example 9

to my parents house. I am sending it back along with this letter. He has court in January for the stated actions in this letter as I have received the house in the TOs and he is in contempt.

Dear

The lack of involvement in Br : life and past actions have demonstrated your lack of care for Br . Thank you for the thought however, a more appropriate gift would be the money owed and the items you three have stolen from our home. (see below) None of yall have seen Br : in months, nor have you even sent a text to ask how he is doing or about his developmental milestones. : has not paid child support in months nor has he paid his half of Br : medical bills. He has also (unsurprisingly) not obtained health insurance for him, he has a \$10,000 surgery in January I suppose I will be solely responsible for that as well. That is fine, I have solely raised him his entire life. His absence in his sons life and lack of care is obvious. Both of you and that deadbeat son of yalls do not even know if he is walking by now or how many teeth he has. Ya'll have made his home unlivable and made the easy access of him (being five houses down) nonexistent. Someone who steals from Br : is no family of his and yalls gifts are unwelcome.

Things stolen from B

Washer and Dryer (making his home unlivable)

Refrigerator along with all of the food in it (Also making it impossible for him to live there)

Kitchen Table

Dining Room Table

China Hutch

B : Rocking Chair

All (3) Tvs

Couch

Loveseat

Entertainment center

Rugs

Two Dirtbikes

Wakeboard/ Lifejacket (Along with many other miscellaneous items that have been stolen from our home)

Along with leaving the house in a complete trashed wreck.

This is probably one of the most disturbing posts that I have found. In it, the writer attacks her husband to his parents! She assumes that the grandparents and the child's (B) father do not care for the child or his development. What makes her the decider? She also accuses the grandparents and the father of theft. That is a lofty accusation. Any gifts to the child are degraded, as though she is the decider of what is considered a proper gift. It's not as though they gave the child anything age-inappropriate or dangerous. She also discusses the medical bills with the grandparents. This is an issue between she and B's father. It is not any of the grandparent's business. She calls their son a "deadbeat." The only purpose of this letter is to vent to the grandparents and to sully her son's reputation to them.

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This letter can be viewed as a bridge towards ---

- Parental Alienation
- Grandparent Alienation
- Devaluing parent involvement
- Name calling
- Accusation of a crime

A letter like this could result in supervised visitation for the poster. The courts may view her as contentious. Since she is willing to sully the father's reputation to his parents, will she do the same with his child? To avoid that, her visitation could be restricted to limited dates and times with a court-appointed social worker.

This letter should never be sent — let alone shared on social media.

The Courts

Most people have very limited court experience. Unless one is an attorney, police officer, private investigator, Domestic Violence experts or professional criminal, most people only see courtrooms on *Law and Order SVU* or *The People's Court*. The courtroom can be a very intimidating place with a judge, bailiff, court stenographer, other plaintiffs, and defendants. If a marriage is not dissolved in mediation or a judge's chambers, the courtroom is the final destination in the divorce process.

Divorce, or Family Law, is a branch of the Civil Court System. A civil action, or tort, deals with contracts. Divorce is a dissolution of the marriage contract. Along with the Divorce Absolute comes the dissolution of other contracts acquired throughout the course of the marriage. Those contracts include jointly owned homes, boats, cars, credit cards, retirement accounts, mutual funds and/or bank accounts. In addition, the issue of child custody is also addressed.

Divorce Court is more about equanimity than "preponderance of the evidence," as with typical civil law. Divorce Court judges want to rule fairly for each spouse and the children. The statement "in the best interest of the children" is tossed around with frequency in Family Law Court. We all know that there are some pretty rotten parents out there, but lousy parenting does not preclude a parent from receiving 50% custody. Unless it has been determined, by a judge, that a parent is physically abusive and that the child is in danger of being with that parent, the courts will usually grant equal visitation with both parents. One parent may receive full physical custody, with the other parent given a visitation schedule. More and more, parents are splitting physical custody 50-50, meaning the child/children live with both parents 50% of the time — usually either one- or two-week stints at a time. In both scenarios, parents will have 50-50 legal custody. Neither may make a unilateral decision about the child or children's education, medical decisions, or religious affiliation.

Unfortunately, a well-defined settlement can still be violated by one or both parties. Not until one party does something glaringly egregious will the judge "tip the scales" and redefine related parts of the agreement. Toxic or contentious divorces consistently tip those scales. Navigating around a spouse who manipulates the court process is very challenging. It is advantageous to familiarize yourself with the courthouse in your jurisdiction by making a visit and meeting the clerks. To further enhance your understanding of how Family Law operates in your jurisdiction, I strongly recommend you participate in a one-on-one meeting with a court mediator and/or court social worker. They are familiar with issues of divorce and can provide you with how the judges typically rule in that particular jurisdiction. In addition, they can be a wealth of information and resources (i.e. — legal financial aid, child protection, child care, housing, utility programs) for a person experiencing financial challenges or involved in a high-conflict divorce. These individuals are paid through tax dollars and their services should be availed at no cost.

One thing to remember is that divorce does not end the relationship with your spouse if there are children involved. It is, rather, an exchange of one set of problems for another. Many people make the mistake to believe that divorce means good riddance to their spouse. What divorce means is that you are no longer married to your spouse, but you are still co-parents to your jointly created children.

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ACE

ACE your case! I have developed the acronym ACE (Attire, Conduct, Etiquette) to remember when it comes to your day in court.

A – Attire

C- Conduct

E – Etiquette

Your attire, conduct and etiquette carry a tremendous influence on how you are viewed by the judge. It is imperative that you maintain excellent courtroom decorum. It's not just what you say, but also how you dress and conduct yourself in the courtroom.

A - Attire

A judge has a few seconds to determine the credibility of the litigants. How one dresses for court is a testament to his or her respect for the courts. Yet, the courts are flooded with people who dress in attire that looks like they are going to a beach, a ballgame or a bar.

Below are some tips for how to dress for court.

For Women

- ☐ A Dress or,
- ☐ A Dress Suit or,
- ☐ Slacks and Top, or
- ☐ A Pant Suit, or
- ☐ Skirt and a top

Shirts should not be cropped, and skirts should not be short

No clanging jewelry

All tattoos should be covered

No dangling earrings

No political or religious statements on clothing

No flip-flops, sandals, or sneakers

THE COURTS

For Men

- ☐ A Suit or,
- ☐ Slacks with a buttoned down or polo shirt or,
- ☐ No sandals, flip flops or sneakers or,
- ☐ Shirts should be tucked into slacks with a belt

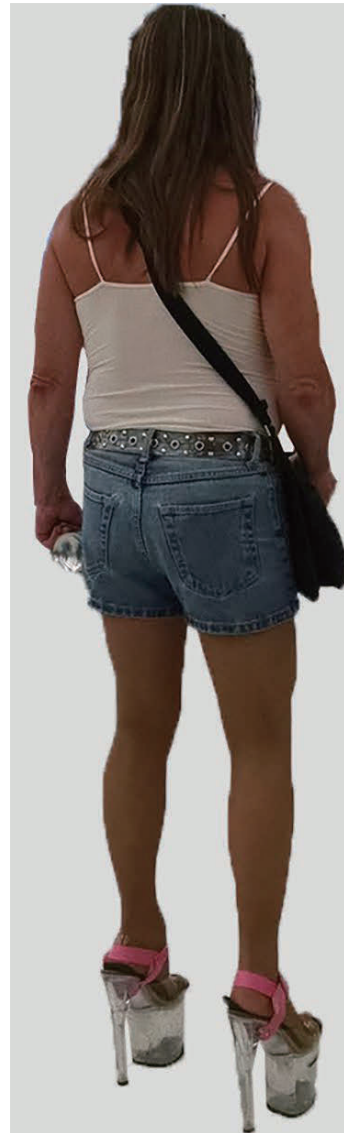
Any tattoos should be covered as best as possible

No political or religious statements on clothing

Examples of Appropriate Court Attire



Examples of Inappropriate Court Attire



C- Conduct

A person's conduct in court has a huge bearing on the outcome of their case. I heard a judge tell a courtroom full of litigants that how a person behaves in the courtroom has a 50% impact on the outcome of their case. That is a very powerful statement, so keep in mind that the judge is ears AND eyes. It's not just what you say. It's also what you do and how you do it.

Favorable Courtroom Conduct

1. **NEVER** interrupt the Judge. When the judge talks, you listen. You will be given ample opportunity to speak.
2. Before you answer any questions, make sure you understand what you are being asked. Too often, we jump at an answer without thinking. As a private investigator, I knew that what I said carried tremendous influence on the outcome of the case. Once you say something, it is recorded (literally) and cannot be unsaid. My rule is to say the question

THE DIVORCE RECOVERY LADDER

twice in your mind before you answer it. If you don't understand the question, ask to have it repeated.

3. Address the judge as "Your Honor." The judge is the decider on the outcome of your case. You must demonstrate that you have respect for the judge.
4. Do not volunteer any information beyond what you are asked. Too often people want to give as much information as possible, and ultimately overshare to their detriment.
5. If you make a mistake or comment in error, fix it immediately. If you don't, you could be viewed as either deceptive or manipulative.
6. Listen, Listen, Listen. The more listening you do, and less talking, the better for your case.
7. If you can't remember something, a simple, "I don't recall", or "that is all I remember" is sufficient. Don't make up information just to fill sentences.
8. Do **NOT** lose your temper. No matter how upset or angry you become, keep your temper under control. Losing your temper could cause you to lose your case, no matter how compelling the evidence in your favor. If your spouse has accused you of being angry or abusive, losing your temper will support the claim.
9. Stay calm.
10. No eye rolling or snide facial remarks. Your ex may say outrageous things during his/her testimony. No matter how disturbing the comments may be to you, keep your expressions under wraps. Judges are eyes and ears. They take note of facial expressions. Don't be perceived as belligerent or obtuse.
11. Stand whenever addressed by the judge.
12. Make eye contact when the judge addresses you directly.
13. Do not use bad or derogatory language.
14. Be polite and speak clearly.

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E- Etiquette

You may be the first case of the day on the docket. On the other hand, you may have to sit through several other cases before it is your turn. There are very clear lines of etiquette when it comes to sitting in a courtroom.

1. No food or drink is permitted in courtrooms – anywhere. If you have a bagged lunch or snacks, keep them tucked in a briefcase, backpack or handbag.
2. No gum chewing.
3. No cellphone use. Silence the ringer and put it away during the hearings.
4. Be on time. Arrive early. If you are going to be late, for whatever reason, call the clerk of the court and give them the courtroom where you are supposed to appear. If you miss “roll call” (when the judge calls the names of the attorneys and litigants for your case) you could be considered a “failure to appear” and lose your case.

III. Move the Children One Step Ahead of the Contention

Divorce is difficult for all children, even when the parents make every effort to make the transition into new lives as smooth as possible, and even when they co-parent with the children's best interest at the forefront. Divorce is a life decision that a child does not ask for nor want to participate in. Children want to live with both of their parents – period.

We all have heard stories of how kids are so much better after the divorce. While that may be ultimately true, ask any child who is a product of divorce. Almost unanimously, they want to be with both parents under the same roof. Divorce not only fractures the family but creates new living situations for children. Children who lived with both parents now are shuffled between two homes, which can be tiring for them. The nature of divorce shakes their sense of security.

Despite wanting what is best, we sometimes get so wrapped up in our own issues, that we lose sight of the impact divorce has on our children. Please keep your ears and eyes open to changes in your children, both academically and emotionally. Notice if their grades are dropping, or if a new group of unsavory friends appear on the scene. Look for any signs for possible alcohol or drug abuse and anxiety behaviors, such as cutting or eating disorders.

People will insist that children are resilient. While they may be correct, divorce is upsetting and leaves deep and long-lasting scars. No matter how clued into our children we “think” we are, often we learn that the things that bother them are so far from what we would imagine.

When we look at the big picture, we make assumptions about what bothers our children the most as a result of the divorce. Most of the time, though, we haven't any idea what profoundly impacts them. Several years after my divorce, my son told me that his hardest moments, post-divorce, happened the mornings before school. Prior to his father's leaving, I would make breakfast for the children while we engaged in lively chatter. I packed their lunches and kissed them as jumped into their dad's car and he took them to school.

After my children's dad left, our morning routine changed. We scurried out the door with everyone eating a different breakfast before we left. The lively chatter no longer took place. Any discussions were relegated to car ride conversations; often, they swirled around after-school activities, who was getting picked up, when and where. The normal routine that was once part of my son's life was now gone. That normal routine gave him a sense of security, day in and day out, year in and year out. It was a happy start to his school day. His new circumstances created anxiety, and the chaotic morning routine added to it. I would never have detected this by his actions.

Different Parenting Versus Undermining the Other Parent

Raising children is always a challenge, even within intact, healthy marriages. Children learn which parent is the more lenient and which one is stricter. How many of us heard phrases like, “Wait until your father gets home?” Growing up, my mother was the disciplinarian and my dad the pushover. We always knew that once my mother made up her mind about something, it was etched in stone and my father would not change the game plan. Period

Divorce switches things up. It is not unusual for parenting differences to become amplified after the divorce. Again, remember -- YOU CANNOT CHANGE THE OTHER PARENT. The adjustment here is yours to make. Don't sweat the little things. If you have a set 9:00 p.m. bedtime for your 8 and 10-year-old and then your spouse, after the divorce, believes that staying up until 11:00 is okay when the children are with him, let it go. There will be bigger battles to fight; this is not one of them. I know you want consistency in raising the children, but let's face it, you and your spouse are no longer unified. Does this confuse the children? Maybe at first. Eventually, they will know the rules at each parent's homes. In the meanwhile, allow your ex-spouse to parent in the way most comfortable for them. You would not appreciate their interference with your parenting style, so give them the same respect.

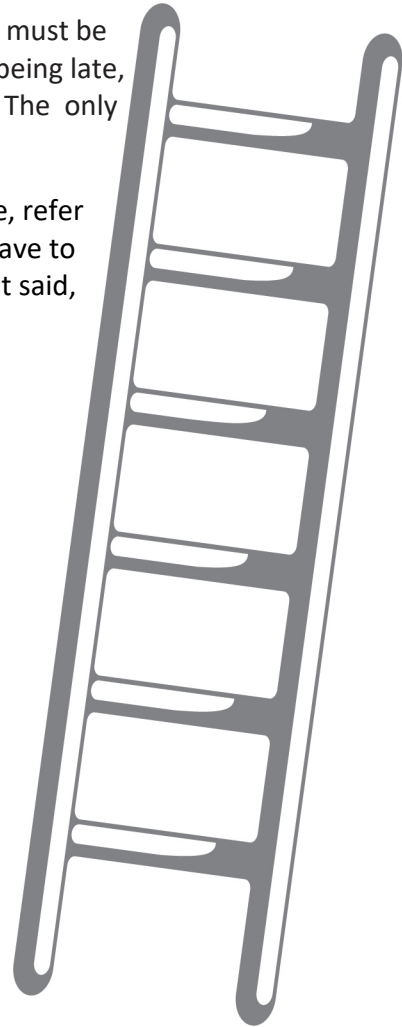
Sadly, I have seen people take outrageous action, like filing contempt charges, because the other party's parenting style is different from theirs. Different is okay. It is no reason to create drama. One day, I was at the courthouse when a woman struck up a conversation with me. Clearly, she was irate. I thought the ex-husband must have done something egregious at best and criminal at worst. However, I learned that she was so worked up because her ex-husband took her daughter to lunch at 11:00 a.m., right after he picked her up from her ballet class on a recent Saturday. This woman told me that she ALWAYS gave her daughter lunch at 12:30. “This way it would not be too long a time before her 5:00 p.m. dinner time.” She spoke rapidly, her arms flailing. You'd think her ex-husband gave her daughter a martini with a crack cocaine biscuit! I hate to think what this woman would do if her ex-husband really did something wrong.

Divorce heightens everyone's emotions. Tempers can flare, emotional fuses are short, and life can seem chaotic. There are several things you can do to make the transition smoother as the children move from a single-family to two-family household. In the instance illustrated above, put your feelings aside and do what's in the best interest of the child.

Below are a few suggestions for children's dual household experiences and the transitioning from the different homes.

THE DIVORCE RECOVERY LADDER

- ☐ Do not badmouth the other parent. Remember your children want to love both of their parents. Your children will become anxious if they believe they are not allowed to love both parents.
- ☐ If the other parent does something blatantly hateful to them or you, you can say, "I am sorry that you were hurt, and you have every right to be hurt. I believe your mom/dad is doing the best that they can." You do not have to agree with any abuse or bad language.
- ☐ Do not interfere with your spouse's visitation. Judges despise it when a parent keeps children away from the other parent; doing so is playing with fire. If you intentionally do not bring your children home after visitations, as scheduled, you risk losing custody.
- ☐ Make sure you are always on time for your visitation. If you must be late, let the other parent know ASAP. If you make a habit of being late, your children will believe they are not a priority for you. The only people hurt by your consistent tardiness will be the children.
- ☐ If the other parent becomes physically or emotionally abusive, refer to the child's therapist and / or physician. You do not have to condone abuse, nor should your children be victimized. That said, before you claim "abuse", be sure that they are being abused.



Place Your Children into Therapy

Children living through a divorce often benefit from working with a therapist. A therapist can be a soft place for your child to land. A therapist will not only help your child navigate through a divorce, but is also able to detect any worrisome emotional issues that arise, such as depression or anxiety. A therapist should also be able to help a child navigate around anxious behaviors such as cutting or eating disorders.

No matter how close you are to your children, they can be great at masquerading their feelings. Children often detect the increased stress levels of their parents and do not want to burden them with their own problems. A good therapist is a safe place for your child to talk about their fears and concerns regarding the divorce, as well as other issues unrelated to the divorce.

Some very important considerations when therapist shopping for your children:

- ☐ The therapist **must** have a family practice.
- ☐ The therapist **must** understand age-appropriate developmental milestones and pathologies of children.
- ☐ The therapist **must** understand the dynamics of divorce and the impact it has on children.
- ☐ The therapist **must** understand the role of a Best Interest Attorney (BIA).
- ☐ The Therapist **must** understand domestic violence.
- ☐ The therapist **must** provide a consistent therapy schedule – once a week, once every two weeks or once a month.
- ☐ The therapist **must** be willing to “betray” your child’s confidence should the therapist learn that the child is using drugs, alcohol or is showing suicidal/homicidal tendencies or ideation.

There are different types of therapists (social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists), just as there are specialties in other professions. A licensed social worker has a master’s degree in Social Work and can have a therapeutic practice. A psychologist carries a doctorate (Ph.D.) degree with extensive clinical experience as part of their doctoral training. Psychiatrists are medical doctors and therefore able to prescribe medication. If your children are being treated by a social worker or psychologist that believes medical treatment would be helpful, they will refer you to your pediatrician for further referral to a psychiatrist.

The sooner you place your children in the care of a competent trusting therapist, the better they will navigate through the divorce. Therapy is always a good option, even in the best of divorce scenarios. Given the volatile nature of a contentious divorce, it is crucial that your children have a safe place to discuss issues uniquely theirs. Do not let a seemingly happy demeanor lead you to believe that your child is happy. Children have a way of masking their feelings, especially if they believe you are overwhelmed and upset. Sometimes, still waters run deep. Teenage years are very challenging, even in the best familial circumstances. Conflicted divorces definitely create additional emotional challenges. A competent therapist will help your child and provide you with peace of mind.

THE DIVORCE RECOVERY LADDER

Always keep in mind that children view parents as a unit. When that unit splits up, the division is very challenging. You may be done with your spouse, done with the marriage and ready to move on with your life. However, your children will have a completely different experience. They are not ready to be done with parent or family unit, nor do they want to move on to changed lives. They want their family together and their parental unit intact. They have no control over that not being the case. A good therapist, well-trained in family dynamics and divorce, will be able to navigate your children through this crisis.

IF YOU SUSPECT THAT YOUR SPOUSE IS ATTEMPTING TO ALIENATE YOUR CHILDREN FROM YOU – Find a therapist who specializes in parental alienation. Children can be alienated very quickly so do not wait to find someone who can recognize and diffuse parental alienation.

Parental Alienation

This topic is awful at its core and difficult to discuss. Yet, it cannot be ignored. Most parents claim to want what's best for their children. Having both parents is always in the best interest of the children, unless it has been proven that a parent is unfit or blatantly abusive. In a child's eyes, there is nothing better than two wonderful parents.

Sadly, there are parents who, for whatever reasons, believe that using the children as pawns to hurt their spouse is a good idea. These parents will align the children with them against the other parent by using tactics that range from bad-mouthing to having the child fear and disrespect the other parent. This behavior is called *Parental Alienation*. The result of Parental Alienation, and its impact on the child, is called *Parental Alienation Syndrome*.

Parental Alienation (PA) was coined by Dr. Richard Gardner in the 1980s. Dr. Gardner saw a rise in a very specific set of behaviors by children who were used by one parent to hurt the other parent, usually in divorce situations. Since then, and with the rise of divorce in this country, attorneys, judges, and therapists have witnessed an increase in the number of children alienated from one parent by the other. This complex syndrome does not carry a set of rules to predict or obliterate it once it has taken hold. PAS can happen quickly. Sadly, once children have turned against one parent, the road to reunite with the alienated parent can be painfully slow — and quite painful, period.

Dr. Gardner developed some key components of PA now used by most experts in the field and study of parental alienation. These manifestations have been adopted, by most professionals in the field of parental alienation as the signs as the gold standard for recognition of this most heinous form of child manipulation. I have provided them below. If you notice any of these behaviors, please contact your attorney immediately.

Signs of Parental Alienation

- ☐ Your once beloved child speaks poorly of you. Her or she calls you names or treats you with disrespect. Not only that, but the child feels justified in doing so.
- ☐ Your child may start to accuse you of doing things you've never done before, or magnify minor incidents to gargantuan proportions. For example, an incident from age four, when you took a toy away because your child grabbed it from another, now turns into a false accusation that you took ALL their toys and left them nothing to play with.
- ☐ Your ex-spouse tries to limit your time spent with your children, and ignores all custody agreements when it comes to drop-off and pickup times. Alienators are notorious for returning children to the targeted parent late, sometimes by hours — and even days.
- ☐ Your child is adamant that no one is influencing their decision to not want to talk, see or be with you. If your child decides that they no longer want to be with you, they will insist the decision is strictly of their own accord.

THE DIVORCE RECOVERY LADDER

- ☐ Your child may begin to parrot your ex-spouse and speak in a way not age appropriate. Should you begin to hear your five-year-old speak as though they are 27, and make negative comments about you that could only come from the other parent, rest assured that PAS is in the making. A five-year-old who says, "My mother always decorates the house and spends all my dad's money, so he HAD to leave her," is clearly not typical five-year-old speak. The other parent channeled it through the child.
 - ☐ Your child refuses communication with once beloved relatives on your side of the family, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.
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To be clear, Parental Alienation is child abuse. Dr. Steve Miller, M.A., M.D.*, an expert in Parental Alienation, states it succinctly: "Normal Parents do not behave this way". A parent who does this to their child is emotionally disordered in some way. Their goal is to have the child feel the same way about the targeted spouse that they do. The alienators don't recognize that the relationship between spouses differs from that between parent and child. Hence, they use the child to do their dirty work.

The questions become, How could this happen? I never did anything to my children to make them afraid of me. Why are my children so disrespectful to me? Why won't my children talk to my parents and siblings?

So how **DOES** this happen? What special talent empowers the other parent to turn your beloved children against you? It may seem like they must possess a special gift, or they carry a bevel of tricks up their sleeves. You will be surprised to learn they need only two things, according to Dr. Miller: 1) access to your child; and 2) the willingness to alienate your children from you.

When your child becomes alienated from you, and thus disrespectful and apparently hating you, it is easy to feel resentful. As difficult as it may be, remember the child is being used and abused by alienation. You have no clue what tactics the other parent is using to keep the child in their back pocket. The alienating parent will have a specific code that the child learns very quickly, of what is acceptable and what is not, when it comes to the targeted parent. In other words, if the child displays any love or affection towards the targeted parent, the alienating parent may take away the child's privileges or even punish them.

PARENTAL ALIENATION

If your spouse has become an alienating parent, they may engage in one or several of the following behaviors or actions to acquire an allegiance from your child:

- ☐ Your spouse may disapprove of the child's relationship with you. That implication may have an actual or perceived punishment attached to it.
- ☐ If your child expresses anything positive about you, your (ex)spouse may act in a dismissive way towards your child.
- ☐ Your (ex)spouse tells the child you don't love her/him.
- ☐ This can be used as a reason for the marital split. "If Mommy really loved you, she would not have divorced Daddy." or "Daddy may be telling you that he works late but he does not love you enough to be home for dinner every night like a Daddy who loves you would."
- ☐ Your spouse showers the child with gifts and does not impose any rules. The enticements include clothes, toys, games, cars, tickets to concerts and/or ballgames, amusement parks and elaborate vacations. Alienators have been known to give older children large amounts of cash, unlimited credit cards or car use to "win" them over.
- ☐ Your (ex)spouse allows the child to make adult decisions. The alienator allows the child/children to pick out the next house they move into, or choose the new furniture. Alienators are very seductive and know how to appeal to the children's sensibilities of what would it take to have that child leave the other parent. As the child is wooed by the new goodies, they see the alienator as a parent who loves them and not a parent indulging them for self-serving reasons. This is an example of "things equal love": the more the alienating parent buys, the more they love the child. This teaches children that love equals money and possessions.
- ☐ Your (ex)spouse may act as the victim to acquire sympathy from the child. He or she may tell the child of being all alone, without anyone. The child often takes the role of parental protector. Who are they protecting the parent from? This parent will have the child believe they are protecting them from you. It seems a very underhanded position, to put the child in the role of parental protector, yet it falls in the alienator's arsenal of tactics to alienate the child for their other parent.

*Dr. Steve Miller, M.A., M.D. is a Board-Certified Physician in Internal Medicine, a medical educator with 30+ years' experience on staff at Harvard University Medical School, a writer, featured speaker and forensic expert in medico legal issues.

So... What can you do to circumvent it?

If you are still involved with your child, you should do the following:

- ☐ Do not blame your child. If your child is being dismissive and disrespectful to you, remember that the nastiness is coming from their other parent and being channeled through the child. Your child is a victim.
- ☐ Don't take the bait. If your child is being obnoxious, stand your ground. They can speak their mind, but they cannot be disrespectful, use bad language or bully you.
- ☐ Hold yourself above the contention. Don't lower yourself to go tit-for-tat with your spouse.
- ☐ Show that you are different from what your ex claims you are. Rising above the contention will prove that point.
- ☐ If your child has a phone, text them every day at the same time; once in the morning, once in the afternoon and once at night. They will see that you are a consistent source of love who cares about them. Your unwavering communication will negate any nasty remarks that your spouse may have about your desire to communicate with your child. Your spouse will have a hard time convincing your child that you don't love him or her if you keep constant connection. Your child may ignore your attempts of communication, but they will know you are there. No matter how obnoxious and dismissive your child, they know you care.
- ☐ In the scenario that your child chats with you occasionally, never ever say a bad word about the other parent. You don't have to gush over the other parent, but keep it neutral or positive. Children internalize a parent's feelings. Since they are part of both of you, why make them feel completely worthless? Your ex has already done a great job of making them feel bad about themselves. Remember, parental alienation creates anxiety for your child. Don't contribute to it.

Never give up on your child.

Your unwavering commitment will stand the test of time.

PARENTAL ALIENATION

If your (ex)spouse keeps the children from you, or you believe you are being alienated from your children from you...

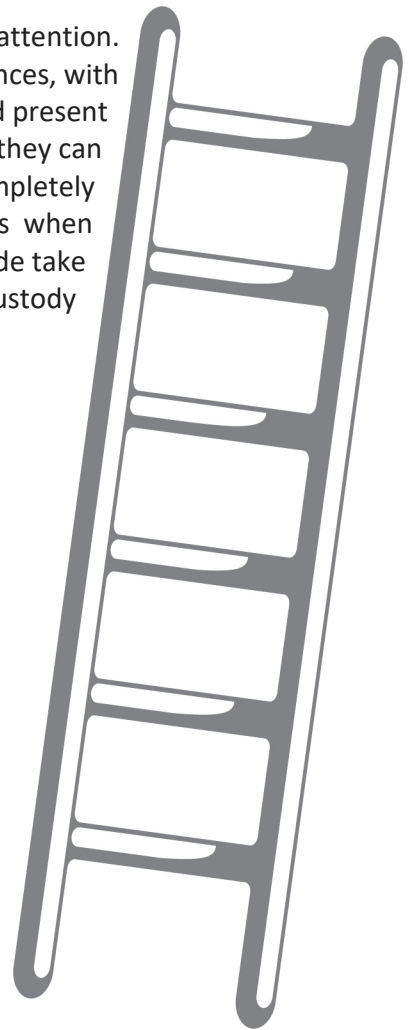
My next guidebook, scheduled for 2020 release, will specifically focus on parental alienation, how to detect it and what to do about it. It is a must read for anyone who suspects that they are being alienated from their child(ren) as well as for those whose relationships with their children have been severed.

YOU MUST GET YOUR ATTORNEY INVOLVED

Have your attorney take the appropriate measures to ensure that you have communication with your child. Your child is entitled to have a relationship with both parents as defined by the divorce decree or courts. Your spouse is not the decider, no matter how much or how firmly they have self-appointed to that role.

If your child has been abducted, you must make a report with your local police and contact The Center for Missing and Exploited Children at 800-THE-LOST or www.missingkids.com.

PA is a very serious situation that requires immediate legal attention. Remember to keep a list of ALL custody violations and interferences, with dates and times. File contempt charges against your (ex)spouse and present all the evidence to the judge. While the alienating parents think they can usurp your parental rights and do as they please, they are completely delusional in their thinking. Judges will take appropriate actions when obvious parental alienation is taking place. In fact, courts nationwide take custody interference very seriously. Your ex-spouse could lose all custody of the children as a result.



A Parental Alienation Story

Sadly, Parental Alienation is a sad story personally near and dear to my heart, one that ultimately resulted in a happy outcome for my child and me. When I was doing research for this guide, I spoke with many people alienated from their children. One consistent theme I heard was that eventually, the alienated parents gave up trying to stay connected to their alienated child. After having letters returned, texts blocked, no answered phone calls, many parents found their efforts not only frustrating but futile. The resounding belief is that one day, when the child got older, he or she would contact their long-lost alienated parent. Sounds good in theory, but in practice? It happens with much less frequency. Once children are alienated, whatever horrors have been told to them about the targeted parent become their very solid truth.

One story of how a parent and child reaped the rewards, thanks to a parent who never gave up trying to contact her daughter, is so powerful that it sticks with me to this day. I want to share it with you. Rachel's father alienated her from her mother when Rachel was six years old. The divorce was very nasty, as most are when alienation is involved. Rachel's mother, Stacy, was a wonderful mother. She worked a part-time job at a local dress store so she could be home most of the time with her only child. The father (whose name has been omitted by request) was a very powerful businessman.

When Rachel was five, Stacy learned that her husband had been having an affair with a coworker, since shortly after Rachel was born. Stacy was so upset by the long-standing deception and infidelity that she chose to leave the marriage. Her husband did not want her to pursue the divorce, since his girlfriend broke up with him before the actual divorce took place. He pleaded with Stacy to work on their marriage. Since her trust in her husband was shattered beyond repair, she did not acquiesce to his requests. They were divorced a month after Rachel turned six.

Very soon after the divorce, Stacy's relationship with Rachel became strained. Rachel began to avoid her mother. When Rachel was with Stacy, she was rude and disrespectful. Rachel began to refuse visits with her, then accused her mother of being a terrible mother, claiming that she denied the child food and toys. None of this made any sense to Stacy. Each visitation with Rachel became more difficult; eventually, Rachel refused to see Stacy.

Stacy went to court to enforce her visitation with Rachel. Sadly, the alienation was so entrenched that even a court-forced visitation was impossible, because Rachel would not comply. In fact, Rachel began to campaign heavily to not see her mother at all. Visitations became battlegrounds. One day, Rachel told her mother to leave her alone. Stacy was heartbroken. She had no idea what had transformed her daughter from a loving daughter into one who despised her own mother.

Eventually, Stacy learned that Rachel's father began his parental alienation effort immediately after the divorce. He told Rachel that Stacy was someone to fear. He added that Stacy did not love Rachel because, if she did, she never would have divorced him. Even worse, he told Rachel that the only reason for the divorce was because Stacy wanted to get away from her. The icing on the cake? His role as the victim: all he wanted was a happy family, he told her. Rachel completely aligned herself with her dad whom, she believed was victimized by Stacy. Like herself.

A PARENTAL ALIENATION STORY

As years went by, Stacy and Rachel's relationship became completely severed. Stacy made attempts to contact her daughter via letters and cards. She never forgot a holiday or birthday, and sent several cards a year to her daughter. In addition, she wrote her daughter a letter the first day of every month. Each began with the following preamble, "I continue to write to you one letter a month on the first day of the month as well as send you cards throughout the year. I don't know if you get them or not. This is my letter for this month (and the month and year was always noted)."

Stacy continued her correspondence attempts for eight years. She never received returned cards or letters, so she had no clue whether or not Rachel ever read them. Rachel's father, fearing a letter from Stacy would reach their daughter, opened a post office box, where he collected all his mail. He thus circumvented Stacy's correspondences; Rachel never saw any of them.

When Rachel was 17, her father went on a business trip for five days. On the day of his return, Rachel wanted to surprise her father. She cleaned up the house nicely and made sure all the laundry was done. She also cooked him a nice dinner. On the way to the supermarket, she stopped at the post office to get his mail for him. Rachel had never done this before, but saw the post office box key on his bedroom dresser and thought it would be nice to collect his mail. In the stack was a letter addressed to her by Stacy.

Rachel opened it and read the first sentences. She began to cry. She had no idea that Stacy had been trying to reach out to her all those years. In fact, every so often, Rachel would ask her dad if Stacy ever tried to contact her. He told Rachel that her mother never wanted to see her and had moved on with a new life. Now, she sat in her car and sobbed as she read her mother's letter. Despite the sweet words on the page, Stacy's pain was palpable to her daughter. Not only could she feel her mother's pain, but she knew that she had contributed to her mother's anguish.

So many emotions flooded Rachel as she sat in her car. While overwhelmed with grief, she was angry that her father did this to her. She retraced her life and recognized that she and her mother missed so much time together. In fact, Rachel lived as though her mother was dead.

When Rachel's father returned home that evening, Rachel confronted him about the letter and all the past correspondences from her mother that she never received. After he realized that he could not hold onto the falsehoods he had told Rachel over the years, he said his only reason was because he thought it was better for Rachel to not have to move between two homes. As he pleaded for Rachel's forgiveness for doing such an awful thing, she packed her bags, loaded up her car and left her father's house. Since Stacy provided her address and phone number on every correspondence to her daughter, Rachel had no problem reaching her mother.

Needless to say, there was a happy reunion between mother and daughter.

At the time of this writing, it has been six years since the reunion. Rachel has graduated from college and still lives with her mom, as they try to make up for lost time. They are the best of friends. Rachel has not seen her father since the day she left his home.

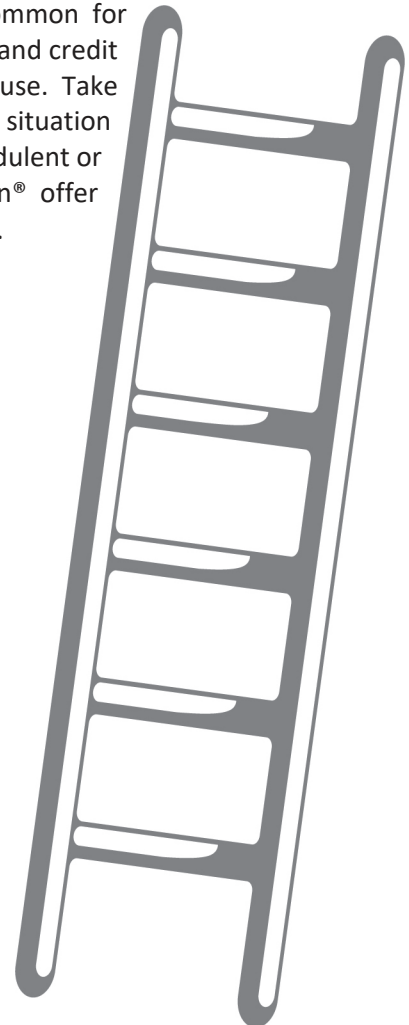
THE DIVORCE RECOVERY LADDER

I share this story because it confirms my strong suggestions to never give up trying to connect with your child – ever. It also sheds light on what happens to the parent who alienates. Although alienators may be successful when they are immersing the child in their venom, ultimately, the alienator stands to possibly lose their child forever.

IV. How to Deal with a Contentious “EX” (Ex) Spouse

A contentious ex-spouse will engage with the purpose to upset you and create chaos in your life. As much as you may want to be reasonable with them, it may not be possible. The best plan of action for dealing with a toxic ex-spouse is outlined in the few simple steps below:

- ☐ Communicate with your ex-spouse as little as possible.
- ☐ If you must communicate regarding the children, discuss only the children and matters regarding them.
- ☐ Do not communicate with your ex-spouse’s family, friends, or coworkers, no matter how friendly you were before the break up. Allegiances change. Your sister-in-law, who used to be one of your best friends, may become your ex-spouse’s information source.
- ☐ A contentious ex-spouse will stop at nothing to create smear campaigns against you or the children, especially if he/she is not happy with the divorce settlement. Sometimes the divorce alone is enough to exacerbate their ill will against you. Listen for this kind of behavior so that you may shield the children if necessary. Always let your attorney know, so it can be thwarted before it devolves into slander or libel. Remember to document everything.
- ☐ Protect all of your bank information and bills by using passwords. Keep your passwords in a safe place away from your house. It is becoming all too common for vindictive ex-spouses to hack into emails, phone bills, bank and credit card accounts to create financial harm to the targeted ex-spouse. Take the extra time early on to inform your financial sources of your situation so that your accounts may be noted for any potential fraudulent or suspicious activity. Companies like LifeLock® and Experian® offer services to detect identity fraud and help stop it in its tracks.
- ☐ Purchase an alarm system for your home and keep the outside of your house well lighted.



Is He/She a Narcissist, Psychopath, or Sociopath? Why on Earth Are They Doing All of This?

What happens when you are seeking a peaceful divorce and your spouse is making your life miserable? How do you settle your divorce when your spouse is not willing to cooperate at all? What to do when a custody battles ensue? Do these bad actions directed against you mean that your spouse is mentally challenged?

The words ‘narcissist’, ‘sociopath’ and ‘psychopath’ get tossed around with a great frequency when dealing with soon-to-be-ex-spouses. Many of my clients swear that their spouses are narcissists and I hear such accusations spewed around often. People want to neatly define their spouse’s behavior, so they may label what makes no sense to them and possibly lay blame on the other person’s “pathology” for the failure of the marriage. While it may take two people for a marriage to fail, all it takes is one person to make the divorce process a complete nightmare.

I am not a therapist; therefore, I am unable to diagnose whether or not a person suffers from a mental illness. However, I believe it’s safe to assume that there must be some emotional instability involved for an individual to stalk, torment, try to control, create a vendetta against and/or manipulate another person. There are so many publications about these disorders that I could devote several chapters on the topic, referring to article after article about borderline personality disorders, narcissists, sociopaths, and how disordered people negatively impact their divorces.

Is it imperative for you to know your spouse’s disorder —and if they even have one? Maybe, or maybe not. Trying to determine whether a spouse or ex-spouse is a narcissist, sociopath, psychopath, borderline personality, or a mish-mash may be futile if the outcome is the same.

A 35-year-old woman, Samantha, contacted me about her soon-to-be ex-husband (I use the word “soon” with hesitancy, since their divorce was in its eighth year when she and I spoke). Samantha told me that over the past eight years, while separated, her husband stalked her, showed up at her work unannounced on numerous occasions, sent her nasty emails, spread terrible rumors about her, keyed her car and didn’t pay his child support. Despite all of this, Samantha was determined to figure out why her husband acted the way he did. She wanted to know if he was mentally ill, because she wanted to “try to act in a loving way because she felt he was emotionally wounded and vulnerable,” in her words. I asked her, “Why does it matter to you?” After all, he was doing some horribly incredulous things to her.

Because of his behavior, Samantha had lost three jobs, filed for bankruptcy, and changed her children’s schools twice. Let’s say her husband was a sociopath and not a psychopath. Would she really respond to him any differently? Would a diagnosis make the things he was doing to her any better or worse? I tried to show Samantha that all his behaviors towards her were not normal and that, no matter the label, he was disordered. At the crux of it all, Samantha was being abused, and badly. I asked her to examine why she thought she deserved eight years of constant abuse by him? Although he exhibited unhealthy behaviors, Samantha was enabling him.

HOW TO DEAL WITH A CONTENTIOUS “EX” (EX) SPOUSE

The challenge for Samantha, or anyone going through these kinds of assaults on their well-being, is to navigate around the toxicity and not wonder what mental illness is driving the behavior of their (ex)spouse. Her responsibility was to have a normal healthy life and not to diagnose her soon to be ex-husband.

◆ Again remember ◆

One cannot change how another person behaves.

We do have control over our own behaviors. This needs to be your mantra.
It is how YOU behave that will have the most impact on the outcome of your case.

Retaliation comes in many forms - How to recognize it

A former or soon-to-be former spouse who is controlling, manipulating, stalking, tormenting, or harassing you is very disturbing.

You may be confused as to whether your spouse's behavior is retaliatory. Maybe you were abused in the marriage, and the actions by your spouse had become your "normal." Here is the good news. You have now moved into a new part of your life and don't have to tolerate any abuse or vendetta-like behaviors.

Below are actions that clearly can be defined as vindictive or retaliatory. Read through them and check off those that may apply:

- ☐ Your spouse won't leave you alone. Excessive texts, emails, phone calls and other contact, such as showing up at your work, where you shop, or family/friends' homes are all signs that your spouse wants to keep in constant contact with you and feels entitled to ingratiate himself/herself into your life. Make sure you document each incident with date and time.
- ☐ Your spouse makes co-parenting almost impossible. The will consistently violate visitation times and dates. Note dates and times when your time with the children is impeded by the other parent.
- ☐ Your spouse encourages your children to disrespect you. Again, document each infraction with date and time.
- ☐ Your spouse interferes with your ability to lead your own life. Your spouse keeps tabs on your daily routines and tries to find ways to keep you from living the way you want. Take note of any time he or she shows up at places where you are that do not involve your children.
- ☐ Your spouse wants to sabotage your relationships and will go as far as to create smear campaigns against you. This may include letters/correspondences to your employers, friends, family, or your children's teachers, with the intention to turn them against you. These correspondences should be collected to show a pattern.
- ☐ If your spouse has been ordered to pay alimony and/or child support, he/she may withhold timely payments to cause additional upset and harm to you while they control your ability to maintain a healthy financial life. In most states, it is illegal to withhold support and could possibly result in having his/her wages garnished by the courts — or even jail time.
- ☐ Parental alienation is a perfect method for a contentious spouse to hurt you. What better way to create angst than to turn your own children against you? Using the child(ren) as pawns to manipulate and control, not to mention disrupt your daily existence, is their way to assure them a front-row seat into your life.

If you have checked any of the above boxes, you may have a retaliating spouse.
These actions must be documented and shared with your attorney.

How can you keep yourself sane as you are being targeted?

1. Always remember that you did nothing to deserve what is happening to you. No matter what the reason for your broken marriage, no one has the right to impede you from having an authentic life.
2. Recognize that if your spouse has a vendetta against you, they may feel they have lost control of you. Again, this is their issue — not yours.
3. If you can't ignore a particular situation, respond with as much reserve and calmness as possible. If you must scream and yell, do it in your bedroom when no one else is around. Don't respond to crazy behaviors by acting as though you are crazy.
4. Document everything! You've heard me say this before and I will say it again — DOCUMENT EVERYTHING. It is an exhausting time-consuming task, I know, but you must do it. I can't impress the importance of documentation enough. The last thing you want to be asked by a judge is to recall a highly suspicious specific event and not be able to do so accurately.
5. Notify the police if necessary. It is imperative that you develop a relationship with the police at your local precinct. Additionally, introduce yourself to the Domestic Violence Unit Coordinator. Provide the police with the background information of your case as well as your current situation. Sadly, police involvement often becomes part of the contentious divorce landscape because child visitation is often violated, property is damaged or physical abuse ensues. Please avail the police of their services. If there has been physical abuse, the police can refer you to abused spouse resource/centers.

When you report an incident to the police, you must be very specific with your complaint. Telling them, "I think my spouse was outside of my house last night because I saw their car out there for a long time" is not sufficient. The police would prefer, "My spouse was parked directly outside of my house last night from 11:15 p.m. until 1:20 a.m. He/she drives a 2014 Black Honda Accord, license plate #55555." Your evidence then becomes their evidence, and the courts are all about evidence.

6. If your spouse pursues you while you are driving, drive directly to the police department. If you go to your house or anywhere else, you will be vulnerable to getting trapped at "the second location." There, individuals are very vulnerable to physical abuse and possibly loss of life. Once at the police department, more than likely, the offending spouse will drive off. You can go inside the building and make a report. You may also ask a police officer to follow you home to assure that you arrive there safely.

V. Keep a Firm Leg Up on Your Finances

In a best-case divorce scenario, people divide their assets and reach a compromise about who pays what. In many cases, the person with the higher earning power has the advantage to abuse and manipulate the case way beyond its natural and reasonable shelf life. If this happens to you, then be sure the core of the intentions to file bogus motions, delaying responses to interrogatories, and anything and everything, is to cause you to spend more money to deplete your assets and leave you broke.

I've received hundreds of emails from "disadvantaged spouses" (court term for the spouse with the lesser salary, or a stay-at-home parent) who have maxed out their credit cards, taken out loans, depleted savings accounts and cashed out retirement/pension accounts. In short, they divested and sold everything they own to make ends meet and stay afloat during the divorce process. I have also spoken with people who feel as though they have been taken "to the cleaners", claiming the majority of their net income goes to pay legal fees, child support, alimony, medical insurance, car insurance, car payments, all to the point of having very little left over for their own support. So, you can see the door swings both ways when it comes to who feels they have received the shorter end of the stick during the divorce.

Historical analysis is becoming a more popular way to equitably divide assets. It also better assures that child support and alimony is paid, as well as the **FAIR** division of property. Typically, settlements can be unbalanced or "unfair", especially if one attorney is more financially savvy than the other. This inequity of the division of property often leads to post-divorce contention and dishonoring settlement agreements.

Historical analysis is conducted by an independent financial individual who specializes in historical analysis associated with divorce. The specialist may be a Certified Public Accountant, Wealth Manager, Certified Financial Planner and/or Historical Analyst. They meet with the two parties, often with attorneys included, to discuss how one household may be divided into two with emphasis of fairness for all involved. They diffuse any prevalent attitude of, "we are going to get him/her for all he's/she's worth" or "she's/he's not going to get a penny more than the value of the house when it sells." Rather, they develop a plan that works for everyone. The goal is that both parties can establish and re-establish financial health, and neither becomes bankrupt or must live in one room with a hot plate because of the divorce.

Although historical analysis is a great method to divide assets fairly, there still needs to be transparency. Both parties need to come to the table with a true accounting of what they own together. Unfortunately, there are often surprises that people encounter during the settlement and historical analysis process.

Hidden Assets

It is common to encounter hidden assets when it comes to a divorce. This occurs when one of the spouses realizes that divorce lies in the immediate future. To assure their ongoing financial strength, they may elect to take money out of jointly held bank accounts, hide bonuses, or borrow money off the family home in order to stockpile cash. They do this to protect themselves from having to split the assets in the divorce — or to relinquish them at all. Marital assets are just that — co-owned assets. Any confirmed hidden assets will be split, and a judge may impose interest and penalties on the uncovered monies.

In a perfect world, this should happen with ease. In the real world, hidden assets are, well, hidden. Usually the person who hides them operates with great finesse by using other people's names and social security numbers for bank accounts, so that the monies cannot be found. In the instance of large amounts of hidden money, a forensic accountant can be hired to locate it. A forensic accountant is a detective able to trace and find money. They come with a hefty price tag, so they are utilized when large amounts of money have been hidden. If you believe you are heading for a divorce, take notice of all your assets co-owned with your spouse, make lists of those assets with statements to confirm their legitimacy, and turn that information over to your attorney.

Sometimes, a spouse will take marital assets and buy property in their name only. That is a big NO-NO. A story to illustrate this:

A woman name Vicki contacted me to tell me her husband purchased a ski villa in Vail, Colorado during their marriage, unbeknownst to her. During the divorce, Vicki's husband claimed that she had no right to the villa, since he purchased it with "his" money and only his name was on the deed. He received the surprise of his life when his own lawyer told him that he either had to sell the property and give his wife half of the proceeds, or pay her half of the amount if he chose to keep the villa. To Vicki's good luck, the judge also granted her lost interest on the money.

Hidden assets extend beyond cash. They may consist of real estate, vehicles, jewelry, commodities like gold, silver or platinum, stocks, bonds, boats, cars, or any other purchase used as a way to hide money from you. If any purchases were made with marital assets, you are entitled to half.

Asset List

Before you meet with your attorney and proceed with an historical analysis, make a list of all your assets. Visit <https://www.susanshofer.com/ws-pdf> to download a current copy of the worksheets

Item	Value	Notes
Real Estate Property		
Vacation Property		
Car(s)		
Motorcycles		
Jewelry		
Art		
Boat		
Pension		
IRA		
401(k)		
403(b)		
Precious Metals		
Stocks		
Bonds		
Mutual Funds		
Seasons Tickets/Licenses (Baseball, Football, Hockey, Soccer, Basketball, Theater, Ballet, Etc.)		
Antiques - Furniture, Flatware, Crystal, China, Art		
Insurance Policies (Life, Term, Whole, Annuities)		
Grave Plots		

Expenses

UNDERESTIMATING EXPENSES

This is a very crucial step in the divorce process and the place where most people make huge mistakes (myself included). Underestimating your expenses can be the difference between you living comfortably or being pushed into poverty. People always make a list of the big expenses – mortgage/utilities, utilities, insurance, car payment and repairs or food – while they forget other expenses and go to settlement without covering all their financial bases.

The case of Cara, a successful caterer with a salary of \$150,000, comes to mind when I think of really bad divorce settlements due to underestimation of expenses. Cara gave her attorney her list of expenses and felt confident that the settlement she made with her husband to pay her \$1,000.00 a month in alimony for five years was adequate. Cara was divorced in December of that year. Two months later, she received the annual camp renewal for the following summer for her three children (ages 11, 9 and 7). The cost was \$2,500 per child. Because Cara worked full-time, her children had to go to day camp. Cara suddenly remembered that she did not include camp in her “list” of expenses. Since she had a nice salary, she paid for the camp. Later that summer, her washer and dryer both broke down. Although she and her husband agreed that she would live in the marital home with their children until the youngest went off to college, there was no discussion in the settlement agreement for how appliances repairs were to be paid. Again, she took on the financial burden of replacing the appliances.

Soon thereafter, her oldest daughter needed orthodontics. In fact, all children needed braces, but none of this was addressed in the financial settlement. Cara thought for sure her now ex-husband would be willing to help with orthodontics. She was shocked when he refused to apply any money to correct the children’s teeth. Cara was left to pay \$5,500 per child out-of-pocket. She felt confident that she could go to court and modify the settlement and filed a complaint to have her husband participate in the paying of dental care.

Unfortunately, Cara learned the sad lesson that a divorce settlement is non-modifiable, except for child support and custody. Her only option was to reduce her expenses and work more hours. Eventually, she moved out of the house. She and the children learned to live an entirely different lifestyle from what they had always known. Had Cara devised a more comprehensive expense list, the outcome would have been different.

Hidden Expenses

Julie was a jovial 47-year-old who was divorced after twenty-five years of marriage. She and her husband, Stan, met when they were in graduate school. They married right after they both turned 30. Two years later, they decided to start a family. After trying to have children for three years, without success, they recognized that they had a problem and embarked on fertility treatments. After five years of fertility treatment, with no success, they accepted that they were not destined to have children. Fertility treatments left the couple \$60,000 in the hole.

After a decade of trying to have a family, with no success, Julie and Stan moved into a childfree lifestyle, where they could work and replenish their depleted savings account. Much to their surprise and delight, the day after Julie turned 40, they learned that she was pregnant with twins! Since having a family was something they wanted, and thought would never happen, this news was a dream come true. They decided that Julie would be a stay-at-home mom while Stan worked at his very successful restaurant supply company. When the twins turned six, Julie learned that Stan was involved in a two-year affair with a woman who worked for him. Stan told Julie that he was in love with this woman and wanted a divorce. Julie was devastated. After two decades with Stan, she thought they had built the life of their dreams.

Despite Julie's pleas for Stan to reconsider, he was adamant that "the heart wants what the heart wants" and that the marriage was over. Each retained attorneys, and the divorce was relatively amicable. Stan continued to be a model father and paid his child support on time. They divided up the little bit of money they had saved, and both embarked on their new lives. Although Julie was heartbroken, she didn't have time to wallow in her emotions since she had two children to care for.

One day Julie, received a letter from a credit card company claiming that she owed them \$25,000. Since Julie did not use credit cards, she believed this to be a mistake that she could easily resolve, and called the credit card company. The creditor confirmed the credit card had been jointly owned by she and Stan; a card that they opened together fifteen years earlier. Julie vaguely remembered it and thought it had been long closed. It turns out that Stan kept the card for years, using it only sporadically, paying the balance any time he did. However, while he was cheating on Julie, he used the card to hide his escapades with his girlfriend and had the statements mailed to his business address. When he stopped paying the monthly bill, the creditor contacted Julie.

As if owing \$25,000 wasn't bad enough, over the next six months, Julie learned of several other credit cards, all with her name on them, all acquired during her marriage to Stan. The collective balance exceeded \$100,000. Julie, a woman who never used credit cards, was now \$125,000 in credit card debt. Worse, she was 100 percent responsible for the debt. Credit card companies don't look at joint owners of debt as 50-50 responsible parties. Legally, both are responsible for the full debt. The creditors don't care who pays the obligation, as long as someone pays. Nonpayment of the debt negatively impacts individual credit histories equally.

Had the credit card issue been addressed prior to the divorce, Julie's attorney could have asked Stan to either pay off the debts or transfer the balance into an account in his name only. That would absolve Julie of any responsibilities to the creditors. In a

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few short weeks, Julie went from believing she was financially strong to being debt riddled, while raising six-year-old twins. She had two options: pay down the debt, which would take her thirty years and amount to over \$200,000 in principal, penalties and interest when all was said and done; or she could file bankruptcy. She filed bankruptcy.

Out of all the financial disaster stories I hear, those like Julie's are most common. Having assets hidden from you is bad enough. In my view, hidden expenses are far worse. **Hidden assets are a loss of something you should own, but don't. Hidden expenses are expenses you should not have to pay. They have the potential to create financial ruin that can take years or even decades to climb out from under.**

Just as with the Asset List, you need to make an expense list, which I have included in the FIVE-DAY EXPENSE LIST (on page 84). Start the exercise on a Monday and write down all your expenses. Revisit the list for five consecutive days to see what you may have missed. Walk around the inside and outside of your house when you make the list. I assure you that you will add items each day. By the end of the week, you should have a comprehensive list that you can turn over to your attorney for settlement negotiation.

In addition to that list, ask your attorney to request from your spouse any debts such as credit cards, finance companies, and tax debts. Your attorney must also make a statement in your divorce decree that you are not responsible for any debts incurred by your spouse from that moment forward. If any debts are uncovered that he/she did not disclose during the divorce at the request of your attorney, you are not responsible to pay those expenses, either. If, for any reason, your spouse opened a credit card in your name or lied about taxes paid, you will be protected by this statement. You can also be protected by the IRS Innocent Spouse rule. Check with www.irs.gov for details about Innocent Spouse rulings.

Taxes – Check to Clear the Deck

While chatting with Karen, a mother of two, I could see she was at her wits end. For the first time in her life, she was in financial despair. Her ex-husband hoarded a great deal of their money that she was unable to find during the divorce. Although she was not happy about losing a lot of money, she felt that she could pull herself up by her bootstraps and move on. Unfortunately, her ex-husband not only hoarded marital assets, but he also owed back taxes to the IRS. During the last few years of their marriage, he was not filing taxes; therefore, they owed taxes, penalties, and interest. Karen remembered signing the filings. She assumed her husband wrote the checks and paid the taxes. He did not. By the time she learned of the tax situation, she was tens of thousands of dollars in debt to the IRS! There was no innocent spouse getaway for her, and she had to settle with the IRS, which caused her tremendous financial hardships.

Before you divorce, contact the IRS and your State Tax office to assure there are no outstanding liabilities.

To Stay Financially Healthy, Remember...

1. To repeat: other than child support and custody, nothing else is modifiable once your divorce is final. If you did not budget correctly and find your settlement inadequate a year or so down the road, not only may you encounter financial hardship, but you will not be able to construct another settlement with your ex-spouse. Therefore, you MUST make sure you include everything possible on the expense list that you present to your attorney.
2. Don't settle too quickly. Take some extra time to fully understand the financial aspect of your agreement before you settle. If there is anything unclear to you, ask your attorney to explain it. The extra few minutes will be well worth the time to know that you will make a comfortable decision.
3. Have an historical analysis performed. This is a MUST DO.
4. What happens if you believe your spouse has stolen and/or hidden marital assets? Your attorney may refer you to a forensic accountant if the cost does not exceed your monetary gain. If your spouse has hidden \$500,000, and the forensic accountant's fee is \$100,000, it may be advantageous to hire the accountant. However, if the hidden money is \$50,000, and it costs \$100,000 to hire the forensic accountant, it will not be worth it.

I have provided a Five-Day Expense list to get you started: .

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The Five-Day Expense Checklist

Category	Day 1 Amt.	Day 2 Amt.	Day 3 Amt.	Day 4 Amt.	Day 5 Amt.
Rent/Mortgage Payment					
Utilities					
Land line phone					
Internet					
Cell Phone					
Car Payment					
Car Insurance					
Homeowner / Renter Insurance					
Life Insurance					
Health Insurance					
Tuition (for children)					
Babysitters/Daycare					
Lawn Care					
Appliance Repair / Replacement Fund					

Please visit www.susanshofer.com/ws-pdf to download a current copy of the worksheets to print for yourself or fill in on your device.



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Category	Day 1 Amt.	Day 2 Amt.	Day 3 Amt.	Day 4 Amt.	Day 5 Amt.
Water Bill					
Snow Removal					
Pest Service					
Furniture replacement					
Food					
Gas					
Car repair fund					
Pool Maintenance					
Vacations					
Summer Camp for Children					
Dental Expenses					
Doctor Expenses					
Prescriptions / Over-the-counter medical supplies					



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Category	Day 1 Amt.	Day 2 Amt.	Day 3 Amt.	Day 4 Amt.	Day 5 Amt.
Haircuts					
Clothing Allowance					
Credit Card Expenses					
Taxes					
Others					



VI. Tip-toe back into the dating world

A very wise attorney told me not to date until the ink dried on my divorce decree. Although I could not fathom dating at that time, it was one of the best pieces of advice I received during my divorce – and advice I wish to impart onto you.

No matter how difficult divorce is, there are people who jump back into the dating world relatively quickly, often within weeks of separating from their spouses. It is not unusual to find people who walk out of divorce court and venture down the hall to complete a marriage license, so they can marry their new love interest. I don't believe it's necessary to discuss the low success rates of these new marriages other than to say that the outcomes are usually not good.

It doesn't matter how much you believe you are ready to "get out there" and date again. Doing so while legally married is a bad bet. Divorce is a very emotional time, and getting involved with someone else while dismantling your marriage will zap your emotional reserves. It's a challenge to emotionally give yourself to another person while going through a divorce. Trying to begin another relationship, during that time is not fair to you or anyone you date.

When I began to date, AFTER my divorce, my worst dates were with men not yet divorced and still going through the process, or men who were still emotionally tied to their ex-wives even though they were divorced. Conversations with these guys almost always swirled around some recent drama with their wives. One guy actually called his wife while I was sitting across the table from him at a restaurant, to tell her that he missed her and begged her to let him to come home. Another told me that, although he was only separated for two weeks, had never loved his wife of twenty years and was now ready to date. Yet another talked about his wife for two straight hours. He was so involved in his monologue he never noticed that I stood up, said goodbye, and left the restaurant. He simply continued to chat away.

DATING WHILE LEGALLY MARRIED – SAVE IT

If you are still legally married, dating may be used as a springboard for your spouse to paint you in an unfavorable way. An innocent dinner date may be morphed into a sleaze fest, which could escalate into you being deemed an unfit mother (or father) to your children. This is the last thing you want to surface during your divorce proceedings. Nor do you want to defend an otherwise innocent dinner date.

One of the saddest stories I ever heard involved a woman named Abigail, a wonderful devoted mother who lost her daughter during one of the nastiest custody battles I have ever heard of. While going through her divorce, Abigail had two dinner dates with a very nice man she met in an Italian cooking class. Her husband had a private investigator follow her on both occasions. Even though she met the man at the restaurant, left the restaurant in her own car, and drove straight home alone, somehow her husband orchestrated a huge case against her as a negligent mother to their then 12-year-old daughter. The result of her husband's revenge resulted in the courts turning full physical custody over to him, giving him veto power for all decisions for their daughter. While this ruling was extreme, it demonstrates how you can never predict any judge's actions or ruling.

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There is no dinner date worth losing your child(ren). You can argue your innocence all you want. You can tell the courts how many partners your (ex)spouse bedded down, while you were married to him/her, how your (ex)spouse abused you, beat you, etc. By this point, it wouldn't matter what you say, because once you get caught in the tangled web of lies and smear campaign your (ex)spouse may have rallied against you, your word may end up meaning nothing. I know it seems unfair, but then again divorce can be unfair. The only way you can keep your head above water and thrive while swimming is to mind your P's and Q's. Save the dating until after your divorce is complete. Will your then ex-spouse cause you trouble when you begin to date after your divorce? It's possible. However, at that point, you will have the right to do what you want.

KIDS & DATING

Please keep in mind how your dating behavior will impact your children, if you still have young and/or teenaged children at home. A parent's dating and children don't always mix well. You may think your new love interest is amazing and the thought of them leaves you weak in the knees. Your kids, however, may think the person is a creep. It is common for children to feel as though the new love interest is a threat, and that their parent will prefer the company of their new "friend". Newly single people often feel guilty because the family they wanted for their children is now fractured. Hoping to create a happy family for the children, people sometimes jump into another bad relationship too soon. Some of most horrible stories I've heard concern "rebound" marriages. People get into them without really knowing their new partners. So many people have told me that the rebound marriage was worse than the first marriage. So, my advice is to slow down. There is no need to rush into a new relationship.

If your children are young, say under age eleven, you need to be careful about them emotionally attaching to someone who may not be Mr./Ms. Right, but rather Mr. /Ms. Right Now. When Mr. /Ms. Right Now, becomes Mr. /Ms. Gone, your children have another loss to add to their already formed loss list. If for any reason, Mr. /Ms. Dreamboat turns out to be Mr. /Ms. Nightmare and the relationship is abusive, there is more angst for them.

What happens after the divorce and your ex still has problems with your dating? The answer to that question is TOO DAMNED BAD. That does not preclude them not creating drama that affects you, so keep your ears and eyes open to the possibly and proceed with caution.

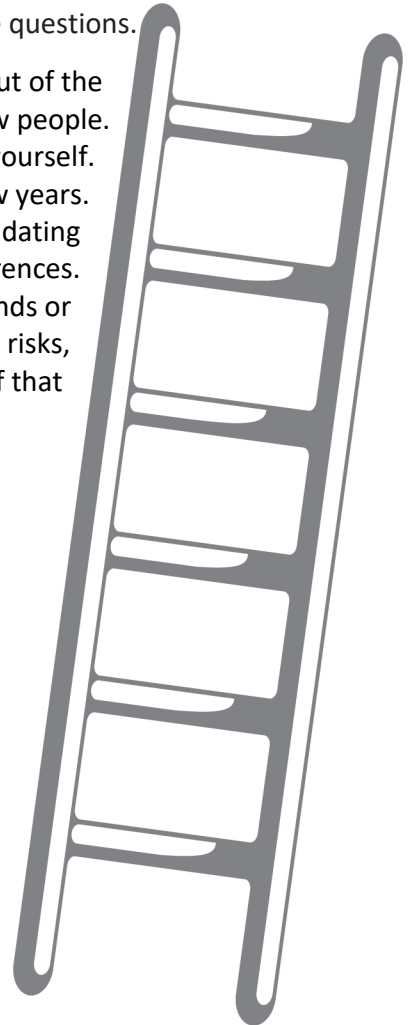
The question you need to determine is – Are you ready to date?

Below is a list of questions to ask yourself to decide if you are ready to get back into the dating game.

- ☐ Do you still think about your ex-spouse daily?
- ☐ Do you envision reuniting with your ex-spouse?
- ☐ Are you looking for someone with personality traits like your ex-spouse?
- ☐ Do you want to meet someone completely the opposite of your ex-spouse?
- ☐ Do you feel all men (women) are bad?
- ☐ Are you just dating for sex?
- ☐ Are you driven by anger and want to “get back” at your ex-spouse?
- ☐ Do you feel needy and want someone to take care of you?

If you checked any of the boxes above, you may not be ready to date. Maybe wait a few months, or so, until you check fewer of the above questions.

Once you are ready, dating can be a lot of fun. If you have been out of the dating world for a long time, this is an opportunity to meet new people. You don't have to commit to anyone right away. Relax and enjoy yourself. Plus, the dating arena has changed dramatically over the past few years. Online dating is the major forum these days. There are so many dating sites now, some very specific to religion, gender and lifestyle preferences. Online dating presents more options than being fixed up by friends or meeting people in bars. On the other hand, it comes with its own risks, so proceed with some caution. Eventually, you will find love again, if that is what you want. If not, have a great time with your new freedom!



VII. I have climbed the ladder and done everything you suggested in this guide and my life is still a mess.

Before you make the claim that your life is a *mess*, I want you to take a look at the overall big picture. Compare where you are now in contrast to where you were at the beginning of your journey. It is unrealistic for you to believe that you should be in the same place as before your divorce. You aren't, and I never guaranteed you would be. In fact, why would you want to be? This guide is about finding your new life. It may take a few years to settle into a new life, but it is safe to assume that your life can be better than you imagined. It comes down to how you choose to look at your life and what is essentially important to you. If you always see yourself as a victim, then you will be one. But I don't believe that to be the case with you. Let me put this in perspective:

Some time ago, while in line at the courthouse copy center, I chatted with a woman named Jeffie. She began to cry as she told me how horrible her life was at that moment. She was in court to file for bankruptcy, because her ex-husband stopped paying the bills and child support. Financial ruin is all too common with divorce and is definitely something to cry about. Through her tears, Jeffie told me one good thing: her ex-husband was no longer beating her. *Wait a minute ... did I hear her correctly? Did she say he beat her?* Yes, I heard her just fine. It turns out that her ex-husband beat her throughout most of their marriage, resulting in numerous hospitalizations. One of the times, he set her on fire!! She pulled up her shirtsleeves to show me where she had been burned. It was a horrifying site to behold. Jeffie also told me that he started to hit their now 12-year-old daughter.

As part of her divorce agreement, Jeffie received full custody of their daughter, whom her ex-husband visited under supervised visitation. Without sounding obnoxious, I asked Jeffie, *"What on earth are you crying about?"* The fact that she and her daughter were no longer getting beaten by this guy, and she held full custody — not to mention restricting him to supervised visitation — sounded like a great victory to me. The money part, while upsetting, was not life threatening; she could always get back on a better financial footing.

Once we chatted, Jeffie stopped crying and began to see how lucky she really was. Yes, the financial part was a lousy deal. However, having a healthy daughter and a safe life was so much better.

**I HAVE CLIMBED THE LADDER AND DONE EVERYTHING YOU SUGGESTED IN
THIS GUIDE AND MY LIFE IS STILL A MESS.**

Your life is different now. No way it couldn't be. However, you have to look at your alternatives like Jeffie did, what you have achieved, what you have learned. Are you emotionally stronger? Have you started a nice workout regime? Did your attorney muster up a nice settlement for you? Do you have new love in your life? Are your children happy and healthy? If you share custody or have a visitation schedule, do you see your children with consistency? Do you have great friends who have stood by you through the divorce? Have you started a new career? Are you getting by financially?

If you answered "yes" to one or more of these questions, then you are surviving and thriving. Divorce can ultimately take all these things from you, so if it didn't, you have come a long way. Now let me ask you: Is your life still a mess? I bet it is not.

With love ---

A handwritten signature in dark red ink that reads "Susan". The script is cursive and fluid, with a large, looping initial 'S'.

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Susan is an agency-licensed private investigator turned divorce coach. **The Divorce Recovery Ladder** is a comprehensive guide with tools, worksheets, information, and tips on how to get through a divorce unscathed.

No one understands divorce and all the pain that comes with it better than Susan Shofer. She's a divorce survivor with firsthand experience with what it feels like to encounter many of the perils of divorce, including successfully circumventing parental alienation.

There are many rungs on the ladder to divorce recovery. Climb them with Susan. Her straightforward, pragmatic approach is rich with humor and wisdom. Find a friend with your new divorce and custody ally.

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*Praise for The Divorce Recovery Ladder: Your Step-By-Step
Guide to Successfully Climb Out of Your Divorce*

"As one who has experienced divorce and its litany of struggles — including many portrayed in the book — I read *The Divorce Recovery Guide* and found myself asking, 'Where was this book when I needed its wisdom?' Not only is the book packed with sensible, specific and well-heeled information and guidance on every aspect of the process, but Susan Shofer goes above and beyond to dive into the emotional turmoil surrounding many divorces — and the problems that often creates. Written with both compassion and strong, sage guidance, *The Divorce Recovery Ladder Guide* might be the greatest investment one can make during a divorce... outside of hiring a good attorney, of course."

— Robert Yehling, author, *Crawl of Fame* and *Just Add Water*

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- ✓ The Divorce Process
 - ✓ Attorneys and Evidence
 - ✓ Court Appearances
 - ✓ Recognizing Retaliation
 - ✓ Self-Care
 - ✓ Custody and Co-Parenting
 - ✓ Parental Alienation
 - ✓ Organizing Finances
 - ✓ Understanding Settlements
 - ✓ Dating Again

