

Where Do You Start?

*Where do you start? Do you allow yourself a little time to cry?
Or do you shut your eyes and kiss it all goodbye? I guess you try.
-Lyrics Marilyn & Alan Bergman*

A new year. A fresh start. There is a reason that in the month of January there is a rise in the number of people pursuing a divorce, and perhaps you are among them. You may have children and did not want them to associate Christmas with their parents' separation. Or you may have come to the sad but true conclusion that your marriage is beyond repair and you simply did not want to drag your broken relationship through another year. Whatever your reason, and whatever the season, when you decide to end your marriage, you may be wondering, "where do I start?" Here are some general guidelines that we as collaborative professionals have found useful in empowering our clients to choose the process that will best support them through this life-changing transition.

1. Recognize that separation is primarily an emotional process, not simply a legal one. This may seem obvious, yet many people look for legal solutions to emotional problems that they may not acknowledge. Friends and family can be eager to give advice, often involving legal action, perhaps because they feel helpless in the face of your pain, or are uncomfortable with the intensity of your feelings, as you yourself may be. There is no question that this can be an especially challenging time emotionally, a roller-coaster of anger, grief, loneliness, fear, vulnerability, and guilt. It matters not whether you are the leaver or the left, the strength of your feelings can catch you off guard, and at times make you wonder if you are losing your mind! Be reassured that it is all part of the process. Rather than seek to escape these feelings, learn to accept them. This requires a willingness to "sit with" your feelings with compassion for yourself, not trying to talk yourself out of your feelings or see them as problems to be solved. Don't be afraid to see a counsellor or join a support group specific to dealing with separation and loss. It helps to have a neutral place to talk about your experience as well as the benefit of guidance from professionals who have seen many others through the process.
2. Your physical, mental and emotional well-being must become a priority in your life. This can seem impossible in the midst of all the practical changes you may be faced with, such as possibly selling a home and moving, changing work hours to accommodate new child care demands, finding employment if you haven't been working, to name a few. It is important to find time to connect with yourself and take care of your needs. Remember the basics, such as eating well, exercise and sleep, and nourishing your well-being on a mental, emotional or spiritual level. As traumatic as separation can be, it is always an opportunity for paying attention to the quality of your relationship with yourself. Again, seek the resources you need to improve this relationship, whether it is a medical doctor, a personal trainer, a counsellor, a yoga class...whatever will support you in the quest to care for yourself.
3. Only when you have paid sufficient attention to your emotional process and have established a sense of balance are you then ready to pursue a legal process. This is not to say that it is wrong for people to seek legal information immediately upon a decision to separate, but there is a difference between getting some basic legal information about separation and divorce, and acting on that information. It is important that both parties in a separation be emotionally ready to negotiate the logistics of their separation and make major legal and financial decisions, regardless of the particular legal process they choose.

There are a number of legal processes available to people undergoing separation. Most people only know about adversarial court process. However there are alternatives to court, such as mediation and lawyer-driven negotiations where lawyers seek to reach an agreement with an intention to avoid court. Collaborative law is the only option where people sign an agreement that they will not go to court, thereby removing the threat of litigation, and creating an environment conducive to finding creative solutions to conflict. There is a great deal of information to consider in looking at each option, much of which will also be unique to your situation. Take the time you need to decide on what is best for you, through discussions with lawyers, counsellors and other professionals who are knowledgeable in dispute resolution processes that do not involve court, so you can have the benefit of a range of options.

Many people want to know about costs, and want to base their decisions on the cost of the process. Generally, an adversarial legal process which involves court is the most expensive option, financially as well as in terms of the emotional toll it takes on families. With regard to the alternatives which seek to avoid court, it is our experience that the cost of the process rises according to the emotional state of the parties; the greater the unresolved anger, grief, or other emotions for which each person avoids taking responsibility, the greater the likelihood that the process will cost more in legal time. This is where divorce coaching can be invaluable. In the collaborative process, for example, people can utilize coaching to help resolve the emotional stumbling blocks to developing a separation agreement, thereby reducing legal costs in the long run.

4. If you have children, now is the time to begin to take a truly child centred approach. Of course, many parents believe they know what their children need, and they do, except that they often have a blind spot in terms of the effect their own attitudes and behaviour toward the other parent have on their children. Simply put, these attitudes and behaviour, if negative, squarely put their children in the middle, and this is an emotionally damaging place for children to be. See things through your children's eyes, and recognize that they are attached to both of you. They need permission to enjoy their attachments, not have them become a source of competition. New research is sobering in terms of the long-term effects on children who are forced to adapt to such circumstances, which effectively robs them of knowing who they are - given that they are too busy managing the hostility, resentment and jealousy of their parents. Note that this does not have to be openly expressed to be damaging to children, who absorb the feeling states of those around them. It may seem ironic and unfair that, on top of the myriad challenges of separation and divorce, the bar is raised for separated parents in terms of minding how they are parenting. Parenting is already challenging enough. Now you are being asked to build a positive co-parenting alliance with someone who seemed unable to co-parent with you when you were together! However, as countless others before you can attest, it is doable, if you can approach it as a congenial business partnership with the common interest of raising emotionally healthy children.

It is not uncommon now for separating parents to access child specialists for guidance in helping their children through separation and divorce. In addition to consulting with parents on their particular family difficulties, a child specialist can also provide a safe, neutral zone for kids to have a voice in the process, a place where their feelings and needs can be heard without judgement or "vested interest", while still providing a conduit for learning vital information about the child which the parents can take into consideration in developing their parenting plan.

5. There are a number of great resources in the community for parents coping with separation and divorce. For example, the BC Families in Transition society is an organization dedicated to the needs of families affected by separation. They offer a number of groups and services to

assist adults, youth and children. The mental health professionals associated with the Collaborative Family Separation Professionals can assist you with finding group and educational resources appropriate to your situation. We can also recommend informative and inspirational reading material to keep you on course with your own goals for your post-separation family.

Remember, the process may be very painful, but it does get easier, Separation offers unsurpassed opportunities for personal growth, but it is up to you to seize them.

All the best in your new year!

Marnie Olchowecki, MSW, RCSW
Divorce Coach and Child Specialist