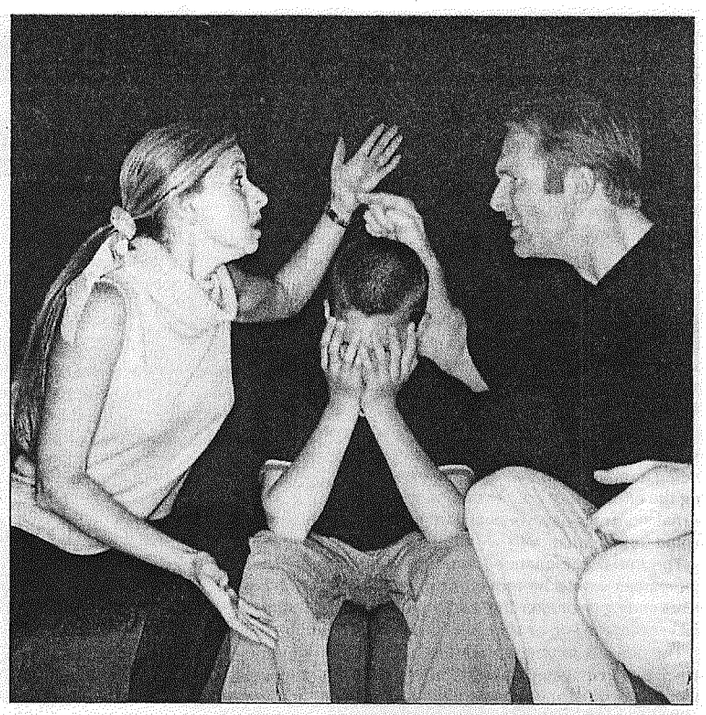
Divorce coaches

Smoothing the waters for a cheaper, more successful divorce

By Dick Dahl
Staff writer



When a suicidal doctor blew up a Manhattan townhouse in July, it was an extreme example of how tensions in a messy divorce can spiral out of control.

But even in a typical divorce, the stress can be intense for clients and lawyers alike.

Enter the divorce coach.

Largely a product of the collaborative-law movement, divorce coaches work with clients to keep them focused on achieving positive results, instead of getting mired in vindictiveness. Their role in the legal team is to help clients navigate the intense emotions and legal frustrations inherent in divorce.

"I'll often ask a lawyer if there's something coming up in the legal process that could be upsetting to the client, and if so I'll plan for it," said Sanford M. Portnoy, a psychotherapist and divorce coach in Needham, Mass.

Divorce coaches help clients corral their emotions so that they can focus on bargaining effectively, according to Kirsten Lysne, a Minneapolis clinical psychologist who devotes most of her practice to divorce.

"In the collaborative process [clients] bear a lot of responsibility for negotiating well," she said. "So that's a big part of what I try to help them with."

> "I don't look at myself as being in the business of divorce. I'm in the business of happier families."
>
> – Karyn Gimbel

New twist in an established trend

Collaborative law, the brainchild of Minneapolis family law practitioner Stuart G. Webb in the early 1990s, requires a formal commitment by both parties to seek resolution in a more cooperative manner than traditional litigation. Typically, collaborative law calls for a team approach with outside financial and mental-health specialists taking part.

In recent years, collaborative-law practitioners have begun using mental-health specialists who are more focused on skills-training than on therapy.

Unlike therapists, who focus on treating symptoms, divorce coaches guide people in how to manage situations. And as the popularity of collaborative law has grown, the job of the divorce coach has expanded into more traditional divorce litigation.

Portnoy has seen a significant increase in the use of his services by traditional divorce lawyers – to the extent that they now comprise the majority of his referrals.

When giving seminars for matrimonial lawyers, Portnoy urges them to think of divorce coaches as something akin to sports coaches.

"During coaching sessions, I will often talk [with clients] about upcoming events in the divorce process, and then we'll explore together their performance in those situations and decide to set goals," he said. "Often, we'll script and role play. Then we'll talk about how it went and evaluate."

But first, he has to know a great deal about the client and her case. To do this, he conducts an initial assessment to understand what led to the break-up, identify the legal issues and gauge the client's emotional state.

The second step, he said, is educating clients about the psychological effects that they and their children can expect.

From here, coaching is a matter of prioritizing issues, helping the client articulate desired outcomes and devising a plan for how to achieve these goals with a minimum of rancor.

A lawyer's perspective

Lawyers who have used divorce coaches say that they can make a big difference in outcomes.

"They bring sane reminders like, 'You don't want to make a bad decision that will affect your children,'" said Karyn Gimbel Youso, a family lawyer with Jacobson & Ratzel in Brookfield, Wis.

Youso practices in both collaborative and traditional settings and said she's more apt to use coaches in a collaborative matter. But even in traditional cases, she sometimes refers clients to coaches on an *ad hoc* basis because she believes an enlightened client is better for everyone concerned.

"I don't look at myself as being in the business of divorce," she said. "I'm in the business of happier families."

Divorce coaches can also reduce legal bills, according to Minneapolis family-law practitioner Ronald D. Ousky. By minimizing emotional and psychological battles, the divorce can be completed quicker and the savings in hourly fees more than make up for the cost of the coach.

"But for it to work, attorneys and coaches have to communicate with each other," Ousky said.

Finding the right coach

Although there is no formal training or certification process for divorce coaches, there are a number of attributes lawyers should look for when choosing a coach for their clients.

"A good divorce coach has a great deal of experience working in the area of high-conflict divorce and is trained in the teaching of communication skills and stress-management techniques," said Pauline H. Tesler, a San Francisco divorce lawyer. "They're also experienced in how to share responsibility as part of a team."

Tesler founded the 3,000-member International Academy of Collaborative Professionals along with psychologist Peggy Thompson. They are also co-authors of a new book, "Collaborative Divorce: The Revolutionary New Way to Restructure Your Family, Resolve Legal Issues, and Move on With Your Life."

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Portnoy recommends that lawyers contact their local collaborative-law organization, many of which maintain websites that list divorce coaches.

Although most divorce coaches have a background in therapy and counseling, some divorce lawyers themselves are becoming coaches.

Elizabeth Dalton had been a divorce lawyer in Salt Lake City for four years and a court-appointed family mediator for 16 when she got a call eight years ago from a divorcing couple. They had heard about her expertise as a mediator and wanted her to handle their divorce out of court.

"It so shocked me that they had taken personal responsibility in a difficult situation and weren't blaming each other," Dalton said. "It was because they'd gotten trained by coaches."

Dalton was so impressed that she decided to become a coach herself.

Today, she divides her time equally between court mediation and divorce coaching. She has had no formal mental-health training, but has mentored with therapists and frequently attends their continuing-education courses. In addition, Dalton said her experience as a mediator provided many of the skills necessary to be an effective divorce coach.

No matter what a coach's background may be, Portnoy defines a good coach as someone who can focus on "self-containment and situation management." He said good coaches can get clients to remove emotion from a traumatic process and focus on the ultimate result.

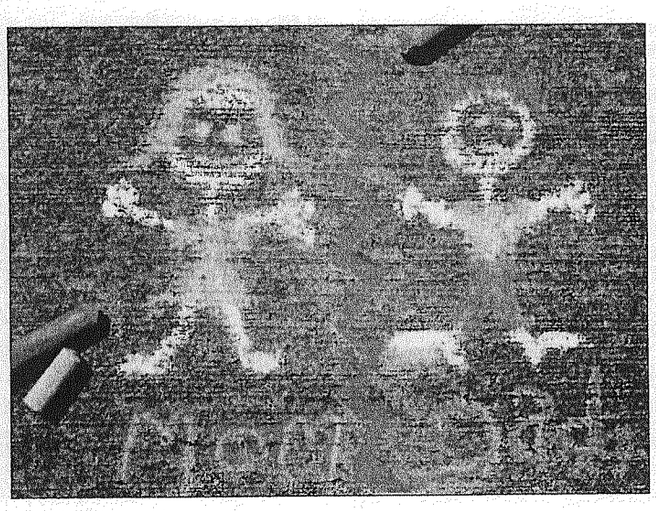
"Or, as a lawyer friend put it, 'Let's help you create the healthiest divorce that you can for yourself,'" he said.

Questions or comments can be directed to the writer at: dick.dahl@lawyersusaonline.com

Benefits to lawyers

Most websites devoted to divorce coaches focus on how they can benefit clients. But Needham, Mass. psychotherapist and divorce coach Sanford M. Portnoy said there are a variety of benefits for lawyers as well.

According to Portnoy, divorce coaches can:

- Advise lawyers on a client's emotional state at various times during the divorce process.
- Instruct clients on how to communicate better with their lawyers and opposing lawyers.
- Prepare clients for specific court events and meetings, thus reducing the likelihood of complications when those events occur.
- Educate lawyers on psychological information that's relevant to the divorce proceeding – such as developmental needs of children.

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