

**Home Will Never Be the Same Again for Adult Children of Gary Divorce**  
Carol Hughes, Ph.D., LMFT, and Bruce Fredenburg, LMFT  
at the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals October '21 Forum



COLLABORATIVE  
PRACTICE  
Resolving Disputes Respectfully

**Learning Objectives:**

Participants will be able to:

1. Explain to their clients why considering the feelings and experiences of their adult children and helping them during significant family restructuring is essential in the family-focused Collaborative Divorce process.
2. Describe to their clients the similar and different concerns and unmet needs that their adult children, who are in various stages of adult development, may face, and how neglecting those concerns these can affect their adult children, grandchildren, the parents, and their divorce outcomes.
3. Educate their clients about how their adult children are stakeholders and major influencers “in the room” and should be acknowledged as such whenever the parents meet, that facilitates better family-focused outcomes.



## **The Role of the Neutral Adult Child Specialist**

**Since confidentiality is the cornerstone of collaboration and mediation, the Neutral Adult Child Specialist does not provide a written report. The Neutral Adult Child Specialist does, along with the Coaches, assist the Co-parents to make better co-parenting decisions for their family.**

### **Who is the Adult Child Specialist?**

The Neutral Adult Child Specialist is a licensed mental health professional with specialized training in Mediation and Collaborative Divorce, who has expertise and experience working with Neutral Adult Children and parents going through divorce. The Neutral Adult Child Specialist brings the voice of the Adult Child(ren) into the process and serves on the team as a neutral representative of the Adult Child(ren)'s needs and preferences in the divorce process. At the full team Evaluating Options and Co-creating Agreements meetings, the Neutral Adult Child Specialist "holds the space" for the Adult Child(ren)'s presence. That said, I remind Adult Children and their parents that Adult Child(ren) have a voice not a choice, because it is their parents who will be making the decisions, some of which may affect the Adult Child(ren).

### **What does the Adult Child Specialist do?**

The Adult Child Specialist:

- Assists co-parents understand the post-separation/divorce needs of each adult child and provides education related to enhancing the adult child's adjustment to the divorce.
  - Elicits a shared vision from the co-parents regarding their respective involvement in each adult child's life in the present and future (which may include initial co-parenting plan ideas).
  - Highlights common underlying interests.
  - Suggests co-parents begin to co-author a new story of cooperation.
  - Assists co-parents to understand each adult child's concerns about present co-parenting.
  - Provides co-parents with the information they need to better understand what is happening to the adult child/children and to make important co-parenting decisions.
  - Provides relevant information to the collaborative team or mediation team.
  - Assists with conflict disengagement and improved co-parenting.
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- Assists the co-parents and the collaborative team or mediation team to craft a co-parenting plan for each adult child and co-parents that meets the needs of each adult child and co-parents.

## How does the Adult Child Specialist gather information?

The Adult Child Specialist may employ a combination of any of the below, or any other Information gathering tools deemed appropriate for the family

- Meets the co-parents together and/or alone to hear each co-parent's hopes, goals and concern, to gain an understanding of each co-parent's view of the adult child(ren) and to observe the co-parents' dynamics.
- Meets each adult child alone to determine his/her needs and wants. (May meet via phone or Skype.)
- May meet with each adult child or children together with each co-parent and with siblings.
- May meet with each adult child and the co-parents in various combinations
- May utilize questionnaires and inventories to gather information.
- May gather information, with appropriate signed releases, from collateral sources. As a protection for the Adult Children, the integrity of the process and the collateral sources, collateral communications may be shared with the Coaches, but not with the rest of the Professional Team or the Parents. **The Child Specialist NEVER divulges information about the case to the collateral contacts. Information goes one way only – from the collateral contact to the Adult Child Specialist.**
- Continuously communicates with Coaches throughout the process about co-parenting issues, family dynamics and any and all pertinent information that assists the co-parents effectively co-parent their adult children, become agreement ready and co-create their agreements.
- Shares the information, as appropriate, with the Coaches in the 5-way co-parent/coaches/Adult Child Specialist meeting.
- Continuously gathers information from all interactions with adult child(ren), co-parents, and all professional team members.

## What does the Adult Child Specialist consider?

- Developmental issues (e.g. the needs of a 4 year old, 10 year old or 22 year old child are quite different)
- Temperament of each adult child and each co-parent
- Each adult child's relationship to family members.
- Relationships beyond the immediate family
- Particular strengths/resilience of each adult child
- The adult child's current reaction(s) to the family changes: worries, fears, hopes, preferences.
- Special vulnerabilities (e.g. learning difficulties, emotional distress, disabilities, substance abuse, etc.)

## How do the adult children benefit?

Each adult child has:

- A safe place with a neutral third party to share his or her story about what's happening in the family.
- An opportunity to ask questions and get clarification about the changes in the family.
- Support and comfort during a stressful time and a sense that he or she has a voice, but not

- a choice, in the process.
- Relief by bringing to the co-parents' attention problems, worries, fears and hopes that may have gone undetected or unexpressed.

### **How do the co-parents benefit?**

The co-parents have:

- New information and the opportunity to consider the special needs and concerns of each adult child.
- Information about their adult child's point of view.
- Help in understanding the specific worries and concerns of each adult child.
- Discussion regarding the anticipated challenges and difficulties inherent in co-parenting.
- Help in identifying and appreciating their common interests as co-parents.
- Input regarding their co-parenting plan, whether the children are minors or adults, because all children, whether minors or adults, benefit from their co-parents working together for the adult children's benefit.

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## **The Neutral Child Specialist's Value Added to Collaborative Divorce and Mediation Teams**

“I have been practicing as a financial specialist in family law matters for the last 25 years, the past 16 years as a Collaborative Financial Neutral. I have experienced working with parties getting divorced in the litigation process, mediation, hybrid collaborative and the full team collaborative process.

In all cases that have utilized the Neutral Child Specialist the decision making process of the parties seems to work better. It is rare that either the father or the mother does not want to put their child first. Even when they are arguing with each other, if the focus can get them back to their child(ren) they have an ability to make decisions for the betterment of the family.

The Neutral Child Specialist brings that child into the room with the parents and helps keep the parents focused on why they chose the full team collaborative process in the first place. I have personally witnessed parents about ready to end the entire collaborative process and go to litigation and when the Neutral Child Specialist steps in as the voice of the child(ren) both parties sit back – stop-listen-think and then come back into the process for the best results of the family going into the future.”

~ Cathleen Collinsworth, CDFA™, MAFF™  
Financial Specialist  
[www.cccdfa.com](http://www.cccdfa.com)

“As one of the lawyers on the team I view the Child Specialist as uniquely situated to center the clients on consensus building. Children, both adult and minor, are ever present during their parents' divorce. Children are a significant part of the family dynamic and not always in the most supportive/functional way. Children, both minor and adult, are stake holders and major influences “in the room” whenever the parents meet. While the Neutral Child Specialist is not a true neutral, being aligned with the children of the clients, being impartial in relation to the parents powerfully amplifies the voice of the child(ren). I have never met a client who did not want to do what is best for their child(ren). Presenting as a co-equal team member, parents work directly with the Neutral Child Specialist as the voice of the child(ren). This discourages them looking to me as decision maker, as lawyer, and puts the responsibility on them as parents and empowers parents to focus on children's needs and interests. It values parents role as parents keeping control of the parenting decisions, brings the kids “into the room”, while being afforded valuable information and guidance. The voice of the child(ren) puts parents [back] on common ground and focused on meeting the needs and interests of someone other than themselves.”

~ Bart Carey, J.D.  
Collaborative Family Lawyer, Mediator and Adjunct  
Law School Professor  
[www.familypeacemaker.com](http://www.familypeacemaker.com)

“I have worked with a number of child specialists, each one bringing a variety of tools for family focus into the process. Beyond the traditional role of bringing the child's (minors, adults, and grandchildren) voice into the process, thereby reminding the parents of their impact and their potential, an effective child specialist is also ever present in the room when financial and legal concerns and topics are being addressed. Typically, the child specialist is the one professional both parents trust and want to hear from in a collaborative process. When the financial specialist and/or the lawyers are discussing technical information, I have experienced the child specialist doing a critical ‘check in’ with the parents, thereby disrupting the discussion to acknowledge an important shift, usually a potentially harmful shift, in one or both parent's body language, tone, or other behavior. Divorce coaches are also ever present at this time, so this is not to discount their critical role. The child specialist, however, brings a reality from within the family, rather than within the parent. The child specialist, as such, I have found, to be critical, especially when no other voice, except for the children's can be heard.”

~Diana L. Martinez, J.D.  
Collaborative Family Lawyer, Mediator & Trainer  
[www.dlmartinezlaw.com](http://www.dlmartinezlaw.com)

“Having an adult child specialist on a collaborative team (or a co-mediation team) is an absolute necessity for me as a collaborative attorney, especially if the children are adult children. When I was a litigator, I used to tell my clients that after their children turn 18, they are no longer minor children, no longer subject to the Court’s jurisdiction and no longer part of the equation. I now understand that adult children of a divorcing family do matter – all children of a divorcing family matter. Divorcing parents are redefining the legacy they leave to their children no matter what the age of the child. They model how adults solve problems, and their children learn from watching how their parents approach the divorce – it is either a ‘battle to be won’ or a ‘problem to be solved’. What is at stake is what children in restructuring families learn from their parents, and what they take with them into their relationships. Adult children can easily become the confidant of a parent, become the hidden voice in the background trying to influence a parent or an influencer trying to steer a parent towards safety or into a position of interest. With the increasing numbers of ‘gray divorces’ I am also seeing increasing numbers of divorces with adult children. Having the adult child specialist on board from the beginning equips the professional team and the family to aid the parents in co-creating healthy agreements, while allowing the children to be in the center rather than in the middle.”

~Brian Don Levy, Esq.  
Collaborative Attorney, Mediator & Trainer  
[www.CollaborativeAttorney.com](http://www.CollaborativeAttorney.com)  
[www.CollaborativeDivorceServices.com](http://www.CollaborativeDivorceServices.com)

“The Neutral Child Specialist (NCS) is the ONLY professional team member who will engage and interact with the entire family. As such, the NCS will have a unique perspective of the family system, how it functions, and the “roles” that each family member plays within the family structure. This is critical information for professional team members to know as they interact with their client individually, or with the couple together. How did this family function (who made the major decisions, why did that person make the major decisions, how were those decisions made, etc.)? These functions will be drastically changing. What role did each family member play within the family structure (martyr, over-achiever, acting-out-trouble-maker, go-along-to-get-

along, etc.)? These roles will be drastically changing. This is but a fraction of the kind of information the NCS will be able to provide to the professional team by interacting with the entire family unit. However, this information can be critical for some families. Their family structure is about to drastically change – from known to unknown, from a one-house unit to a two-house unit; from joint parents (together) to co-parents (individual). Learning to work together as co-parents rather than as joint parents requires an expert to educate, training, structure, and encouragement. It requires a Neutral Child Specialist.

As a collaborative divorce coach (who is not a NCS) I find the information received from the NCS to be extremely valuable and beneficial for me, and therefore my client. With the information from the NCS I am able to provide my client with an awareness of the developmental stage of their child and therefore their child's level of understanding of what's happening in their world. Understanding what's happening at their child's level allows my client's the opportunity to bring their child's needs to the forefront of the process. And, this is especially true for adult children who seem acutely aware of what's happening, yet have an extreme need to "understand" their parent's divorce. Understanding what's happening at their child's level brings meaning to the phrase we often use: Kids Before Money. It also allows for my client to rethink their views of an appropriate and desired parenting schedule – a schedule that can now take into account what's happening in their child's world, rather than just into their own world of hurt, confusion, frustration, and anxiety. As such, it is my very firm belief that whenever children are involved (whether minor or adult children), a Neutral Child Specialist is a much needed value added asset to the professional team process."

~ Marvin L. Chapman, PsyD, LMFT, CFC  
Divorce Coach and Psychotherapist  
[www.marvinchapman.net](http://www.marvinchapman.net)

## FIELD NOTES

# Never Too Old to Hurt From Parents' Divorce

By Jane Gordon Julien

April 21, 2016

In the room that would be the scene of Lisa George's divorce in 2012, Ms. George, now 59, was seated on the same side of the table as her about-to-be-ex-husband. Each of their divorce lawyers slid into seats across from them.

Between the lawyers sat Carol Hughes, a divorce coach in Orange County, Calif. Dr. Hughes placed two collages on small easels on the table. One was pasted with photos and words from the couple's daughter, 25 at the time. The second was of their son, who was 28.

In the middle of the negotiations, "even in the heat of disagreement, there was an immediate realization that our kids were part of this," Ms. George said. "It was the best possible reminder to stay grounded."

The divorce rate among couples 50 and older has soared. The number of individuals who are adults when their parents divorce is climbing with it. Yet the vast majority of recent research, and subsequent counseling, for divorcing couples is focused on young children.

But for adult children of divorce, specific therapy or even divorce coaches like Dr. Hughes are difficult to find.

When Krista Mischo's parents divorced after 45 years of marriage, she sought comfort from others in her situation. "I went to a divorce care group, but it was a meeting for adults going through divorces," said Mrs. Mischo, who lives in Wisconsin and was 43 at the time. "The only group for children of divorce I could find was for young children."

In 2012, she decided to create a group of her own, and began writing a blog, Time for Serenity ([acodtimeforserenity.blogspot.com](http://acodtimeforserenity.blogspot.com)).

In a short time, she said, the blog had attracted more than 20,000 readers around the world. Mrs. Mischo, who stopped writing the blog after two years, said, "I think I really exhausted every possible topic I could think of, and therapeutically I have worked through almost every aspect of this, and I don't want this to define me."

Her need to connect resonated with others in the same situation.

"Readers used the word 'devastated,'" she said. "The wind is knocked out of you."

The effect on adult children is undocumented, said Susan L. Brown, a sociology professor at Bowling Green State University, whose 2012 study with I-Fen Lin, "The Gray Divorce Revolution," established that the divorce rate among people 50 and older had doubled in the previous 20 years.

"I don't know how it will play out," Dr. Brown said of her findings. "For most people getting a gray divorce, the children are adult age." But, she said, research "actually applies to a past generation. Where is the research that will help this generation?"

Jenny Kutner, 24, of Manhattan, a senior staff writer for the online news site mic.com, is still negotiating her way through her parents' 2013 divorce. Soon after it was final, Ms. Kutner's father told her and her college-age sister that they needed to call him every day. For about a month, they did.



"My father told me I wasn't sad enough about it," Ms. Kutner said. "He would say, 'I just got divorced.' And I would say to him: 'My parents just got divorced. I don't know what to tell you.'"

Then her mother wanted to share details of her dates. Ms. Kutner had had enough.

"I have said so many times over the past year that I felt as though I had two 50-something-year-old children," Ms. Kutner said. "And I have totally resented it."

Both parents want the children to understand their pain and confusion. That's not O.K., therapists say. Parent up, they say.

"In our work, we're seeing the trauma to adult children whose parents are going through divorce," Dr. Hughes said. "The parents say, 'The children are adults now, they'll be fine,' but they aren't fine. Often, the children can be pulled into the divorce process."

Adult children are already trying to figure out the logistics of their parents' divorce: where to spend holidays and birthdays, if they need to visit more often to support the more emotionally struggling parent. Getting dragged into teary midnight phone calls or contentious conversations about whose fault the divorce was makes a difficult situation unbearable.

Worse, many adult children begin to question whether they want children of their own, or if they have the ability to maintain a healthy relationship.

"I really have no interest in the idea of getting married," Ms. Kutner said. "If my parents could end up not staying together, to me it really indicates that we live too long, and I have found a lot of peace in that. Some people really do outgrow each other, and the relationship is as long as it is and that might not be a lifetime."

Most therapists treat adult children of divorce the way they treat those who are grieving from any other loss, or who are depressed or anxious. Without a wealth of recent research on gray divorce and its impact, gathering information is left to the therapists.

Dr. Hughes has created her own questionnaires for her clients, "generic questions I have developed from knowing the developmental stages the adult children are in," she said.

Dr. Hughes recommends certain behavioral modifications for divorcing parents. She knows, for example, that many of them break the news by telephone.

That is what happened to Ms. George when her parents divorced when she was 36. As Dr. Hughes coached Ms. George through her own divorce, she told her that children of any age want to hear the news in person, and with their siblings.

"She told us neither parent should deliver the entire message, and that they need to hear that this isn't the result of anything they had or hadn't done," Ms. George said. "At any age, they need to hear that."

So Ms. George and her husband waited until the whole family was together at Thanksgiving and until others were out of the room. Then they spoke to their children. Afterward, both children contacted Dr. Hughes for further conversations about the divorce.

Such help wasn't available nine years ago, when Mrs. Mischo's parents divorced.

Her mother was 66 at the time, her father 71. "My parents' divorce definitely affected my own marriage," Mrs. Mischo said. "You live, eat, breathe and sleep with what's going on. Their marriage had always seemed intact and very committed. I had to rethink everything."

Those thoughts include adult children's questioning of their own perceptions. "Adult children begin to question the reality of their own lives growing up," Dr. Hughes said. "Some parents will say, 'I wanted to divorce your mom or dad when you were little, but we had you kids.' The adult child asks, 'Was it all a facade?'"

Dr. Hughes is part of a small but growing field of therapists working with lawyers to encourage divorcing parents to consider the needs of adult children. Her practice, part of Collaborative Divorce Solutions of Orange County, "is very active on this topic," she said. "I think we're in denial as a nation as to how adult children are affected by divorce."

As sad as she is about her divorce, Ms. George said she had no regrets about the process. She first heard of divorce coaching when she stopped at a tag sale in her Newport Beach, Calif., neighborhood and, chronically teary-eyed from the difficulties of the divorce, came away with a business card for a divorce coach. Eventually, she met Dr. Hughes.

"I wanted for my kids to have a better sense of this process for themselves as young adults as they are making their own coupling decisions, and a place where they could feel safe with someone to talk to," Ms. George said. "I didn't have anyone to talk to regarding my parents' divorce. I wanted someone there for them, and that was Carol."

## **What Is the Gray Divorce Revolution? The highest divorce rate in history isn't subsiding.**

**(Reprinted from *Psychology Today*, August 16, 2021)**

### **Key Points**

- Since 1990 the divorce rate of people over 50 has doubled
- Researchers predict gray divorces will triple by 2030
- There are many contributing factors
- Fulfilling relationships benefit health

For more than three decades, a silent revolution has been unfolding without much comment, creating a seismic shift in American families and families in other countries. Three to four generations of families are feeling the effects. While the divorce rate in younger age groups has declined, people over 50 are divorcing in record-setting numbers.

The American Association of Retired Persons coined the term "gray divorce" in 2004 when it published a study about divorce at midlife and beyond. In 2012, researchers at Bowling Green State University named this phenomenon the "gray divorce revolution." Their study found the divorce rate for the U.S. population over 50 doubled in those two decades and more than doubled for those over 65. Since half of the married population is 50 and over, these researchers projected that, as the U.S. population ages, by 2030, the number of persons aged 50 and older who divorce will grow by one-third.

The explosion of gray divorces is not isolated to the United States. The same trends are occurring in Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan, Europe, Australia, and India. Canada's national statistical agency indicates that "grey divorce" has been consistently growing among those 55 and over, including those 65 and older. And rates are expected to increase as more people continue to age. The United Kingdom's Office for National Statistics announced in 2018 that the divorce rate among those 55 or older, dubbed "silver splitters" and "silver surfers," has doubled. In the past two decades in Japan, couples married 30 years or more have seen their divorce rate quadruple. The Japanese are calling it "Retired Husband Syndrome."

Gray divorce is an undeniable worldwide reality that is transforming the social and economic lives of divorcing couples, family members, and society.

### **Why Is This Revolution Happening?**

Myriad circumstances underlie the meteoric rise in gray divorce over the past thirty years. In the late 1960s and 1970s, a focus on personal happiness and self-fulfillment became prominent. In subsequent decades in most industrialized countries, life expectancy significantly increased, attitudes about marriage as a lifelong institution shifted, divorce became more socially acceptable, women joined the workforce and became more financially independent.

Couples who married decades ago and have drifted apart or been unhappy for years become willing to face their differences about finances, interests, and emotional fulfillment and acknowledge their unsatisfying relationships. When they experience the empty nest syndrome as

adult children leave home, they wonder what they now have in common. Infidelity and addictions often contribute to the decision to divorce. Spouses seek refuge from mental, emotional, and physical abuse. Betrayal from financial improprieties propels spouses to seek relief. People realize they are not living the dream they imagined when they married decades ago and are unhappy and unfulfilled. They look to the remaining decades ahead to pursue personal happiness.

### **The longest study on happiness**

The Harvard Study of Adult Development, one of the world's longest studies of adult life, followed the lives of two groups of men for more than 80 years. A former director of the study, psychiatrist George Vaillant said, "When the study began [in 1938], nobody cared about empathy or attachment. But the key to healthy aging is relationships, relationships, relationships."

In his highly regarded 2015 TED talk, Dr. Robert Waldinger, the current director of the study, said, "It wasn't their middle-aged cholesterol levels that predicted how they were going to grow old. It was how satisfied they were in their relationships. The people who were the most satisfied in their relationships at age 50 were the healthiest at age 80."

Waldinger noted that the study's surprising finding is that taking care of our body is important but tending to our relationships is also a form of self-care. He shared the three lessons learned from the study:

- Social connections are very good for us, and loneliness kills.
- Living in conflict is very bad for our health.
- Good relationships don't just protect our bodies. They protect our brains."

### **The quest for personal happiness and self-fulfillment**

People ages 50 and older who initiate a divorce report they want something more and different. Many of them grew up experiencing their parents' divorce and divorces of their friends' parents. They came of age in the late 1960s through the early 1980s when divorce became widespread and are more likely to have married as young adults, divorced, and later remarried. Some have lived for decades in marriages with conflict. Some have little or no interaction with their spouses. They ask, "Is this all there is?" and report feeling lonely and disconnected from their spouses. "Staying in this shell of a marriage is killing me" is a common refrain. The findings in the Harvard Study of Adult Development support what they say and feel. They hope that pleasure, contentment, and joy await them as they move into the next stage of their lives.

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*The following article was written by My Collaborative Team member, Irene King, Esq.*

I am a daughter of divorce and a divorce attorney. Most collaborative professionals have reasons why they have chosen to put down their armor and swords and the bludgeoning tactics of court battles and do divorce differently. My reasons resonate in my practice, but I have only recently started to share, and this is the first time in writing, that I am a collaborative divorce attorney because my family legacy was decimated while I was almost 10 years into my practice as a family law litigator. I have been practicing 17 years. By sharing this legacy, I hope that you, especially if you are a parent contemplating divorce, or are in the midst of divorce, will consider your family's legacy as you go through the process.

For 10 years, my job was to litigate family conflict in a courtroom. I trained to "win" and gave all my heart, grit and the preparedness of a gladiator to fight cases I was hired to fight. With each trial, I sharpened my tools and took each supposed "win" or loss as an opportunity to one up my opponents in the courtroom. I put on my empathy repellent cloak, told my clients to listen to me if they wanted to win, and that we would prevail by out lawyering the other side.

While I am humbled by the work I did as a trial attorney, my heart was frozen during the 10 years I "did my job" in the courtroom. What I didn't prepare for, and I was ready-set-fire for anything involving a court battle, was that the very advice I had given my clients time and time again - to listen to my advice to win their case - was the very advice that broke my frozen heart into a million pieces.

People hire attorneys to tell them what to do. Attorneys tell people what to do. People listen to attorneys because we are attorneys. It's that simple. It's also not that simple because attorneys do not experience the reality of people's lives. We do not have to live every day with the real facts of life, with the people in the roles we have created for the case, and we certainly do not ever have to consider the legacy long after the case is over.

Between 2013 and 2014, however, I lived the consequences of one attorney's advice that changed my family's legacy. The advice to win the case was given to my father, my foundation, and the most trusted person who had been there for me every day of my 35 years of life - until one day - with one piece of advice - he wasn't.

After 45 years of marriage, my parents went through a divorce. The divorce story, and all the deceitful and salacious details, could have been the central topic here. They are irrelevant. The notable aspect of the divorce was one piece of advice my dad's attorney gave him: Do not speak to your divorce attorney daughter during your divorce.

My dad hired an attorney to tell him what to do. He did what "good" clients do: He listened. The person who gave me life and supported me through every stage of life, was suddenly gone. For a year, it felt like my dad was dead - only he wasn't. On the "advice of counsel," he went silent.

We could perhaps debate why my father, an educated professional, thought that talking to me or not talking to me had any bearing on his case, or was a strategy with any validity, but he took this

advice as the gospel. He did what most clients in litigation do when they are told how to win the case in court: He followed his attorney's advice.

For at least a year, every attempt I made to contact my dad failed. Every call, text, email, plea, was ignored.

One night during the year, one of my dear friend's 80-year-old dad who was in impeccable health died in a tragic accident. I called my dad and left messages pleading with him to call me back, Daddy. In between messages, I talked to my friend as she was desperately coordinating travel to reach her dad before he passed away. They had a very brief phone call right after the accident and then he died. My very much alive dad did not answer my call on the advice of his attorney.

I called many times afterwards. No response. I emailed him a link to our hometown newspaper's story of a young man he knew who attended my high school who had lost all of his family members in two horrific plane crashes, sharing with my dad, a former pilot himself, that I was heartbroken that he had vanished and that I grieved for this young man who had actually lost his father and could never speak to him again. "You teach and lead your children by example and that is your legacy," I said. I asked him to find a different way to handle the divorce and to stop the continual hurt. No response.

I addressed him as an attorney. I addressed him as a daughter. I sent messages begging him to see things from my perspective as his little girl and how his attorney's advice had taken away our relationship. That I wasn't involved in his divorce and that both he and my mom had attorneys. That resulted in his attorney threatening me in a letter sent to my mom's attorney, belittling my pained messages to my dad, calling me a jilted Board Certified Specialist in Family Law, and telling me to come sit across from him and try the case myself.

Even so, a few days after the divorce decree was entered by the court, my dad finally called. "Quiet time," as he called it, was over. The damage, however, endured.

As a daughter, I have forgiven, processed and mourned the loss of my foundation, my relationship with my father, my family as I knew it, my childhood home, my support system, and everything else that was destroyed during the divorce. I have forgiven my father, but as a daughter, the void in my heart remains.

As an attorney, I have recalibrated my entire perspective, overhauled my law practice to be a 100% out-of-court, collaborative, and mediation practice, and walk with people through the divorce process as a guide and counselor-at-law.

My Ode to the Collaborative Divorce Process and to my dad on this Father's Day 2021, almost seven years after the divorce is long over, is captured in these thoughts to my dad in writing after I opened the doors to King Collaborative Family Law in 2015:

*I am and always have been and will be your daughter with your blood running through my veins. I understand and have compassion for your perspective that you believed you were just taking the advice of your lawyer.*

*In fact, I left my law firm and restructured my career because of that advice and, because of the fact that you somehow chose to protect yourself by taking such advice over protecting your daughter's emotional health. In late 2014, I decided I could no longer advise people to take actions that could any way cause any harm to any family members in a situation fraught with conflict. I made an oath, of sorts, to do no harm. That's why I left my partnership with my firm and started my own firm.*

It was a move out of utter despair at the effect a lawyer's advice and a father choosing to take it could have on a family. I had advised people for so many years just how destructive litigation could be if people chose that path, but I had never experienced it. I have experienced it in the way I advised people that it would cause lasting pain and destroy relationships that could not be repaired.

I hope I have upheld my oath to do no harm. In my collaborative divorce work, I strive to empower clients to create their new futures while compassionately preserving their family legacies. To me, being a collaborative divorce attorney is how I honor my own family legacy. What legacy will you leave long after the divorce process is over?

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## **5 Pitfalls to Avoid If You Divorce in Your Golden Years: Tips and Strategies to Help You and Your Adult Children. - Part 1**

**(Reprinted from *Psychology Today*, July 11, 2021)**

### **Key Points**

- People over 50 are divorcing in record-setting numbers, and it is affecting their adult children.
- Divorcing parents can learn how their divorce affects their adult children and how they can minimize their children's painful experiences.
- When parents acknowledge the impact of their later-life divorce on their adult children, it can heal and enrich their life-long relationships.

For more than three decades, gray divorce has created a seismic shift in families worldwide. Whether couples are splitting because divorce is now more acceptable, their children have left the nest, or they want different things out of life, later life divorce is an undeniable reality for couples.

But gray divorce doesn't just affect the couple; it impacts three (or even four!) generations, extended family, and friends. And the adult children of the couple are often left reeling without the support, help, or empathy they need.

This 2-part article describes common pitfalls and offers you solutions if you are divorcing and have adult children, so you can minimize the pain that accompanies divorce and preserve your valuable family relationships.

### **1. Failing to Understand How Your Divorce Affects Your Adult Children**

Parents often underestimate how their divorce impacts their adult children because the prevailing myth is that their divorce won't affect them since their children are adults. Adult children tell a different story. They report that the rupture of the familial bonds that ensue from their parents' divorce shakes them to their core, and they feel invisible, isolated, and alone. Since they are adults, their parents, family members, and friends expect them to "roll with it" and adapt to the family crisis churning in the wake of their parents' divorce.

*Listen without judgment to understand and acknowledge what your children tell you they are feeling and experiencing. Avoid telling them what you think they should feel.*

### **2. Ignoring that Your Adult Children Are Grieving**

Divorce brings with it many losses. Your adult children and the "younger children" inside of them may be in pain and grieving all that is lost -- the loss of the constancy and continuity of their nuclear family; their parents' love; their intact extended family and support systems of family friends and community; decades-long family togetherness and family memories; their identity that grew from their formative years when their family was together; their dreams about future family celebrations, traditions, and rituals, such as graduations, weddings, and births; their family home that was the family's nest, a place to bring their children to share where they grew up; and their parents united as grandparents.

*Expect and accept that your adult children are likely experiencing a range of feelings that are different from yours. Refrain from judging their feelings. Understand that their timeline for grieving, acceptance, and healing may be on a different trajectory and last longer than yours. Tell them you understand and respect their timeline.*

### **3. Engaging in an Adversarial Relationship with Your Adult Children's Other Parent**

Divorce is stressful for everyone involved. Adult children, like minor children, proclaim that their uppermost wish is that their parents will be amicable during and after their divorce. Litigation is the default divorce process in the United States and other countries. It is an adversarial divorce process that can fuel interparental conflict, causing adult children to feel caught between parents, which leads to weak parent-child relationships and tenuous well-being. (Amato and Afifi, 2006, 232)

*Choose a family-focused divorce process like mediation or collaborative divorce that can provide opportunities to solve conflict respectfully with dignity and minimize emotional and financial costs.*

### **4. Failing to honor the “child” part of the parent-child relationship**

Your children are in adult bodies, but they are likely in pain and grieving all the losses. For decades, the family unit enraptured their formative years and shaped their identity.

You are divorcing your spouse, not your children. Many divorcing parents forget this and move on with their lives, oblivious to how the divorce affects their adult children. Often parents focus more on *their* pain and fear, or happiness in their new lives and moving on or away. They forget to nurture their relationship with their adult children.

The parent-child relationship is forever. *Assure your adult children that you want one-on-one time with them, so they know that you value them. Keep the lines of communication open and positive.*

## 5. Putting your Adult Child in the Middle of Your Divorce

Adult children report that they often feel caught in the middle between their parents even if they think they should be helping their parents. When one parent rants about their other parent or shares the details about what went awry in their marriage, sex life, finances, or the legalities of their divorce process, adult children experience loyalty conflicts.

*Avoid such discussions because it assumes a peer relationship and can cause your children to feel unease and additional loss – losing you as the parent.* When this occurs, your children can become overwhelmed by conflicting feelings and begin to wonder, “Was everything about our family unreal, a fantasy, like a movie set that is just a façade?” They may react with anger toward you or withdraw from you.

### **Conclusion:**

Divorce in later life presents many challenges. However, there is hope. *Suppose you avoid these pitfalls and use the strategies. In that case, you can mitigate the negative impact on your adult children and facilitate healing that will enable you to navigate life's next chapter confidently.*

Part 2 will describe additional pitfalls and offer solutions for avoiding them.

### **References**

Amato, P. and Afifi, T. "Feeling Caught Between Parents: Adult Children's Relations with Parents and Subjective Well-Being," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68 (2002): 232. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2006.00243.x.

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## **6 Pitfalls to Avoid If You Divorce in Your Golden Years: These Tips Can Help You Support Your Adult Children - Part 2**

(Reprinted from *Psychology Today*, July 26, 2021)

### **Key Points:**

- **When parents divorce later in life, it is easy to overlook the effect on their adult children.**
- **Common pitfalls for divorcing parents include using adult children as confidants and enrolling them as allies against their other parent.**
- **Focusing on preserving family significant relationships can help all family members heal and move forward.**

### **1. Failing to Keep the Lines of Communication Open with Your Adult Children**

You may be focusing on dealing with your pain and losses or moving away from your past life with your adult children's other parent and moving toward your future. Your adult children are looking backward at what they are losing from their past and what will always be their past, not their future. *Discuss with your adult children that you understand these differences.*

You and your adult children may have different views about your roles. Since your adult children are adults now, you may view them in the role of peer, while they still see you in the parental role. *Discuss with them the different views you may have of each other's roles in your relationship and your expectations.*

If your relationship with your adult children is fractured, *be the one to reach out to them and ask them to go to counseling to improve your communication, heal, and restore your relationship. Listen without judgment to their feelings and experiences.*

### **2. Failing to Respect the Generational Boundary Lines**

*Realize that your adult children may need you to say that you understand that you are still the parent, and they are not your friend, confidant, therapist, surrogate spouse, or dating buddy. Maintain a firm boundary in your parent-child relationships, even if your children do not.*

Sometimes adult children feel guilty and think they should be their parent's confidant, helpmate, or dating buddy. It may feel good to be close to your children in this way and believe that they understand you. Nevertheless, *resist allowing your adult children to slide into this role reversal.*

### **3. Trying to Enroll your Adult Children into an Alliance Against Their Other Parent**

*No matter how upset you are with your spouse or hate what she has done during the marriage, avoid trying to enroll your adult children into an alliance with you against their other parent. Doing so creates loyalty issues. While it is human nature for children to attempt to figure out which parent is more at fault for the divorce, trying to “win her to your side” puts her in an uncomfortable position knowing information about her other parent that is inappropriate.*

*A good rule to follow is one that children often say. “Love me more than you hate my other parent, and don’t put me in the middle. I want to be free to have whatever relationship I want with both of you.”*

### **4. Making Yourself the Center of Celebrations, Not the Honored Person or Holiday**

Sometimes parents are still so hurt and angry at their spouse they will insist they will attend family celebrations like graduations, weddings, births, and holidays only if the other parent doesn’t attend. Or they will turn family celebrations into family traumas because they have not healed enough to control their anger or pain. *Let these family events be about the honored person or holiday. Consult a professional to help you heal.*

If there was physical violence in your marriage, consult a professional to discuss a workable solution.

### **5. Expecting your children to be as happy for you as you are**

*If you are glad to be out of the marriage and dating or in a relationship with a new person, understand that your children may feel the opposite. They may be having conflicting feelings about you dating and experiencing difficult emotions, including renewed grief about the loss of their family unit; discomfort seeing you behave in non-parental ways; anger at you; doubts about their relationships or marriages; and worries about your safety and financial security, as well as their inheritance. They may be experiencing your new relationship as a loss. Avoid saying, “Why can’t you be happy for me?” Give them time to adjust to the “new normal.”*

### **6. Introducing Your Children to Your New Significant Other Too Soon**

Exuberant about their new love interest, parents often want to share that person with

their adult children right away. *Remember that your children may feel resentful that they never saw you be so happy with their other parent. Avoid insisting that your new partner be involved in all activities with your children.*

Many children report that their parents never talk about their previous family lives together. *Instead, reminisce about fond memories, so they know that you value the family that you had together and that you have not erased their entire family history with their other parent and you.*

**Conclusion:**

While divorce in later life presents many challenges, *you can mitigate the negative impact on your adult children when you use these strategies. Understanding what your grown kids are experiencing, accepting what they are feeling, building new connectedness, and celebrating life's events with your family members can facilitate healing and enable you to move confidently into life's next chapter.*

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## **How to Avoid Taking Sides in Your Parents' Gray Divorce: Six Tips to Help You during this Stressful Time.**

**(Reprinted from Psychology Today, June 28, 2021)**

### **Key Points:**

- **Divorcing parents often underestimate the impact on their adult children, thinking that since their children are grown, it will not affect them.**
- **Adult children struggle with the breakup of their family and accompanying losses that ensue from their parents' divorce.**
- **Adult children need to set healthy boundaries to avoid falling into loyalty issues, inappropriate roles, and alliances against one parent.**

Gray Divorce refers to divorce after age 50. Divorce at any age is an emotional roller coaster for everyone involved. It is the second-highest stressor for humans, second only to the death of a loved one. Unfortunately, parents often underestimate the impact their divorce has on their adult children. They believe that since their children are grown, their divorce will not affect them.

When divorcing parents of adult children think this way, they can inadvertently force their kids into taking sides in the divorce. Here are ways you can avoid this:

### **1. Ask Your Parents to Avoid Conflict and Be Amicable with Each Other**

Decades of research indicate that interparental conflict correlates with children of all ages feeling caught between parents, leading to weak parent-child relationships and insecure well-being. Encourage your parents to choose a family-focused divorce process like mediation or collaborative divorce, which provides opportunities to solve conflict respectfully with dignity and minimize the emotional and financial costs that often accompany litigated divorces.

### **2. Tell Your Parents You Want to Have a Relationship with Both of Them**

Your parents will always be co-parents, with the emphasis on “co-.” While some adult children of gray divorce say that their parents have no relationship, it is impossible for parents to have *no* relationship. What they mean is that their parents have a negative co-parenting relationship. Remind them that each of them is *your other* parent, and you want to have a relationship with both. Explain to your parents how you, your children (if you have children), relatives, and family friends can benefit from them focusing on preserving meaningful relationships and avoiding the temptation to pull you into an alliance against your other parent. As the Nobel Prize-winning French philosopher said, “Peace is the only battle worth waging.”

### **3. Request Your Parents Respect Generational Boundary Lines**

Ask your parents to honor your parent-child relationship. Remind them that they are still your parents, and you are their child. Adult children often feel guilty and think they should be their parent's confidant, therapist, surrogate spouse, helpmate, secret keeper, or even dating buddy. It may even feel good to be close to your parents in this way and to share confidences. Nevertheless, resist allowing yourself to slide into this role reversal. It is much healthier for your parents and you if they develop their support system of friends and professionals to discuss more intimate topics.

### **4. Ask Your Parents to Tell Family and Friends There Will Be No Battle Lines**

When couples divorce, both have some responsibility for the deterioration in their relationship that contributed to divorce. They likely ignored underlying problems or were unsuccessful in dealing with them. Even if there was a particular offense, like a recent or ongoing affair, everyone must understand that requiring children to take sides against their other parent is harmful to children, including adult children. If your extended family, friends, and community members now despise one of your parents after decades of good relations, ask your parents if they are willing to create their "divorce story" to share with them. A divorce story acknowledges the positives in their decades-long marriage, establishes that they intend to proceed in their divorce being amicable and respectful, and asks that everyone do the same.

If your parents are currently unwilling or unable to create their divorce story, and others invite you to join in a "bashing your other parent" conversation, know that you do not have to participate. Instead, you can say that you appreciate their concern, it is your parents' business, and you prefer not to discuss it.

### **5. Request that Your Parents Keep Their Personal Issues out of Celebratory Events**

Often divorcing or divorced parents who are still hurt and angry with each other ruin celebrations for their adult children. Even if your parents' separation and divorce were rancorous, remind them they once fell in love and created a family together. That family still exists, even though they are divorced.

Tell them that rather than allowing tension, resentment, and anger to become your family's landscape, you want them to be able to attend family celebrations, like graduations, birthdays, weddings, and grandchildren's performances so that everyone can still feel a sense of family. Share with them that such gifts can promote healing for everyone.

If one parent continues to turn family celebrations into traumas by expressing his negative thoughts and feelings toward your other parent, explain that while you empathize that he is still hurting, you will not join in bashing your other parent. You can also ask a parent not to attend if she makes family gatherings toxic.

### **6. Remind Your Parents that You Are Grieving and Need Time to Process the Losses**



Divorce brings with it many losses for adult children: their identity that grew from their formative years when their family was together; their dreams about future family celebrations, traditions, and rituals, such as holidays, graduations, weddings, and births; their family home that was the family nest, a place to bring their children to share where they grew up; and their parents united as grandparents. In addition, younger adult children often lose financial support from their parents. When their parents are experiencing life crises replete with pain and losses, adult children may also lose emotional support from their parents.

Stress to your parents that you are grieving the losses. Ask them to realize and accept this. Request that they not judge you but understand and respect that you need time to mourn the losses, accept their divorce, and heal. Grieving takes time, often a lot of time. If your parents can support you in this way, you can avoid taking sides and being in the middle of their divorce.

[Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., LMFT](#), and [Bruce R. Fredenburg, M.S., LMFT](#), are psychotherapists and co-authors of *Home Will Never Be the Same Again: A Guide for Adult Children of Gray Divorce*.

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# **I emptied the family house after my parents' divorce and this is what I learned**

By Ruben Regalado, [www.eldiario.es](http://www.eldiario.es) - February 16, 2020 - translated by Patricia Garavoglia

There will no longer be a “tomorrow as in my parents' house” nor a “let's go to the grandparents' house.” With each object, a dilemma: Donate? Give away? Keep? Throw out?

My parents have divorced, so the family home is no longer the family home. It has become a financial asset, and, as such, it has been sold. I have had to empty it of the things accumulated over the years; mine and theirs. Suddenly, I am facing a whole lifetime and the memories of a project, the family, that is broken.

Emptying a home is like watching an Almodóvar movie. It is a mixture of drama, memories and comedy, depending on the closet you open. From the poems written to your first girlfriend, to that photograph in Ibiza, to the four of us, when divorce was what happened to everybody else. From the piece of hashish you did not finish, to the photograph with that friend who crashed a car. From the class notes to the cassette tapes.

When we moved to the house there were no mobile phones. Felipe González governed and Javier Sardà was a renowned radio journalist. It was 1994, and I was eleven-years-old with an attic to fill with toys, junk, and books. Fifteen years later, at Christmas time, my mother telephoned me: “We have sold the house, when can you come to help me empty it?” I think I am not exaggerating if I say that in that house nothing has ever been thrown out. In hindsight, we might even have an undiagnosed case of Diogenes syndrome.

## **A “millennial museum”**

My bedroom was kept as an ode to the millennial adolescence. There remained the cassette tapes of radio recordings, the CDs, the first mp3, the collection of cigarette cartons, of beer bottles, the little box with hashish in the sock drawer... Posters of Laudrup, of Ché, of the Beatles, and the flag of the Second Republic. The Mercadona stub from the first Viña Rock festival. The sheet metal planters from which we drank Calimocho<sup>(1)</sup>, the employee card from that summer job at the Pryca.<sup>(2)</sup>

Useless junk, yes, but also memories. And facing each object, a small dilemma: Donate? Give away? Keep? Throw out? Almost everything went to the trash, and in some way, each new bag full of junk was like killing that future which will never be. There will no longer be a “tomorrow as in my parents' house,” nor, a “let's go to grandparents' house.” At the same time, each toy, each book put into a bag, was like throwing a little piece of me in the trash. As if a little bit of my childhood were dying.

Is it normal to feel like this? The psychologist Carol Hughes, a specialist in divorces with adult children and author of several studies on the subject, believes it is normal. She addresses it with her clients with an exercise: “I ask that you imagine that you find a box in a closet in the family

home. The box contains an object which represents a special moment in your family life. An object that makes you happy and one you can take, touch... and, then the object dissolves into dust.“ In that moment Dr. Hughes asks her clients what they feel, and the answer is always the same: “They feel a loss, as if a family member had died and they feel overwhelmed by the sadness. Everyone asks me if that’s normal. Yes, it is normal, they are grieving a profoundly significant loss in their life.”

### **Something akin to death**

With that idea of the parallelism between death of the family project and the real death of a family member, I turn to Paco Roca, author of *La Casa*, who was elected best national comics artist in 2015. In it, Paco tells how he had tackled emptying the family home when his father died. “There is something similar in both cases in the sense that you confront yourself with the things that you had left open over the course of your life. Memories, that gift from your ex-girlfriend that you never threw away...”

Somehow, I think, it is like seeing your life pass before your eyes. The objects transport you to the past. The pre-school notebooks took me to pre-Olympic Barcelona, to Güell Park, to the 500 pesetas my father gave me when my brother was born. With the class notes I saw myself as a “botellón”<sup>(3)</sup> at Parque del Oeste or waiting for the first bus to take me home, already daylight. The Knights of the Zodiac series took me to my cousin’s house, to Pressing Catch (WWE television program) Sunday mornings. I found the membership cards for sparks club and Kids Bank Club. The Ninja Turtle fanny-pack turned up full of marbles. My childhood’s memories are not the memories of a courtyard of Seville<sup>(4)</sup> but they have a point.

### **It is over**

But the journey is not only personal, “it is like taking a journey through family history over the years,” Paco recalls. And it is here where things get complicated. Who gets what? The community property, photos, books, paintings. Things that for me symbolize the happy years but for my parents have become reminders of pain and a possible motive for conflict. I have WhatsApp full of photos with questions: “Was this yours? “My mother/father says that as far as she/he is concerned we can get rid of it, do you want it?” And so, bag by bag, we went emptying the house, until one Wednesday evening there was nothing left.

The empty house seemed something else. It was no longer a place where I had been happy. It was a wasteland. I turned on the hall light and walked over to the living room. I heard the echo of my footsteps and I started to cry. I sat on the floor. When I stopped, I felt a bit stupid, but above all surprised, I did not expect it. Nevertheless, it is normal, “you were not crying over the house, the books, the toys, but for all the memories and the family union. You were crying for the broken history,” Hughes tells me.

They are difficult moments, says Paco Roca, that, despite all, took some positive things from the process: “It is difficult to empty a whole house...those are things that are not valuable and that

end up in the trash but, at the same time, you realize how your parents have loved you, from all the things of yours they kept fondly through the years. I have a four-year-old girl and a seven-year-old boy, and I am saving all their drawings and school work.”

And what have I learned from all this? Of me, that I have not betrayed myself and that I am more or less where I thought I would be. Of the uselessness of keeping things, like Paco, nothing. I have the house full of my daughter’s drawings and a shelf full of work she has been bringing from preschool and her three years of school. Of how to organize life with divorced grandparents and a young daughter, it is better if we talk another day.

(1) A wine and coke cocktail

(2) A supermarket chain

(3) Group drinking in public

(4) Machado, Antonio, In “Retrato” Machado writes “Mi infancia son recuerdos de un patio de Sevilla”.

<https://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2010/02/antonio-machado-self-portrait-from.html>

## **Adult Children Are Stakeholders in Their Parents' Divorce**

The below is excerpted from *Home Will Never Be the Same: A Guide for Adult Children of Gray Divorce* by Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., LMFT and Bruce R. Fredenburg, LMFT.

*Carol writes:*

Almost two decades ago, Bart J. Carey, a Collaborative Divorce Family Lawyer, Mediator, and Adjunct Law School Professor, and I were attending a collaborative divorce training in Arizona. He said to me, “You know, Adult Children are stakeholders in their parents’ divorce.” This one sentence became the seminal concept for my future work with and writing about children who are adults when their parents separate and divorce. When I was conceiving the ideas for this book, I knew I wanted Bart to share some stories from his practice that would illustrate how Adult Children are stakeholders in their parents’ divorces.

*Bart writes:*

It began like any other consult. A woman in her late 50s called to make an appointment to inquire about mediation services. We inquired if her husband would be able to join us. She would ask but doubted it. At the appointed time, she appeared alone. However, as she was filling out an information sheet, in tramped two young men with a determination that spoke of a sense of mission. These were her sons. One was 24 years old, and the other was 31. They had followed her to our office.

One of the sons was married, and the father of the family’s only grandchild. The other was a recent college graduate still living in the family home as he attempted to launch his career and pay down student loans. And they were adamant to speak with me.

First, they wanted to be sure I wasn’t a shark who was going to influence their mother to get into a litigation that would devastate the family finances—money they were sure she was going to need because, secondly, their father was to blame for all this, and was going to abandon her in mid-life and leave her destitute. She needed protection and they were going to do everything they could to protect her from their father.

While their mother remained in the waiting room, I brought the sons into the mediation room to hear their concerns. I reframed the concerns about their mother’s future and that of the family, removing the judgment and blame they were expressing for their father. I focused instead

on the uncertainties and questions that their mother and father would have to answer for the *entire* family, while developing a statement for their hopes for everyone to make the transition through divorce with a financial safety net and the family intact. I assured them that, if I were privileged enough to be their parents' mediator, their concerns and hopes would be shared.

This was a bit more dramatic than we typically see but serves as an example to illuminate the concerns that their parents' divorce can raise for Adult Children -- concerns which they harbor, sometimes quietly, sometimes not, but which infect the whole family. After all, Adult Children are affected by every major life transition that their parents experience. When their parents divorce, they are not in control, not decision makers, but they have a stake in the journey and the outcomes.

Adult Children are stakeholders. Parents mostly recognize this, but in the fog of war, they may still lose sight of the impacts on the family.

On occasion we get referrals from attorneys and judges. These can be the most challenging cases, because the couple may have been battling over rights and entitlements through the court system for one or more years and may be entrenched in the war. As former Secretary McNamara reflected, in the fog of war, perspective may be lost, affecting our perceptions and judgments.

One such referral brought a couple to our office on the eve of trial. Both were in their early 60s, married for 30 years, bread-winner father and homemaker wife, with little more than their cars, family home, and husband's retirement. Their shared mentality of scarcity was supported by the realities they were facing. They were instructed by a settlement conference judge to try mediation and instructed by their attorneys to attend. They sat in my waiting room in unhappy silence.

I invited them to join me in the mediation room. The wife was the first to speak. She informed me that her husband didn't feel the need to negotiate anything because he was going to win at trial, so we'd be out of there very quickly. I asked her husband if this was true. He confirmed her statement and went further saying he would 'win everything' at trial. Asked what 'everything' means, he informed me it was his car, all 'his' house, his social security, and 'all' of his retirement. Asked what his wife would have, he said her car and her social security check. How could he be so sure? His attorney assured him of these outcomes so, no, there was no point to continuing our meeting. I asked him if he'd give me five minutes. He agreed.

At this point I asked his wife to kindly allow us to speak alone for five minutes. She returned to the waiting room.

A couple of questions confirmed that husband was certain, despite my skepticism, his attorney had assured him of the outcomes at trial. So, instead of discussing rights and entitlements and the uncertainties of trial and community property acquired during a 30-year marriage, I asked him if they had any Adult Children. They had two: a single daughter up north and a son [clearly a favorite child] living close by. He had a five-year-old grandson, who was his fishing buddy. His retirement plan was to spend a lot of time fishing with his grandson and being involved, as he grew up, in other sports, camping, and other activities with him. We bonded over how great it is to be a grandparent. Then, we were coming up to the end of our five minutes so I asked him, before his wife came back into the room, to again confirm that she would only have her car and social security. I observed it didn't seem possible she could live on that. 'Her problem,' he said.

"One more question, I said. "Assuming you get 'everything', as your attorney has assured you, it seems improbable your son would not step up to help his mother. So, how's that going to work when you show up at his house to hang with your grandson or take him fishing, and she answers the door?"

In the fog of war, he had forgotten to consider how 'getting everything' would impact his son and perhaps his plans with his grandson. He quickly became open to 'some flexibility' and our five minutes became a much longer joint session.

I hope these examples from our work speak to the impacts of parents' divorce on their Adult Children and the power of bringing their voices and concerns into the process, while parents make decisions about, not only their own future, but the future of the *family*.

Reprinted with permission from *Home Will Never Be the Same Again: A Guide for Adult Children of Gray Divorce*, by Carol R. Hughes and Bruce R. Fredenburg

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## YIKES! MOM OR DAD IS DATING AGAIN

### How to Avoid a Family Rift

**D**ivorced or widowed parents might feel excitement or hope when they return to the dating world after decades away. But their adult children might feel anxiety about the parent's safety and financial security (and their own inheritance)...renewed grief over the loss of the family unit...or discomfort at seeing the parent behave in a non-parental way.

Here's what parent and child should do—and not do—to protect their relationship during these emotionally difficult times...

#### WHY GROWN KIDS AREN'T HAPPY WHEN MOM OR DAD DATES

Parents often cannot understand why their adult children have a negative emotional response to the news that they are dating or in a new relationship. In fact, the adult children might not completely understand their own reactions.

The parent's return to the dating world forces a role reversal. Traditionally, it is parents who are asked to be happy for their children's happiness and parents who watch and worry while their children endure the ups and downs of meeting new partners and taking chances on new romances. When a parent dates, these roles are flipped, forcing unfamiliar and difficult-to-navigate dynamics for all.

If the parent settles into a new long-term relationship, that might force the adult child to finally con-

front the difficult fact that the family unit of his/her youth is gone forever. Intellectually, this adult child, of course, understands that the family unit ended when the parent was widowed or divorced—but some adult children manage to avoid psychologically confronting this fact until the parent starts seeing someone new. (This is especially likely if the parent is divorced, not widowed. The adult child might have been telling himself that his parents would get back together eventually.)

In these cases, the adult child is looking backward and grieving the loss of the old relationship just as the parent is looking forward in excitement to a new one. That difference in perspective virtually ensures that they will struggle to see eye to eye.

#### WHAT PARENTS SHOULD DO

To reduce the odds that a new romantic relationship will damage your parent/child relationship...

**Share the news that you are dating again—or that you are in a relationship—in a calm, private moment.** Present this news in a straightforward manner, such as, "I wanted you to know that I'm dating again." Or "I wanted you to know that I'm seeing someone." And then let the adult child process what you've said and ask questions. Do not phrase this in a way that demands happi-

ness from the adult child, such as, "Isn't it wonderful—I'm dating!"

**Do not find fault with your adult child's reaction to your return to dating or a new relationship even if that reaction is negative.** There is nothing immature or even unusual about an adult child's less-than-positive response to this news. This is an emotionally challenging situation, so be ready to take any reaction in stride. Telling your adult child to "grow up" or asking, "Don't you want me to be happy?" only increases the odds that the parent-child relationship will suffer.

**If you find someone who you think could become a long-term partner, ask your kids if they want to meet this person rather than trying to force a first meeting.** Offer the option of waiting to see whether the relationship lasts a while longer before agreeing to meet. Parents often have unrealistic expectations that their new partners will instantly become part of a happy family unit. That almost certainly will take time (if it happens at all).

**Also:** Dissuade your new partner from pushing too hard to form close bonds with your adult children when they do meet. Your partner should be pleasant and polite but should let your adult children take the lead in these relationships.

**Continue to find as much time as possible for your adult children and your grandchildren—ideally *without* a date by your side.** When parents of adult children start spending time

*Bottom Line Personal* interviewed Carol Hughes, PhD, psychotherapist and divorce coach based in Laguna Hills, California. She has more than 30 years of experience working with divorcing couples and their children and is one of the founding members of Collaborative Divorce Solutions of Orange County. DivorcePeaceMaking.com

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dating, they often spend less time with their children and grandchildren. This gives the adult children an additional reason to find fault with the parent's return to romantic life.

**Reassure your adult children that your money is safe.** Your initial reaction to their financial worries might be, "My money is my business"... "My new partner loves me, not my money"...or "It's selfish of you to put your inheritance ahead of my happiness." But it is perfectly reasonable for your kids to be concerned. Relatively savvy people sometimes do fall victim to dating scams, and when they do, their entire families can pay the price. So rather than dismiss your kids' money concerns, you could reassure them that you are not splurging on extravagant gifts for this new partner...and that if you do someday remarry, you will get a prenup. Or you could agree to work with an estate planner (or some other trusted financial adviser) to make sure that your money remains in your family.

**Reminisce with your adult children about the old days when your original family was intact.** This subtly reinforces the sense that your search for a new relationship does not invalidate the family unit of their youth.

**Do not discuss your sex life with your adult kids.** It is surprisingly common for parents to share details about their revitalized sex lives with their adult children when they return to the dating scene. Doing this only makes a difficult situation even less comfortable for the adult children.

**Do not denigrate your ex-spouse.** Detailing everything that was wrong with your ex will not help your adult children understand why

you need someone new. It will only make them angry that they are being pushed to see their other parent in a negative light.

**If you are divorced, do not ask your kids not to tell your ex that you're dating.** That would put your kids in an uncomfortable position and make it harder for them to see your new partner in a positive light. One option is to contact your ex with the news around the same time you tell your kids, assuming that your lines of communication with your ex remain open.

#### **WHAT ADULT CHILDREN SHOULD DO**

To remain on good terms with your parent—and help protect your parent if necessary...

**Stifle any negative initial reaction you may have.** This negative reaction likely is rooted in your deep-seated emotions surrounding your childhood family unit, not in your true opinion of your parent's decision to date or of the new partner. If you can't say anything positive, say something noncommittal such as, "Thanks for letting me know. That's big news."

**Raise any concerns you may have about your parent's finances in a way that does not imply that a new partner is a gold digger or scammer.** Suggesting that a new partner might be after your parent's money will only make your parent rush to his defense. Instead, note that starting a romantic relationship can have financial consequences, and recommend that the parent meet with a financial adviser or estate planner.

If after getting to know a new partner, you still harbor fears that this person might be after your parent's money, discuss these concerns with one of your parent's trusted peers who has met the new partner.

A trusted peer is more likely than an adult child to be able to successfully discuss this difficult topic with the parent. Alternatively, you could discuss your concerns with an attorney who specializes in elder abuse. (You can find one through the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys at [NAELA.org](http://NAELA.org).)

**Don't be surprised if your parent's rekindled romantic life makes you experience doubts about your own marriage—and don't overreact to these doubts.** It is not uncommon for adult children to leave their spouses when their parents start dating again. Our parents are our relationship role models—whether we like it or not. When we see a parent searching for (or finding) someone new, we might feel an itch to do the same even if our relationship previously was sound. Meet with a counselor, and talk through your feelings about your parent's return to dating and your feelings about your own marriage before taking any big relationship steps.

**Reassure yourself that your feelings about your parent's new relationship are completely unrelated to your feelings for your other parent.** Some adult children express negative feelings about a parent's new relationship because at some level they fear that accepting this relationship would be disloyal to their other parent (or to the memory of the other parent, if deceased). Such feelings are normal, but they are not accurate and are not helpful to anyone.

If you cannot shake negative feelings about your parent's new relationship, discuss these feelings with a therapist or clergy member. **BLP**

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Carol Hughes, PhD

## WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR PARENTS DIVORCE

### And You're Already a Grown-Up

**H**eading home for the holidays is a treasured tradition in many families. But what do these families do if their aging parents divorce?

The divorce rate among couples age 50 and up more than doubled between 1990 and 2010, according to a study by researchers at Bowling Green State University, and it shows no signs of falling. It isn't just the older divorced parents who endure the emotional consequences of these splits. The dissolution of their marriages can take a toll on their adult children, too—at any time of year.

Here is what the adult children of divorced or divorcing parents need to know...

#### YOU MIGHT FEEL ABANDONED

It might not come as a surprise that the divorce of one's parents can be traumatic. What is surprising is that this trauma can be deeper and longer-lasting than living through a natural disaster.

**Reason:** People tend to get over shared traumas faster than private ones. In the wake of a shared trauma, they feel understood and supported...and they see other people coping with the same trauma and getting on with their lives. But in a private trauma, they feel alone, lost and abandoned in their pain.

This can be the case for adults whose parents divorce. Intellectually they know that other adults' parents have divorced, but the topic and its emotional consequences are discussed so rarely that they feel they are experiencing this alone. And when these adult children mention how much they are hurting, they often do not receive much sympathy. Other people don't understand how adults who most likely have been living on their own for years can be so traumatized.

In fact, these feelings of abandonment and pain are perfectly normal. Your parents' marriage forms part of the foundation of who you are. If that marriage ends, it can feel as if your foundation has crumbled, leaving you unsupported.

**What to do:** Find people who have endured the same trauma. Speaking with them can transform the private trauma into a shared one, likely speeding the recovery process. Start with your siblings—they are enduring your parents' divorce, too. Complex family dynamics and differing emotional responses to divorce mean that this won't be the answer for everyone, however. Other possibilities include friends whose parents have divorced...therapists or clergy members...and support groups for people experiencing grief.

#### IT CAN HURT YOUR MARRIAGE

People learn how to be husbands and wives in part by watching their parents during childhood. If those parents later split, it is only natural to ask yourself, *Did I really learn how to sustain a marriage? Am I good marriage material?*

Meanwhile, one or both of the divorcing parents might lean heavily on an adult child for financial or emotional support. This new demand for the adult child's time, money and/or emotional resources means that he/she has fewer resources to devote to his spouse, kids and career, opening the door to difficulties in these areas.

**What to do:** If you begin to question your own marriage, consider that this might be a stage in your grieving process, not a sign that you truly are headed for divorce. Speak with a therapist trained in the treatment of grief if these concerns persist.

If one (or both) of your parents leans heavily on you emotionally during or after the divorce, help that parent find a broader and more appropriate support system. Ask the parent's friends and church leaders whether they can assist...and/or help the parent find a local support group for divorced people.

If a parent leans on you heavily for financial assistance, pay a certified financial planner to determine how much support you can provide without jeopardizing your other fi-

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nancial responsibilities. Invite the parent to a meeting with this adviser.

### CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Divorcing parents sometimes battle each other through their adult children. They discuss their former partners' flaws and failings with their adult children either out of spite or despair or in hopes of convincing the children that the divorce was the other parent's fault.

And sometimes children of divorcing parents argue with each other (or with other family members)—because they blame different parents for the split...or because a sibling cuts off contact with the parent who seems to be at fault while another sibling does not.

**What to do:** If your parents' divorce causes you to fight with your siblings, say, "Our parents are splitting up, but that doesn't mean we have to. In fact, it's more important than ever that we stick together." Say words to this effect each time anger arises between you. If you simply cannot discuss this topic calmly, agree not to discuss it any more than is absolutely necessary.

If your parents try to fight battles through you, explain that you have no interest in listening to bad things about either of them. Do not be surprised if you have to repeat this boundaries discussion many times.

### THE HOLIDAYS ARE HARD

The holidays can be the time of year when the parents' divorce truly hits home for adult children if gathering together had been a tradition.

**What to do:** Create an entirely new holiday tradition. Take your immediate family somewhere fun and interesting for the holidays. Or invite members of your extended family—including your parents—

More from Carole Hughes, PhD

## Four Ways Divorcing Parents Can Limit the Fallout for Their Adult Children

Parents' behavior during and after their divorce can significantly affect how much their adult children suffer. Parents should...

- **Break the news together**, in person and without blame or anger, if possible. Say something along the lines of, "We've decided we're not going to stay married. It's no one's fault." When pressed for reasons, simply say, "We have problems that we haven't been able to solve." This will be especially difficult if you feel that your spouse is at fault, but expressing blame and anger will only make the divorce more difficult for your adult children.

If the children already know (or are likely to find out) that one parent has clearly wronged the other, the "wronged" parent could admit that the situation is not quite as clear-cut as it seems. *Example:* "You already know that your mother had an affair, but you should know that we had been growing apart for years. Neither of us was the best spouse we could have been." This gives the children permission to continue having a positive relationship with the parent who seems primarily to blame. Even if you are very angry at your soon-to-be-ex-spouse, your kids still have a right to

have a relationship with both of their parents.

If the divorce follows from one parent coming out as gay, it's best to say this. It might be a difficult conversation, but it gives your children an understanding of who their parents truly are and why the divorce is happening.

- **Emphasize what won't be changing.** *Example:* "We both still love you kids, and we always will," and "We'll remain friends/friendly/amicable with each other." (Choose the most positive word you feel you can here.)

- **Seek emotional support from people other than your children.** Your kids deserve to live their own lives, not suffer through your problems.

- **Role-model effective problem solving.** When you are tempted to lament your situation or act petty toward your ex in front of your adult child, consider what lesson you wish to teach in this moment. Children learn from their parents' example even during adulthood. This is an opportunity to teach a lesson about handling difficult times with grace and maturity. That lesson could be part of the legacy you leave behind after you are gone.

over to your house. If your parents can't treat each other civilly or if it's painful for one of your parents to see the other, you could invite them on different days during the holiday season.

### YOU MAY FEEL RELIEVED

When parents have been fighting for years, their adult children sometimes feel glad when they hear that

their parents are divorcing. They might then feel guilty about this initial reaction.

**What to do:** If you think the divorce is warranted, let your parents know this. They probably will be relieved that you are not angry with them. Your positive reaction could help other family members admit their relief, too. **BLP**

## **Adult Children of Divorce: The Invisible Children**

By Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., LMFT  
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How would it benefit your adult children to speak with a Neutral Child Specialist during your Collaborative Divorce Process? How would it benefit you, their parents?

Research indicates that divorce is life's second highest stressor, second only to the death of a loved one. If this is true, why is it so common for divorcing parents to assume that their adult children are "ok", simply because they are adults? Divorce destabilizes the family system and inevitably shakes every family member's perception of their past, their present and their future. Experiencing their parents' divorce shatters adult children's view of their family as they have known it. They report that their familial foundation has been rocked and that their family history has been rewritten.

When their parents divorce, adult children experience most of the same feelings as minor children experience, though there is little support for them to deal with these feelings, since they are now adults and expected to be "ok" because they are adults. Adult children of divorcing parents report feeling shock, disorientation, depression, loneliness, anxiety, stress, worry about the well being of their parents, sleep and appetite disturbance, embarrassment, anger at one or both parents, grief, guilt, shame, abandonment and often role-reversal in that they feel that they now need to take charge and become a parent to their parents. They also report feeling invisible, since it seems to them that their own feelings and lives must inevitably become secondary to those of their parents. All of these feelings and experiences can take a devastating toll on adult children of divorcing parents.

Children of divorce, whether adults or minors, are experiencing multiple losses. These losses may include the loss of their parents as a co-parenting unit, the loss of their intact family, the loss of the family home where they grew up, the loss of the security and stability that their parents provided and the loss of their family as a support system, as well as the support system of family, friends and extended family members. Children who were adults when their parents divorced often report that they never felt lonelier in their lives than during the time of their parents' divorce.

Often divorcing parents inappropriately discuss with their adult children what led to their divorce and may blame each other to their adult children. Sometimes one or both parents see themselves as victims or martyrs and share that view with their adult children, causing their adult children to feel guilty or angry with their parents, thus damaging the parent-child relationship. When parents put their adult children in the middle of their pain and conflict, their adult children can feel divided loyalty and pressure to "choose sides". They may feel guilty for loving both parents and for spending time with both parents. Children who were adults when their parents divorced report that they hated being put in this position and feeling that each parent was attempting to form an alliance with them against the other parent.

Adult children of divorcing parents may feel responsible for their parents' unhappy marriage if their parents tell them that they were unhappily married for years and that they stayed together because they wanted to provide a stable home environment for their children. This can also cause them to reconsider their childhood memories and to doubt their reality. They may wonder what was real and what wasn't real. Was my childhood and adolescence a façade?

Depending on where your adult children are in the developmental stages of adulthood, your adult children may be experiencing the following:

**Post high school, college age children** are especially vulnerable in that they are transitioning from adolescence into young adulthood. Divorce precipitates an uncoupling process for parents that is usually so tumultuous and painful that it impairs parents' ability to be at their best and to continue providing the customary emotional support system for their young adult children. The impact of their parents' emotional turmoil can create difficulty in focusing on their studies, their jobs and their own friend and romantic relationships. They may begin to doubt their own ability to maintain relationships and to question commitment and family. They may become isolated and have difficulty making decisions. College age adult children who are attending college are typically still financially dependent on their parents. During divorce finances may become strained and the parents may not be able to continue to pay as they have previously paid for their adult children's college expenses. This creates tremendous stress for college age adult children, who do not yet have the means to contribute to their college expenses. College age adult children may avoid spending time with their parents during their college vacations, in an effort to avoid dealing with their uncomfortable feelings and because of their conflicted feelings of loyalty to both parents, as well as the many feelings described above.

Adult children **who are graduating from college or who have recently graduated from college** when their parents divorce, may experience difficulty moving out into the world toward their career and even marriage, when their familial foundations have lost their stability. They may begin to doubt their own ability to maintain relationships and to question commitment and family. They may become isolated and have difficulty making decisions. Adult children in this developmental stage of adulthood often report that they feel destabilized because it seems that, just as they are coming to terms with the reality of growing up and moving away from their family and into the world, the reality they knew growing up no longer exists. Many feel conflicted that perhaps they should delay their "launch" and move close to one or both parents to assist them during the stressful time of their divorce process.

**Adult children who are established in adult life**, married or single with their own career, home and perhaps with children of their own, may experience that their current life, which has roots in their familial past, may no longer feel so firmly rooted. The responsibilities of their own nuclear families, coupled with the additional responsibilities they may feel for the well-being of their now divorcing parents, can cause them additional stress. Complicated by their parents' divorce, such accumulating pressures can become overwhelming for the adult child in this stage of life. Because these adult children are in such a "mature" stage of adulthood, their world typically does not offer support to them regarding their parents' divorce. The underlying message from our culture is to deny their distress and pain regarding their parents' divorce.

When adult children have the opportunity to speak with a Neutral Child Specialist, they are able to discuss the above issues in a safe, neutral environment with a professional who has the training and expertise not only to answer their questions and provide them with information about the new life situations they are experiencing, but also to assist them plan how best to navigate their changing lives.

The benefit to you as their parents is that the Neutral Child Specialist sensitizes you, your adult

children's **co-parents**, to the needs of your adult children in the context of your divorce and gives you useful information about the restructuring your family is experiencing, so you can be the best co-parents possible for your adult children. Your spousal relationship is ending, but your co-parenting relationship lasts forever, no matter how old your children are. You will always be your children's **other parent**. The Neutral Child Specialist can assist you to create the legacy you want for your adult children: a peaceful, restructured family with amicable, cooperative, and respectful co-parents who understand the needs of their adult children.

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Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., LMFT, holds her doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology, and her master's degree in Counseling Psychology, achieving both summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa honors. She is also a two-time Fulbright Scholar. In private practice in Laguna Hills, CA, since 1983, Dr. Hughes is a respected expert and sought-after speaker on the effects of divorce on children. She is a board-certified clinical hypnotherapist, an EMDR therapist and a former professor of Human Services at Saddleback College. In 2003 she became one of the founding members of Collaborative Divorce Solutions of Orange County and is also a co-founder of and trainer for the Collaborative Divorce Education Institute in Orange County, CA, a non-profit organization, whose mission is to educate the public about peaceful options for divorce, as well as to provide quality training for collaborative divorce professionals. She frequently trains and mentors collaborative practitioners and has appeared on the Time Warner Public television series "How to Get a Divorce". Carol is a frequent presenter at conferences of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals, the Association of Family Conciliation Courts, and California's annual statewide conferences for collaborative professionals. In 2011 Carol was honored with the Eureka Award, which recognizes those who have made significant contributions and demonstrated an abiding dedication to establishing and sustaining Collaborative Practice in California.

She is the co-author of the book *Home Will Never Be the Same Again: A Guide for Adult Children of Gray Divorce*. For a complete listing of her collaborative practice training and teaching workshops please visit [www.CollaborativePractice.com](http://www.CollaborativePractice.com), the website of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals, and click on the "Locate a Collaborative Professional near you" link. In addition, please visit her website at [www.DivorcePeacemaking.com](http://www.DivorcePeacemaking.com).

## **How To Help Your College-Age Kids Cope While You Are Divorcing: Your Young Adult Kids are in College or Beginning a Career, and You Are Getting Divorced. The Biggest Mistake Parents Must Avoid.**

Your kids are in college. You are getting divorced. Your own emotions of fear, anger, confusion can overwhelm you. Although you might want your adult child to take your side in this divorce or be tempted to confide too much of your private adult life, you need to avoid this temptation – and this is why. Whether they like it or not, your adult kids could become participants in your divorce. It doesn't matter if your kids are in college or choosing a different path. They are suddenly in the middle of changing or changed interpersonal boundaries with their parents, brothers and sisters, and other family members. It is a disturbing and confusing time. Friends and relatives who are genuinely concerned can intrude into your adult child's boundaries.

### **Your adult kids might have to deal with difficult choices:**

- Figuring out how to support one parent emotionally while sympathizing with their other parent.
- Doing their best to maintain a balance with older and younger sisters and brothers.
- Some adult kids must decide whether to keep a parent's affair secret or how to help a parent who needs financial support.
- How to deal with aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins from both sides of the family who choose sides against one of the divorcing parents?
- What to do when one adult kid chooses to blame and isolate one parent and insists that the other adult kids join him?

### **Here are some ways you can help your college-age kids avoid getting sucked into taking sides.**

1. You can help your children by refusing to “bad mouth” their other parent. Make it clear that you respect each one's right to have her relationship with each parent. You can support them by making it clear to your adult children and all family members and family friends that as far as you are concerned your adult children have every right to refuse to participate in a “bashing their other parent” conversation
2. Help your college kids understand and create boundaries. The term boundary is about setting a limit or extent. In this case, it is about each person's right to have her thoughts, feelings, and personal space. This includes her right to have her relationship with each parent. As a parent, you can remind yourself and your adult children that both you and your divorcing spouse will always be their other parent and that their feelings about those relationships are uniquely theirs.

3. Encourage them to talk with family members and others about the boundary agreements they want going forward. You and your divorcing spouse could support them by taking that message to your siblings and parents and insist that they avoid pushing or encouraging your adult kids to take sides.

4. There will be questions. Help your kids decide how to respond to sensitive or intrusive questions. For example, you can reassure that when the others ask questions or criticize you or their other parent, it is O.K. for your adult children to say that it is difficult to talk about it and they prefer not to discuss it. When acquaintances ask her about your divorce, another option is they can reply that they appreciate the concern, thank them for asking and say that it is their parents' business and that it is not their place to discuss it. If the person knows one or both parents, they can suggest that the person ask you directly. You can continue to support the idea that they have that right whenever they want.

5. When relatives ask, it can be different. For grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, most families have their practices about emotional boundaries. Those boundaries create an understanding within the family about where I begin, and You end. If possible, have a conversation with your adult children to help them sort out their limits and what your family's limits are about sharing private information. Reassure them that they are not obligated to offer any more information than you choose.

6. Don't make your adult child into your confidant and primary support person. As a divorcing parent, sometimes you could be overcome by emotions. Either one of you might succumb to enrolling one of the kids into the role of being your primary emotional support person. You must guard against this mistake. Your college-age kids don't want to hear all of the intimate details of your feelings of betrayal, either of their parents' sexual practices or the financial blunders committed by the other parent. Also, none of them want to be your dating buddy. Forcing your adult children into these roles can cause them to feel like a traitor to their other parent. Adult children of all ages struggle to understand and accept differences between what may be good for their parents versus what is good for them. If you don't have a support network, consider getting professional help such as a clergy person or a family therapist to help you and spare your adult child this burden.

Remind your college age kids that boundaries help them take care of themselves, not to control others. That will make it easier to handle these problems. They don't have a choice about whether you are divorcing. They do have a choice about whether to react or thoughtfully respond when dealing with all these changes. Always make it clear that you support their right to have a relationship with both of their parents, and no one has the right to demand otherwise. Finally, remind your children as many times as necessary that your relationship with their other parent is different from their relationship with that parent and that neither their mom nor dad is divorcing them.

Bruce R. Fredenburg and Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., are licensed Marriage and Family Therapists in California. Each has more than 30 years of experience helping families resolve painful problems they are struggling with and cannot solve on their own, including separation and divorce. They are co-authors of the eye-opening book *Home Will Never Be the Same Again: A Guide for Adult Children of Gray Divorce*.



# GRAY DIVORCE: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

## For Adult Children and Their Divorcing Parents

by Carol R. Hughes, PhD, LMFT and Bruce R. Fredenburg, LMFT

For myriad reasons, there has been a meteoric rise in gray divorce over the past thirty years. Whether they are splitting because the kids have finally left the nest, because divorce is now more socially acceptable, or simply because they now want different things out of life, divorce in later life is an undeniable reality for families worldwide.

But gray divorce doesn't just affect the older couple; it impacts three (or even four!) generations. And the adult children of the couple are often left reeling without the support, help, or empathy they need.

Most people understand why divorce is hard for minor children. After all, they are entirely dependent on Mom and Dad. That's all they have ever known. The loss of their intact family is profound. In our culture, adult children, and many other people, are surprised by how much it hurts and disrupts their lives.

### 5 Things to Know If You Are an Adult Child of Gray Divorce

1. **It's normal to feel bad when your family is disintegrating.** Many adult children use the word "surreal" to describe their experiences. You are not alone. When adult children express their pain, fears, or confusion, people treat them as if it is "just one of those things, you'll get over it and adjust" type of experience. The unspoken message is, "Get over it. You're lucky they didn't divorce when you were a kid." Even adult children say something must be wrong with them when they find what they are feeling is so difficult to understand. We want you to know that it's normal to feel lost, confused, angry, afraid, and even stunned.
2. **Be kind to yourself.** We would expect adult children to grieve their parents' death. Why would we expect adult children not to feel pain, sadness, and deep grief at the "death" of their family, as they have known it their entire lives? There is no one way to grieve. Allow yourself the understanding that you will likely have good days and bad days and that grieving is a process, not a one-off event.
3. **You might get pulled into loyalty conflicts by a parent.** What do you do if one parent needs more emotional or financial help? Divorcing parents, siblings, extended family, and community members often pull adult children in two directions. When this happens, how do you maintain your relationships with them? What if one parent tries to bring you into an alliance against your other parent? What if one parent resents you helping your other parent? If this happens, we recommend working with an experienced family therapist or clergy member to help you sort out your feelings and create a plan that works for you.

4. **Avoid slipping into taking sides against a parent.** No one should presume to have the right to deny you your relationship with each of your parents. In many families, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and others take sides. They might expect you to align with them against your other parent. Keep in mind that your parents are divorcing each other. They are not divorcing you. When invited to join in a “bashing your other parent” conversation, you have a right to decline if that is your preference. You could tell the person attempting to have you join in that it is difficult for you to talk about it and that you prefer not to discuss it. Give yourself permission to share as much or as little as you want. You can also reply that you appreciate the concern that it is your parents’ business and that you prefer not to discuss it.
  
5. **There will be other challenges.** In the future, adult children might become the ones to manage family celebrations like graduations, weddings, and births if their parents don’t get along. Added to this is that during and after divorce, parents might be so overwhelmed by their feelings of anger, fear, loss, and confusion that both younger and older adult children can’t turn to their parents for help.

Understanding the many variables that affect you during life’s challenging times, like divorce, provides one aspect of what you need to heal. Although it is often difficult to maintain hope while grieving, it is essential to healing. You will get through this. It can be made easier by consulting with a family therapist experienced in working with divorce. You could be surprised how much a trained therapist who is neutral to your family and not caught up in your family’s pain can help you discover ways to heal.

**Dr. Carol Hughes** is a California licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and family-focused divorce professional who works with children, adolescents, and adults. As a therapist, co-parenting and child specialist, divorce coach, and mediator, she has assisted hundreds of families experiencing separation and divorce. She is the co-author of *Home Will Never Be the Same Again: A Guide for Adult Children of Gray Divorce*, published by Rowman and Littlefield Publishers and available on Amazon or directly from the publisher.

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# **How To Talk With Your Adult Children About Your Upcoming Separation or Dissolution of Marriage**

by Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., LMFT

[www.DivorcePeacemaking.com](http://www.DivorcePeacemaking.com)

(To avoid the clumsiness of using “child/children”, I have intentionally used “children” throughout this article.)

The following are some tips for you as you prepare to talk with your adult children. It is clear that you care about doing the best you can for your children, because you are reading this article. Give yourself permission not to be perfect. No one is. Remember to keep taking slow, deep breaths...you and your children will get through this difficult time.

1. Schedule a time when you can speak with your children together and preferably in person. Siblings need the support system that they can provide each other. When you are scheduling the time to talk, tell them that you have something important to discuss with them and assure them that no one is sick or dying. If they ask you what you want to talk about, tell them that you prefer to discuss it in person when you are all together. If it isn't possible to speak in person due to residing long distances apart, then schedule a time to speak via Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, or another video chat program. Avoid telling them via telephone or email. It is too impersonal. Divorce is a major life crisis for all family members and should be treated as such. Children who were adults when their parents divorced consistently report that the news of their parents' divorce “rocked the very foundation” of their world!

2. Plan your presentation to your children in advance. Make some notes about what you plan to say and review them so that you are familiar with what you intend to say. Anticipate what they may say to you. You can have the notes in front of you, if you wish, and simply say, “We have made some notes because what we are going to be talking about is very important for all of us and we don't want to forget anything.” Remember that your children will likely be in emotional shock after you tell them your intentions to separate and/or end your marriage and they will not be able to absorb everything you say this first time. Be prepared to have the same conversation with them numerous times. Their shock and grieving will interfere with them being able to fully take in all that you are sharing.

3. Tell them that the two of you have decided to separate and/or end your marriage because you have problems between you that you haven't been able to resolve. Avoid using the word “divorce” because it is laden with negative connotations.

4. Avoid blaming each other. This is the time for the two of you to have a united front with your children. Remember that this news will shatter their view of their family as they have known it. Blaming each other puts them in the middle of your pain and conflict, causes them to experience divided loyalty and feel that they need to choose sides, as well as feel guilt for loving both of you. Children who were adults when their parents divorced report that they hated being put in this position and feeling that each parent was attempting to form an alliance with them against the other parent.

5. Next, tell them what is going to remain the same. Tell them that you are all still family, that you will always be their parents and that your intention is to be amicable so that you can both attend family gatherings and not create tension for them and their significant others. If they are still in college, tell them how you will be continuing the financial arrangements you have had in place. Tell them if one of you intends to stay in the family home, etc. Assure them that they will continue to have the emotional support of both parents in the newly restructured family.

6. Next, tell them what is not going to remain the same. Tell them if you will be unable to continue the financial arrangements you had regarding college. Tell them if you intend to sell the family home. If you have been assisting them in paying off college loans and won't be able to continue doing so, tell them that. Assure them that you will do everything you can to assist them financially, as you have in the past, while at the same time acknowledging that there will be some economic impact as the family restructures. It's important to be neutral and factual. Resist being a victim or martyr. It will only make them feel guilty.

7. Remember that you are still their parents. It is your job to put their feelings above yours and provide them with the support they need to hear, feel and understand. Acknowledge that you realize the announcement is a shock and that their feelings (anger, sadness, grief, shock, etc.) are normal. Focus on and be empathetic with THEIR feelings. Don't talk about your feelings, e.g., how you haven't been happy for years, how you deserve to be happy, etc. Having just received such painful news, they will be unable to express their happiness for you, and it is unreasonable for you to expect them to do so. Remember, their familial foundation has just been rocked and their family history has been rewritten. They have become members of the "lost nest" generation. There will be no "family nest" to return to at the holidays.

8. Tell them that you still believe in family and that you hope they will too; that this doesn't mean that they will not be able to have a strong and happy relationship. Tell them that you don't expect them to take care of you emotionally or physically, that that is your job, not theirs. Tell them that you have, or plan to have, your own support system separate from them and that you want them to establish a support system for themselves as well. For example, yahoo groups and Facebook has a group for adult children whose parents are divorcing. Also, the book *Home Will Never Be the Same Again: A Guide for Adult Children of Gray Divorce* will help them realize they are not alone.

9. Avoid telling them that you stayed together or delayed restructuring your family because of them. This will make them feel guilty for your unhappy marriage. They will already be recalling their childhood memories and wondering: "What was real and what wasn't real? Were you really happy on those family vacations? Has my whole life been a sham?" Divorce destabilizes the family system and inevitably shakes every family member's perception of their past, their present and their future.

10. Assure them that this will be a process for all of you to move through, at your own

pace and in your own way. Assure them that you will always love them and that you will always be there for them in whatever ways will be most helpful to them. You want them to know that they aren't alone, so they don't become isolated and depressed. Encourage them to speak with a counselor about their feelings. Tell them you have spoken with or intend to speak with a counselor as well, because you have learned that, for all family members, the end of a marriage is a major life stressor, second only to the death of a loved one.

Divorce is a family event that affects everyone in the family. All the family members are transitioning to a "new normal." Understanding what your grown kids are experiencing, accepting what they are feeling, building new connectedness, and celebrating life's events with your family members can facilitate healing.

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Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., LMFT, holds her doctoral degree in Clinical Psychology, and her master's degree in Counseling Psychology, achieving both summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa honors. She is also a two-time Fulbright Scholar. In private practice in Laguna Hills, CA, since 1983, Dr. Hughes is a respected expert and sought-after speaker on the effects of divorce on children. She is board-certified in clinical hypnotherapy, an EMDR therapist, and a former professor of Human Services at Saddleback College. In 2003, she became one of the founding members of Collaborative Divorce Solutions of Orange County and is also a co-founder of and trainer for the Collaborative Divorce Education Institute in Orange County, CA, a non-profit organization, whose mission is to educate the public about peaceful options for divorce, as well as provide quality training for collaborative divorce professionals. She frequently trains and mentors collaborative practitioners and has appeared on the Time Warner Public television series "How to Get a Divorce". Carol is a frequent presenter at conferences of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals, the Association of Family Conciliation Courts, and California's annual statewide conferences for collaborative professionals. In 2011, Carol was honored with the Eureka Award, which recognizes those who have made significant contributions and demonstrated an abiding dedication to establishing and sustaining Collaborative Practice in California.

She is the co-author of the book *Home Will Never Be the Same Again: A Guide for Adult Children of Gray Divorce*. For a complete listing of her collaborative practice training and teaching workshops please visit [www.CollaborativePractice.com](http://www.CollaborativePractice.com), the website of the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals, and click on the "Locate a Collaborative Professional near you" link. In addition, please visit her website at [www.DivorcePeacemaking.com](http://www.DivorcePeacemaking.com).

## **You Have Chosen to Divorce: Are Your Adult Children Too Old to Hurt?**

**By Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., LMFT**

The effect of divorce on minor children has been a hot topic for decades. But divorce can also significantly impact adult children whose parents are divorcing. These adult children report many of the same feelings and experiences.

“My friends at college say I should be glad they didn’t divorce when I was younger because that would have been a lot worse. It’s like they expect me to just ‘get over’ what I’m feeling. I feel so sad and alone,” shared an 18-year-old college freshman.

"It’s been two years since my parents divorced. I was in shock. It was like an earthquake was shaking what I thought would always be the rock-solid foundation of my life. For almost two years, the aftershocks kept shaking me and upending everything in my life," reported a 27-year-old adult child.

“I just started sobbing out of nowhere, and I didn’t know why. Then I remembered--my family is gone. My family is dead,” recalled a 34-year-old adult child.

“There are so many ‘nevers.’ Nothing will ever be the same.”

### **Our cultural myth is that adult children are too old to hurt from their parents' divorce.**

Recent research found that 51% of parents who were 50 years and older reported that their adult children were “unsupportive,” “somewhat upset,” or “very upset” about their divorce. Even among adult children who were supportive of their parents’ divorce, the parents perceived that 67% were very sad, and 19% were devastated.<sup>1</sup>

### **Divorce is not a neutral event for children, whether they are minor or adult children.**

Adult children suffer in different ways than minor children. When parents are ending decades-long marriages, a frequent refrain from their adult children is: “Home will never be the same again.” Why do they say this?

Adult children experience myriad losses when their parents divorce. Below are a few examples.

- Family relationships change. Accustomed to counting on their parents for emotional and sometimes financial support, adult children may lose this support and find themselves in a role reversal where they feel like they are the parents who are supporting their parents. One parent may call them for support and complain about their spouse. Next, the other parent does the same. Adult children feel caught in the middle and are at a loss how to handle this.
- Loyalty issues can arise when one or both parents expect them to side with them against the other parent. Or, siblings and extended family members may pressure them to take sides.
- Siblings call to talk about what is happening and how to deal with it. Life is disrupted just by talking about their parents' divorce.
- The permanence of their intact family vanishes. Unsettling concerns arise, since the accustomed family traditions, celebrations, and togetherness are no more. Stress ensues about how to handle

holiday, birthday, and graduation celebrations. If they have children of their own, they worry about how all of this will affect them. Will their children be able to be with their grandparents and extended family at the same time, when their family is split down the middle?

- They begin wondering if their childhood and adolescence were based on lies and if the appearance their family showed to the world was a façade.

**Divorce has many witnesses, many victims...Each divorce is the death of a small civilization. ~ Pat Conroy, American novelist**

We expect to grieve when we lose a loved one. Yet, many parents and adult children are unaware that they are grieving the losses—all the ‘nevers.’ Divorce is the rock that drops into life’s lake, and the ripples of grieving wash over everyone in the family’s circle.

**How Collaborative Divorce Helps**

The Collaborative Divorce process helps divorcing parents understand their adult children's concerns and how to explain to them that while some things will change, not everything will. Parents need to reassure their adult children that they, the parents, will not put them in the middle of their problems. They will not share their problems with the children and ask them to take sides.

Collaborative Divorce is a family-focused process that emphasizes that you are still a family. It is a family apart, but still a family. It is an opportunity for you to minimize the emotional damage to your family, including your adult children. We help you recognize the importance of supporting your adult children through the divorce process and the value of ensuring them that you will always be a family.

We help you schedule holidays and other family events in a way that is best for everyone. We also assist you to get your adult children’s input about how they would like you to be involved in their daily lives and the lives of your grandchildren.

Your divorce will be respectful and amicable. You will have the opportunity to create your legacy about this time in your family’s lives--a legacy that will include what will be best for all family members because *you are always a family*.

**References**

1 Todd M. Jensen and Gary L. Bowen, “Mid- and Late-Life Divorce and Parents’ Perceptions of Emerging Adult Children’s Emotional Reactions,” *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 56, no. 5 (July 4, 2015): 419, doi:10.1080/10502556.2015.1046795.

**Dr. Carol Hughes is a California licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and family-focused divorce professional, who works with children, adolescents, and adults. As a therapist, co-parenting and child specialist, divorce coach, and mediator, she has assisted hundreds of families experiencing separation and divorce. She is the co-author of *Home Will Never Be the Same Again: A Guide for Adult Children of Gray Divorce*, published by Rowman and Littlefield Publishers and available on Amazon or directly from the publisher.**

## Our Language Matters

### Litigation/adversarial language

### Collaborative/cooperative language

|                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---|
| you.....                        | I   |
| my children/ my house.....      | our children/our house  |
| tell .....                      | ask/request   |
| You are entitled to .....       | What are your hopes, concerns, interests and values?                            |
| divorce petition .....          | transition document   |
| child support/Disso Master..... | What it takes to pay for our children's expenses / needs and abilities          |
| spousal support .....           | reallocation of family resources  |
| child custody/visitation.....   | parenting time/co-parenting plan/time with the children / time w/Mom/time w/Dad |
| discovery/subpoenas .....       | voluntary transparency, information gathering                                   |
| exhibits/evidence .....         | information   |
| opposing counsel .....          | collaborative counterpart   |
| fair.....                       | What I can live with.   |
| never/always.....               | sometimes/often   |
| I will not.....                 | My request is....   |
| proposal .....                  | option  |
| win/lose.....                   | mutually acceptable   |
| negative past .....             | positive future   |
| recommendations .....           | information/education   |
| make settlement proposals ..... | brainstorm options  |



I recommend that you ..... One option to consider might be...

My legal advice is ..... Let me give you some legal information.

I'll see you in court ..... Clients brainstorm and craft agreements

I insist on/that..... You can bring up your concern at the team meeting.

The law says .....The law is one option to consider, and the law limits you from assessing other options that may be far better suited to you achieving success as you have defined it for yourself and for your family.

I know that under the law ..... The law is uncertain, and what a judge will do is difficult to predict as legal professionals can and do differ.

parties/clients ..... person's name/the person I am working with

opposing party ..... the person's name

expert ..... someone with expertise/experience

therapist/counselor ..... divorce coach/communication facilitator

child therapist/custody evaluator .... child specialist/voice of the children

session ..... meeting

custody evaluator's written report ... Child specialist orally shares information with parents and coaches to assist them craft their co-parenting plan.

opposing counsel/other side ..... collaborative co-counsel/collaborative colleague

financial planner/ CPA/financial ..... neutral financial professional  
expert

I represent (client's name) ..... I am (client's name) collaborative lawyer/divorce coach

I will protect you ..... I will make sure that you have all of the information necessary to enable you to make good choices for your family

As your attorney I will ..... You have a team of collaborative professionals to support you.

I am a divorce lawyer ..... I am a peacemaker.

I will provide you with solutions .... We will brainstorm together as a team.

I can get you ..... You are supported in this process by your Divorce Coach, Neutral Financial and me so that your emotional, financial and legal needs will be met.

I know what you want or need ..... Let's make an assessment of what will position you for success.

I am in charge of ..... We work as a team of Collaborative Professionals.

You will end up with ..... I will position you to achieve success as you have defined it for yourself and for your family.

You should ..... What would it look like if...

ground rules ..... foundations for success

professionals speak for the clients.... clients speak for themselves

clients talk to the professionals ..... clients talk to each other

adversarial body language ..... collaborative/cooperative body language

temporary support/child support..... income & expense sharing

**Why do we use collaborative / cooperative language instead of litigation / adversarial language?**

(Adapted by Carol R. Hughes, Ph.D., LMFT, and Brian Levy, J.D., with permission from Collaborative Divorce Team Trainings ©2009 and the International Academy of Collaborative Professionals Train the Trainer 2013)

Good Morning, Adult Child,

I am following up with you in my role as the Adult Child Specialist for your mom and dad's Collaborative Divorce. You may recall that Collaborative Divorce is family focused. As I explained to you previously, this focus includes bringing the adult children's voices into the process whenever necessary and appropriate. It also includes a focus on the family members' transition as the family is restructuring. It is regarding this family restructuring that I am reaching out to you.

I have spoken quite a bit with your mom during the past many months. I think it would be beneficial to her, and I think to you as well, if you were willing to meet with her and me to discuss your and her desires and expectations regarding your and her relationship going forward. When parents of adult children divorce, it is not unusual for the parents, as well as the adult children, to need some assistance communicating about their desires and expectations for their relationships as they are transitioning into their restructured family.

I don't know if you think you need this assistance. I know that your mom needs it. It would certainly help me be able to help her with this transitioning and restructuring if the three of us could meet, so that I can subsequently reinforce with her what I hear you say to her. Of course, I would remain available to you for assistance as well, should you need.

I know that when we talked before I mentioned an article I wrote about adult children and divorce. In case you would like to read it, you can find it on the Resources page on my [DivorcePeacemaking.com](http://DivorcePeacemaking.com) website.

Your mom has shared with me that you are planning to be in So Cal in August. Would you be willing to schedule meeting with her and me in this regard?

I appreciate you taking the time to read this email and I look forward to hearing from you.

All my best,  
Carol

***Carol Hughes, Ph.D., LMFT***

***Creating more peace in the world, one person, one couple, one family at a time.***

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***Co-author of Home Will Never Be the Same Again: A Guide for Adult Children of Gray Divorce. Order at <https://tinyurl.com/p8uw9rzt>***

**Psychology Today blog: Home Will Never Be the Same Again: Guidance for Families of Gray Divorce: <https://tinyurl.com/ydkj5rzm>**

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Links to *Psychology Today* Blog - Home Will Never Be the Same Again: Guidance for the Families of Gray Divorce

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/home-will-never-be-the-same-again>

COLLABORATIVE  
DIVORCE SOLUTIONS



COLLABORATIVE  
PRACTICE

Resolving Disputes Respectfully

## Home Will Never Be the Same Again for Adult Children of Gray Divorce

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These professionals also conduct Collaborative divorce cases online through virtual video conferencing and document sharing platforms.

### OTHER COLLABORATIVE RESOURCES

#### International Organization

IACP – International Academy of Collaborative Professionals  
[www.collaborativepractice.com](http://www.collaborativepractice.com)

#### State Organizations

CP Cal – Collaborative Practice California  
[www.cpcal.com](http://www.cpcal.com)

CD Cal – Collaborative Divorce California  
[www.collaborativedivorcecalifornia.com](http://www.collaborativedivorcecalifornia.com)