

What To Expect When Working With A Collaborative Divorce Coach

A premise of Collaborative Practice is that clients are best served by working with people who are trained experts in their field. A divorce involves “uncoupling” in three areas:

Emotional / Family Restructuring Financial Legal

Rather than having one professional who may or may not have competence in all aspects of a divorce, the Collaborative Process works better, is more efficient, and can be less costly in the long term by adding specialists in each area to the Collaborative Team.

This handout explains the role of the Collaborative Divorce Coach and what clients should expect when working with a Coach in a Collaborative Case.

In Washington State, a statute, RCW 7.77, codifies the Uniform Collaborative Law Act. Pursuant to that statute a Collaborative Case requires two parties, each represented by their own attorney, and a signed agreement that disqualifies the attorneys from representing either party outside of the Collaborative Process. While there is no requirement that a Collaborative Divorce Coach be a part of every case, the work of the Coach is so specialized and essential to the Collaborative Process that many experienced Collaborative Attorneys will not accept a Collaborative Case without a Collaborative Divorce Coach on the Team.

In the Collaborative Process, “Coach” refers to a mental health professional whose function relates primarily to untangling the emotional dynamics and communication patterns between the clients, which have been established during an intimate relationship. We call this process “uncoupling.”

Unproductive conflict and unresolved emotions are the key disruptors when engaging in the very problem-solving you need as part of reaching divorce agreements. Along with uncoupling, the Coach will be the professional who helps you address the restructuring of your family, particularly for children, but also for extended family members with whom important bonds have been established.

The Coach, who has extensive knowledge in personal growth and development, will be there to assist with parenting questions, and to work through many of the two home family considerations that will be part of your eventual parenting plan.

Your Collaborative Divorce Coach is the one team member who will be most familiar with the two of you: your needs, your interests, and your dynamics as a couple. Your coach may be a key part of your joint sessions to assist you with keeping your center, smoothing out difficult reactions, and keeping the process on track.

It is important to note that the Collaborative Divorce Coach is NOT providing psychotherapy or marriage counseling. When you start your work with the Coach, your decision to seek a divorce or a legal separation has most probably been made.

Your First Meeting With the Coach

Any of the following scenarios is possible and depends on your situation:

1. You find a Collaboratively trained Divorce Coach online or by referral and you arrange to meet with the Coach to explore different ways to proceed. The Divorce Coach is fully versed in the different divorce options available to you and if you request will make referrals to Collaboratively trained Attorneys.
2. You meet with a Collaborative Attorney and the attorney recommends that before deciding on a divorce process, you meet with the Coach. Attorneys have an obligation to make sure that you and your spouse are good candidates for the Collaborative Process and the Coach provides a second layer of evaluation.
3. You are referred to a Coach by the Collaborative Attorney before or after the Collaborative Participation Agreement is signed, and the Team is still being constructed.

How a Coach Will Help You Through The Collaborative Process

You and each professional stand on equal footing and each person brings necessary information to the Collaborative Process. All professionals have appropriate training and while there is some crossover in what is brought to the table, everyone on the Collaborative Team wears a main “hat.” Here are some of the ways a Divorce Coach may assist you in your Collaborative Case:

1. In any legal proceeding, emotions have a direct correlation with the cost of the process and ultimately the quality of the Resolution. You bring into your divorce process a broad range of emotions. The Collaborative Process is designed to address those emotions and to take the energy from them so they do not prolong or undermine the process. While all Collaborative Professionals are mindful of those emotions and their impact, the Divorce Coach has special training to address them.

2. The Collaborative Process works better and is more cost effective and time efficient when the Collaborative Attorneys delegate to other professionals on the Team. There is no hierarchy on a Collaborative Team. Remember that your attorneys are the most expensive part of the process. In addition, you deserve to work with the specialists who can best provide you with what you need in order to make the decisions necessary to conclude the process successfully.
3. If you have children, the Coach will work with you to prepare your children for the divorce. The Coach will also help you prepare to move into a two-home family and to develop a residential schedule to ensure a strong, engaged relationship for the children with both parents. This includes how to spend the holidays and school breaks, *and* how to commit to the actions and activities that will help you maintain a skillful co-parenting relationship for the years to come. These agreements will be memorialized in the form of the Parenting Worksheet. Once you approve this Worksheet, the Coach will give the Worksheet to the Collaborative Attorneys to translate into the court-mandated Parenting Plan form.
4. At times parents would like the divorce process to include their children's own voices, their children's versions of what they need. If you bring this desire up to your Attorney or your Coach and decide to move forward, the Coach will arrange to include a Child Specialist who then meets with you prior to meeting with your children. A Child Specialist has expertise in interviewing children whose parents are separating and then assisting with identifying normal adjustment issues and differentiating them from distress needing more rigorous attention.

After seeking input from the children (specifically, asking, "What's working for you as your parents set up your two-home family, and what's hurting or particularly hard for you?"), the Child Specialist will return to the Coach's office to discuss the children's input with the parents and the Coach. This *neutral* input helps parents understand their children's perspective and experience in order to make adjustments necessary to assist the children with their own grief and acceptance. The Team understands that the Coach is dedicated to working with the parents and the Child Specialist is dedicated to working with the children to bring the "voice of the child" into the divorce process.

5. It is recommended that the Coach attend all Team meetings other than the first four-way meeting. Throughout the Process discussions can trigger emotional responses. The Coach's presence during the meetings acts as insurance to help get through these discussions. The Coach also has skills for meeting facilitation, group process, meeting flow and management. This frees the other professionals on the Team to focus on their respective roles.