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Ready to shake up the break-up blues



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Helping hand: Liza Caldwell, right, and Kimberly Mishkin say clients feel paralysed by the decisions they face

Divorce lawyers have a reputation for burning through warring couples' finances. The last thing they need is to spend even more money on splitting up, surely? Yet that is the desire of divorce coaches, a new industry dedicated to helping husbands or wives navigate their way out of marriage.

Karen McMahan, a divorce coach in New York, says: "Coaching is in its infancy and divorce coaching is embryonic." Practitioners come from a range of backgrounds, including financial planners, therapists and mediators. Crudely, coaching — traditionally associated with executives — focuses on future goals and potential, whereas therapy might explore past emotional issues in order to gain insight.

Karen Bigman, also based in New York and known as the "divorcierge", charges about \$95 per hour. She describes the work: "We help educate [clients]

about their options. We can act as a sounding board, help put together a plan, coach through difficult periods as well as guide clients through meetings with divorce professionals such as attorneys and financial advisers.”

SAS for Women, a divorce coaching business for wives, is run by Kimberly Mishkin and Liza Caldwell. They charge up to \$300 an hour and typically see clients in their New York office once a week, though it can be more frequent if required. The two divorcees met in Haiti in 2011 when they were both experiencing a kind of second adolescence and enjoying their post-coupled freedom. Many of their clients are paralysed by the immensity of the task ahead, coming as it does at an emotional time. Ms Mishkin describes the kind of decisions that assail people contemplating divorce. “They think: what now, where do I live, what do I tell the kids, how do I tell work I need time off for court.”

Phyllida Wilson, co-author of *A Woman’s Guide to Divorce*, notes that many people try unburdening themselves to their lawyers, which is both expensive and unwise: “It’s very difficult for a solicitor to provide emotional advice. The majority of solicitors don’t have the time or the skills.” A divorce coach may help clients plan ahead for legal meetings to maximise efficiency.

In the UK, Sara Davison, who ran a self-development and training business with her ex-husband, stumbled upon the idea of divorce coaching when the couple separated. “I had been coaching for 14 years yet the divorce hit me. I wondered how people without coaching skills got through it.”

The long, messy and costly process, involving expensive lawyers, struck Ms Davison hard. A couple of months of therapy had given her more clarity but no strategy so she decided to create a coaching programme to get through her own divorce. In the past three years, she has offered it to others for up to £165 an hour. She also runs retreats and has created an app.

Despite the number of marriages that break down, she believes divorce still has a stigma. The issues tackled include how to talk to a child about separation (heaps of reassurance, make them feel loved and make sure they know that it is not their fault; nor should you treat them as a go-between or a therapist); how to hand your child over to your ex; how to move on and forge a single life.

One issue many clients seem to suffer from, she says, is remaining stuck in the past. “I create little stepping stones, for example, making them commit to going out, rather than hide under the duvet.”

There is also a loss of self-esteem, she notes. Those coming out of relationships can find it tricky to untangle their personality from

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that of their ex-partner. Ms Davison cites one woman who claimed her favourite television programme was *Top Gear*, despite hating cars and Jeremy Clarkson. It quickly became apparent that it was not the programme itself she liked but sharing time with her husband snuggled up on the sofa.

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Many people express feelings of shame about divorce. Ms Mishkin says that part of the process is helping them overcome the belief they are an aberration.

Friends and family are not always a source of comfort. “They’re lovely, but often burnt out” by the divorcing person’s anxiety and anger, says Ms Mishkin. In her own case, she knew when her nearest and dearest had had enough. “Their eyes glazed over and you could tell they thought ‘Oh here she goes again.’”

Coaching is more interactive and practical than psychotherapy, argues Ms McMahon. The characteristic most of her clients share is their ability to “time travel”, she jokes. “Someone divorcing tends to be filled with regret about the past or fear the future.” Her mantra is to “keep your head where your feet are”.

Ms Bigman says the most challenging type of client is one clinging to their version of events and not willing to change perspective. The other challenge she faces is persuading men to embrace coaching. “I find that if I meet a man in a social situation [who] is going through a difficult situation in their marriage, he will share with me and I will end up coaching him and he’s quite receptive. On the other hand, they never follow up. I’m not sure why but I suspect it has something to do with being vulnerable and asking for help.”

However, Ms Davison finds that men feel more comfortable being coached than seeing a psychotherapist.

Many people feel concerned that they will not cope without a spouse, says Ms Caldwell. She cites one very wealthy client who is paralysed at the prospect of being alone and worries that she will not be able to look after herself. For the stay-at-home parent (typically women) who does not work, the world of lawyers and courts can be imposing, she says. For this reason she has a list of good driving instructors and handymen to provide clients with practical help.

One of the biggest challenges of the job can be witnessing heartbreak. “There are moments when I cry after a session,” notes Ms McMahon. “But it is transitory.”

“Seeing people upset is never easy but because I can help them I feel lucky”, says Ms Davison.

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