



# The Emotional Roller Coaster

a guide to preparing for divorce



The purpose of this guidebook is to help you prepare emotionally for your divorce. Simply being aware that your emotions can prevent you from handling the legal and financial end of your divorce is powerful knowledge. This guidebook offers support for consciously navigating through the “roller coaster” of emotions, especially grief and loss so you can engage more effectively in the legal process of divorce.

In the end, you are much more likely to have a marital settlement agreement that reflects your intentions, values and priorities, save tens of thousands on legal fees, and most importantly, feel more at peace.

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## How to Use the Strategies in this Guidebook

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Some of these strategies will resonate with you right away and some may not. That is fine. You may choose to adopt and use some strategies every day, while others you may use only a few times. That is fine as well. Now that you have this guide, you can return to it again and again for reference.

[If at any point you feel you would benefit from additional support, feel free to contact me directly.](#)

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## Preparing Emotionally for Your Divorce

Divorce represents a major transition in your life. Maybe you and your partner mutually decided to pursue the divorce. Alternatively, one of you may have decided that this was the best way to honor yourself and your opportunities for happiness in the future while the other partner wants to hold onto the marriage. Either way, this shift from one phase of your life to the next will be complex.

Part of what makes getting a divorce so complex is that it comprises two very distinct pieces - an emotional journey and a legal process. In most people's experience, the two pieces tend to blend together. This leaves partners confused, angry, sad and unable to effectively advocate for the things that really matter to them.

*Do not let your fears choose your destiny.*

In most cases, partners do not enter into the divorce process with the intention to "ruin" each other or "take it all for themselves." In fact, spouses generally want relief from the stresses they have been experiencing. They want what is best for their children, and they want to enable each person to rebuild their life.

So what happens? Why does it so often get ugly and feel threatening? Simply put, it's because the divorce process, because the divorce process activates powerful emotions like anger, fear, resentment and sadness that interfere with decision making. . Pain, anger and fear are normal stages of grief and loss. The problem is, when these emotions get out of control and then enter into the legal and financial aspects of divorce negotiations, good intentions and reason fails us.

## The 6 Stages of Grief and Loss in Divorce

We begin with a look at the stages of grief and loss associated with divorce. We begin here, because gaining awareness about what you may be experiencing is necessary to making healthy and effective choices.

Depending upon whose material you read, you will find between 5 to 7 stages of loss and grief. The information is the same, just divided up differently.

Here are 3 important things to know about the stages of grief and loss:

*"There is no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bear witness that a person has the greatest of courage, the courage to suffer." ~Frankl*

- 1) **The stages of grief and loss are not linear.** This means that you will not necessarily pass through all the stages in the order in which they are listed, or pass through them only once and be done. These stages represent experiences that you are likely to have at any time on the journey. You can skip some and pass through others multiple times. There is nothing wrong with you if this happens. This is completely normal.
- 2) **Ignoring the stages and pretending that you are not experiencing or will not experience grief and loss is likely to keep you ensnared in feelings of sadness, loss, anger or despair for a very long time.** The feelings associated with the stages are painful. They run deep. A common response is to try and ignore them. However, regardless of whether you name them or not, they are likely to show up in one way or another.



Our emotional self is linked to our physical self, so even if you ignore the emotions you are likely to experience your grief and loss physically in the form of nausea, weight loss or weight gain, compromised immune system, loss of sleep, irritability, stress, headaches, and so on. Our physical selves are a very informative guide to the state of our overall well-being.

- 3) **Acknowledging the stages and facing them will actually take you on an inner journey of discovery that is important for your growth into your next phase of life.** As convenient as it may be to believe that the dissolution of your marriage was *all your partner's fault*, the fact is that when there are two people in a relationship, both play a part in everything that happens. Facing your fears and pain will lead you to deeper understanding of what your role was so you can make more empowered and effective choices in the next phase of your life.

In this first stage of grief, the prevailing question is: *How can this be happening to me?* You may have

**Denial, Shock & Disbelief****STAGE 1**

a sense of disbelief about what is happening. *Is this true? Can this really be happening?* You may have a tendency to shut down or ignore what is happening. You may attempt to act as if nothing is happening, or if you don't see it, then perhaps it is not really true. It is common to want to avoid telling others and keep the divorce a secret.

**Pain & Fear****STAGE 2**

At this stage, you may feel a great deal of pain and be afraid. Pain arises from the sense of loss of everything you believed was true or would remain the way it was. Fear arises as you begin to wonder what you will do, how you will take care of yourself, how the divorce will affect others, and whether you will ever find love again. Often times, fear can give rise to bargaining where one partner offers to do anything to stop the divorce.





Anger

STAGE 3

It is normal to feel angry – angry with yourself and angry at your partner. People sometimes become angry with themselves

or feel a sense of guilt or shame around not having done something differently in the past that “could have changed things.” It is also common to be angry with your partner for the choices they are making or the things they have done. There is a great deal of hurt and someone has to be blamed.

Depression & Loneliness

STAGE 4

You are in this stage when you feel a deep sense of loss, sadness and weariness. It can feel difficult to get up in the morning. There can be a lack of desire to be with other people. It can feel impossible to smile. Common signs of situational depression can include: loss of appetite, insomnia, isolation and lethargy.

Inner Journey & Acceptance

STAGE 5

Eventually, a deep desire to heal leads people to seek support and undertake the

inner journey that is a precursor to acceptance. It is the stage when we honor and separate from the past, heal the wounds and decide to let go of being a victim, and choose to enter life again in the acceptance of a new reality. [To get to this point of peace during this journey almost always requires emotional support.](#) You can seek support in a variety of ways including [reading, coaching, counseling, meditation, and support groups.](#)

While I have never seen hope listed as a stage of grief and loss, I believe it is essential for creating a life you love following separation or divorce. At its core, separation and divorce represent a transition in one’s life.

Any major transition is an opportunity to grow and to invite the extraordinary. [In my work as a divorce and life](#)

[empowerment coach, my goal is not to help clients \*get through\* their divorce, but rather to empower people to ultimately seize this opportunity to grow and create a life of extraordinary happiness, joy and fulfillment.](#)

Hope

STAGE 6



## Why Grief, Loss and Anger Impair Judgment

Grief and loss, like all emotions, originate in our brains. And when these powerful and consuming emotions take over, it impairs our rational judgment and ability to make a discerning decision. Here is a very brief and highly accessible biology lesson that explains why.

All information that we take in through any of our five senses, transmits through our brain. It enters the brain through the thalamus and then the thalamus sends the information off to (a) the neocortex – the rational thinking part of our brains and (b) the amygdala – the part of our brain that is designed to recognize anything that may be threatening so we can gear up and protect ourselves.

The first step toward getting somewhere is to decide that you are not going to stay where you are. ~ Anonymous

This was very useful when we hunted in the woods and we wanted a prompt and decisive reaction to spotting a predator. It can also be helpful in kicking our “protection mode” into gear if we cross the street at a red light and suddenly notice a car speeding toward us.

A matter of life and death is not the time we want to weigh the pros and cons of different options. We don't need rationality, so the brain shuts down that function, kicks up the flow of adrenaline, and off we go. We don't need a speeding car racing toward us, however, to trigger an amygdala hijack. *Your survival instincts and chemical reactions in the brain kick in any time you are feeling threatened.*

An argument with a partner, fear of being alone or left financially vulnerable, or anger about custody arrangements will all have the same effect. They will trigger the amygdala and shut down the rational thinking part of the brain – presumably the part that would be most useful for [crafting a marital settlement agreement that maintains the best interest of both partners and any children that may be involved](#).

## 10 Essential Strategies for Navigating Your Divorce

Learning to identify your personal triggers, recognize when your amygdala has been hijacked, and developing the capacity to navigate through the hijacked state without causing damage is difficult, but well worth it. It can make all the difference between an ugly divorce and one that produces an agreement that respects both partners.

*"Speak your mind, even if your voice shakes"*

As mentioned above, the amygdala hijack is one of the most significant impediments to a fair settlement. It drives legal costs up, drags the process out, creates more stress, and leads to decisions that do not serve well for the long term -- all very good reasons for choosing to prepare emotionally for your divorce and learn essential strategies for navigating your divorce consciously.

Going through divorce is like riding a roller coaster. There are periods of calm and just when you are feeling steady, you realize you are headed up a huge hill and will soon be soaring uncontrollably down the other side. And it happens over and over again. In the course of all of these hills, turns, and loop-d-loops, you will experience a wide range of emotions.



You will feel sad, angry, loving, compassionate, despondent, and the list goes on and on. And all of these feelings are normal. You are normal.

Here is an example how to validate and acknowledge your feelings:

**Acknowledge and Validate**

I am feeling \_\_\_\_\_ (name the feeling. The more accurate you try to get, the better.) It makes sense that I would be feeling \_\_\_\_\_ (name of feeling again) because \_\_\_\_\_ (name what it is you believe has triggered your emotional reaction).

Example: *I am feeling hurt. It makes sense that I would be feeling hurt because my partner always told me that s/he would be there for me and take care of my and now s/he has drifted away and only seems to be looking out for him/herself. And when I feel hurt, I cry, so it makes sense that I am crying right now. I will not cry forever, but crying makes sense right now because of what I am feeling.*

Women, especially, are used to ensuring that everyone else's needs are met first. But there is a

**Put on Your Oxygen Mask**

reason why the safety video on an airplane instructs you to put your own oxygen mask on first and then help others. You must be able to breathe and reason effectively if you are going to be effective at helping others. The same is true in divorce.

Turn to the worksheet at the back of this guidebook and make a list of 4-6 things that are essential to keep you breathing, well nourished (physically, emotionally and spiritually) and strong. Build these things into your life on a daily or weekly basis to ensure that you have the strength and clarity to navigate this long and winding journey.

### Learn Your Triggers

Knowledge is power, and awareness about oneself is very powerful knowledge. We all have things that trigger us, and chances are that you and your partner have developed skillful capacity in pressing each other's buttons. You know when it has happened because your conversation quickly erupts into a battle or ends when one of you retreats into hiding, feeling bullied. Most of the time the button is pushed and the reaction occurs so quickly, we feel like there is nothing we can do. We tell ourselves, *"The cycle is what it is and is impenetrable."*

The good news is, this is not true. Knowledge is power and knowing what the triggers are – identifying them and naming them – enables you to develop the capacity to make another choice or decision when your buttons are pushed.

*"Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear." ~Ambrose Redmoon*

Make a list of the things that your partner does that set you off. How do you normally respond? How would you like to respond? Write this down as well. The next time your partner presses one of your buttons –and you will know it when it happens- you can make the choice about how to respond. The more you write about it, the more effective this strategy will become.

*Stop, Drop and Roll* is an effective strategy in a fire, and it is also very useful when discussions become heated.

### Stop, Drop & Roll

**STOP:** End the conversation. Nothing productive can be gained when either party is angry, scared, yelling or feeling overwhelmed. Make a commitment to yourself to disengage from conversations unless they meet certain criteria of calmness and respect.

**DROP:** Drop it. Stop thinking about the topic that led to the disagreement. Your amygdala in your brain has been hijacked and there is no way you can make productive progress when you are aggravated or scared. Of course, you want to solve the problem or figure out how you will “counter” right away. Drop it. Let it go and come back to it when you are calmer and rational thinking has been restored. The next step or the solution will be much more accessible at that time.

**ROLL:** Roll. Rotate. Move in a new direction. Pick up an activity that is restorative to you. This relates to the previous three strategies: Recognize that you have been triggered. Acknowledge what you are feeling and know that it is normal. And now, put on your oxygen mask. Do something that gives you energy and makes you feel good about yourself. Exercising, meeting a friend and taking a walk are always good options.

### Practice Gratitude

At a time when your life feels volatile and you are on an emotional roller coaster, you may think the author of this guide is “off her rocker” for suggesting that you practice gratitude. How can I feel grateful for the mess my life is in? Keep reading.

Psychologists have found that practicing gratitude can actually improve our emotional and physical well-being. For example, it has been found that people who keep weekly gratitude journals had fewer physical symptoms, exercised more, had a better outlook on life and were more likely to reach their goals. In another study, practicing gratitude was found to increase happiness by 25%.

When we are struggling most in life, we tend to become self-absorbed and focus primarily on our own struggles. We can even get tired of hearing ourselves whine, complain, and vent! Committing to a daily practice of gratitude can make a big difference in outlook and uncover new places to focus your energy.

**Build a Trusting Circle of Support**

One of the most powerful things you can do for yourself as you navigate through separation or divorce is to [thoughtfully construct your circle of support](#). People may be generous in offering advice, but what kind of support do you really need? When building your circle, consider all the kinds of support you need. Some common examples include: Child care, help with meals and running errands, someone who you can go out with so you can recalibrate, [a thought partner who is unattached to your choices and decisions](#). Ask!

The thought partner should be someone unattached to the choices you make and who can help you think from an objective vantage point about what will serve you best. Many people [seek out a coach or therapist to serve in this role](#). Be selective about all the people you bring into your circle of support, and be sure that they provide what you need most - *not what they think you need most*.

**Be Proactive**

One of the most stressful aspects of separation and divorce is the loss of trust. Whereas you trusted each other fully in the past, now you feel suspicious about everything. *What advantage is s/he trying to gain? What is s/he going to launch at me if I pick up the phone?* This is normal and often exacerbated when hiring lawyers to go to court. While you were married, the implicit agreement was that you each made choices in the best interest of the family. In separation and divorce, especially in the court process, things do shift.

So, be proactive. Develop agreements about how and when discussions will happen. Important discussions related to any aspect of the marital settlement agreement should not be made on the fly or without ample opportunity for both people to prepare for the conversation. A best-practice is to make a list of topics that need to be discussed and plan a schedule for the conversations. You can do this weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly, depending upon the pace of your process.

New topics will arise all the time, so putting a process in place is very helpful. You can identify the topics in an e-mail and then agree upon a schedule for the conversations. This will give you both time to gather the information you need to discuss the topic as well as to prepare emotionally.

Your commitment to following the process is essential for its success. This means that if/when your partner raises a topic on the phone or after dropping off a child, you stop the conversation and refer to the schedule for discussions.

### Love Your Kids More Than You Hate Your Ex

Kids know they are a product of both parents. This is one of the most powerful reasons that I have ever heard anyone give as to why you should not bad-mouth your ex. If you “hate” some part of your ex, then your kids think you must hate this same aspect in them.

Kids of divorced parents can be happy and thrive as long as they receive love and know that there is stability for them. Love your kids enough to have conversations in private and keep them out of the middle. Separate from your ex emotionally, but retain a level of civility that creates a calm and secure environment for your children- and make choices that are true for your situation. The kids do not *need* for you all to be together at a holiday. What they really need and expect is to be loved.

Life during separation and divorce can feel chaotic and unstable. Everything is changing.

While there is a lot that you cannot control or

stop from changing, you can create pockets of stability in your life by establishing daily practices. Daily practices are anything that you choose to do every day, regardless of what is happening. I recommend that you choose things that are small and easy to do. Commit first for 30 days and watch what happens!

### Develop a Daily Practice



Some examples of daily practice may include:

- Express gratitude for the day that is in front of you when you first wake up in the morning.
- Send and receive a text from a close friend or family member daily so you know you have a regular contact with someone who cares about you.
- Stretch for 5-10 minutes each day in the evening to release tension.
- Identify a poem or verse that you recite each day.
- Write in a journal for 15 minutes per day.
- Set aside time to sit and listen to favorite music with nothing else to do for 15 minutes per day.

This final strategy is one of the most important *and* one of the most difficult. It is natural to feel anxious or scared when your life is changing, but know it will pass.

Keep Your Seatbelt Fastened

You do not need to react to everything that comes before you. You do not need to panic if someone gets upset or uncomfortable. You and everyone around you is changing and hopefully growing. Discomfort is a part of the growing process. Keep your seatbelt fastened and don't try to jump out of a moving car. Discomfort passes and things will become calm again. Trust yourself, and trust that the passage of time can be very restorative.



Be good to yourself. ~ Journey

What are the things that are essential to keep you breathing, well nourished and strong?

Make a list of 4-6 things, including physically, emotionally and spiritually)

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