

The 12 Steps for Divorce

By Alison L. Patton

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I've watched friends get divorced and friends get sober, and it's always surprising to me how much the recovery process is the same. Those first several months, it can be a struggle to make it through each day. For the alcoholic, the overwhelming urge is to take that drink. For the person getting divorced, the urge is to give into anger, revenge and blame. Both people know that such behavior will sabotage themselves. . . but that's the addictive quality of alcohol and human emotions – the pull is so great that sometimes self-destructive acts triumph over rational thought.

I've often thought that if divorce court were run like Alcoholics Anonymous, it would be an entirely different experience – and one with better outcomes. Everyone would attend meetings, surrounded by other couples struggling with the same issues. The newly-separated would be inspired by the long-timers who have reached the light at the end of the tunnel. The speakers would share their inspirational message of hope, telling of the positive life changes that came out of their divorce. They would speak of how the temptation to lash out at their ex is still there, but it is easier now to walk away.

Everyone would be given a sponsor, someone you can call day or night when you're feeling weak, or when you are about to walk into a settlement meeting with your spouse. Finally, at your one-year mark, you'd stand up and be honored for having made it through one of the most difficult years of your life.

You'd be given all the same slogans too – “This Too Shall Pass,” “Fake It Till You Make It,” and – my own personal favorite – the Serenity Prayer: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”

I tell my clients these very same things: “This is not the end of your life, even though it feels like it right now.” – “Try to keep it together around the children even if you have to fake it.” – “You can't control your spouse's behavior – just focus on your own actions.”

Although this is a far cry from the legal system we have today, you can still choose to follow this model. The main thing it requires is for you to wake up each day and say, “I'm not going to give into anger, revenge and blame,” the same way the alcoholic wakes up each day and says “I'm not going to take that drink.” Granted, it's much easier said than done, but we've all known courageous people who did it – whether in sobriety or divorce.

My “12 Steps for Divorce”© read like this:

1. I am powerless over my feelings of anger, sadness and fear. I accept that these feelings are a normal part of divorce and the grief process. I will allow myself (and my spouse and children) to experience these feelings without impatience or judgment.
2. I refuse to give into anger and revenge, no matter how much I am provoked by my spouse (or his/her attorney).
3. I refuse to see myself as a victim.
4. I will get the support and professional help I need to keep my emotions from controlling my actions. I will not make decisions when I am out of control. I will make important decisions only when I have clarity.
5. I will face myself and my pain with courage, knowing that something positive will come from this suffering.
6. I will focus on the future and will not allow myself to dwell on the past, knowing that I cannot change what has happened and that engaging in blame will take me nowhere.
7. I will not create conflict or further pain for myself or my children by engaging in nasty, petty, passive-aggressive or immature actions against my spouse, either in the legal arena or in our regular interactions around the children and the divorce.
8. I will take the necessary steps to educate myself about my legal rights and options for handling the divorce so that I will not be vulnerable to the bad advice of friends, family or misguided attorneys.
9. I will not be a doormat. If necessary, I will seek assistance from attorneys and mediators to reach a fair agreement that is in the best interests of our children. I will not engage in useless conflict over issues which are neither important nor legally significant, and I will very carefully pick my battles and focus only on the issues which really matter in the long run.
10. I will carefully choose an attorney whose philosophy and experience is suitable to my goals for fair resolution and minimized conflict. If I am forced into litigation by my spouse, I and my attorney will continue to make wise and rational decisions that are necessary to protect my legal rights, but I will never use the court system to strike back in anger or revenge. I will never use my children as pawns in the legal process. I will always keep in mind that the best gift I can give to myself and my children is to minimize the conflict as much as possible.
11. I will protect my children and show my love for them by not dragging them into the conflict, not speaking badly of their other parent, and not fighting in front of them. Unless their other parent is a danger to them, I will make custody and parenting decisions that allow my children to have ample time with both of us. I will not interfere with his/her custody time and I will have the children ready on time for transfers, with

whatever they need packed. I will not criticize his/her parenting or what he/she is doing with the children when they are with him/her, unless his/her actions are truly endangering the children's safety or emotional well-being.

12. When I am able, I will commit to the process of moving on and working toward forgiveness. With the help of a therapist, a spiritual advisor, or through other means, I will work to let go of the wrongs done to me by my ex-spouse in the marriage and during the divorce. I will also face my own mistakes and failings so that I can learn from them and forgive myself. I will make amends to my ex and to anyone else I hurt during my divorce out of fear, ignorance or pain, unless to do so would cause further harm to them. I recognize this final step is essential to moving forward with my life and finding the inner peace and happiness I desire.

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