

Tips for families to prepare for a peaceful and cost efficient divorce or legal separation.

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Finances – Gather information on your monthly expenses, income, and cash flow needs on a monthly basis. To help with this task, there are free sites such as www.mint.com that can categorize spending and help you understand your monthly budget. Many banks and credit unions offer this service as well. It's also a great time to meet with a financial adviser to better understand your financial situation and how to save and plan for the future.

Kids – Start thinking about your vision for co-parenting and how these new roles will be to help your child or children thrive and minimize the negative impact of divorce. Inquire about parenting classes for divorcing parents offered in each county. Statistics from the court show the earlier each parent completes these courses the greater the likelihood of avoiding litigation and co-parenting with success. I also recommend meeting with a child specialist or parenting coach to optimize communication and ease the transition of your family and children during this difficult transition.

Home – Start thinking about your goals and vision for the future, and whether you agree on selling the family home, buying out your spouse's share of equity, or continuing to co-own in some manner after divorce. Gather information on value of home, mortgage(s) and any lines of credit attached to the home.

Debts – Run free annual credit reports to better understand any and all debts and liabilities outstanding as well as credit score for possible re-finance or loan. One site that seems user friendly is www.myfico.com but there are many others you can find as well. You may consider closing unused joint accounts and trying to simplify and disentangle debts.

Tip for unemployed spouse looking to transition back into the workforce – I highly recommend meeting with a vocational coach or career services staff at a local college to explore initial steps to develop a plan for re-entry into the workforce and different educational plans and career paths.

Family business – If you have an ownership interest in a family business, it is a good idea to organize your accounting and books to make sure everything is up to date and in order. It's money well spent to hire a good bookkeeper or accounting firm to help set up QuickBooks accounts or assist in bookkeeping.

Taxes – If you have any past years in which you have not filed taxes, it is crucial to meet with a CPA or other tax professional and catch-up to current year.

Retirement accounts – Try to avoid early distributions or withdrawals from retirement accounts prior to divorce or legal separation. I highly recommend obtaining legal advice for any possible creative solutions to avoid penalties and look at all available options.

Communication – Most importantly, in my opinion, is the ability to maintain open communication and transparency, so there are no surprises or changes from the “*status quo*” without discussion and agreement. Family coaches and mediators can help facilitate these discussions in a safe and confidential environment. Also, think about using the collaborative team approach if you would like to have more support and advocacy than mediation offers while still staying out of court and meeting family goals. Coaches can be utilized in both mediation and collaborative models.

Bottom line is separation and divorce don’t have to be awful. It takes hard work and compassion to keep the process peaceful, and we have a community of collaborative professionals here to help. We are peacemakers at heart, looking to help families avoid the pain and cost of litigation.

Disclaimer: Content of this article is not intended as legal advice and it’s strongly recommended that you consult with an attorney licensed in the state in which you reside if you have legal questions.