**Getting through the family court process**

If you’re considering family court or have already initiated family court proceedings, you may find yourself struggling with many conflicting emotions – relief, anger, fear, humiliation, sadness, and so on. You may feel overwhelmed at times and you may experience a sense of loss that may continue for some time. Even if you weren’t happy with your situation the way it was, it was what you knew and may have provided some sense of stability. Change can be difficult to cope with and you may feel very alone. You may feel apprehensive about the future, unsure of yourself and where to go from here. You may be facing a loss of home, community, finances, relationship, and support network. You may also have to learn to do things or worry about things that you didn’t have to before and that can be scary.

Although your situation and experience are unique, you are not alone. Many people have faced similar challenges and have come through it all stronger than before. They have learned to seek out information, weigh their options, and make difficult choices. They have learned to ask for what they want, assert their needs, and stand on their own two feet. They have learned that they do not need to settle for a life of misery or insecurity and that they deserve to be happy on their terms. They have learned to raise their children in homes that are healthy even though both parents don’t live under the same roof. They have taken care of themselves and gradually re-established that sense of security and stability. You can too.

Here are some suggestions to help you through the family court process:

* Make a plan. Take it one day at a time. Focus on the present and not the past. Try to control only those things within your control.
* Make a to-do list to help you stay organized and set your priorities. List all the items you have to accomplish and mark them off as you go through them.
* Put aside any money you can. Think about ways to cut your expenses if possible.
* Keep a calendar to record any meetings with your lawyer, court dates, discussions or interactions with your ex-partner, visitation with the children, missed appointments or visits, violations of an agreement or court order, appointments with your children’s teachers, doctors, coaches, tutors and so on.
* Prepare a notebook or file to keep all of the paperwork in. A three ring binder and a three-hole punch work well. Put papers in chronological order and make an index. An alternative is a file of some kind.
* Stick to a routine. It will help if you try to keep things as normal as possible in your life. Do not skip meals or change sleeping habits. Positive routines like using your to-do list and calendar will help you keep focus. Exercise is always a great way to [relieve stress](http://divorcesupport.about.com/od/copingduringdivorce/tp/tips_stress.htm). Try not to isolate yourself from your friends.
* Be constructive. Try to maintain a positive outlook and do not let yourself be lured into needless [conflicts](http://divorcesupport.about.com/od/conflictresolution/tp/exconflict.htm) with your ex-partner. Keep in mind that you paralyze yourself by focusing on the things you don’t have and can’t do. Rather, focus on what you do have, and can do.
* Gather financial information. If you are going through a divorce or separation, one of the primary goals of the divorce process is the make an equitable distribution of marital assets and debts. In order to get your fair share, you need to know what is owned and what is owed. A good way of organizing the information you find is a financial statement which can be used as a checklist. Many courts have a form financial statement available at the court clerk’s office and sometimes online. Give it to your lawyer at the first meeting to save time and expense.
* Make a list of all possible assets, including the marital home, any financial accounts, vehicles, artwork, pension plans, inheritances or belongings brought into the marriage. Gather all documentation regarding each asset including the present value, when and where the asset was purchased and whether it was purchased with joint or separate funds. You will especially want a copy of any recent real estate appraisals. The easiest way to determine marital debt is to get a copy of your credit report. Any debt you have will be listed on your report. You will also be able to find out if there is any. Once you determine what debt exists you need to obtain statements on all open accounts with the balance due showing. Turn all documentation over to your attorney. Be sure to keep a copy for yourself.
* Determine what your costs of living will be and prepare a budget. You will have to estimate some expenses but it is important so that you can have some idea of what you will need to survive in your new life. It is also important because it will influence how you [negotiate your divorce settlement](http://divorcesupport.about.com/od/propertydistribution/ht/divagreement.htm). You need to know what you will need financially in order to evaluate your settlement options or what you may ask for should your case go to court.
* If you don’t have any credit in your name alone you should establish some now. You can do this by obtaining a credit card but remember you want a card that is in your name only. Once you have a credit card in your name use is sparingly and make sure you are able to pay it off each month. The goal is to establish a good credit score not to run up a bunch of debt. This is done by using credit cards only to the degree that you are able to pay off monthly.
* It isn’t uncommon, after learning there is an impending divorce for a spouse to raid financial accounts. Sometimes it is done out of anger, sometimes it is done on the advice of an [adversarial attorney](http://divorcesupport.about.com/od/divorceattorneys/ht/attorneyhowto.htm). You will want to protect yourself and keep your spouse from being able to clean out any joint accounts you have together. If you fear your spouse doing such a thing you can protect yourself by opening accounts in your name alone, remove half of the funds from the joint accounts, and deposit them into your new accounts. Do not hide the fact that you have done this and do not spend the money foolishly. Document every penny you spend so that you can have an accounting for it during settlement negotiations or in court. If you have savings accounts, money market accounts or any type investment accounts and you fear your spouse will tamper with those you should consider having the accounts frozen. You should, of course, discuss with your attorney any action you plan to take regarding joint financial accounts.
* Before you separate when possible, close all joint credit accounts. Closing them before divorce proceedings will keep an angry spouse from using the account and running up charges that you may later be held responsible for. If you are not able to pay off or come to a settlement agreement regarding the balance owed you should have the accounts frozen. This will keep you from being able to use the account but will also protect you in the end. Once the divorce is final, the balance owed on the account can be transferred to the party the court holds responsible for the debt. If the responsible party does not pay the debt then you don’t have to worry about it affecting your credit score.
* Contact and alert creditors to the fact that you are going through a divorce. If there is a change of address, make sure they know it so that you will continue to receive bills from all joint accounts.
* Make sure all credit card bills are being paid. Divorce proceedings can take months and all it takes is one late payment to hurt your credit. Even if you have to pay the minimum on accounts that you know will ultimately be your spouse’s responsibility it will be worth it.
* Do your research. It is valuable for you to learn everything you can about your family court issue early in the process. If you know little or nothing about the process, you may not make the best decisions or choices. Most people are uncomfortable with the unknown. You can raise your comfort level and your odds of success by finding out what is going to happen before it happens. The Internet is a convenient way to obtain summary and detailed information about divorce. You can also start your research at a library or bookstore or talk to friends who have been through divorce.
* Forgive yourself. Try not to be overly critical of yourself and be sure to pat yourself on the back.
* Learn to create little victories for yourself and build on them. Shoot for one little thing each day that can show progress in a particular area of your life.
* Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Although you may be hesitant to ask for help, no one can read your mind. There are many people who would be happy to help you if you ask.
* This new life is a work in progress, so be patient with yourself. Masterpieces take time to create!
* Learn to let your perfectionism go: Each time you feel the pressure to get too many things done in a day, ask yourself which things really don’t matter and let them go. It’s freeing.
* Friends will take sides and this will hurt, but those who are true will be there to listen and will be there forever.
* If your children will be visiting their other parent, you will need to learn to get used to your time without them as best you can. If you can make good use of this time, it may be easier on you and your children.
* Search for inspiration and feed your soul and mind with upbeat information.
* Make a list of “Things To Do Before I Die” with all your dreams and aspirations, and fun things you’d like to do. And then start doing them and checking them off!
* You will learn to sleep alone but also to come and go as you please on your own schedule.
* When you think you don’t have the strength, dig deeper. You’ll be amazed at what you never knew was inside of you.

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