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## What Smart Women Do After Divorce

"Why do some women do well after divorce, while others get stuck?" a divorcing client asked me, confronting her worries head on. "I want to be happy again. I want to rely on myself and not be afraid of the future. I can't make it without his support, but it's tough being tied together for so many years through the kids and the money."

Indeed, financial entanglement is a double-edged sword. Moving on is much harder for women (and men) who remain connected via a custody share, child support or alimony. How do you get closure when the contact and financial dependency continue? What's the key to regaining your independence and confidence?

My answer is something most people already know, but nonetheless is the greatest challenge of divorce: You commit to being happy or commit to being right. The smartest women I know choose happiness, and this has been the key to rebuilding their life. I've observed five actions and attitudes these women adopted that made the difference in their recovery process. It's never too late to start.

### **#1: No More "Woe Is Me" (ideally after the first year)**

*Smart women make that mental shift from victim to survivor, and they take the necessary steps to get there fully.*

By far the most important (and most difficult) step is to impose a statute of limitations on feeling sorry for yourself, even if the conflict is ongoing. The first year, it's normal to dwell on the loss, to cry, grieve, vent to your family and friends about every last detail. But after that, even though you're still raw, it's important you make a deliberate mind shift from seeing yourself as a victim. Regardless of what your husband did or is still doing, you don't want to make the pain of your divorce your identity and your calling card.

Your negative feelings won't disappear miraculously, and of course this isn't a one-time mind shift. Sadness and despair roll in when you least expect it. You're not unusual (nor should you be embarrassed) if you need antidepressants for some period of time to get unstuck. Many women also find it beneficial to examine their feelings in a therapeutic setting, such as private therapy, a divorce support group, or counseling services from their church/synagogue.

Friends can be a great resource, but don't use them only as a sounding board for self-pity. If you're hanging around a friend -- divorced or otherwise -- who spends her time man-bashing and telling you how you've been screwed, that friendship is keeping you stuck. Spend time (and connect online) with women who are upbeat and can be role models for moving forward with strength and optimism. Two blogs I like, created by women who did something constructive to deal with their divorce, are [Chick Chain Walking Club](#) and [One Mom's Battle](#).

One client summed up her recovery process: "I developed the strength and discipline to give my victim feelings a shelf life ... I'd say to myself, 'I get tonight to feel sad and then tomorrow it's back to business.'"

An added benefit of taking this step is you'll be a role model for your children, especially a daughter, about how to recover from a life crisis.

### **#2: Accept the Economic Reality of Divorce**

*The smartest women come to terms with the reduced lifestyle they have after divorce. They reaffirm their priorities or commit to changing their lifestyle. They do not rely on their ex-husband as their long-term financial solution, nor do they see "finding another man" as the solution.*

Unless you're wealthy or a movie star, your economic level will decrease as a result of divorce. The same income that used to run one household is now running two. Women often don't get paid the same as men for comparable work, and women's careers are impacted by choosing to raise children -- but these are facts, but not obstacles to happiness. Smart women deal with these realities in one of two ways:

- They accept this reduction in lifestyle. Their joy comes from other things, like their children and the opportunity to be an involved parent or appreciation of their job and the flexibility it affords them even if it doesn't pay as well as a high-paying career.
- If/when the timing is right, they make the decision to increase their earnings through their own means, such as a better job, increased hours, or additional education and training.

Either of these choices leads to greater peace and self-confidence.

### **#3: Develop a 10-Year Financial Plan**

*Smart women take charge of their finances during and after divorce. They hire a financial planner or an accountant to review and organize their finances and map out spending and goals for the next decade. Although daunting at first, this step is immensely empowering.*

Divorce may be the first time you've managed the family finances and planned for the future. Although it feels overwhelming, don't stick your head in the sand with the naive hope that you'll be able to make it forever on what you're getting in support and assets (or that you'll meet someone who will take care of you).

First, educate yourself about financial planning through a book, seminar, or online resource. Second, find an expert (an accountant or financial planner) with whom you can review your finances and spending. (I strongly suggest you choose an expert who charges by the hour instead of on a commission basis.)

Looking at the economic reality is a wake-up call for most women. One client said after her meeting, "I quickly saw that I need to be much more thoughtful about how I use my assets and how I spend what I am getting in support. I'm now focused on my short-term goals -- reducing my spending and finding ways to supplement my income -- and my long-term goals of getting the kids through college and saving enough to have a dignified life in later years. I feel more in charge of my future and less anxious as a result."

#### **# 4: Repeat After Me: "I Cannot Change My Ex"**

*Smart women recognize they can't change their ex-husband. They pick their battles, they let go of issues that don't really matter or can't be changed, and they accept with grace and maturity the general unpleasantness of an ongoing custody share -- knowing this is just the reality of divorce.*

It's normal to want to have a say in how your ex behaves -- particularly related to the kids. But save yourself the struggle. In a strange way, this step is about taking control of your inner life by letting go of outside control.

Sharing custody involves a lot of frustrations. The most common ones I hear from women are: he cancels or is late; he feeds the kids junk food; there are no limits at his house on TV, video games or computer; he buys them toys/electronics you said no to, instead of buying the shoes and school clothes they need; he gripes about expenditures for the kids' extracurricular; he lets them stay up past their bedtime; he doesn't return their clothing or returns everything dirty; he doesn't make the kids do chores, so they complain when you enforce this rule at your house; he has joint custody but you still have to take the lead on doctor and dentist appointments, school, homework, extracurricular activities and sports.

Is this behavior fair or considerate? No. Is it worth getting upset over? No. Unless he is abusing the kids or repeatedly not showing up, you can't generally control these kinds of actions. It's a costly endeavor to try.

I'm not saying smart women allow themselves to be doormats -- they definitely don't. Sometimes you have to put on the business hat and confront an issue with your ex. Sometimes legal action is required. Be sure the issue warrants it and has a good probability of resulting in change. And work to let go of the rest.

#### **#5: Focus on the Future, Commit to Growth and Introspection, And Build a Relationship with Yourself**

*Smart women channel their energies post-divorce into examining their life, their goals, their mistakes and how they can learn from the past. Instead of jumping into another*

*serious relationship (or spending their time complaining about their ex), they focus on their own life issues. They redefine their priorities and discover what's meaningful to them. They mature fully into themselves as women whose identity is not tied to the role of mother or wife.*

We've seen this or been there ourselves -- how men and women "lose themselves" in marriage. For many women, their identity becomes tied to their husband or children early on, and so when the marriage ends and these roles are lost or diminished, the woman feels unsure of who she is. This is one reason divorce can be a real moment of crisis.

The smartest women I've observed use their divorce as an opportunity for growth and maturity. They take inventory of their life, mistakes and all, and devote time and energy to discovering who they are and what they want for their future. This process takes time, patience and dedication, but in the end, these women are able to put their divorce behind them. They go on to be centered, stable, self-assured, capable women who find the happiness they felt they had lost. In fact, when I asked these women if they could turn back the clock and stay married, the answer was overwhelmingly a heartfelt "no" -- they would never go back, even with all of the known challenges.

What would be on your list for recovery?

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