

A practical and emotionally healthy approach to separation



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Red Robin Counselling & Training Practice

The Christmas break and the start of a new year are joyful times for many, but for others they are a time of increased strain and tension. This is particularly pertinent in today's climate of restrictions and lockdowns. It is no surprise that there is a sharp increase in enquiries to divorce lawyers in the weeks following the festive break; notably the so called "Divorce Day" on the first working Monday in each new year. These go hand in hand with people seeking emotional support from counsellors – it is well recognised that mental health takes a plunge during separation. Counsellor **Charlotte Carroll of Red Robin Counselling** and family lawyer **Anna Shadbolt of Dawson Cornwell** share their thoughts on what may help those struggling with relationship breakdown.

Where do I start?

Charlotte: The first contact is ALWAYS the hardest, with many putting it off for some time; there are naturally many unknowns if you haven't had counselling before. Simply not knowing what a counsellor may ask can be daunting. Here are a few initial questions that are likely to be asked:

- Have you ever had counselling before? What was this experience like?
- What would you like to gain from counselling?
- How would you know if you've achieved your goal?
- Your history of self-harm/suicidal thoughts.
- Any medical conditions the counsellor should be aware of.

There should always be space for you to ask as many questions as you'd like. Remember, the luxury of private counselling is that you can CHOOSE your counsellor. If this one doesn't feel right, contact another – it is ok to shop around. Check online directories of qualified counsellors (examples in Notes below) to ensure your counsellor is qualified and follows an ethical framework through a membership body. [Also see Notes for pointers on finding free or low-cost support.]

Finding a counsellor online can feel similar to online dating. You will be faced with many counsellor profiles and you may decide upon a counsellor by their photo before you read anything about what they offer. However, do take your time to read the

counsellor profile to see if you feel a connection to them. Do they look and sound like someone you can open up to and would want to talk to? Once you've found a counsellor you like the sound of you can drop them an email or give them a call. Many counsellors offer a free 15-30 minute call and some offer a whole free session.

Anna: Picking up the telephone to make that first call takes courage. Sometimes it's the first time a client has said out loud that they want to get divorced. Sometimes it's the first time they feel ready to hear advice about their options and think about what lies ahead. Often, it's the end of a long road of trying to make the relationship work and they are desperate for change in some form. My clients come to me from a variety of sources; some referred to me personally by my contacts, some know of Dawson Cornwell's excellent reputation, some have simply searched online for a divorce lawyer in their area. As with people in general, divorce lawyers come in all shapes and sizes. You need to find the right one for you. You may seek a lawyer who is a forceful litigator, or you may prefer a more measured and less adversarial approach. Above all, you need a lawyer with clear expertise in family law and one that you can trust. The following are a good start:

1. Resolution 'Find a law professional' search: <https://resolution.org.uk>
2. Only Mums and Dads Family Law Panel: <https://thefamilylawpanel.org>
3. Legal 500 directory (lists top ranked firms): <https://legal500.com>
4. Chambers & Partners directory (lists top ranked firms): <https://chambers.com>

Who is the right professional for me?

Charlotte: You will need to consider whether you want someone to listen and sit with you and support you through this time or whether you want someone who can provide more practical support. Some types of therapy will be about making changes for self; identifying unhelpful thinking habits/behaviours and finding ways to alter them. Other types will focus on listening to you, or some therapists will be interested in thinking and linking your current concerns with childhood experiences, giving you a greater understanding of your patterns of relating. I am an Integrative Counsellor. This means I can pull on strings from more than one approach and mould therapy to the individual sitting in front of me. I am able to work at your pace and provide a safe, non-judgemental and confidential environment. I will sit with you and develop an understanding of your world ('Person-Centred'). I am also able to work with you to explore your past and how unresolved historic events/feelings can impact your current behaviours, thoughts and feelings ('Psychodynamic').

Whatever the form of therapy, the counsellor will work at your pace, providing you with a space where you can freely speak and explore. Follow your instincts when you are reading the counsellor profiles and have your first call. If it doesn't feel right, you find a connection isn't forming or feel possible, trust your instincts and try another one.

Anna: You will know by the end of your first telephone call whether that lawyer is the lawyer for you. During an initial call I do the following: a) get to grips with the key facts b) outline the divorce process c) provide my thoughts on what financial settlement you can expect to receive d) estimate how long the process takes and potential costs e) advise on points to think about when managing the interim period, including arrangements for any children.

I am a proud member of two organisations: Resolution and the Family Law Panel of Only Mums and Dads. Both these organisations promote constructive and cost-effective negotiations, with the interests of the family at heart. My key aim is to sort out the dispute and protect a client's interests during the process; I am not interested in running up enormous legal bills on fights that will ultimately not serve you well. In all cases there are robust arguments that must be made, and I am an experienced litigator so am comfortable in the court arena, but I firmly believe that protracted, acrimonious and costly court proceedings must remain a last resort.

Why is it important to seek support?

Charlotte: Mental health support before, during and after divorce can be incredibly useful in the following ways:

- Helping you to feel less stressed and alone.
- Enabling you to be in a position where you can best support your children.
- Enabling you to be sure you are making the best decisions for you.
- Ensuring you and your feelings are heard, accepted, and understood.

Your solicitor is there for you but they require facts so they can best help you obtain what you need and deserve. They don't necessarily have the time nor the training to support you emotionally; this is not their primary role. Plus, you will be paying them a lot more per hour than a counsellor, who is better equipped to support you with mental health concerns. A counsellor is there just for you; to listen, accept and understand you and your feelings.

Counselling is also available for your children, especially if you notice they are struggling with the transition. Counselling can aid children in understanding what divorce is and means for them. It also encourages them to consider their own thoughts and feelings, giving them a voice, which can often be silenced during the divorce procedure.

Anna: Simply put, forewarned is forearmed. It's best to know your options from the outset: a) how to best manage the interim position and protect your interests in the short to long term b) what constitutes a realistic financial settlement – there's no point spending months arguing over a point that will, in legal terms, get you nowhere b) what funding options you may have for expensive legal fees c) potential forums for resolving

this dispute including alternate dispute resolution forums such as mediation and arbitration.

The legal process is not straightforward to navigate; there is archaic terminology to get to grips with, set procedures to follow and limited publicly available guidance on the specifics. Whilst the Government has helped make some parts of the process simpler for the general public (e.g. obtaining a divorce online), other parts such as drafting a court order that embodies your financial settlement largely remain the remit of lawyers. You need confidence that your agreement will be legally binding, and a specialist practitioner will be able to provide you with that assurance.

How to cope: 3 top tips

Charlotte:

1. Consider who constitutes your support network. Who can you go to for emotional support, a shoulder to cry on or someone to vent to? Who can you go to for practical support, perhaps collect some shopping, help on school runs etc? The best tip I can give you in supporting your children is to not use them as a shoulder to cry on or an ear to vent to. They, too, will be holding a lot of uncertainty and emotions.
2. Find a new routine when you are ready – it can be easy to do what you've always done, in the home you've owned, with the person you once loved, maybe still love... it's ok to make changes. In the meantime – find time for you, whether that be seeing friends, joining a book club, finding a hobby or just having space to watch TV.
3. Be kind to yourself: divorce is a huge life transition and the end of a commitment, the death of a relationship and the life you once knew or thought you were going to have. Grief can be felt in very different ways. If one day at a time is all you can handle right now, that is ok. There is no right or wrong way to emotionally navigate a divorce.

Anna:

1. Don't panic. Seek advice at an early stage so you know your options. You will find a way out of your difficult situation; the reassuring thing about the legal process is there is a structure and timescale to resolving disputes so the end will be in sight even though it might not feel like it.
2. Try not to raise the heat. Keep things calm at home as far as possible, especially in front of the children.
3. Be pragmatic. You won't win every fight – focus on what is really important and think about what is realistic and achievable. What arrangements are likely to

work for your children when you are living separately, what type of property can reasonably be afforded, how can precious financial resources be best utilised, how can you avoid a protracted and costly legal process that will ultimately drain the asset pool, and so on.

Concluding thoughts

The benefits of a two-fold approach to a separation – seeking mental health and legal support – cannot be underestimated. It is more likely that you will be able to cope with the challenges of the divorce process if you are feeling mentally well. It is hoped that this article provides some helpful tips and reflections in what is inevitably a demanding time. **Charlotte Carroll of Red Robin Counselling can be contacted on Charlotte@redrobincounselling.co.uk or 07581061242. Anna Shadbolt of Dawson Cornwell can be contacted on anna.shadbolt@dawsoncornwell.com or 02072422556.**

Notes

Mental health support signposts:

- First point of call for free mental health support can be through your GP, but you may find there are rather long waiting lists. Secondly you may find low-cost counselling services via agencies in your area. An alternative option is to find a private counsellor. “Private” sounds expensive and it certainly can be, but many counsellors offer a sliding scale.
- Recognised counselling directories: Counselling Directory, Psychology Today, BACP Directory, NCS Directory (this list is not exhaustive). If you are still unsure don't be afraid to ask a counsellor for evidence of their qualification, their membership status, and their insurance.