

Lost in transition

A divorce coach can be a guiding hand through a topsy-turvy time

For decades, 12-step programs have recognized the importance of providing people with someone you can count on in tough times. Alcoholics Anonymous calls them sponsors.

The process of divorce isn't quite the same as recovery from substance abuse, but it's another of those life passages no one remembers fondly.

So why shouldn't you go through it with someone who knows what it's like? Think of them as divorce coaches — people you call when you're tempted to dial up your ex, whether it's to say something nice or something malicious.

Ideally, the divorce coach is someone who has experienced a divorce (or two); who can live locally or in a different state. The caveat: availability has to be all-hours, whether to offer support, hold you back or listen while you cry.

"The biggest change in a person's life at

BY KRISTI L. GUSTAFSON
STAFF WRITER

the point of divorce is a loss of support," says Michael D. Zentman, director of the Adelphi University postgraduate program in marriage and couples therapy. "The friendship and companionship of your partner was an enormous source of support, and now you no longer have that." A divorce coach, Zentman suggests, can offer this unconditional strength your spouse once provided.

You won't find the term in the Yellow Pages or online. When you need to recruit a divorce coach, it will be someone you know already — a divorce survivor, so to speak.

And they don't charge by the hour. "You can call your lawyer and vent, and it costs you a lot of money," says Stacy Philips, author of "Divorce: It's All About Control—How to Win the Emotional, Psychological and Legal Wars."

"... Sometimes people just need to let off steam."

Talking with someone who has been through a divorce, Philips adds, can make the newly separated feel those roller-coaster feelings are justified and normal.

Preferably, your coach should be someone of the opposite sex.

"If you put a bunch of women in the room who are getting or have gotten divorced, it can get into slandering all men," says Ann MacAffer of Slingerlands, who went through her own divorce a decade ago. "If you get someone of the opposite sex, it gets away from 'Men are pigs — they don't listen, don't pick up their socks.' A person of the opposite sex can give you insight that another women may not see."

MacAffer found a divorce coach in a male friend she met around the time of her separation. He had gone through a divorce several years earlier.

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"The fact I wasn't interested in having a (romantic) relationship with him made it easier to bounce things off of him," says MacAffer. "I didn't worry about what he would think. I could say anything that was on my mind."

MacAffer and her coach talked about loneliness, emotional confusion and frustration. He discouraged her from bypassing divorce lawyers and never seemed annoyed when she kept asking questions along the lines of "What's wrong with me?" and "What did I do wrong?"

They'd have dinner, on occasion, but mostly he was a phone call away — there to listen and not to judge. They moved onto discussing her dating life, and she'd pose scenarios, asking what he thought.

Sometimes they talked every day. A few years ago, they lost touch. She had moved on, was dating and no longer in need of a coach. She equates it to someone being a member of a survivor group eventually wanting to get out of that group and back out

into the "normal" world.

Helping somebody

Trish Caines' three-year marriage ended about a year ago. Six months ago, she began coaching a Florida man she met through a divorce group Caines created on MySpace (<http://groups.myspace.com/divorcesucks>).

He was feeling alone and desperate, as if he'd failed. He even talked about hurting himself. Caines, 22, of Schenectady, gave him a call, they talked for about an hour. Since then, she's watched as he posts progress on the MySpace Divorce Support Group message board. He sounds much better.

"It felt good to know I helped somebody and was there for the stuff they were going through," says Caines, who vividly remembered feeling the same emotions after her own breakup. "It's important to have somebody to lean on in your time of need."

Not any divorced person makes a good divorce coach, experts say. Your coach must be past his or her own issues. If not, the person may end up doing everything but help-

ing you.

"Anger breeds anger," says Ann Zak, professor of psychology at The College of Saint Rose. "Your post-divorce adjustment will be a lot worse if you add fuel to the fire" by depending on advice from a bitter divorcee.

A coach is not there to bash your ex, but for objectivity and firmness. They are less likely to tolerate mistakes — dating the wrong person, poor decision-making — than a therapist might be, says Zak, because your coach has something invested in the relationship — it's not as if your friendship will terminate, unlike a relationship with a therapist, which is often short-term.

"Every divorce is different and every story is different," says Caines. "But when you're at the bottom it's nice to have someone who can say 'I was at the bottom, too, but it gets better.'"

► *Kristi Gustafson can be reached at 454-5494 or by e-mail at kgustafson@timesunion.com.*

