

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVORCE EDUCATION FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS

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Most professional training programs are committed to training intelligent and responsible professionals. However, there is a surprising lack of training to guide counselors, therapists, doctors and others in how best to help people through the divorce process.

In an era where approximately half of marriages end in divorce, clinicians who deal with divorcing individuals and families cannot ignore the impact of the divorce process on their clients. Helping professionals are positioned to have a major impact on how a divorce unfolds. Their interventions at critical entry points in the divorce process can have ripple effects, positive or negative, on all family members. Collectively, mental health practitioners and other helpers can have a major impact on the well-being of families across society.

Too often, helping professions think they are helping separating and divorcing clients when they are not. In empathizing with their clients, professionals sometimes unwittingly get drawn into advocacy roles, supporting what they believe to be their clients' best interests -- winning custody of the children, keeping the house, securing restraining orders, avoiding nasty alimony judgments -- without stepping back to look at how their interventions, or lack thereof, affect the divorcing client and family..

In addition, many professionals are unaware of the divorce process itself. When practitioners understand the process and the various alternatives to litigated divorce, they are better positioned to assist their clients to make informed decisions that can reverberate in their lives and the lives of their children for years.

Another purpose for divorce education is to help professionals protect themselves as they tap-dance through the highly charged and volatile arena of divorce. Working with divorcing clients can be ethically challenging, to say the least. Ethical complaints against practitioners who work with divorcing clients are amongst the most frequent, if not the most frequent, source of reports to professional boards of ethics. It is imperative that training programs help practitioners stay out of trouble in their counseling roles with divorcing individuals and families.

Divorce can be a devastating, draining, and demoralizing process. But divorce doesn't have to be that way. Educators of psychotherapists, counselors and other helping professionals can take the lead in broadening the awareness of how to work with divorcing families. They can help their students advance a new model for the divorce process, one that is intelligent and growth-oriented and serves the needs of all family members.