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Care for yourself, care for your children

Whenever I'm on a plane, I wonder if, in that moment of fear, I will remember or be able to secure my mask first before taking care of our precious daughter.

I imagine all of us would like to believe that even in the most threatening of circumstances we could win the battle between sound judgment and raw emotion. But would we?

Attorneys working in the field of family law are constantly reminding clients of the importance of taking care of themselves. However, we are often left wondering, "Why can't they get it?" Well, we can only imagine that moment when one realizes that their life as they know it, and everything they hoped for, is suddenly in free fall.

For most of our clients, divorce is a free fall. It threatens their very identity as a person and as a parent. If we are to assist in obtaining a safe landing, we need to better understand their fear — not only for their children but for their own survival.

Terrance S. McNicholas, an experienced therapist, mediator and collaborative law fellow offers this insight: "The issue is the fundamental need to feel a sense of power over who we are and some sense of control over our lives. As practitioners, we must remind ourselves that their divorce threatens their identity.

"When our identity is threatened, we desperately need to re-establish a sense of who we are in relation to all there is."

McNicholas shared how individuals attempt to accomplish this in a combination of three ways.

The first is to attempt to

establish power over someone else. This, of course, is what we often see in divorce situations. The ineffectiveness and the destructive ramifications of this strategy are clear. We often see this by a person going to every firm they consider "powerful" for a consultation so his or her spouse is precluded from using that firm.

This also allows him or her to choose which process to divorce they want to use: litigation, mediation or collaborative law. The other spouse is left dealing with responding to this choice.

While the seemingly obvious choice would be to turn to litigation and to use the courts as a tool to hurt the other spouse, some choose to manipulate the other spouse by using a form of alternative dispute resolution. This is often done to buy more time to hide assets or to manipulate a desired parenting schedule.

The second way to establish equilibrium is to access the "power with" someone else. Instinctively, people going through divorce seek out others for support. Unfortunately, they often turn to individuals who actually fuel their anger. In the business, we often refer to this as the "Greek chorus."

How many times have we heard our clients say, "My friend's cousin's neighbor's husband makes the same amount of money as mine and she is getting twice as much support as me and it's not fair." This support system means well, as it tells friends what it thinks they want to hear, but rarely does the advice given actually help. In fact, the advice often makes things much worse and sets the person up for disappointment.

COLLABORATIVE CONCEPTS



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The healthiest way to establish equilibrium is to access the "power within." The goal is to re-establish a sense of identity and meaning to life. Once this need is met, the individual has less desire to exercise power and control over the other person and then they can more rationally resolve issues. Rarely can an individual do this without the assistance of a therapist.

As practitioners focusing on family law, we are constantly asking parents, "Do you believe this is in the best interest of your children?" In reality, rarely can a parent think about his or her children's needs without doing so through the lens of their pain, anger and other emotions. When parents are making decisions which will impact children's lives forever, they cannot possibly do so without therapy and proper coaching.

There is often confusion over the distinction between a divorce coach and a therapist. As both a therapist and a divorce coach, McNicholas explains the difference in this way:

"A divorce coach provides the

client with education, modeling, guidance and tremendous emotional support. They assist the client in identifying their current needs, in the context of the divorce, and help them craft and choose a plan to best meet those needs.

"A therapist takes this process a step further by helping the client to better understand the source of their personal pain to better enable them to continue in the long term to separate their 'personal issues' from future problem-solving efforts.

"The therapist's ultimate goal is to assist the client in gaining a greater self-awareness so they can begin their own healing process. While both roles are absolutely essential to healing, they are different sides of the same coin."

Most parents want desperately to save their children from the potential devastating effects of the breakdown of the marriage. However, they find themselves gasping for air.

As practitioners, it is absolutely essential that we directly address the parent's own primary need for survival. It is essential that the parent's needs be discussed at the initial client meeting and at each meeting thereafter until the client understands that they cannot begin to address their children's needs until they have done the hard work of addressing their own.

We can guide our clients to find the balance between sound judgment and raw emotion as they come to terms with their new post-divorce reality. With the proper support, our clients can move successfully through the divorce process taking care of "self" in a way that results in the best outcome not only for them, but for their children.