

Happily EVER AFTER

Breaking up is hard to do... but a new breed of counsellor is helping take the pain, anger and confusion out of the marriage split experience. Meet New Zealand's first divorce coach

BY TRUDIE McCONNOCHIE



Want a better body? Hire a personal trainer. Want a better life? Hire a life coach. Want a better divorce? Hire a divorce coach.

That's a fashionable thing now. You probably haven't heard of it before, but Elaine Taylor, New Zealand's first accredited divorce coach, is confident it won't be long before we're all familiar with her profession. Divorce coaching originated in the US - no surprises there - and it's just reached our shores. This personal development service, explains Taylor, aims to guide people through the process of rebuilding their lives after divorce or separation. It's not, she stresses, relationship coaching -

she works with individuals, not couples - nor is it legal counsel. Although there are no statistics showing how popular it is yet, divorce coaching is being well received by Americans, and the Blenheim-based mum is hoping Kiwis will be equally responsive.

Before you dismiss divorce coaching as just another fad, consider this: 35%, or just over one-third, of marriages in our country will end in divorce, according to Statistics New Zealand. That's a significant chunk of the population starting again after their 'happily ever after' turned out to be not for ever, grappling with thorny issues such as dividing property and negotiating custody of children, with heartache >>

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and anger often making communication between the separated parties strained. Sure, most people will figure their way through without professional help, Taylor says, but for some, an objective guide could mean the difference between a satisfying post-divorce life and a stagnant one.

"There are three areas I work with clients on," Taylor says. "First, the internal part – the emotion, the confusion – to help them gain the clarity they need to make sound decisions moving forwards. Then there's the business of divorce, which is helping them get all the documentation together to figure out where they stand financially and getting them prepared for meetings with solicitors. The final part is helping them build a new life. I don't tell clients what to do. I'm a sounding board – we brainstorm together and put a plan together to move forwards."

But is there a need for divorce coaching? Isn't this being catered for by professionals such as counsellors and lawyers?

Lucy*, 56, one of Taylor's clients who got divorced three years ago, doesn't think so.

"I went to a counsellor and got, 'you're a great person and this is really unfair'. You feel better but it doesn't give you any guidance. My lawyer knows what I deserve and he knows the law, but he can't sit there and guide me about what I'm going to do with my life – that's not his business."

Five years ago Lucy's husband of 20 years left her for a younger woman – it was a classic mid-life crisis scenario, she says without bitterness, involving him dyeing his hair and buying a new Lexus – but it's only since she started coaching with Taylor this year that she's finally put it behind her.

"I was really stuck," she recalls. "I think everybody who goes through divorce is shattered, no matter how much of a brave face

they put on it, because all your dreams just go up in smoke. You do the blame thing and you wallow. It's hard to stop being a victim. I needed to take real control and move on, and working with Elaine was really helpful."

The impetus for Lucy, who has three adult children, to try divorce coaching came from a brutally honest friend. "She said to me, 'I don't know how you've got any good friends left; I'm sick of hearing about this! You've got every excuse and I'm over it!' It shocked me into thinking 'I really need to start doing something'. My sisters had been supporting me emotionally and they probably hit their heads against the wall. Families can't say the hard things to make you move on. And they hold too much emotion towards the other person so they're not neutral."

FINDING A WAY

While divorce can be devastating, Taylor, 49, points out it provides an ideal opportunity to revamp your life. Her motto is "Choose to thrive, not simply survive", and given her own career redevelopment, this former accountant's a pretty good advertisement for her profession. As you might expect, the mum of two – her son Rob, 20, is studying commercial aviation in the UK and daughter Isla, 17, is in Year 13 at school – was inspired to train as a divorce coach by events in her own life.

"I was divorced a couple of years ago and it was a drawn-out process because my business interests were entwined with my ex-husband's

and it was very difficult, long and exhausting. I realised there wasn't really the help out there for people going through this process."

But the seeds of this career path may have been sown decades before the demise of her 18-year marriage. Taylor's first husband, an American, passed away, leaving her widowed at 24. She attended a grief counselling group while staying with his family in Connecticut, and noticed how people could become trapped by the force of their emotions.

"There was one lady who was very angry; it turned out her husband had left her. I remember her saying we were the lucky ones – our spouses didn't choose to leave us. Even though this was over 20 years ago she's been in my mind often. Hopefully divorce coaching will become widespread enough that people like her can work through the process without retaining the anger and bitterness."

Initially Taylor trained as a life coach at the New Zealand School of Coaching in 2011 then enrolled with the Florida-based College for Divorce Coaching (CDC), studying online via web seminars to qualify as a certified divorce coach at the end of 2012. This was the only specialised institution for this emerging field at the time, but through Taylor's efforts courses are now run through the New Zealand School of Coaching.

From her hometown Taylor plies her trade nationwide, offering Skype sessions which makes her service particularly attractive to those who live in rural areas. The sessions are

45 minutes apiece. Fees vary but are around \$120 per session, and Taylor offers a free, no-obligation initial session.

"[The length of coaching] really depends on the person. So far I've found it's an average of eight sessions, but some people who've gone through CDC say they work with clients for a whole year."

For Lucy, six sessions has been enough, but she'll book follow-up sessions if she feels she's losing her way.

ADDED COSTS?

It's early days, but so far Taylor has received very positive feedback.

"People say they're getting a clear head, and at the end of the session they're given some action points to do, and they find this accountability very helpful. It keeps up the momentum, so they're not going round in circles; they feel like they're actually making progress, even if it's only little steps."

Naturally there are sceptics of personal development coaching, and Taylor expects to attract some criticism.

"One question people might ask is, 'Divorce is an expensive process, why would I want to employ another cost?' I believe because I'm helping people get organised for visits to accountants and lawyers with documentation and a list of questions to address, they're making the best use of professionals' time and limiting those costs."

There's also the potential criticism that Taylor is targeting people who are vulnerable. "Absolutely not," she states. "Having gone through divorce myself and found it very difficult, I do this because I believe passionately in how positive it is for people to have someone to help them through."

MOVING ON UP

As well as establishing her own coaching service, Taylor is busy developing web seminars which provide tools and strategies on divorce. Lucy is busy putting her new life together, and plans to move back to Auckland, where she hails from, as soon as she can sell the business she owned with her ex-husband.

She muses, "I think your brain tries to trick you into staying where you are because it's so familiar. Divorce coaching keeps you moving down that road and not stopping. It gives you more confidence. I wish divorce coaching had been around earlier, really." □

*Name has been changed to protect privacy

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LIFE AFTER DIVORCE

Betsy Lawson had never heard of divorce coaching, but when the 46-year-old mum spotted a flyer advertising this service at her local tennis club, she had a hunch it could help her forge a harmonious, or something close to it, separation from her husband. Lawson, who lives in Lexington, US, about 32km north-west of Boston, booked sessions with Debra Block, a CDC-accredited divorce coach, to guide her through the process of leaving her husband and setting up a new life.

"Having never gone through a divorce I guess I didn't want to make any early mistakes I would end up spending years trying to recover from," Lawson explains to NEXT in a Skype interview.

"Since I had decided to end the marriage I decided it was only fair I be the one to move out of the house, and I really didn't know if I would forfeit any rights to my children; if it would be looked upon as abandonment. I think the consequences of making a misstep in a separation process can be long-lasting."

Naturally, her primary concern was for the welfare and feelings of her children Sarah, 12, and Tim, nine.

"I had a lot of sessions with Debra right before telling the kids, and right after. Because that was my biggest fear – they're going to hate me and they're going to cry all the time. I needed a lot of reinforcement that a happy mum is the best mum for a kid. So there was sort of an intense period that she helped me through."

Before her separation in February, Lawson was working 12 hours a week in a communications job and as a freelance writer. She now works full-time as a communications manager at an IT firm. She rents a house close by and visits her former home every afternoon to spend time with her kids before their father gets home, and has them stay with her regularly. She regards her ex as a friend – something she says might not have been possible without Block's counsel.

"I had a goal to minimise the discomfort and disruption to my children's lives. That their dad and I could be grown-ups and work this out," she says.

"I started dating someone and I had a question about whether or not to tell Kevin. The houses are in such close proximity – what if he happened to show up when my boyfriend was visiting? Debra really cautioned me, and said even though I knew the marriage was over years ago, it's probably still new information for Kevin and for the kids, and to see me so quickly having gotten over it only could have hurt them. And I'm so glad she said that, because it turns out this guy wasn't so great and I broke up with him. They had no need to go on that emotional rollercoaster."

Lawson says while she found divorce coaching highly beneficial, it might not suit everyone.

"When I play tennis, I don't want my coach telling me, 'Hey, you really tried out there, and too bad you lost.' I want a coach who says, 'You could have got your racket back faster and you weren't moving your feet.' I want to hear the tough stuff so I can have a better outcome, and I have a thick skin for that," she explains. "Not everybody does."

Although her friends have been a great support, Lawson says she needed an impartial party to keep her moving forwards when it all seemed too hard.

"She helped me keep my focus on what the end goal was, which was to live a life more the way I would want to define it, and she helped me remember it was not just the end of a chapter, but that it was also about new beginnings," she says. "A coach is someone who's looking at outcomes, and that sometimes means you have to run extra laps when you're tired, you have to change what's comfortable, and my friends may not want to make me feel uncomfortable, they may just want to put their arms around me and let me cry. But if you just cry through this process there's a big risk in not being a strong advocate for yourself. I think a divorce coach can remind you to be your own best advocate."