



Nawal Houghton

YOUR DIVORCE COACH

# Relationship Survival Tips Whilst Living with the Person You're Divorcing

- 1. Create Structure.** Just because you and your spouse may both be working from home that doesn't mean that you have to let your life devolve into chaos. Make a schedule for yourself and for your kids. Designate certain times as study time, mealtimes, work time, exercise time etc. It doesn't matter that the schedule is completely artificial. Making a schedule and sticking to it will give your life a sense of order.
- 2. Separate Your Space.** If you can, designate a certain space as "your" workspace and a different space as "your spouse's" workspace. Even if you're a stay-at-home parent, or you're currently unemployed, it's still a good idea to create a separate space for yourself anyway. If your kids are home, make sure they have some space of their own as well. Doing that will give everyone a small sense of separateness. It doesn't matter if your home doesn't have a lot of rooms. Your "space" can be a small room or even a large closet. You can move the furniture around to create areas that feel like they're separate from the rest of the room. If there is truly no way to separate your space, then at least get yourself some noise-cancelling headphones. That will help you tune your spouse (and your kids!) out, at least for a while.
- 3. Respect Each Other's Boundaries.** Designating a certain place as "your space" won't make any difference at all if your spouse and/or your kids keep coming in and bothering you anyway. After you establish your boundaries, you've got to work to enforce them if you want to keep your relationship as peaceful as possible. How do you do that? You might want to start by calling a family meeting. Have each person choose his/her space. Have everyone agree when the "work/school" hours will be. Then have everyone agree – out loud — not to bother other family members during their work/school time when they're in their designated area. At first, respecting each other's boundaries will be tricky. No one will be used to the new rules. Everyone will screw up. That's why getting everyone's agreement to respect the boundaries on the front end is so important. Then when they screw up you can calmly point out that, not only are they overstepping the boundaries, but they're violating their own word. That may help you to enforce your boundaries.

Finally, remember that it's up to YOU to enforce your own boundaries! If your spouse or your kids come barging into your space while you're working, it's your job to remind them that you're working. If you allow them to interrupt you, then they will.

4. **Pick Your Battles.** If your spouse is driving you crazy with how she/he is acting, or what she/he is doing during this crisis, stop and ask yourself 3 questions:

1. **Why does this behaviour bother me?** Whether you want to admit it or not, your spouse's behaviour isn't the only thing that's making you feel bad. Your reaction to your spouse's behaviour is what really gets you. If you can dig deep inside of you and figure out what it is about your spouse's behaviour that's driving you nuts, you may be able to change your reaction to that behaviour. Changing your reaction will help you feel better even if your spouse keeps doing whatever it is that is bugging you right now.

2. **Can I persuade my spouse to change that behaviour, even just temporarily?** Sometimes a simple conversation can solve your problem. It may be that your spouse doesn't realise that what s/he is doing is annoying (most of us do things unconsciously, we're not even aware of our quirky habits OR the way they affect others!) So, before you go crazy, see if your spouse will agree to change his/her behaviour, at least during the time you're living together.

3. **Will fighting about this help my current situation?** If working with the first two questions didn't help, then you need to decide whether whatever is bothering you is worth fighting about. You also need to figure out whether fighting will cause your spouse to stop doing whatever it is that's bothering you. If not, and the only thing that fighting will do is make you and your kids walk on eggshells for a while, then you may just need to suck it up and look the other way for the period of time you're living together.

5. **Designate "Kid" Time.** Taking care of small children when both you and your spouse are trying to work from home can be a real challenge. If your kids are so young that they need fairly constant supervision, the only way to manage is going to be to divide and conquer. In a perfect world, you and your spouse can each designate at least six or seven hours of "work time" in a day. That may mean that one of you starts your day and works from 5 am until noon, while the other works from noon to 6-7 pm. It may mean that one of you works after the kids go to bed. Or maybe you each only work 3 days a week, plus one weekend day. The bottom line is that if you both can be flexible, you can create a schedule that will allow both of you to work, and both of you to take care of the kids. That schedule may change from week to week. It may change from day to day. It will require a tremendous amount of both self-control AND cooperation. What's more, it probably won't be perfect. But you can do it.

6. **Exercise.** Exercising is critical to both your physical and mental health. Getting a little movement and blood flow will do wonders for your body, your brain, and your marriage. It will also give you an outlet to constructively deal with all the extra stress you're currently under. So, instead of lashing out at your spouse because you're all stressed out, you can use your stress to fuel a new exercise regimen. If you're used to going to the gym, and you can't do your usual workout because you don't have the right equipment or an exercise class, go to YouTube. Hundreds of fitness professionals are online doing everything from yoga, Zumba, to interval training and dance. If you've never exercised before, you can still go to YouTube. Search "fitness for beginners" and you will bring up hundreds of videos. No matter how out of shape you may be, you can find something on YouTube to help you move.
7. **Don't Overindulge.** It doesn't matter how nervous, bored or stressed out you may feel. Overindulging in alcohol, marijuana, food, or any other substance, is guaranteed to make you feel worse. The same thing is true of overeating. Eating too much junk food, or just too much food, causes inflammation in your body. Inflammation affects your immune system. A lower immune system makes you more susceptible to illness. Finally, drinking, drugging or "numbing out" on anything is not likely to help your situation. You're much more likely to get into a fight with your spouse when you're drunk than when you're sober. That kind of conflict will only increase everyone's stress level and make dealing with your situation whilst living together that much more difficult.
8. **Manage Your Own Anxiety.** The stressful times we're living through are raising everyone's anxiety level. If you already had a tendency to be anxious or worried before this crisis, you're probably feeling even more out-of-control now. That, in turn, will take a toll on your relationship. To manage your anxiety, you may need help. There is no shame in talking with a therapist. Most therapists are willing to work remotely. They can talk to you via telephone or video conferencing. Some will even work with you through texting and email. If you don't have a therapist, you can find one through BetterHelp. It's the world's largest online counselling service. Within 24 hours of contacting BetterHelp they will match you with a therapist who meets your specifications, and your needs.
9. **Designate "Alone Time".** Everyone needs time alone. To preserve your own mental health, you need to make sure that you make some time every day for yourself so that you can relax, think, and breathe. If you can, take a walk alone outside. The fresh air will help your body and a brisk walk will help clear your mind. If you've got a dog, walk your dog. If you don't, then just walk yourself. If you can't get outside, then go inside – deep inside yourself. Put on some headphones and meditate. If you don't know how to meditate, go to YouTube and search "How to Meditate for Beginners." You'll find more meditation videos than you'll be able to watch.

10. **Get Outside.** Not only will it provide you with a change of scenery, but it has tremendous health benefits as well. (Taking a walk outside is also a great way to burn off some frustration when your spouse is really driving you crazy!) Being outside boosts your energy and affects your mood. It increases your vitamin D level and improves your immune system. (i.e., it can help make your body more resistant to disease, including the coronavirus!) Plus, when you feel better, you're likely to act better toward your spouse. What you do outside isn't important. That you get outside does. So, go for a walk. Do some yard-work. Plant a garden. Play tag/football/tennis/anything else you can think of outside with your kids. Just get yourself outside and breathe!
  
11. **Do All the Things You've Been Meaning to Do "Someday".** If you're not working right now, it's easy for your days to meld together in a sea of sameness. You have nothing particular to do. You're probably already tired of binging on Netflix or playing video games. Motivating yourself to do anything gets harder with each passing day. In short, you're bored. Chances are, though, that there are TONS of things that you've wanted to do in the past, but you never had time to get to (like clean the garage or organise the storage room!) Instead of getting angry or aggravated with whatever your spouse is doing (or not doing!) channel your energy into doing something constructive for yourself. Sit down with a pen and paper and make a list of every project you would like to get done. (Yes, you want to physically WRITE the list. It may be old fashioned, but writing stimulates your creativity more than sitting at a keyboard.) After you have your list, make a plan for which project you will work on every day. Then start working on one project at a time until you work through your list.