

The Divorce Coach

Seeking help with the emotional stress, financial strain and complex legalities that come with the end of a marriage, New York women are turning to *Liza Caldwell*, a new breed of adviser, who guides them through the journey every step of the way

Photography by Ralph Mecke Words by Eve Claxton

When a woman walks into Liza Caldwell's discreet office on New York's Upper East Side, she is usually in crisis. Perhaps she has just been hit with divorce papers, or reached an impasse with her lawyer, or negotiations with her ex have broken down irrevocably. She is likely to be feeling utterly overwhelmed. How will she survive this? What about the kids? Housing? Finances? Caldwell and her partner Kimberly Mishkin – two of the top divorce professionals in New York – can help answer those questions and offer much-needed perspective. “We like to use the term ‘divorce adviser,’” explains Caldwell. “We coach and we educate.”

Most of us are familiar with the role of mediators, lawyers and marriage guidance counselors in a separation. Divorce advisers or coaches, meanwhile, are a more recent phenomenon. Although Caldwell has been practicing since 2012, when she co-founded her consultancy SAS (Support and Solutions) for Women, the title of ‘divorce coach’ was not officially recognized by the American Bar Association until last year. It is a profession that has grown in tandem with the popularity of life coaches, and in step with concerns about the divorce rate in the US, where over a third of marriages are projected to fail.

Caldwell, a sunny and sincere blonde, explains the difference between her work and that of a therapist or mediator. “A divorce coach can guide you through the entire process,” she says. “We’re generalists. We can give a woman information about her options with mediation, or what to look for in a lawyer or a therapist. And sometimes it’s just about empowering her and giving her confidence that she can do it.”

With a professional coaching certification and an MA from Columbia University, Caldwell typically meets with clients weekly, often for two hours at a time. Part of a session may be dedicated to what she calls “the black and white”: identifying the challenges

a client is facing at that particular moment. Then, together, they brainstorm to create an action plan.

When I ask Caldwell to name the most important quality needed for her job, she responds, “Intuition.” Above all, she sees herself as a sounding board and a guiding presence. “It’s really about reading and listening and hearing, and understanding the client’s particular needs, hopes and desires.”

The advice she dispenses is born from harsh personal experience. In the 1990s, she was a young mother with two children living on the Upper East Side, miserable in her marriage but feeling unable to leave her husband. “Although I was extremely well-educated, I didn’t even have an ATM card!” she recalls. “I had a very traditional, Victorian kind of life where I wasn’t empowered.” She stayed in this “spin cycle of indecision” for years. Eventually she extricated herself, but only after educating herself about her options and building a support network of mentors, friends and teachers. She hopes to do the same for other women who are ready to break free from an unhealthy marriage, guiding them through the journey while minimizing the negative impact.

Although every case is different, the women Caldwell meets all tend to have a high level of access to information, while often lacking an understanding of what to do with that information. “There’s no doubt women are doing divorce differently today,” she observes. “Modern women are empowered because of their education and the internet, but even so, it can be incredibly confusing. They’re looking for the right kind of counsel. They want to know, ‘Who’s going to help me get through this?’”

“When a woman first comes to us, she’s very depressed,” she continues. “When she walks out, she’s shifted. She feels more empowered. Women increasingly recognize that there is great possibility after divorce. They want to thrive.” ■