

17 ways to have a better divorce in 2026

How do you untangle a life together with minimal misery? Lucy Denyer spoke to the experts to find out



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Lucy Denyer

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Around 42 per cent of British marriages end in divorce, according to ONS data — and January is unofficially Divorce Month. The bleak days of the new year are when divorce applications are said to soar, possibly after the festive season has pushed couples to breaking point.

Nevertheless, 13 years — the length of the average marriage — is plenty of time to have built a life with someone and, if you decide to end it, there are good ways and bad ways to do so. Nobody wants to spend time wrapped in years of expensive and poisonous

litigation that risks being both emotionally and financially ruinous, and that's before you worry about the children.

So how do you untangle a life together with minimal misery? This is an experts' guide to a good divorce.

1. Know it could take as little as six to seven months — but it probably won't

Legally in England or Wales, you start the process by making a divorce application, which you can do online and which costs £612. Today, there is only one legal reason for divorce — the irretrievable breakdown of the marriage — and you have to have been married for at least a year before you can start divorce proceedings. There's a 20-week cooling-off period between the date on which a divorce application has been issued by the court and the date on which an application can be made for a conditional order. There's no obligation to proceed with the divorce if, after the end of this period, you change your mind. This gives a couple time to resolve logistical elements such as financial and child arrangements. You then have a six-week and one day waiting period before the conditional order can be made final, after which you'll be legally divorced. That means you're looking at a six to seven-month period for a divorce to go through, minimum — in reality, it'll likely take longer.

- [No-fault divorces: the end of mud-slinging?](#)

2. Don't make a lawyer your first port of call

“Unless your safety is at risk, deal with the emotional stuff first,” advises the barrister and co-founder of the Divorce Surgery, Samantha Woodham. A lawyer should be the third or fourth person to reach for — after an emotional counsellor, a mediator or perhaps a co-parenting counsellor. “If you can deal with talking to your kids, figuring out how you feel emotionally and talking to a financial adviser, then by the time you get to a lawyer you're not in fight or flight mode any more, and you've probably got a really good understanding of what you're agreed on.” Plus, once you start the lawyer's clock ticking, the costs are only going to mount.

3. Treat divorce like a project

“Getting your project manager hat on is the key to having a good divorce,” says the solicitor-turned-mediator Dede Gold. Break things down into what you can and can’t do yourself. For example: you can get a divorce order yourself; you don’t need a solicitor to decide who picks up your children; you will need financial and tax advice; you will need a solicitor to make sure everything is above board.

“If you have a partner who you can almost talk to without wanting to stab them in the eye, mediation is a really good way to do the decision-making,” says Helen Thorn, a comedian and author of *Get Divorced, Be Happy*. Mediation is where a neutral third party helps you to reach agreements over disputes. It is not always mandatory, but if couples cannot agree on finances or childcare arrangements, they will be asked to attend a Mediation Information and Assessment Meeting (MIAM) to see if sessions might help. If you do go into mediation, come with a list of things you want to discuss and agree, and be prepared to compromise. “It’s negotiations,” Gold says. “But that’s better than fighting it out through an adversarial route.”

4. Don’t use your mutual friends as your support group

“Don’t go and empty your dirty laundry to your mutual friends because it will make them feel they have to choose a side,” says the divorce lawyer Laura Naser, who posts on Instagram as @thefamilylawyer. Instead, both she and Thorn advise signing up to support groups. “Just a few people who see you and know your circumstances is helpful,” Thorn says.

5. You don’t have to be best friends with your ex

“We shouldn’t think the ideal goal is for everyone to remain happy families afterwards, because often that’s not realistic,” says the psychotherapist Katherine Walker, author of *Step Up: Step-parenting and the Art of Creating a Healthy, Happy, Blended Family*. Don’t feel you need to continue doing things together just because you have children. “Of course we want to maintain stability, but ultimately children don’t need to do the same things with the same people at the same time in order to feel that.” Thorn agrees: “If it’s

possible to be friends with your ex that's great, but being polite and businesslike is OK too."

- [The woman who thinks divorce should be celebrated](#)

6. But if you have kids, remember your relationship won't end with divorce

Your children will continue to have birthdays and in future there could be graduations, weddings and grandchildren. "Divorcing when there are children means a family changes shape, but it does not mean that the family ends," says the family and divorce lawyer Ellen Jones of Forsters LLP. This may mean talking about things like what your relationship with your ex's parents might look like going forward, especially if they're involved in, say, school pick-ups. "If there are concerns, talk them through and air them rather than brushing things under the carpet," Walker says.

7. Make a parenting plan

This means working out not just how you divide up your time, but planning things like schooling, how you introduce new partners and discipline ground rules. Value your co-parent and ensure you preserve the relationship they have with your children. "My child arrangements order includes the provision that if our alternating weekends mean the kids aren't with me or their dad on Mother's or Father's Day, we get the option to swap either the whole weekend or the day to make sure they are," Naser says. "Getting these types of details included in your arrangements can save a dispute down the line."

8. Share calendars ...

... and reassurances, and communication. "One of the core reasons a divorce goes downhill is because people are struggling to trust what the other person is saying," Naser says. She advises constant minor reassurance — that the reason you haven't replied to an email is because you've been really busy with work, for example — and having shared calendars across tech devices. "I share mine with my ex and my new partner and my son, which makes family life a bit easier," she says. If your children are too young for

phones, use a printed calendar and colour-code days for time with each parent, so they understand what's going on.



Having a shared calendar can help make life easier for all parties

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9. Don't birdnest

The practice of “birdnesting” — keeping the family home and having the separating parents rotate in and out of it to look after their children — has become increasingly fashionable, but it doesn't really work, according to Walker. Not only is it an emotionally exhausting rollercoaster for the parents, but it's confusing for the kids and, if and when one person meets a new partner, it makes things really complicated.

10. Don't go to war by WhatsApp

“The aspect I hear most about is warfare via WhatsApp,” says the psychotherapist and author Julia Samuel. “When fury at an ex surges, it can feel like you are hijacked. In that state we are far more likely to say something we later regret.” Samuel advises taking a

moment to breathe or going for a brisk walk to discharge the adrenaline. “Some people find it helps to write the furious reply they want to send, but keep it in drafts until they’ve calmed down. Only when the body and nervous system have settled is it wise to respond.”

11. Set a divorce budget

According to the solicitors Woolley & Co, the average cost of a divorce in the UK depends heavily on its complexity. You’re looking at approximately £1,300-£2,600 for a relatively straightforward, uncontested divorce and up to £30,000+ for a contested financial settlement. Woodham advises jointly working out how much money you’re going to need and approaching everyone from divorce coaches to lawyers with your budget, and asking them what they can give you for your money. Lots of divorce-related services are now fixed-fee — from mediation to shared lawyer solutions, where both parties have the same solicitor.

In the meantime, Naser says, be sensible about where you can tighten your belts but don’t suddenly withdraw your income from going into the joint account, or stop direct debits — try to keep things running as smoothly as possible.

12. Be pragmatic about your financial settlement

“Achieving a brilliant financial settlement after years of contentious litigation will rarely feel like a ‘good’ financial separation,” Jones says. “Similarly, achieving a quick financial settlement without due process will likely leave one party feeling aggrieved and regretful.” Take your time. Understanding your numbers is absolutely crucial, says Lottie Kent, a financial planner. Work out what’s in the joint financial pot, what you own individually and what the outgoings are — as well as what they will be after divorce, including how much it costs to run a house and to retire. “You only get one shot at this so both parties need to make sure it will work, not just now but for the future.” And make sure everything is covered with a court-approved consent order when it’s all agreed, otherwise your ex could make a claim years in the future.

- [How to get divorced: can anyone even afford to split up any more?](#)

13. Don't stay together because you can't afford not to

Limbo prevents you moving on with your life. Gold advises getting some legal advice and then “negotiate and mediate your way through. It’s up to you both how much your divorce is going to cost you.” If you’re really stuck, you could consider living “together apart” as an initial stepping stone — where you basically stay in the same house but live separate lives. However, you need firm boundaries, ideally drawn up into an agreement that includes the right to use different parts of the house at different times, and also financial and parenting obligations.

Note there are funds available to divorcing couples: until March 2026, the government is offering a family mediation voucher scheme of £500 for child-related disputes. If you’re in an abusive situation, legal aid may also be available.



An agreement on financial obligations can make separation more feasible

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14. Don't be too attached to the family home

"Your solicitor can tell you what the law is and what you're entitled to, but in reality just because you're entitled to something doesn't mean it's going to fit the need," Kent says. "Don't prioritise keeping the house over having liquid assets or income — at the end of the day, you can't sell the kitchen to pay the bills."

15. Consider sharing legal advice (yes, really)

If you've worked out your finances and are broadly agreed on the childcare arrangements, you could consider the "one couple, one lawyer" approach. This is where you share a divorce lawyer who will help you work things out fairly. The old-school separate solicitor approach "sucks for couples, because it pits them against each other," says Woodham, whose Divorce Surgery business pioneered the one-lawyer, one-couple approach in Britain (their fees start at £6,270 per couple).

"What most people don't realise about divorce is that it's really normal not to agree, so really it's about figuring out what's fair as quickly as possible." Most couples want a fair split and "not to spend a fortune on lawyer's fees", she says. The one lawyer, one couple option not only achieves that outcome, but "it's much quicker and more dignified".

- [Why couples are paying judges £10,000 to quietly mediate divorce](#)

16. Don't feel s**t about the fact your marriage ended ...

"All the research on the impact of divorce on children shows that it's actually not divorce that's the problem, it's exposure to parental conflict," Woodham says. "So if you're in an unhappy marriage and arguing all the time, probably the best thing you can do is get divorced." "Divorce does not mean failure," Jones agrees.

17. ... But do learn from your mistakes

"Some people divorce a partner and then marry a different version of the same person," Samuel says. "We repeat our mistakes unless we recognise our part in them." The key is to take responsibility for your part in the marriage breakdown so that you can learn from it. Otherwise you might find yourself in the same position a few years down the line.