

# A First Guide

## WHEN YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT DIVORCE

Divorce can feel overwhelming, especially in the beginning when there are more questions than answers. This guide outlines important first steps, what you can do on your own, and how different approaches—like mediation—might fit your situation.

### Important First Steps

- **Pause and take stock:** Think about your goals—what matters most to you (children's wellbeing, financial stability, peaceful process, fairness)?
- **Gather information:** Collect key documents (financial records, property information, children's schedules). Being organized early helps no matter which path you choose.
- **Learn your options:** Divorce can be handled in different ways—on your own, through mediation, with attorneys, or in court. Each path has trade-offs.
- **Care for yourself:** Emotional resilience is critical. Divorce is both a legal and a personal transition. Reach out for professional, emotional, or community support.



### How Much Can You Do Yourself?

- Many people start by researching their state's divorce requirements online. Most courts have self-help websites with forms and instructions.
- You can fill out and file paperwork yourself if your situation is fairly straightforward (e.g., no major disputes about children, finances, or property).
- The more complicated your situation, the more helpful it is to involve professionals (mediator, attorney, financial neutral, therapist).

### Can You File Without an Attorney?

- Yes—this is often called a *pro se* divorce (filing “on your own behalf”).
- You can download the forms from your state's court website.
- You'll need to complete them carefully and file at your local courthouse (sometimes electronically).
- You are still legally responsible for everything in those documents. The court will not “fix” errors for you.
- **Tip:** Even if you file on your own, you might want a professional to review your paperwork before it's finalized.

## Mediation: Pros and Cons

-  **Pros**
- Less adversarial: Focuses on collaboration instead of conflict.
- Child-centered: Helps parents create parenting plans that work for their children.
- Flexible and private: You set the pace and keep decisions out of public court.
- Often less expensive: Usually costs significantly less than litigation.
- Empowering: You and your spouse maintain control of the decisions, rather than leaving them up to a judge.
-  **Cons**
- Not always appropriate: Mediation doesn't work well if there's abuse, intimidation, or extreme imbalance of power.
- Requires willingness: Both parties must commit to open dialogue and compromise.
- May need outside review: Agreements from mediation can still benefit from attorney review to make sure your rights are protected.
- Can take time: If one person is not ready to negotiate, the process may stall.

## Your Next Step

Every family is unique. The best starting point is to clarify your priorities and then explore the process that aligns with them. You may be able to handle much of the paperwork yourself, but professional support (attorneys, mediators, financial experts, or therapists) can reduce stress and prevent mistakes.

*Remember: Divorce is not just about ending a marriage—  
It's about shaping the next chapter for you and your family.*



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