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Setting Boundaries During Divorce: The Co-Worker Rule

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Divorce Mediator Kimberley Keyes reviews how The Co-Worker Rule can help divorced and separated spouses co-exist.



Many spouses who are going through a divorce cannot simply cut ties completely with a former husband or wife. Perhaps they [share children](#) who depend on both parents, while others might work together or [share financial interests](#). For many separating spouses or [divorced spouses](#), a major challenge is reimagining their relationship with their former spouse, so they can move past [negative behavioral patterns](#) they may have developed during the marriage. The “Co-Worker Rule” helps divorcing spouses determine what behaviors and interactions are appropriate during this difficult and emotional time.

Setting Boundaries is Important During and After a Divorce

During and after a divorce, spouses must erect boundaries that would have been unnecessary or even destructive while they were still married. For separating spouses, though, these new, stricter boundaries are crucial: Emotions are running high and it is very easy to take out your anger or frustration on your spouse or blame him or her for all that is happening. Individuals who are used to venting anger on each other during their marriage often struggle to realize that it is no longer appropriate to vent to a former spouse. While it might seem justified and emotionally liberating in the moment, venting your emotions on a divorced or separated spouse only makes post-married life more stressful and contentious for both spouses. Worse, a failure to recognize the need for new boundaries can damage the divorce process, by reinforcing negative patterns of anger, resentment and blaming at the exact moment when individuals should be trying to turn the page in their lives. In the mediation context, a lack of boundaries can result in divorcing spouses focusing heavily on old emotional conflicts – at the expense of resolving real-world issues that couples must address in order to move forward with their new lives. Even if you understand that new boundaries are necessary, knowing what topics should be “off limits” with a former spouse is difficult. It is impossible for separated or divorced spouses to erase years of memories, nor is it easy to ignore the verbal and non-verbal cues you studied during all of those years of marriage. For many couples, turning off the spigot of familiar reactions feels artificial and forced. The “Co-Worker Rule” can help.

The “Co-Worker Rule”: How to Stop Talking to Him/Her Like You’re Still Married

If you and your spouse are divorcing – or already divorced – but you still need to interact with each other, recalibrating your relationship is essential. Treating a former spouse like he or she is still your husband/wife creates conflicts and frequently results in the kind of “oversharing” that harms the speaker as much or more than the

listener. This is where the Co-Worker Rule can be useful. The rule is simple: treat your ex-spouse, or soon-to-be-ex-spouse, the same way you would treat a co-worker in a professional setting. What does this mean in practice? Use common sense. You shouldn't vent unfiltered anger at your co-worker, or needlessly make a co-worker angry. You shouldn't share intimate details about yourself or engage in proactive or reaction-seeking behavior around co-workers. Avoid oversharing about your personal life in the work place. Maintain a steady, composed demeanor. Be a professional. Under the Co-Worker Rule, separating or divorced spouses can measure their behavior by asking a simple question: "Would it be appropriate to say or do this to a co-worker?" If the answer is no, then you probably shouldn't say or do it to a former spouse. Part of being divorced is that you no longer have the right to treat your former spouse like your husband or wife.



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Why the Co-Worker Rule Works for Divorced and Separated Spouses

The Co-Worker Rule amounts to an acknowledgment that you must continue to civilly associate with your former spouse for child-related or financial reasons. Many former spouses deny that they allow their emotions to dominate their relationship with their ex-spouse to the detriment of their children or financial considerations. These former spouses justify all manner of *inappropriate conduct* by simply blaming the former spouse. However, every employee knows that we can't react to a problematic co-worker by copying their bad behavior. The same goes for former spouses. For example, the Co-Worker Rule makes it clear that it is inappropriate to comment on someone's minor mistakes or flaws in their appearance, dress, speech, or behavior. Employees know that blurting out every criticism that runs through their head

crosses the boundaries of courtesy and appropriateness in the workplace. By exercising restraint, effective co-workers keep personal conflicts to a minimum and focus their energies on staying productive and completing their assignments. Under the Co-Worker Rule, separating spouses can deal with each other like co-workers who have been assigned the job of raising their children. Co-workers don't need to like each other, but professionalism limits how vocally we criticize our co-workers, particularly when voicing personal disapproval will undermine your own standing in the workplace. Co-workers who get fired because of a personal beef with another employee have failed as professionals. Harming your children or undermining your financial affairs because you can't control your [anger towards a former spouse](#) is no less a failure.

Kim is a divorce mediator for South Shore Divorce Mediation, located in Hingham, Massachusetts and East Sandwich, Massachusetts. She is also a Senior Associate Attorney for Lynch & Owens, P.C., where she specializes in divorce and family law issues. Kim is a statutory mediator under [M.G.L. Ch. 233, s. 23C](#) and a proud member of the Massachusetts Council on Family Mediation. To read more from Kim Keyes, check out [her author page on the Lynch & Owens Blog](#). **Disclaimer:** The information you obtain at this site is not, nor is it intended to be, legal advice. You should meet with an attorney for advice regarding your individual situation. You are invited to contact our office. Contacting the office does not create an attorney-client or mediator-client relationship. Please do not send any confidential information to the office until such time as an attorney-client or mediator-client relationship has been established. This blog is considered an advertisement for the Law Office of Lynch & Owens, P.C. d/b/a South Shore Divorce Mediation. The Massachusetts Rules of Professional Conduct broadly govern all advertisements and communications made by attorneys and law firms in the Commonwealth. Generally, legal websites and any other content published on the internet by lawyers are considered a type of

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