**KNOW YOUR LEGAL RIGHTS**

**Six Surprising Strategies for Saving on Divorce Costs**

By Attorney Kelly Dodd

An old joke says, “divorce is expensive … because it’s worth it,” but clients still want efficiency and cost-effectiveness when they are paying for legal work. When both parties to a divorce are likely pulling from the same pool of funds to pay attorney fees, it can quickly feel like the only ones who “win” in a divorce are the lawyers. What can a client do to stop the financial bleeding? A lot. Here are six surprising ways you can help control your attorney fees and mitigate the financial impact of your divorce.

**1. Cooperate as much as you can**

If your attorney asks you to provide documents or other information, you can save money by responding quickly and thoroughly. When your attorney must spend extra time following up, sending reminders, or requesting supplemental information you have failed to provide, the time adds up, resulting in unnecessary additional fees.

**2. Allow your lawyer to cooperate, too**

Allow your attorney to request documents and information from your spouse informally before requiring them to demand information through “formal discovery” such as depositions and subpoenas. Exchanging information voluntarily is cheaper and faster than exchanging it through a formal legal process. Ask your attorney for “homework.” Ask what information you can gather or what documents you can provide. Everything you do yourself is one less thing your attorney will have to do for you—but consult them beforehand to make sure everything you intend to gather is relevant and useful to the case or you will be wasting your own time AND your lawyer’s time.

**3. Help your spouse choose the best possible lawyer**

It may seem counter-intuitive, but if you and your spouse have any trust left between you or a common interest you both value above all else (such as your children), one of the best things you can do for your family is to ask your lawyer to recommend a lawyer for your spouse.

When parties to a divorce have an antagonistic relationship and major communication problems, it is more important than ever that you choose lawyers who can get along when you and your spouse can’t. Attorneys who work well together and refuse to behave like warring adversaries can be much more effective and efficient. They will also provide a better overall experience for their clients free of insults, delays, and demands that escalate costs and make their clients’ relationship even harder.

**4. Keep the lines of communication open with your spouse**

Unless there is a restraining order or “no contact” order in place (which is rare), you and your spouse are not prohibited from talking to each other and working things out directly if you can—even if both of you have lawyers. Your lawyers may advise you not to make any final or written agreements without consulting them first, but you can often save on fees by not asking your lawyer questions you could easily ask your spouse directly. Maybe you want to make a one-time modification to the visitation schedule to accommodate an event? Or perhaps you want to close some unused joint credit card accounts. It is easier to ask your spouse directly than to make your lawyers the go-betweens. Working together is always cheaper and faster than working through lawyers.

**5. Get a good therapist**

Your lawyer is an expensive friend. Learn the difference between legal questions and non-legal questions and leave the non-legal questions to friends and family or a good therapist. And do not spend time chit-chatting when you talk to your lawyer on the phone. You will be charged for the full length of the call—regardless of what you discuss.

**6. Read your fee agreement before you sign it**

Some lawyers charge for photocopies or mileage costs. Others charge “file opening fees” or postage. Nearly all lawyers charge for reviewing, forwarding, and responding to emails—no matter how short. Being aware of what your attorney charges for can help you mitigate those costs. For example, if your lawyer charges copying costs, you might decide to bring an extra copy of documents for your attorney, so she doesn’t have to copy them. If your lawyer charges for emails, you can resist the temptation to send multiple follow-ups or platitudes.

Finally, most divorce lawyers are happy to help their clients save money on fees. Understanding how lawyers (and their fees) work is half the battle. When in doubt, ask your attorney for guidance. After all, they are on your side!

*Atty. Kelly Dodd is Director of Legal Operations at Karp & Iancu, S.C. She is a member of the State Bar of Wisconsin Family Law and Appellate Law Sections.* Know Your Legal Rights *is sponsored by the State Bar of Wisconsin Lawyer Referral and Information Service, which connects Wisconsin residents with lawyers throughout the state. Learn more at* [wislaw.org](http://wislaw.org/).