

Taking the High Road After Divorce

Objective

To relate to your ex-partner in a healthy manner following divorce.

What to Know

“Taking the high road” refers to following a course of action which is the most moral or most correct and which is least likely to harm or upset others. It often makes things turn out better for you, and it is often the best choice during and after divorce because it means doing the right thing even if it is not popular or easy – even if your ex is behaving poorly.

You probably know it is best to take the high road in life – you often know what you “should” do. But following divorce, emotions can become intense when you are communicating with your ex about practical matters like negotiating parenting schedules. Especially if your divorce was contentious, it might be easy to communicate in a disrespectful way. Perhaps it is tempting to disregard your ex’s feelings, but there are benefits to choosing your words carefully and conducting yourself in a way you will not later regret.

But what exactly does it mean to take the high road following divorce? Here are some suggestions.

1. Mindfully communicate and manage your emotions. This is not about ignoring your feelings, because you do need to acknowledge, express, and release them. But your emotions should not serve to damage communication channels with your ex. For example, when you write to your ex:

- use email rather than text so you have a record of correspondence
- and you are feeling emotional, take a few breaths, and write your letter in a Word document or your phone’s ‘Notes’ and save it
- ask a trusted friend to read an emotion-laden text or email
- write as if you are speaking to a loved one instead of your ex
- hire a divorce coach or therapist to help you manage emotions and learn to communicate effectively

2. Be respectful – even if they do not deserve it. No matter what your ex has done in the past, you owe it to them to be civil – especially if you have children together. Reflect and choose your words carefully and remain as neutral as possible to preserve your dignity. Your ex is more likely to receive your message if you are non-reactive and respectful.

3. Share information about your children. Openly sharing information about the children is a powerful way to build a relationship as co-parents.

4. Be flexible. Perhaps you are irritated because it seems like you constantly rearrange your schedule to accommodate your ex. If it is best for your children, try to be flexible.

5. Avoid telling your kids the gritty details of the split. You want to be honest with your children, but there are some things they never need to know – no matter their age. You protect them when you hide inappropriate details about your marriage from them.

6. Avoid using damaging information. This might go against what your divorce attorney advises! Maybe you have the power to destroy your spouse legally, financially, or emotionally, but at what cost?

7. Choose when to engage. If your ex says something mean, does something aggravating, or intentionally pushes your buttons, take a deep breath, and walk away. It might take a great deal of self-control, but you do not have to react. The more you fight, the greater your stress – and the more your children are negatively affected. “Giving in” does not make you a wimp. Controlling your temper is the strongest, most courageous choice.

8. Cut the cord. Avoid constantly texting or calling your ex or stalking them on social media. This is self-torture, and you might have a hard time letting go, but failing to do so only harms your wellbeing.

9. Avoid lying, cheating, or hiding resources. If preserving your own integrity is not reason enough to take the financial high road, observe it from a practical perspective. If you have evidence your ex has been dishonest, and you must return to court for any reason, your case will be stronger if you have maintained your integrity.

10. Do not be a doormat – choose your battles wisely. If your ex needs to “win,” allow him or her to feel like a “winner.” In the end, you will be much better off if you rise above your ex’s pettiness.

11. Apologize if you make a mistake. You may not owe your ex an apology but strive to be the kind of person you want to be – and set an example for your children.

12. Do not take things personally. Taking things personally may cause you to feel offended or defensive – leading you to spend time and energy convincing your ex of their flawed perspective. Then, your ex becomes invested in showing you the inaccuracy of your perspective. This can become a never-ending cycle where no one wins.

12. Be honest. Telling the truth is easier than telling (and remembering!) a lie. An atmosphere of trust improves communication, allowing for productive and mutually beneficial agreements. Lies, silence, evasiveness, ambiguity, or vagueness create an atmosphere of anxiety, anger, distrust, and fear. Telling the truth in the kindest way possible is *not* being “brutally honest,” which can be hurtful and unnecessary.

13. Avoid assumptions and ask questions. Making assumptions leads to misunderstandings, distrust, and poor communication. Divorced couples often assume the worst. Assuming and then reacting to what you believe to be true creates drama. In addition, do not assume your ex can read your mind. Hinting, crying, throwing tantrums, or gossiping are not substitutes for asking questions and clearly expressing your requests, goals, intentions, or concerns.

14. Maintain your integrity and your legacy. Your words always leave a trail, and at some point, you may look back and regret your tone, the accusations you made, or name-calling. If you are a parent, remember that saying horrible things about your ex hurts your children. Maintaining your integrity is far more valuable than acting in ways you will later regret.

15. Prioritize kindness. You may have mixed feelings following your divorce – anger, sadness, loneliness, grief, and many other emotions may cause you to neglect self-care. Be kind to yourself.

Taking the high road during and after your divorce is not easy. It might even seem unfair. Why would you want to do anything good, fair, or kind to someone who destroyed your family and your dreams for the future? Committing to taking the high road increases trust, minimizes anxiety and fear, and benefits you and your children.

What to Do

First, answer the following questions.

What are some ways you can improve communication with your ex? Be specific.

What are some ways you can be more flexible?

Is taking the high road difficult for you? Why or why not?

What are some things you can do right now to take the high road? Explain.

Did this exercise help you take the high road with your ex? Why or why not?

What else can you do to relate to your ex-partner in a healthy manner? Be specific.

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
