

The Divorce Agreement Newsletter

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The Art of Staying Young 101 for Divorce Professionals

By comparison with fishing for giant crabs off the Alaska coast, ours are not stressful professions. Still, we do have some moments when we get stressed out. OK, perhaps more than a few!

It's easy to start feeling old before we get there chronologically. Let's say we have achieved a solid command of the knowledge and techniques that our profession requires. At times we may start to feel that we are mostly doing the same thing over and over. Except, of course, for those interesting cases that are different – including the ones that remind us of the old Chinese curse.

If we seem to be bouncing between boredom and moments of real tension, feeling old may mean we just want to get the hell out of what we are doing. Is there a way to go back to the ideals we had when we started out, and to recover the freshness of our younger years?

Here are a few thoughts from a family lawyer who has been a member of the Virginia State Bar for 50 years and is still doing divorce mediation:

Remember that “it’s what you learn after you know it all that counts.” Even at the top of one’s profession, it’s easy to feel like being in a rut. Realizing that there is always much more to learn about any given area of divorce practice, and that we will never know it all, can be liberating.

Think of it as a lifelong journey. We know enough to be respected professionals. If we are open to consider new dimensions in how we think, beyond just staying current, then we can find ways to expand the scope of how we practice so as to stay clear of some of the boredom and stress.

Be a problem solver. Defining a problem, and thinking in terms of the practical options to resolve it, expands the way we can look for possible solutions. This is an approach that promotes both flexibility and creativity.

Get “outside the box.” Here’s a concrete example for those of us whose profession revolves around divorce agreements: If the parties’ metaphor is to be a two-person court, then they usually look backwards and may find rather limited options. If they imagine themselves instead as a two-person legislature, they can face the future more directly and will surface some additional practical options.

Sort out the emotional elements. Almost every divorce involves a mix of substantive issues and emotions. We sort out the emotions to avoid (as much as possible) getting caught up in them, and to diagnose a practical strategy.

Try out fresh ideas. Some fresh ideas sound good, but they don't always work out in practice. There's only one way to find out.

Practice "AER." Even high-conflict clients usually appreciate *attention*, *empathy* and *respect*. And our fellow professionals value *civility*.

Nurture spirituality. Spirituality is a reverence for life and for the beauty that we find in so many ways and places. It exists in our ongoing search for meaning in our lives, for peace, and for fulfillment in our relationships. It includes our ability to balance our sense of morality with a spirit of tolerance.

Be mindful. "Mindfulness" is a professional's ability to be in the moment, to be thoughtful rather than emotional, and to be both engaged and relaxed. It includes our being able to think about the *structure* of what we are doing professionally, and not just the details.

Don't take oneself too seriously. We are all in serious professions. That's an excellent reason to have a self-effacing sense of humor. (And, of course, remember-as I always do-to avoid all opportunities to pontificate!!)

Identify the team. Helping someone through divorce is usually not just a one-on-one situation. Identify the other professionals and individuals who are involved in the process, and look for those who can be part of the solution.

Keep a journal. Taking time to make some confidential notes enables us to reflect on who we are, the concerns we have, and our basic values and sense of direction. It's a way to be one's own therapist. Try it!

Beyond everything else, staying young is a matter of *attitude*. Part of being young is to be on an exciting journey of self-discovery. For professionals, it's also to consider our practices as being part of a lifetime learning experience, which includes the goals we have in addition to earning a living.

Staying young won't enable us to avoid all of the stress of being a divorce professional, but it will help.