

What Divorce Takes, and How to Get It Back

A MCINNIS METHOD GUIDE FOR MEN

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PART 1

Start with what is actually happening

Most men going through divorce spend a lot of time trying to answer two questions: What happened? And what does this say about me?

Those questions can take over quickly. But before you answer either one, get clear about what is actually happening.

A household split. A schedule broke. A future you had spent years planning disappeared while you were still living inside it. At the same time, the demands went up. There are documents to gather, lawyers to pay, exchanges to get through, decisions to make, and people who need you to be steady on the exact days you feel least steady.

That is the situation: loss arriving at the same time as increased demand.

Start there.

Before deciding what any of it means about you, your marriage, or the person you are divorcing, be able to describe what is actually happening. Not the explanation. Not the verdict. Not who is to blame. The reality first.

Write down the three things that changed most in the last ninety days. Do not explain them. Just name them.

PART 2

Pain can start feeling like danger

Here is the part almost nobody tells men.

Divorce can make pain feel urgent enough that your mind starts treating every painful signal like something that has to be solved immediately. A marriage may be ending. You may be seeing your children less. You may open a legal filing and barely recognize the man being described. Some threats during divorce are real. Others are predictions. The work is learning to tell the difference.

When pain and threat get mixed together, attention can narrow around whatever might happen next.

That can look like rerunning the same argument at two in the morning, checking her social media, or losing an entire evening to one text notification. The behavior may be trying to give you certainty, control, or advance warning. It may also be responding to something that genuinely requires action. Do not assume which one.

If you find yourself scanning, the useful question is not whether you should be doing it. Ask what the scanning is trying to accomplish and whether there is anything real to act on.

When you notice yourself scanning, ask: What is actually happening right now? What am I predicting? Is there something I can act on, or am I trying to gain certainty that is not available? The goal is not to talk yourself out of real danger. It is to separate what is happening from what your mind is predicting.

What you did to protect yourself is now costing you

When something is treated as dangerous, you adapt. You do whatever makes the danger feel manageable.

Men in divorce adapt in recognizable ways.

- You get angry, because anger at least gives you something to do with the pain.
- You go flat, because feeling nothing is easier to control than feeling everything.
- You monitor, because knowing what she is doing feels like protecting yourself from being surprised again.
- You work, because work gives you problems you know how to solve.
- You explain, endlessly, because if you could just get her to understand, none of this would be real.
- You go quiet around the people closest to you, because you do not want them to see you like this.

None of these automatically says something bad about your character. Any of them can become protective. The question is what the behavior is doing for you and what it is costing now.

A man I worked with had been putting off calling a lawyer for months. At first, the delay looked practical. But when we slowed it down, something else emerged. Calling a lawyer would mean taking a step toward a divorce he was still hoping might not happen. Not calling left that possibility open. For him, the delay was doing more than postponing a legal conversation. It was helping preserve a version of his life that had not ended yet.

The behaviors on that list do not all mean the same thing. Anger may create distance from grief. Monitoring may be an attempt to avoid being surprised. Work may provide structure when the rest of life feels unstable. Explaining may be an effort to regain control or to avoid finality. The function has to be discovered, not assumed.

Whatever the function, these patterns can carry a cost. Look at what has become harder to access since this began:

Sleep. Concentration. Appetite. Patience. Hope. Trust. Curiosity. Humor. Desire. The ability to sit through a meal without your phone face up.

That does not mean something is broken in you. Some abilities may simply be harder to access under the conditions you are living in now.

The moment you can see a pattern as something you do rather than a definition of who you are, you have more room to find out what it is doing and whether it still fits.

If you have children, one cost is worth naming on its own. They are inside that same wall.

A father told me about going to comfort his daughter after she had seen her mother screaming at him. He felt the grief starting to come up. What arrived next was not the grief. It was the instruction to stay composed. He stayed composed.

He was trying to protect his daughter from seeing him fall apart. But in holding everything back, he also became harder for her to reach. Children do not know why a parent suddenly feels distant. They only know the distance. They will not remember that you were protecting yourself. They will remember whether you were there.

Being there does not mean falling apart in front of them. It means this. Sitting with your son in the car for a minute before you turn on the radio. Answering the question your daughter actually asked instead of the one you wish she had asked. Feeling the grief for ninety seconds without doing anything about it.

There is also a practical cost your attorney sees before you do. Impulsive emails. Escalating texts. Decisions made at midnight that get read aloud in a courtroom in March. Protection that keeps you feeling safe tonight can damage the exact outcome you are protecting.

Make the list. What is harder to do now than it was a year ago? That list is not a diagnosis or a promise about what will return. It gives you something concrete to investigate: what changed, where those abilities are still available, and what conditions affect them.

PART 4

Find out what is still available

Before deciding an ability is gone, look across the rest of your life.

Divorce can make abilities that once felt ordinary much harder to access. That does not tell you why yet. Protection is one possibility. Exhaustion, grief, lack of practice, current danger, or a genuine skill gap are others.

So look for where the ability is still available. If it shows up somewhere else, that gives you useful information. The problem may be context rather than a global deficit.

Look at your list again and check it against the rest of your week.

- You cannot say a plain sentence to her. You say plain sentences to a subcontractor at seven in the morning without thinking about it.
- You have no patience at the exchange on Sunday. You have enormous patience with a work crew that is behind schedule.
- You cannot sit with your own grief. You sat with your friend through his father's funeral and did not flinch.
- You cannot make a decision about the house. You made four difficult business decisions before lunch on Tuesday.

That is not necessarily inconsistency or contradiction. It may be showing you that the ability is context dependent. The important question is what changes between the places where it is available and the places where it is not.

If patience, steadiness, or directness already exists somewhere else, the work may be to understand the conditions that support it there and see whether those conditions can expand into the harder setting.

If it already exists, you may be expanding where you can use it.

So go find it. For each thing on your list, get three specifics, not the general sense that you are "still able to" do it somewhere.

- Where in your life can you still do this?
- With who?
- Under what conditions?

A domain, a person, and a condition. If you can name all three, you have useful evidence about where the ability is already available. If you cannot find it anywhere, do not force the conclusion. You may be looking at something that needs to be learned rather than recovered.

Pick one ability off your list. If you can find where it still works, name the place, the person, and what is different there.

PART 5

You do not have to be ready

Not feeling ready does not automatically mean you should wait. It also does not mean you should act.

During divorce, waiting can be wise and it can also become a way of chasing certainty that is not available. The question is whether you have enough reality to know what the next step is.

Sometimes action produces information that waiting cannot. Sometimes more observation or information is exactly what is needed.

You do not have to feel completely ready before every useful step. But action has to earn its place: the reality should be clear enough, the cost should make sense, and the step should test something important rather than simply discharge pressure.

Readiness is information, not a command. So is urgency. Neither one gets to make the decision by itself.

If action has earned its place, make the step small and specific. One thing, not three. Clear enough that you will know whether you did it and useful enough that either outcome teaches you something.

Say the sentence to her. Not the whole speech. The sentence.

Sit with your son in the car for one minute before you turn on the radio. Answer the email tomorrow morning instead of tonight.

If you take the step and nothing changes, that is worth knowing too. The point is not to force movement. It is to get better information from reality.

Then watch what comes back. It arrives in small, unglamorous increments.

- Sleeping through a night. Then a week.
- Watching a movie without checking your phone.
- Getting through an exchange without composing a reply in your head afterward.
- Something is funny again, and you notice.
- Having a day that is not about proving anything, with your kids or just to yourself.

None of that is dramatic. All of it is the point.

Divorce can make capacities that were easy to access elsewhere much harder to use. Look for where they still show up. Where they do not, find out whether the problem is protection, exhaustion, grief, lack of practice, current conditions, or something else.

Pick one thing you named in Part 4. Decide what would give you the best information this week: using it once in the harder setting, observing when it becomes unavailable, asking a question, or gathering more reality before you act.

A LAST THING WORTH KNOWING

None of this is unique to divorce. Major transitions can expose patterns that were already present, create new ones, or simply make ordinary capacities harder to access. Divorce makes those changes easier to see.

You may recognize similar patterns elsewhere in your life: things you stopped doing, subjects you route around, or capacities that become available in one setting and disappear in another.

For many men, divorce does not create every pattern. It makes some of them much harder to ignore.

IF YOU RECOGNIZED YOURSELF IN THIS GUIDE

Counseling is one way to understand what divorce has made harder to access and what would help. My practice works with men, fathers, and teenage boys going through separation, custody disputes, and life afterward.

I do not provide legal opinions, custody evaluations, expert testimony, litigation strategy, or advocacy for either party. I help clients get steady enough to think clearly, stay available to their children, and use the legal guidance they are already paying for.

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