

CORONAVIRUS

# More Australians make divorce inquiries, as lawyers offer discounts to struggling couples

**The coronavirus is the “straw that broke the camel’s back” with more Australian couples seeking legal advice. Experts have been offering more help for a discounted rate. See their tips.**

Maria Bervanakis, News Corp Australia Network

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Divorce lawyers are offering discounted services to help couples cope with legal fees that can top \$20,000 or more, as the effect of COVID-19 lockdown takes its toll on relationships.


Australian Family Lawyers, a national firm listed on the ASX, have seen a record 50 per cent increase in new cases over the last three months compared to the same time last year.

Most shockingly, in March almost half (46 per cent) of new cases the firm took on involved some kind of family violence compared to 36 per cent of new cases in January.


The AFL’s head of family law, Courtney Mullen, told News Corp it is offering discounted services to help divorcing couples in hardship cope with legal costs.

The firm is offering up to three \$500 sessions with lawyers to provide people with advice, coaching for negotiation and/or the documents they need to fill out for a DIY divorce.



 Courtney Mullen from Australian Family Lawyers.  
Picture: Supplied



 Fiona Reid says free initial phone consultations have doubled at her Sydney law firm. Picture: Supplied

“We know there are many families under stress during the coronavirus crisis, which is why Australian Family Lawyers have created the AFL ASSIST program, where senior lawyers can offer family law advice and coach people through the process in three sessions. You don’t have to do all three sessions if you don’t need to,” she said.

“If you were to do your divorce yourself it costs just over \$1000 dollars to file the documents in Federal Court including parenting and property orders.

“Often people call on legal experts because their family law matters are more complicated, with the average divorce in Australia costing around \$15,000 to \$20,000.”

Fiona Reid, of Reid Family Lawyers in Sydney, said the firm works out the cost per client on “a case-by-case basis”.

“We are doing what we can for existing clients in terms of giving them longer to pay their bills etc,” she said.

“For potential new clients, we offer a free 10-minute initial phone consultation with one of our lawyers to assist people who are finding themselves embarking on separation during which we can provide information regarding mediation services, legal aid and ways of keeping their legal fees to a minimum.”

## TIPS FOR DIVORCING COUPLES

- Set up an individual bank account and separate moneys including credit cards
- Set up a separate mailbox or mail collection point
- Make sure if kids are involved, that they are safe and supported
- Speak to a lawyer
- Understand your financial situation and circumstances
- If a business is involved, understand how this could be affected and what type of continuity /contingency planning is required

Ms Reid said inquiries have doubled at her firm since the virus lockdowns.

“I have done far more (free consultations) than I normally would. If I normally do three or four a week I might be doing eight a week,” she said.

“There’s a whole lot more pressure on couples beyond that financial pressure certainly than what I have seen in my career.

“While history shows that a financial crisis is always followed by a spike in divorce rates, we now have the added pressure of isolation.”

Ms Mullen also said the coronavirus had created issues for separated couples with children living interstate, prompting the Family Court to create a COVID List to address the matters urgently.

“What we are seeing a bit of with parenting matters in particular the risk of contracting coronavirus is being used as a reason not to facilitate time with the other parent,” she said.

“That’s what’s caused the need for the court to create a separate list.”

Australian Institute of Family Lawyers and Mediators chair Andrew Davies told News Corp the coronavirus is “the straw that broke the camel’s back”.

Mr Davies said his firm has experienced a 15 per cent increase in calls.

“There has been a significant increase in the number of people making contact arriving out of family violence. Not only the people who are the subject of it but also the perpetrators,” he said.

Cheryl Duffy, the founder of The Divorce Centre, certified divorce coach and author of *The Divorce Tango*, told News Corp she has seen a surge of 50 per cent in website visits.

She normally charges \$150 per hour but is giving a 50 per cent discount on online coaching sessions via her [website](#) using promo code covid.

She anticipates a flood of divorce initiations as lockdowns are lifted around the country.

“Usually the global divorce month is January. That’s after Christmas when people have been spending time together over the school holidays,” she said.

“Once lockdown finishes it will be like coming out of that time altogether.”



📷 Divorce coach Cheryl Duffy has halved the price of online coaching sessions to assist struggling couples. Picture: Supplied