



3 Critical Tech Issues for Divorcing Couples

by Elizabeth Harper on August 22, 2013

Technology has changed our lives in many ways — and complicated them as well. If you're in a rocky relationship or marriage, the technology you rely on can make a break-up or divorce even more challenging. "These tech-related problems are seldom the worst ones for people who are considering divorce," explains Virginia L. Colin, Ph.D., a professional family mediator. "But they are not always minor problems. Everything is connected to everything for a lot of couples."

But with foresight and perhaps some help from a family mediator, marriage counselor or lawyer, you can dodge these common tech snags whether you're getting divorced, separating or just going through a rough patch. We spoke to experts in the field about the most common tech issues in divorces.

1. Playing nice on social networks

If you're having relationship trouble, it's only natural to want to talk to your friends about it. But what you're sharing on a social network isn't private. "The information that people gather from each other's social media sites and pages, that's becoming a lot more prevalent," explains **Lori Barkus, a Florida-based family law attorney**. "People tend to post a lot of things on Facebook. That information gets spread, and in divorce, people have mutual friends or they have ways of looking at each other's information."

Sharing that information can cause big problems if you're saying things that you don't want your spouse to be privy to. If you're already fighting, something shared can make those fights a lot worse or even become fuel for divorce proceedings.

"Online dating services would probably be a close second," **Barkus** continues.

There's an easy solution to oversharing, and it's a good rule for social networking etiquette in general. If you wouldn't say something to your spouse's face, you probably shouldn't share it on a social network, even privately. Chances are you have mutual friends, and what you say will eventually come back around.

If you're having issues and you don't know how to bring them up with your spouse, it might be time to consider talking to a professional family mediator or marriage counselor who can help you work through things. It's certainly more likely to help than talking on a social network.

2. Juggling shared online accounts

Another major tech problem in relationships is the number of shared digital accounts, from family cell phone plans to Netflix accounts. "How do you separate [cell phone plans] when you have a contract that goes for another 15 months but you do not trust each other?" says Colins.

Cell phone plans can be especially tricky to separate, since you're typically under contract for two years and face additional fees if you break your contract. "If you have a shared plan, you can look at somebody's minutes, somebody's text messaging," says Barkus. "That's a somewhat common occurrence, especially if there's infidelity or there's suspicion of it." You're really left with only two options: breaking your plan and paying the penalty, or coming to an arrangement and agreeing to each pay part of the bill for the duration of the contract. "If people are simultaneously resolving the property questions, then cell phone costs or penalties usually look small compared to other matters (mortgages, car payments, credit card debt, etc.), and that makes it easier to decide what to do," Colins says.

Shared accounts with a cost but no long-term contract can be a big issue as well. Separating couples, whether they're divorcing or just separating for the time being, suddenly have to use the same income to support two households. "Suppose, for example, that a mom decides the couple must separate and the dad does not want to separate but agrees to move out," says Colins. "As a family, they had a pretty expensive cable bill, partly because the dad really likes some special sports and movie channels. Everybody agrees that both households will need cable internet access. But how much TV should either household pay for? Why should the dad have to give up his favorite entertainment on top of losing his family? It certainly doesn't seem fair to him. Then again, funding college is also important, and there's only so much money."

It's a tough question without an easy answer. Both parties have to find an amicable solution that fits the new budgetary requirements.

Some couples share email or social accounts for the family. If friends or family members only know how to make contact using the shared account, you can find yourself with some real communication problems. "I once worked with a couple that had this sort of shared email account," says Colins. "They did not tell me what they decided to do, so after they separated, I had no way to email the second parent."

Fortunately, separating social accounts is another easy fix. Whether one of you keeps the family account or you both create new ones, be sure to get in touch with your entire contact list to let them know how to reach you. You don't even need to tell people that you're doing this because of a potential divorce, if you don't want to go into it. Colins recommends this possible approach when explaining a new email address to friends: "We have realized that each of us wastes time looking at emails that were intended for only one of us, so we are separating our email accounts and asking all of you to use our new email addresses."

"I imagine if the issue got forced into court, a judge would say separate the accounts," says Barkus. "I've dealt with it with clients and they've asked me and I've told them 'You've got to separate it.' Sometimes you'll see a delay in that because people want to kind of keep that together and maybe sometimes deep down they want to keep the marriage together, and this is one of those small ways they're trying to do it."

3. Setting up separate passwords

Tying in with shared accounts is the issue of shared passwords. Whether you share accounts or not, your spouse probably knows your usual passwords. This could mean that your spouse can get into your email, your social networks, or your credit card information to watch what you're doing. If divorce or separation is really happening, it's best to change your passwords to something your spouse doesn't know and won't guess to avoid problems like this before they start. This includes your mobile phone. While no one likes to think it, some spouses may resort to installing spyware to follow your activities. So.

Remember to look at your own relationship before coming to any decisions about managing your tech. "Each ex-couple is unique," says Colins. "There is no one-size-fits-all solution."