

PART THREE



THE 7 PITFALLS



CHAPTER FIVE

Pitfall #2: Getting Hooked by Your Ex-spouse

“Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much.”

Oscar Wilde

Have you ever been totally triggered and emotionally hijacked by something your ex said or did? Have you ever been totally triggered and hijacked by something your ex didn't say or do? I'm hoping you just answered yes to those questions, so I'm not the only divorced parent out there who has felt that way!

To make sure we're on the same page, let's define what we mean by being “hooked by” or “plugged in” to your ex-spouse. When you're plugged in to the actions of someone else, you typically have a strong emotional reaction and a very strong opinion that you are *right* and the other person is absolutely *wrong*. It's interesting that the phrase is “plugged in,” because that is what it feels like. It's as if you have some kind of outlet or opening that allows the other to come right in, like plugging a wire into an electrical socket, and *zap*—you're gone.

You are wired up to that person, who hijacks your emotions and drains a lot of your time and energy.

Do you find it hard to be the kind of parent you want to be when you're feeling like that? I know I do. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could consistently parent your children from a connected and loving place? If you want to learn how to defuse some of those volatile emotions so you can stop taking out the frustrations you have with your ex-partner on your children, this chapter is for you.

Signs That You're Stuck

- **Your emotions run high.** You feel strong emotions, such as anger, resentment, blame, or fear. These emotions feel “hot” to handle, which is exactly where common phrases like “in the heat of the moment” and “in the heat of battle” come from. As emotions run high, the ability to think rationally runs low. Some people feel like they've been hijacked by their emotions, leaving them wondering, “Did I really say that?” or “I can't believe I actually did that!”
- **You are reactive.** When you're hooked, you react out of instinct. Instead of getting creative and trying to solve the problem, your old reptilian brain usually fires up some of the fight-or-flight neurons in your system. With all of those neurological defense systems activated, the ability to calmly reflect and consider alternative courses of actions takes a nosedive. Everything is black or white, right or wrong, and you are not willing to tolerate dissenting views.
- **Let the blame game begin.** You start to blame your ex-spouse. The laundry list of current and past grievances starts pouring out of your mind or your mouth as you create a bulletproof case of how your ex-spouse is absolutely *wrong* and you are absolutely *right*.
- **You climb up on the soap box.** With your prepared case of how you are victimized by your ex-spouse, you argue your case to whomever you can. This is commonly known as gossip. You plead your case with righteous conviction, and you are unwilling to hear alternative views.
- **You have negative, repetitive thoughts.** You experience a repeating pattern of internal dialogue. “Man, when she said this, I should have done that. And then she would have never tried what she tried.” It's like having the record needle stuck in a scratch on your record. (For those of you who never had the joy of experiencing vinyl record albums firsthand, trust me on this one—it's tedious and annoying.)

- **You waste time and energy.** When that initial surge of adrenaline hits the bloodstream, being hooked can seem energizing. But in reality, it's an energy drain. When you're hooked into another person, a huge amount of time and emotional energy is wrapped up in that drama. The other person doesn't even have to be in the room—or in the country, for that matter—but when you get hooked, they can suck your life force. Ironically, the person you publicly proclaim you're "over with" ends up consuming your thoughts, time, energy, and peace of mind.

Your Ex Knows How to Push Your Buttons

In the breakup of an intimate relationship, you move through many layers of "detangling." Over the years of your relationship, you likely developed emotional closeness and compassion, caring deeply about the happiness and well-being of your partner. In fact, you cared so much about each other that you chose to have children together.

As that relationship breaks up, it takes a while for you to unhook yourself from the emotional connection that characterized your partnership. Have you noticed your former partner seems to know exactly what buttons to push to drive you absolutely around the bend? How does he or she know the exact thing to say or do, or the exact thing to not say or not do, that will knock you off balance and send you into a foul mood? Is it just because your ex is being vindictive, or is it because you have remained emotionally hooked into your ex-spouse?

It is highly likely that when you were married or living together, your partner would find ways to "push your buttons" and vice versa. Within the context of being in a committed relationship, there is a willingness to work through these emotional issues together. Within the context of divorce, there typically isn't the desire or the structure to work through these issues together, so the responsibility to sort out your emotional flashpoints with your ex-spouse lies with you.

If the relationship with your ex-spouse feels difficult, it indicates that there's still work to do and issues to be healed, says author Debbie Ford. "We must heal our inner wounds. If we don't do it, we keep fueling the conflict and the hurt."¹⁴

To move forward and create new loving relationships in the future, it's important to get to a sense of completion with your former partner. The breakdown of the relationship, whether you initiated it or not, creates a shock to your system. "It's important to emotionally release the pain and anger," advises

intimacy expert Vered Neta.¹⁵ The form of emotional release will depend on the individual. “Without completion, you’ll start new relationships while still carrying a remnant of your old relationship.” To release those energetic remnants, Neta recommends finding a strategy that works for the kind of person you are. “Some people are more physical, so running like hell on a beach and screaming is a great way to release negative and painful emotions,” she says. “Others may be more suited to journaling about their feelings and thoughts quietly. It’s important that you allow yourself to cry and grieve the loss of the relationship.” According to Neta, completion has more to do with yourself, not your former partner. “Ask yourself, where did I grow? What did my partner contribute to me? Most importantly,” she urges, “take the time to acknowledge yourself.”

Right now, take a moment to evaluate, on a scale of 1–10, how plugged in you typically are to your ex. If you’re never plugged into your ex, give yourself a 1. If you feel extremely agitated and plugged into your ex on a daily basis, give yourself a 10. When you first separate, you’ll likely find yourself in the 7–10 range. I recommend using this simple technique to take a reading on your emotional state. Over time, and with greater life experience, you will see that number drop, and one day, you’ll even be able to consciously shift it.

The Cost to Your Children

Very often, particularly in the early stages of separation and divorce, it’s very easy to simply react to your former partner—the things your ex does (or doesn’t do), how he or she says things, or his or her personal habits. You get upset when agreements are broken, or you get angry when your former partner brings a new love interest home to meet your children. “He is just so self-centered,” Amanda fumed about her former husband. “Of course, he was an hour late picking up the kids, just like he always was, and I’m left answering their questions as to why Daddy was late!” When you parent from a reactive state, you risk spilling some of your toxic emotions of frustration and anger at your ex-spouse onto your children.

Here’s an analogy that I find useful to remember when I think about how being hooked into my ex-husband affects my parenting. Do you remember the “olden days” when you used to have to turn the radio dial to go from one station to the next? Imagine that your children are on a frequency that is the next radio station. As a parent, you want to tune into that station so you get a clear, strong signal and can hear the music of your children. When you are plugged in to strong emotions or unresolved issues related to your ex-spouse, you encoun-

ter static in your tuner. All of a sudden, it's hard to tune into your kids because of all of the interference. Listening to static gets irritating pretty quickly!

What happens when your unresolved issues, energy, and emotions regarding your ex enter into the parenting arena? It creates static in your relationship with your child. It shows up in how you parent your children in the following ways:

- **You're not present.** Your body may be there in front of your child, but *you* are not there. Your mind and heart are off somewhere else, hashing it out with your ex-partner.
- **You're not available for your child.** How do you feel when you try to speak with or connect to someone when they are distracted by someone or something else? Do you feel like you're not being heard? Do you feel like you're not important enough to warrant their attention? That's exactly what happens to your child when you're hooked.
- **The connection between you and your child is broken.** You'll have static in your communication channels with your child. Children are like intuitive sponges, and they pick up everything, even if it's not verbal. They pick up on your tone, your energy, and your mood. They can feel the disconnect between themselves and you.
- **Children feel powerless and confused.** When your parenting becomes inconsistent and unpredictable because you're hooked by your ex-spouse, your children feel like they're walking on eggshells. They pick up on the tension you feel, which leaves them feeling unsettled and frightened.

The bottom line is that your children need to make sense of your behavior, and they will make it mean something about them. If they see you distracted or upset, they may conclude they've done something wrong or your emotional state is somehow their fault.

Your children also may start to model your behavior. Children will do what you do, not what you say. So if they see you with a short temper that flares up unpredictably, or watch you roll your eyes and sigh at the mention of your ex-spouse, chances are high they'll follow your lead.

Strategies to Get Unhooked

It is important to parent from a neutral place. You need to be able to speak to your children from a clear, connected place without the static of your judgments of their other parent in the way. The impact of being hooked by your ex-spouse affects your tone, your body language, your listening, your attitude, and your energy level. You need to adopt five key strategies to stop getting hooked by your ex-partner:

1. Realize that what your ex thinks of you is none of your business.
2. Take responsibility for your reality, and focus on what's under your control.
3. Reframe your relationship with your ex-spouse and adopt a business partnership model.
4. Create a supportive environment.
5. Don't rely solely on a legal solution.

1. What Your Ex Thinks of You Is NONE of Your Business

As you shift from a romantic/intimate relationship with your ex-spouse into a more business-like partnership that focuses on raising your children together successfully, you must start to pull out the emotional hooks that you have embedded in your psyche. The most important mantra you can use is: **“What my ex thinks of me is none of my business.”** Yes, that's right—to have emotional freedom and to take full responsibility for your life, the most important shift in awareness that you can make is to realize that what your former spouse thinks of you is absolutely none of your business.

You must choose to not take the actions of your ex-spouse personally. Don Miguel Ruiz, author of *The Four Agreements*, says that “not taking anything personally does not mean that you will not have a reaction or you will not take action. But when you take action, you have clarity, you know exactly what you want. When you take things personally, you do things you don't want to do and say things you don't want to say, because emotions are controlling you.”¹⁶

Notice how you feel about this idea right now. Do you feel yourself resisting it? “But I want him to understand what I'm doing so he doesn't sabotage me!” “She's going to bad-mouth me all over town, so I have to manage my risk!” If you're hearing a lot of inner dialog welling up in opposition, that means right now you're actually pretty committed to spending a lot of your emotional and

psychic energy in an area you have absolutely no control over. Does this sound like a good strategic choice to you?

Let's face it—most of us were raised to believe that to be a “good girl” or a “good boy” we needed to care about other people's feelings. Yes, it is important to have respect for their feelings and not to be callous and deliberately vindictive with others. However, many of us have gone too far in taking responsibility for other people's feelings and emotional well-being. This seemingly “kind” act actually has a number of potentially destructive outcomes.

When you make what other people think or feel about you more important than what you think or feel about yourself, you feel dissatisfied and ultimately resentful. You withhold communicating something important to you because you worry they might “take it the wrong way” or become upset. Instead, you erect a barrier that prevents you from being truly authentic and available to this person. Is this the kind of connection you want to create with people you say you care about?

Needing to please others, to have them approve of you or “like” you, victimizes you. You set yourself up for feeling powerless in your own life. In a way, you also victimize the person you're trying to please. They don't get to relate to the real you, and they build their connection to you on a false premise.

Now take a look at how this plays out specifically with your former spouse. Ask yourself why you wouldn't want to make the fact that what your ex thinks of you is none of your business as your personal motto. Do you want your ex to like you? To agree with you? To understand you perhaps? People spend a lot of time and energy looking at their ex-spouses. “How could she treat me like this?” “What is going on that he could say something like that in front of the children?” We spend a lot of time and energy getting other people to see it our way as well. After all, we'd rather be right than happy.

Be honest with yourself—did your ex like, respect, or agree with you when you were married? Chances are, not enough, otherwise you might not be divorced now. If your ex-partner didn't “get” you or respect you when you were married, how is that suddenly going to turn around now that you're divorced?

Worrying and getting upset about what your ex-spouse will think or feel or say about you is simply a habitual distraction that you use to avoid looking at how *you* feel about your situation and seeing what *you* need to do. Will your former partner ever think a negative thought about you, get upset about something you've done, or bad-mouth you to other people? Absolutely. You're divorced, and most likely not happy with each other all the time, right? Is there anything you can do to prevent that? Who knows? If you try to go on the offensive and start retaliating in some way, you're just engaging in a power struggle

that will take you nowhere fast and leave you feeling bitter and exhausted. The likely victims from that power struggle will be your children.

The only thing you do have control over is you—the thoughts you think, the actions you take, the things you say, and the feelings you have. Your ex-spouse can worry about how he or she feels about you. Your ex-spouse is a grown-up and can take care of him- or herself. Law of Attraction expert Michael Losier offers a useful update to the adage of “mind your own business.” He defines the Law of Attraction as: “I attract to my life whatever I give my attention, energy and focus to, whether positive or negative.”¹⁷ He teaches his students to “mind your own vibration” because otherwise you’ll start attracting more of the dynamics you don’t want in your life.

After you start focusing on what you feel about yourself and what you need to do, you can reclaim some of the energy you’ve been frittering away worrying about things you have no control over. That’s when things have the possibility of turning around. You gain so much freedom in letting go of the fantasy that your ex should behave, act, or think in a certain way. Suffering comes when your fantasy is different from the reality you’re living. The ironic thing is that after you let your fantasy go and start taking responsibility for what you do have control over, that’s probably when your ex will start to behave differently.

2. Take Responsibility for Your Reality

Remember the THRIVE Principles™ that we started with? The R is for responsibility. The bottom line is that you are only responsible for your own feelings, emotions, behaviors, actions, and thoughts. Ultimately, those are the only pieces of your life over which you have any iota of control.

You are not responsible for other people’s feelings, emotions, behaviors, actions, and thoughts. You are not responsible for their emotional experiences or judgments. When you play the game of being responsible for things that are beyond your control, you’ll lose every time and become miserable in the process.

In the midst of my separation process, I was talking to a wise friend of mine and complaining about how unreasonable my former husband had apparently become now that we were talking about nuts and bolts issues, like asset division and money. She said, “If he didn’t get you or appreciate you when you were married, why are you expecting him to do that when you are divorcing?” Wham! New perspective!

If you’re feeling stuck in old patterns with your ex, ask yourself the following question: How will I live a great life even if my ex never supports, agrees with, or acknowledges me? Don’t let your happiness and self-esteem hinge on

something your ex may never be willing or able to give you. Choose to thrive after divorce and do your best for yourself, with or without the support of your former partner.

Ask yourself what you need, and then give it to yourself. Name it—if your ex isn't being respectful, is there some place in your life where you need to give yourself greater respect? When your ex doesn't follow through as promised, is there some issue where you are not following through as promised? Our relationships with our former partners often offer the biggest clues to us as to how we can move forward and take responsibility for creating our results.

3. Reframe Your Relationship with Your Ex

Becoming a single parent requires you to redesign the relationship you have with the mother or father of your children. At one point in your lives, you were in love with each other, excited to create a family together, and engaged in living your version of “happily ever after.” Although the marriage has ended, the job of being a parent has not. So it's critical that you take a step back and decide what you'd like that parenting partnership to look like. Out of the ashes of a failed marriage arises the opportunity to create a new relationship with your former spouse.

Your relationship with your ex will need to change from an emotional and romantic relationship to more of a business partnership. Imagine you are both cofounders and CEOs of the business of raising healthy and emotionally well-adjusted children. As in any business partnership, your mission, expectations, agreements, job descriptions, and boundaries need to be explicit and negotiated. Your communications will need to be structured. Meetings will be much smoother if you work from an agenda, rather than view each interaction as an opportunity to reopen old wounds.

It's not always easy to be great coparents, and yet that is a gift well worth giving to your children.

4. Create a Supportive Environment

Thomas Leonard, the founding father of the personal coaching profession, wrote about the importance of your environment. Your environment includes physical and social structures. When you choose to thrive after divorce, ensure that your external environment can support and enhance that choice.

Is there a feeding frenzy with friends or family, wanting to engage in gossip or ex bashing with you? Initially, this may feel good to you and satisfy any feel-

ings of revenge that you may have. In the long run, it will do you and your children no good. You don't move forward when you blame or make others wrong. You actually perpetuate and strengthen your relationship with your ex-spouse, but in a very detrimental way that makes you a victim.

It's important that you create a supportive environment for yourself, knowing that divorce propels you through a major life transition. Like a snake needs to shed a layer of skin, you may need to shed some old friends or habits that don't support your growth and healing. "Sometimes your friends aren't the best people for support," advises best-selling author Debbie Ford. "We train our friends how to be with us. They all have agendas, righteous positions, and opinions. At a time of pain, they might just give back the reflection of our old selves. What's wanting to be birthed is a new creation of ourselves. It's imperative that we surround ourselves with people willing to have and see and allow a new version to be birthed, rather than people who will support us in our old story."¹⁸

You may need to retrain your support people. Surround yourself with people who understand your desire to change the old dynamics of your relationship with your ex. Let your supporters know you are making a few changes, such as:

- **The pity party is over.** Tell your social circle you've decided to stop wallowing in the past and are ready to move forward. Tell them you've chosen to thrive after divorce, and coos of sympathy and expressions of "poor you" don't work for you anymore.
- **Implement a "no gossip" policy.** Tell your supporters that you've decided to take responsibility for your thoughts, words, and actions. You've decided that from now on you plan to speak to the person who can take action on your issues. Let them know you'll no longer talk behind other people's backs to third parties. Advise them that you won't participate in gossip fests with them about other people either.
- **Appreciate their support.** When you decide to unplug from your ex, you might find that some of your supporters will feel like they no longer know how to support you. To continue to feel connected to you, they may want you to plug in again so they feel they have a purpose and relationship with you. A great remedy is to appreciate them wholeheartedly for their past sympathy and support. Let them know you plan to divert the energy you might have spent gossiping toward more positive endeavors and creating your future.
- **Alter your environment.** You may find that some people in your environment continue to drain your energy like vampires, even if you've

laid out your ground rules. You will have to let go of some people to move on. Make yourself less available to your “energy vampires” and find other positive influences for yourself.

5. Don't Rely Solely on a Legal Solution

You are ultimately responsible for your relationship with your ex-spouse. Some single parents make the mistake of relying on the court system and lawyers to hammer out a working relationship between the two parties. In cases of physical threat or abuse, the courts, child welfare agencies, or the police need to be called in to intervene. However, it can be a costly mistake to assume that the family law courts will positively impact your coparenting relationship with your ex-spouse.

When I got separated, I assumed that after I hired a lawyer everything would get sorted out. My lawyer would figure out the best custody arrangements, the best financial settlement, and the best way to handle any future disputes.

While most lawyers are highly trained, ethical people, they get paid by billing you by the hour. The legal system is inherently costly and conflict-ridden. Every dollar you pay your lawyer is a dollar that could have gone to supporting your children.

I've spoken with family lawyers who feel that the system simply chews people up and spits them out, leaving big bills and more anger and toxic emotions behind. The courts view you as a “case,” not as a “family.” Although you definitely require legal advice, your lawyer can only act upon your direction. You need to be the quarterback who's prepared to call the plays.

Michael Cochrane is a prominent Canadian lawyer and author of numerous books, including *Surviving Your Divorce: A Guide to Canadian Family Law* and *Surviving Your Parents' Divorce: A Guide for Young Canadians*. “We allow people to resolve family law disputes in the same way as we handle breach of contracts,” Cochrane explains. “You position yourself, you exchange documents, and the legal pleadings are done in the formula of attack, defend, reply.”¹⁹ He believes this allows the court system to further victimize people financially and emotionally.

Cochrane believes a more appropriate model for a divorce would be a labor relations tribunal. “We want people to be able to work together in the long run,” he says. “People should get help resolving their dispute, knowing that they have to carry on in the same workplace (or family) and be happy and profitable.” Divorce mediators can help divorcing parties create a separation agreement with less stress and cost than duking it out in courts. Cochrane advises caution for people assuming the courts will provide a solution that works for

your family and allows you to move forward. “The more dust you kicked up in the divorce, the more you’ll have that needs to settle,” he warns.

A new brand of family law called the collaborative law process has the potential to change this dynamic. Lawyers represent parties in a collaborative proceeding; however, the lawyers agree that they will work hard to get your case settled so it doesn’t have to go to court. If they fail in that, they agree upfront that they will not represent you in any future court proceedings. A collaborative proceeding may also include other specialists to support the process, such as a parenting coordinator, financial professional, or divorce coach. Collaborative law is still in its infancy and has yet to stem the flood of cases going to the courtroom.²⁰

Until alternative ways to resolve disputes between warring parents become the rule, rather than the exception, relying solely on the courts and your lawyers to sort out your relationship with your ex isn’t a good strategy. The adversarial courtroom environment is inevitably costly and emotionally toxic to cooperative long-term relationships between former spouses. The children will not be immune to the stress and hardship a hard-fought court battle creates. “Unfortunately, quite a few lawyers are a part of the problem. There are lots of really good lawyers who know how to get a case settled,” says Cochrane. “It’s a big machine. If you only have a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail.”

Take Action!

1. Identify the physical and emotional clues you get when you are emotionally “hijacked.” Does your face flush? Do you get a lump in your throat? Do you have a negative inner dialogue? Write down the clues so you can become more aware of them.

SIGNS OF AN EMOTIONAL HIJACKING



My physical clues are:

My inner dialogue says:

Take Action!

✓ Accountability Check

- I will complete this exercise by: _____
- I completed this exercise on: _____

 *Remember to Celebrate!* 

2. Do some preplanning. What are some of the situations that typically get you plugged in to your ex-spouse? Examples might include holidays, times when you transfer the children from one home to the other, or when you have to request a change to the schedule. For each situation, identify one choice you could make to better prepare yourself. You might want to create a script ahead of time of things you could say, or decide to use e-mail to communicate.



ADVANCE PLANNING GUIDE

Situations where I get hooked	Choices I could make instead

Take Action!

✓ Accountability Check

- I will complete this exercise by: _____
- I completed this exercise on: _____

 *Remember to Celebrate!* 

Remember to record your actions in the “Take Action!” Tracker at the end of the book.