

Filing For Divorce Is Easier Than Ever. But Is That a Good Thing?

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If *Kramer Vs. Kramer* were made today, would Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep spend their entire divorce placidly staring at laptops and avoid all the Oscar-winning acrimony? That's what celebrity divorce lawyer Laura Wasser is banking on with It's Over Easy, a site dedicated to providing affordable access to often expensive divorce services.

Active now in California and New York and launching in seven other states this year, It's Over Easy is a lifestyle hub for people about to become single and a do-it-yourself divorce resource. Wasser, whose personal clients include Angelina Jolie and Christina Aguilera, taps celebrity friends for interviews on her "Divorce Sucks" podcast. There's an index of divorce-related services ranging from spray-tanning to mental health professionals and resources for selling your newly superfluous wedding ring. The site's centerpiece is its step-by-step online guide to filing for divorce, which can be accessed for prices ranging from the \$750 basic package to the \$2,500 premium tier.

"The things we practice at my firm, in terms of resolution, in terms of settlement, in terms of best practices for kids and dividing assets, are things that I wanted everybody to be able to know, not just people that could pay \$25,000 retainer," Wasser said.

It's Over Easy is one of the latest and most high-profile online divorce services promising to strip stress and expense from divorce. These services offer lawyers on call, advice portals, and have divorce submission forms that make the process as simple as applying for a job.

But while the sites have low costs upfront, legal professionals worry that they may bring pain over the long term. At the same time, divorce reform advocates are concerned making divorce too easy could harm marriage. Because, if divorce is as simple as clicking a few buttons and paying a small fee, what's to stop people from filing as soon as a rough patch appears?

Divorce isn't cheap. Divorce filing fees range from \$70 and \$80 in states like Wyoming and Montana to more than \$400 in California. New York state warns splitting that uncontested divorces will cost a minimum of \$335.

And that's just the bare minimum paperwork. The above costs don't reflect mediation (usually between \$3,500 and \$10,000 depending on the mediator and the case's complexities), attorney fees (ranging from \$50 to \$650 per hour, plus retainer fees) and other possible expenses such as therapy, moving, and court fees. That minimum cost also assumes the split is the platonic ideal of an amicable divorce where both spouses agree on division of property and custody of children.

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In the real world, the average cost for a contested divorce hovers around \$15,000-\$20,000. Then, there's of course another side to consider: Divorce is also a painful emotional ordeal that can drag on for months. Wasser doesn't believe it has to be this way.

"Divorce is not easy," Wasser said. "Divorce is hard, but the legal part of it should not be hard. The legal part of it should not be complicated. It should not be so much easier to get married than it is to get divorced."

The first online divorce preparation service, Complete Case, launched in 2000 and automated legal document preparation service LegalZoom followed in 2001. Today, online divorce is a crowded field with sites like Get Divorce Papers and Divorce Papers competing for online divorce market. It's also captured media attention with the 2012 launch of the venture capital-backed startup Wevorce and last year's launch of It's Over Easy.

Online divorce service prices and resources vary. Some sites charge low fees for basic legal document services while others have far more robust offering. Complete Case's uncontested divorces cost \$299 before court filing fees; the more individualized services of Wevorce are \$949 per couple plus court fees. For packages ranging from \$750-\$2,500, Over Easy guides people through divorce documentation the way TurboTax walks its clients through tax preparation, only with more hand-holding via AI-prompts and videos of Wasser explaining legal terms and processes.

Wasser cautioned that It's Over Easy isn't right for every split. The service is built for uncontested divorces where both partners understand their finances and generally agree on division of assets.

"It wouldn't work for a couple that really, really could not figure out a way to see eye to eye about things or if issues of domestic violence or alcohol or drug abuse precludes one or both parties from entering into an agreement," Wasser said.

Legal professionals caution that divorce is an inherently complicated process and that forgoing legal counsel could lead to costly mistakes. Patra Sinner, a family law attorney who represents divorcing clients in North and South Carolina, said that attorneys can prevent divorcing spouses from signing agreements they later regret.

"It's dangerous when parties sign something on their own without having it reviewed by an attorney who understands the details of their situation," Sinner said. "Sometimes they agree to things they'll want to go back and change but find they're non-modifiable. Then that's really bad for those people."

During divorces, attorneys advocate for their clients. They guide them through a complicated legal process and defend them from exes with axes to grind. With exceptions, do-it-yourself divorce services don't offer that protection—It's Over Easy includes a national index of mediators, therapists, personal trainers and attorneys alongside blog posts with advice about things like moving after a divorce and co-parenting with an asshole. When divorce sites offer one-on-one services, the cost rises: Through Wevorce, users have the option to consult with financial planners, family services experts, attorneys, and mediators for \$199 per hour.

Sinner noted that even if both spouses are trustworthy and amicable, divorces can go awry. Terms that initially seem simple or acceptable can be deceptively complex.

"If you sign a contract or alimony without a termination date on it, you may have just obligated yourself for permanent lifetime alimony because you took it outside the scope of something that a court could go back in and modify for you," Sinner said. "At first, you might say 'Why would I mind if I sign off on \$200 a month in alimony?' Well, you might mind if you can't ever terminate it."

Sinner says that while do-it-yourself divorces are cheaper in the short term, they may prove costly over the long run. "With a divorce, typically someone's only going to have a certain amount of time in that process for your attorney's fees and then they will eventually get a final result that hopefully made the fees they incurred worthwhile," she said. "The alternative is that you don't have that protection. Without it, you risk a cost that's even greater."

When divorce becomes too easy, some critics worry that marriage itself suffers. Beverly

Willett, author, attorney and co-founder of the Coalition for Divorce Reform, thinks that married people are better off when divorce is imposing.

“I don’t think enough people realize two things,” Willett said. “One, the aftermath of divorce, the kind of fall out that there is after divorce in terms of both physical, emotional, mental issues with both children and the impact on fathers and mothers. And two, they don’t realize that actually more marriages can be saved than people think.”

Willett noted that the introduction of no fault divorces in the 1970s led to a spike in the American divorce rate. With no fault divorces, spouse no longer need to prove marital misconduct to end a marriage. Incompatibility and irreconcilable differences became sufficient grounds for divorce and divorces were therefore easier to attain.

“What you have seen with divorce becoming easier is a correlation between divorce getting easier and more divorces,” Willett said.

But, recent data appears to complicate the connection between easier divorces and increasing divorces. The American divorce rate dropped by 18 percent between 2008 to 2016, when online divorce services proliferated. Tellingly, the decline was led by the most digital native demographics of our time: millennials and some gen-xers. We could reasonably assume millennials, the first generation who’ve spent their lives online, would be comfortable filing a divorce by opening a new tab on Chrome while watching Netflix. Nonetheless, that ease of use doesn’t seem to be ending more marriages.

Santa Rosa, California therapist and marriage counselor Sharon Rivkin doesn’t believe fear of divorce keeps marriages together. As self-described “last ditch effort therapist” who specializes in salvaging relationships after infidelities and severe marital crises, Rivkin has worked with couples teetering on the edge of divorce for 30 years.

“My intuition says the cost doesn’t matter,” Rivkin said. “If you really want to stay married you’ll work on your relationship.”

Rivkin believes that couples who’re ready to split don’t fret about their budget. They prioritize putting to end a part of their lives that’s causing them pain.

“If you’re really miserable,” said Rivkin, “You’re not going to let money stop you.”

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