

Jackie Walker is one half of a dynamic, pioneering duo which also includes Kirsten Gronning and together they make up the ground-breaking organisation Breakup Angels, which is dedicated to helping people going through divorce emotionally, financially and pragmatically.

Breakup Angels makes up part of the cutting edge Collaborative Movement in Family Law and together with life coaches, lawyers and many others, the organisation focuses on working through life crises with the compassion and the respect required to really make a difference.

In this interview, Jackie tells us why adversarial methods are a thing of the past and how Breakup Angels fits neatly into the twenty first century's vision of Family Law.

1. Jackie, yourself and Kirsten Gronning are the co-founders of Breakup Angels; what kind of organisation is it and how did you come up with the idea?

Breakup Angels is a fast growing collaboration of quality professionals and organisations including family lawyers, financial consultants, coaches, mentors, counsellors and mediators skilled at supporting separating and divorcing people. We offer - or find someone through our network of experts who offers - support for **all** the reasonable emotional, financial, legal and practical issues which arise for people who are facing separation; going through the process, or who are still trying to find answers well after breaking up.

It's clear that traditional adversarial methods of resolving family conflicts are impacting adversely across every aspect of family life. Newer initiatives eg. collaborative family law, whilst welcome, are slow to make an impact. In 2006 more than 132,000 couples divorced in England and Wales, impacting 125,000 children with huge financial and emotional cost. Countless other co-habiting, unmarried couples split too with similar issues and we are starting to see civil partnership breaking down too.

We felt that there needed to be a new approach to relationship breakdown and want to see people who need help get the right help and not just approach the legal profession as their only port of call

2. Both you and Kirsten focus on different angles within family dilemmas: how do they work together?

Yes, Kirsten has vast personal experience of the practical processes of family law and her focus within Breakup Angels is at the coalface when people are actually getting divorced, visiting lawyers, going to court, negotiating settlements etc. My own experience is more focussed on those who realise that their relationship is breaking down, who are considering divorce and also those who are have gone through it all and are now looking to build a new life for themselves. I tend to focus on people's emotional wellbeing. Together therefore we cover every angle and the way we work is openly recognising what the client needs – because we take every situation on its own merits we can refer the client to the most appropriate helper.

3. What kind of training is involved?

Both Kirsten and I are qualified coaches. Kirsten has a Life and Executive coaching diploma and is a Mackenzie Friend. I'm a Master Practitioner of NLP (neuro linguistic programming), Timeline Therapy and Hypnotherapy. Much of the training is experiential and both of us have quite unusually challenging divorces to draw upon. Whilst I don't believe it's necessary to break a leg to know it'd be sore, in the case of divorce I believe that having gone through the process is a key part of the training and enables us to empathise with the client allowing us to offer hope.

4. When the Family Courts are unable to offer families the support they need and the cost of court is prohibitive, organisations like yours offer a real alternative for mind, body and wallet! What other factors about the Family Justice System do you note that makes it an awkward arena for the resolution of family issues?

Family law has come a long way since the early 80s when it was seen as just another type of litigation. The formation of the Solicitors Family Law Association led to Resolution, the name for the group of over 5000 solicitors, who are committed to promoting a non-confrontational atmosphere in which family law matters are dealt with in an sensitive, constructive and cost-effective way.

The majority of cases which go to court – 9 out of 10 - settle before the final hearing². One of the law firms we refer clients to report that 74% of their firm's cases start the court process, usually as a means to negotiate with a recalcitrant spouse. With their average divorce costing almost £10K (multiply that by two to get both parties costs) and by two again to allow for the fact that London lawyers often charge more than double the rest of the country, you can see how much money people are spending on divorce. How many of these people regret going to court in the first place? Why are they there? What could have been done at an earlier stage – by their lawyer or themselves – to prevent it from going to court?

Lawyers are supposed to tell their clients about mediation but I wonder how many do. My clients often think mediation is the same as couples counselling and others say they have never been told about mediation by their lawyers. Who is responsible for marketing the advantages of mediation? If it's down to lawyers then it's plainly not happening. If it's down to not-for-profit agencies, how much more money can be put towards their marketing efforts to get the message across?

But the growth of collaborative law is, hopefully a positive indicator of the commitment of a growing number of lawyers who recognise the need for a different approach to divorce – one moves away from over 30 years of adversarial law to one which encourages splitting families to want to find their own solutions. We feel this is a great, if late, start – but it still begs the question as to who will educate them in this way? Because if the message can't be put out fast, then the courts will continue to be used by people who are in a really hard place because they've left it all too late; when it's easier to use litigation as a last resort (and for the wrong reasons) than to consider dispute resolution options and take part responsibility for the breakup – and how to deal with it.

5. The concept of third party family support during divorce has been promoted in America and seems to be working well as a model there: bearing in mind the cultural differences between the States and the UK, and our tangible cynicism when it comes to medical experts, your brand of guidance offers a perfect middle ground. What would you say to families who may be shy to try your service?

We have now amassed a raft of case studies which prove the benefits of working with a non judgemental third party. In the UK it has taken time for people even to consider counselling or going to their doctor – however the tide is turning and it's becoming so much more commonplace for people to recognise that they need or want help and that it's now available. In the UK divorce coaches do not need to have the medical expertise (it's too off putting for many who think they're going to see a shrink) – we are able to bridge the gap by being able to help them look forward and build up self confidence, give the most needed and most lacking ingredient which is support and be a shoulder to cry on. Families who are going through a rough patch can kiss and make up or kiss and break up when they are working with us and it's only fair to say that this is the way forward – a couple who can understand one another's reasons without anger or angst in order to help the whole family build a new life – together or apart.

6. Breakup Angels is taking part in the Starting Over Show in March this year; can you tell us about the show?

We are delighted to be a part of this ground breaking show which shares Breakup Angels twin missions of informing and inspiring the newly single and others going through life changing situations in a safe, informative and inspirational environment.

[The Starting Over Show](#) is the first UK event to help people bounce back from relationship break ups and life crises.

The venue is the lovely Old Ship Hotel by Brighton's Pier and the date is Sunday 15 March. Breakup Angels will be hosting the free financial and debt surgery and there is also a free legal surgery from Wikivorce. Breakup Angels Facilitators will be offering free laser coaching sessions. The guest speaker is Daily Mail columnist Anna Pasternak (Daisy Dooley Does Divorce) and the Divorce Doctor Francine Kaye will be running a workshop.

Courageous men and women who are going through or facing separation or divorce and who want to learn that there are many ways to get a divorce or break up, and to see the choices open to them will find a very warm welcome!

7. Collaborative Law also shares the same spirit as your organisation; the desire to work with rather than against family conflict is catching on in the UK: is there a place for resources like yours within Collaborative Law?

Absolutely and we have worked with clients in the collaborative process as well as spoken to collaborative lawyers about their client's needs.

Clients pre-collaborative process may have a number of questions which they feel they can't put to their lawyer or they may feel unready to appoint a lawyer yet but pressure may be put on them by their (ex) partner. If they are going through the collaborative process, they may feel the process is not going well because they can't communicate their needs and preferences in the four-way meetings, or they may worry about losing control in the meetings and what effect this will have on their ability to stay in the process.

As a result we offer our program:

"What's stopping me from reaching agreement in Collaborative Family Law" which is a support program designed for people thinking of, or going through, the Collaborative Family Law Process and who are looking for help for the non-legal questions.

Areas where Breakup Angels can really help with non-legal support include support with emotional issues, for example:

- To find the courage to enter into the process.
- To learn how to communicate more effectively in the 4 way meetings.
- To understand their partner's emotional state (and their own) in order to understand their respective needs and wants.
- To find the confidence to believe in their ability to make the right choices.

Previous clients have also requested support with practical issues for example:

- How to find a collaborative lawyer right for them.
- What questions to ask of their collaborative family lawyer.
- To discuss alternatives; to off-load; to have an independent yet knowledgeable expert second opinion.

Clients are also assured that they are doing everything they can engage with the collaborative family process and that they make it as time and cost efficient as possible. This is an important factor in enabling the whole family to move on after the process is ended and the agreements signed.

We are unable to answer any legal questions but we will encourage you to ask these of your lawyer. With your permission, we will work with your lawyer. By using our services you are likely to save not only time and anguish, but preserve family assets by becoming better equipped to acknowledge and deal with the tension which leads to prolonged argument and escalating legal costs.

8. The legal system may be hesitant to incorporate organisations like yours because they do not have a governing body: how would you address this concern?

It is heartening that parts of the legal profession are now recognising our contribution and how, by working together for example, by sharing expertise and best practice in Breakup Angels, we are creating a win/win/win outcome – better support and best possible solutions for the families breaking up, with reduced cost and stress. We will be ready to welcome them. There are many legal companies already who are more than happy to embrace our offerings and we know that it is only a matter of time before others are brave enough to follow suit.

9. What has been your best experience to date running Breakup Angels?

To date, my best experience given that we are a fledgling company is the wholehearted welcome from professionals and clients alike. It seems to us that we are addressing the key issues head on, in a way which none of the individual experts could do given their professional bias. We act as a voice for both client and professional to provide a better support service leading to less adversarial cases and it is an opportunity which we are proud to take on.

10. If there was one piece of advice you would give to divorcing couples, what would it be?

We'd ask them what they were looking to achieve by divorcing and then the piece of advice which is most needed is – Your solicitor may or may not be the best first port of call. Please remember that the other person has a right to respect as a human being even though they seem to be at loggerheads with you just now. Please remember that they too are working through a tough situation.