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## How to Prepare for Your First Mediation Session -- Your Eight Steps Plan

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So, you have scheduled your first mediation session and from what I hear from my clients, I am sure you must be nervous. How will it go? How will the other party behave? What will they say or do? How to prepare and what to expect?

Well, first of all, breath. You have made a very good choice for your kids, as well as for yourself. You have made a financially sensibly, and family friendly choice. I commend it. Now, let's prepare, to make sure that you are doing everything possible on your end, to assist the process and contribute to its success. Here are ten practical tips for preparing to your first mediation session:

### 1. Come with Organized Financial Documents:

This should include the following: a list of all the assets you have: bank account, mutual funds, brokerage accounts, retirement funds, real estate, vehicles, time shares, businesses, important household contents, annuities, stock, equity in companies, pending law suits. You need to have balances of all bank accounts and retirement funds. For your debts, you will need the balance and monthly payment on your mortgage and home equity loan, all credit cards balances, all loan balances including student loans, private loans, loans against retirement funds and car loans. If you have any loans within the circle of your family members or friends (you borrowed or lent money to someone, including parents, siblings, friends etc.) make sure that you have concrete information on that as well. You may or may not need to bring original documents (please check with your mediator about that), but make sure that you are super organized. Typically, a spreadsheet or an organized list will do wonders in sparing both of you time and money in mediation. You can work on the list together or separately, depending on your relationship. Both options are fine.

### 2. Get Your Emotions Under Control:

Mediation is, for the most part, a negotiation process, and heated emotions, as understandable as they are, will not allow you to have the clear head you need. This is not the time for hurtful words or getting at the other party, and it is not good for the process or for any of you. Find a great therapist, which will be so much more productive in handling this process in the best possible way. Join a support group. Be kind to yourself. Get support from your family and friends. But come to mediation as composed as you can be. It will work for you, believe me.

### 3. Be Prepared to Negotiate, Not to Argue:

The past is the past. It cannot be changed. This, however, is a forward looking, proactive process. You will find this refreshing, and very helpful. Arguing is something that you have done before, and it does not work. Negotiating, however, works and works well. So the first question to ask yourself is: What do I want? Think about that. Then, together with your mediator, you can think about how to accomplish what you are looking for, within reason and within the scope of what is possible.

### 4. You Can Ask to Talk to Your Mediator Alone:

If you have specific concerns, go ahead and express them. You can ask for a few minutes individually with your mediator every now and then, most mediators allow that, and none of what you discuss with the mediator will be transferred or reported to the other party. Most mediators understand that not everything can be discussed with both of you in the room. A few minutes of private discussion with your mediator every now and then, can help the process tremendously. Your mediator will spend similar time with the other party. Be respectful and stay away. Session will then resume with both of you, it is a normal part of mediation.

### 5. Get a Non Adversarial Attorney to Advise You Throughout the Process:

It is important to know what your rights are, and to get legal advice. If you feel that your attorney is steering you towards litigation and is more adversarial than you are looking for, you can ask your mediator for a referral. It is great to have the legal advice on the one hand, and keep yourselves out of litigation and out of adversarial proceedings on the other hand.

#### 6. Plan a Budget:

It will be easier to negotiate if you know how much money you need (monthly or as a lump sum) in order to achieve what you are looking for, or how much you can afford to pay. Be realistic. Base your budget on fair and concrete expenses, and bring it to mediation with you. Your budget form should include housing and household expenses, car expenses, kids activities and expenses, health insurance, co pays, deductibles, and miscellaneous (detailed and specified) expenses. There are many family budget forms online. Find the one that you like the most or ask your mediator for one.

#### 7. Learn Your Rights and Obligations:

Go to more than one consultation. Gather information. Read articles. Do not go into the process of divorce before you know the terms, the meanings, the implications. Educate yourself. Read books. Many professionals offer free consultations. Go to a few, together or separately, and ask a lot of questions. It will give you a clearer picture of what your options are, and what each option means for you.

#### 8. Put Your Concerns on the Table (or in Writing):

Your concerns are important to the process. Put them on the table so that they can be discussed. Some people are concerned about travel with the kids, some have a family member they are concerned about, others are concerned about not being notified before the kids when a significant other is introduced to them. Everything is relevant, and should be brought up. Use this proactive process to assist you in setting the grounds for productive co-parenting and peace of mind.

Good luck!

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