

Life After Love – First Aid
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Life After Love

Okay, he said some words, you said some words, you've both got an attorney now, and it's all over except for the slam of the judge's gavel. Right? Wrong. In the crazy world of divorce, you're just getting started.

You need to go to the bank, right away. Be sure to talk to your attorney first, though, because laws vary from state to state. Still, the most common immediate problem women face in a divorce is an instant financial crisis. And, things can go downhill from there.

"It's a huge problem," says Mark Franco, vice president of SunTrust Bank, West Georgia. "The biggest, most consistent problem bankers see in poor credit situations is due to divorce." He says bounced checks, cleaned out checking accounts, credit cards run to the hilt, and an "I'm not going to pay it!" attitude on both sides kills credit ratings for years. "It's a huge, huge problem, because people don't understand the long-term impact of their decisions now."

So money is likely to be your first critical juncture in the split – especially if he splits with all of it.

What do you do if your man cleans out the checking account and leaves you and the kids sitting in the house dead broke? "Call the bank immediately. Explain the situation and work out a plan to pay your mortgage and other loans. It's easier for a banker to deal with the problem upfront than it is for you to deal with it on the backend," says Franco. Get a copy of your checking and savings accounts to give to your attorney to prove your ex absconded with the dough. Also, keep a journal on all such financial shenanigans; it'll help you keep your facts straight and most judges accept journals as evidence. Don't stop there, though.

Fifteen bankers were polled for their advice on what women should do immediately when a divorce is imminent to protect their financial well-being. This is their unanimous consensus: get a copy of your credit report and then close all joint checking and credit accounts.

Why? Because in the end it doesn't matter what the judge says, creditors can demand that you pay if your name is on the account. That includes whatever amounts your ex might charge after he's flown the coop. Don't forget all those "pre-approved" credit card applications that come in the daily mail, either. Your ex can easily sign your name to the application and Voila! you are liable for something you don't even know exists. Remember, he knows everything about you including your social security number and

your birth date. Stores and credit card companies are not real dedicated about checking to see if your signature is real – especially if the application is mailed rather than executed in person.

If your ex writes a bad check on your joint checking account, you could be liable even though it's his signature and his dirty deed. In most states, you are liable just because your name is on the account, and both the bank and the stores can prosecute you. But, you can't simply have your name removed from the account; to protect yourself you will have to shut it down. However, in the game of Drop The Loser, nothing is quite that simple. The judge may take a very poor view of you taking the dough. Talk to your lawyer first.

But be aware that as long as your name is on any account – you may be forced to cough up the payoff. Cancel existing credit cards and get new ones issued in your name only. Try to negotiate through your attorney to get your ex to payoff or refinance any debts in your name that he's suppose to pay. From then on, check your credit report every three months to ensure there are no new debts or credit cards issued in your name. Don't be afraid to press charges for fraud if you find anything.

After all, just because you cleaned house doesn't mean you have to take a bath!

See you next week.