The Second Act Financial Foundation Framework™

The Informed Woman's Complete Pre-Divorce Financial Strategy Guide

HEAL · RECLAIM · LOVE

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

A Note Before We Begin

I was sitting on the floor of my home office at midnight, surrounded by stacks of paper I'd frantically photocopied while my husband was out of town. Bank statements. Tax returns. Insurance policies. Bills. Account numbers I didn't recognize. Documents stuffed into folders with labels that told me nothing.

I was an attorney. I had spent years in courtrooms. I had argued cases, cross-examined witnesses, stood my ground under pressure. And yet, sitting on that floor, I felt more helpless than I ever had in any courtroom in my life.

Because the case I was trying to understand was my own life — and I didn't have a single piece of evidence organized.

What I didn't have that night was a system. I had urgency, I had fear, and I had a growing pile of paper that told me everything and nothing at the same time. What I needed — what I desperately wished someone had handed me — was exactly what you're holding now.

This guide is the system I wish I'd had.

It is built from three things: thirty-three years of lived experience navigating a marriage where I didn't control the finances; a legal career that taught me how financial information is actually used in divorce proceedings; and years of working with women who were exactly where you are right now — standing at the edge of the biggest financial decision of their lives, terrified of what they didn't know.

Here is what I learned: the fear of the unknown is almost always worse than the reality. And regardless of what you discover, knowledge gives you options. Ignorance gives you none.

You are not discovering problems. You are discovering solutions. And you are doing it from a position of strength — because you are doing it before you file, before the clock starts, before emotions run so high that clear thinking becomes nearly impossible.

Let's begin.

GETTING ORIENTED

How to Use This Guide

This guide is organized into five phases that build on each other. Each phase contains:

- ☐ **The Work** — what you're actually doing and why
- ☐ **The Attorney's Perspective** — legal context that shapes how this information matters in a divorce proceeding
- ☐ **The Worksheets** — fillable templates where you record your findings
- ☐ **The Coaching Prompts** — questions to help you process what you're discovering
- ☐ **The Checkpoint** — what you should know before moving to the next phase

You don't need to complete this in exactly 14 days. Some women move faster. Some need more time with certain sections. What matters is that you complete every section honestly before you file.

Plan for 30–60 minutes of focused work per day. Do it alone, in a quiet space, when you won't be interrupted. Keep your documents and this guide in a secure location — either locked, in a private cloud folder, or at a trusted friend's home.

> **DIGITAL SECURITY NOTE**
>
> If you share a computer with your spouse, do this work in a private browser window. Save nothing to shared drives or shared cloud accounts. Consider using a personal email address your spouse doesn't know about for any accounts you create during this process.

THE BIG PICTURE

Your 14-Day Roadmap

Here's the shape of what's ahead. Each phase builds directly on the one before it — by Day 14, every number you need will already be in your hands.

Days 1–4	**Phase I — Expense Mapping** Discover what your life actually costs.
Days 5–7	**Phase II — Income Reality Check** See the real gap between household and personal income.
Days 8–10	**Phase III — Assets & Debts** Build a complete inventory of what you own and owe.
Days 11–12	**Phase IV — Debt Optimization** Explore your options before you file anything.
Days 13–14	**Phase V — Gap Analysis & Path Forward** Turn everything you've learned into a strategy.

PHASE One

Expense Mapping

Days 1–4

Discovering What Your Life Actually Costs

THE WORK

When I was preparing for my divorce, the first thing that shocked me wasn't the number. It was how little I knew about the number.

I knew roughly what the mortgage was. I had a vague sense of what we spent on groceries. Beyond that, I was guessing. And in a divorce, guessing is dangerous.

Here's why this phase matters more than it might seem: your post-divorce financial life will be built on one foundational question — what does it cost me to live? Not what you think it costs. Not what you hope it costs. What it actually, honestly, verifiably costs.

Women who skip this phase tend to make one of two errors. They underestimate their expenses, agree to a settlement that looks fine on paper, and find themselves scrambling within six months. Or they overestimate out of fear, create unnecessary conflict, and cost themselves time and money in negotiations. You want the truth. The truth protects you.

> THE ATTORNEY'S PERSPECTIVE
>
> Why Expenses Matter in Divorce Proceedings — Your documented monthly expenses are used for three critical purposes: (1) **Spousal support calculations.** One primary factor most states use is the marital standard of living, and your documented expenses help establish it. (2) **Asset division negotiations.** Knowing exactly what you need to live on gives you flexibility to decide which assets matter most. (3) **Temporary support orders.** If you need support while the divorce is pending, courts will ask for this exact documentation — having it ready means you can respond quickly and accurately. Document everything. Keep receipts and statements as backup.

Day 1–2: Housing Expenses

Your housing costs are the foundation of everything else. Get these numbers exactly right.

How to find these numbers: mortgage statement for principal + interest · annual property tax bill ÷ 12 · call utility companies for your 12-month average usage.

Monthly Housing Costs

Expense	How to Find It	Monthly Amount
Mortgage or rent payment	Mortgage statement	
Property tax (annual ÷ 12)	Annual tax bill	
Homeowner's/renter's insurance	Insurance policy or escrow	
HOA fees	HOA statement	
Home warranty or maintenance plan	Policy documents	
Electric (12-month average)	Utility company	
Gas/heating (12-month average)	Utility company	
Water/sewer	Utility bill	
Trash collection	Utility bill or bank statement	
Internet and cable	Monthly bill	
Home security/alarm	Monthly bill	
Pest control (annual ÷ 12)	Service agreement	
Lawn care or snow removal	Service agreement or receipts	
TOTAL HOUSING		

IMPORTANT NOTE ON HOUSING

One of the most painful realizations some women have is discovering they cannot afford the marital home on their own income alone. I want you to have that information now, not after you've fought to keep a house that will drain you financially for years. Document these numbers honestly. We will revisit your housing decision in Phase Five.

Day 3: Family and Personal Support

This category surprises almost every woman I've worked with. Even when children are grown and living independently, most mothers are still providing some level of financial support — and most have never added it up.

This is not about deciding whether to continue that support. It's about knowing the true cost of your current family financial life so you can plan honestly.

Family and Personal Support (Last 12 Months)

Expense	Annual Amount	Monthly Average
College tuition, room, or board		
Adult child's student loan payments you cover		
Adult child's health insurance		
Adult child's car payment or insurance		
Adult child's cell phone plan		
Graduate school costs		
Regular emergency financial assistance		
Support for aging parents		
Your own health insurance premiums (current)		
Your prescription medications		
Dental and vision (annual ÷ 12)		
Life insurance premiums		
TOTAL FAMILY & PERSONAL		

IF YOU HAVE MINOR CHILDREN AT HOME

This framework assumes many readers have grown children, but not all do. If you have children still at home, add these to your total: childcare or after-school care, school tuition or fees, extracurricular activities and camps, tutoring, and children's health insurance and medical costs. These are marital expenses just like any other — document them with the same care.

COACHING PROMPT

Look at the total in this category. Is this a level of support you could realistically maintain on your post-divorce income? Is it a level you would want to maintain? This is not about cutting off the people you love. It's about deciding — consciously and from a position of knowledge — what your commitments will be going forward.

Day 4: Household Operating Expenses

This is the category most women most dramatically underestimate. These expenses are constant, routine, and easy to overlook. Groceries feel small until you add up twelve months. Clothing feels occasional until you track it consistently.

How to complete this section: pull three to six months of bank and credit card statements. Do not rely on memory. Look at every transaction and categorize it. This is the most time-consuming part of Phase One, and it is worth every minute.

Monthly Household Operating Expenses

Expense	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	3-Mo. Avg
Groceries and household supplies				
Dining out and takeout				
Gas and fuel				
Car maintenance and repairs				
Car insurance				
Car loan or lease payment				
Clothing and personal care				
Subscriptions (streaming, apps)				
Gym or fitness				
Entertainment				
Pet care and veterinary				
Gifts (annual ÷ 12)				
Travel and vacation (annual ÷ 12)				
Professional services (hair, nails)				
Church or charitable giving				
Other				
TOTAL OPERATING				

DON'T FORGET: POST-DIVORCE HEALTH INSURANCE

The health insurance premium you documented above is your *current* cost — often subsidized by a spouse's employer plan. That coverage ends at divorce. Before you finalize your expense picture in Phase Five, get an actual quote for COBRA continuation or a marketplace plan in your name and use **that** number, not your current premium. This single line item surprises more women than almost any other in this guide.

Phase Checkpoint

What You Know	Amount
Total monthly housing costs	
Total monthly family/personal support	
Total monthly household operating expenses	
Total monthly debt payments (from Phase Three, Day 9)	
Estimated post-divorce health insurance (if different from above)	
TOTAL MONTHLY EXPENSES (your most important number)	

PHASE Two

Income Reality Check

Days 5–7

Understanding What's Really Coming In

THE WORK

Here is the hard truth about income and divorce that most women aren't told upfront: your household income and your personal income are two completely different numbers — and the gap between them may be significant.

Right now, you may live in a household that generates $150,000 a year between two incomes, two Social Security contributions, and rental income from a jointly owned property. After divorce, your personal income column may look dramatically different.

The purpose of this phase is not to frighten you. It's to give you an honest picture of the gap you may need to bridge — and then, in Phase Five, to help you figure out how to bridge it.

THE ATTORNEY'S PERSPECTIVE

Income in Divorce Proceedings — Income information matters in two distinct ways. For **spousal support**, courts look at both spouses' current incomes, earning potential, the length of the marriage, the standard of living during the marriage, and your contributions to it — including non-financial contributions like raising children or supporting your spouse's career. For **asset division**, income affects your ability to maintain certain assets: whether you can realistically keep the marital home, make payments on a vehicle, or manage investment properties. One important concept — **imputed income**: in some states, courts can assign you an earning capacity based on your education, work history, and local job market, regardless of what you're currently earning. If you've been out of the workforce, this is critical planning information. An attorney in your state can advise you.

Day 5: Current Household Income

Complete Current Household Income

Income Source	Whose	Monthly	Annual
Your employment income	Yours		
Spouse's employment income	Spouse's		
Your self-employment/business income	Yours		
Spouse's self-employment/business income	Spouse's		
Rental property income	Joint/Whose?		
Investment dividends	Joint/Whose?		
Social Security income — yours	Yours		
Social Security income — spouse's	Spouse's		
Pension income — yours	Yours		
Pension income — spouse's	Spouse's		
Trust or inheritance income	Yours/Spouse's		
TOTAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME			

Day 6: Your Personal Income Reality

Your Post-Divorce Income

Income Source	Current Monthly	Post-Divorce Realistic
Your employment income (after tax)		
Your Social Security		
Your pension income		
Your rental income (if keeping property)		
Your investment/dividend income		
Your business income		
Subtotal — Income You Control		
Spousal support/alimony (estimate only)	N/A	
Share of spouse's pension (QDRO)	N/A	
Social Security on spouse's record (if 10+ yrs)	N/A	
Subtotal — Possible Additional Income		

IMPORTANT NOTE ON SPOUSAL SUPPORT

Factor spousal support in as a planning number, not a certainty. Support can be negotiated, modified, or in some states terminated by remarriage or cohabitation. Make sure your financial plan works even at a reduced support level — and ideally, at no support at all. That's not pessimism. That's protection.

Day 7: The Three-Scenario Income Projection

Income Scenarios

Scenario	Description	Projected Monthly Income
Conservative	If you needed income immediately — this week — what could you realistically earn?	
Moderate	With 3–6 months to update your resume or relaunch freelance work, what could you earn?	
Optimistic	With 1–2 years to retrain, complete a certification, or build a business, what is your realistic ceiling?	

COACHING PROMPT

What work feels possible to you right now? What would feel possible with six months of preparation? What has always been in the back of your mind as something you could do — and have never let yourself seriously consider? Write your answers somewhere private. They matter for Phase Five.

Phase Checkpoint

What You Know	Amount
Your current personal monthly income	
Conservative post-divorce income	
Moderate post-divorce income	
Optimistic post-divorce income	
Possible spousal support (estimate only)	

PHASE Three

Assets & Debts

Days 8–10

Understanding What You Own and What You Owe

THE WORK

This is the phase most women dread most — and the one that most consistently surprises them.

Some women discover they have significantly more in assets than they realized. Others discover debts they didn't know existed. Most discover some of both, along with accounts, policies, and financial instruments they had no idea were part of their financial picture.

Here is what I want you to remember as you work through this phase: you are not creating this reality by discovering it. It has always been there. You are simply finally seeing it clearly — and that clarity, however difficult, is power.

THE ATTORNEY'S PERSPECTIVE

How Assets Are Divided — **Marital vs. separate property:** in most states, assets acquired during the marriage are marital property, subject to division. Assets owned before marriage, or received as individual gifts or inheritances kept separate, may be considered separate property — unless commingled with marital assets, which can cause them to lose that separate character. **Equitable distribution vs. community property:** most states use equitable distribution, dividing assets fairly but not necessarily equally. Nine states are community property states (AZ, CA, ID, LA, NV, NM, TX, WA, WI), where marital assets are generally divided 50/50. **Retirement accounts require special handling:** dividing a 401(k) or pension requires a Qualified Domestic Relations Order (QDRO). Without one, you cannot legally require your spouse to divide these accounts, and you cannot access them without tax penalties. **Hidden assets:** if you suspect your spouse may be hiding assets, the legal discovery process has tools to find them — noticing discrepancies now is exactly the information your attorney needs.

Day 8: Complete Asset Inventory

Real Estate

Property	Est. Current Value	Mortgage Owed	Est. Equity	Ownership
Primary home				Joint/Sole
Other real estate				Joint/Sole
Rental property				Joint/Sole

Financial Accounts

Account Type	Institution	Acct # (last 4)	Current Balance	Ownership
Checking account				Joint/Sole
Savings account				Joint/Sole
Money market / CD				Joint/Sole
Brokerage/investment account				Joint/Sole
401(k) — yours				Yours
401(k) — spouse's				Spouse's
IRA — yours				Yours
IRA — spouse's				Spouse's
Pension — yours				Yours
Pension — spouse's				Spouse's
HSA / 529 college savings				Joint/Sole

Other Assets

Asset	Estimated Value	Notes
Life insurance cash value		Check policy — not death benefit
Business ownership interest		May require professional valuation
Stock options or RSUs		Check current vesting schedule
Cryptocurrency		Use current market value
Valuable jewelry (appraised)		
Art or collectibles (appraised)		
Money owed to you		
TOTAL ASSETS		

Day 9: Complete Debt Inventory

When debt stays vague and frightening in your mind, it controls you. When you write it down and look at it clearly, you can start making strategic decisions.

Complete Debt Inventory

Debt Type	Creditor	Total Balance	Rate	Min. Payment	Whose Name?
Primary mortgage			%		Joint/Sole
Second mortgage/HELOC			%		Joint/Sole
Car loan 1			%		Joint/Sole
Car loan 2			%		Joint/Sole
Credit card 1			%		Joint/Sole
Credit card 2			%		Joint/Sole
Credit card 3			%		Joint/Sole
Credit card 4			%		Joint/Sole
Student loans — yours			%		Yours
Student loans — spouse's			%		Spouse's
Personal loan			%		Joint/Sole
Medical debt			%		Joint/Sole
Tax obligations			%		Joint/Sole
TOTAL DEBT					

YOUR TOTAL MONTHLY DEBT PAYMENTS

Add up every number in the **Min. Payment** column above. That total is your **Total Monthly Debt Payments** — carry it forward to your Phase One checkpoint and to the Phase Five Master Worksheet. It belongs in your monthly expense picture, not just your debt ledger.

	Amount
TOTAL MONTHLY DEBT PAYMENTS	

Day 10: Net Worth and Strategic Analysis

Your Net Worth

	Amount
Total Assets	
Total Debts	
NET WORTH	
Liquid/accessible assets (for living expenses)	
Total monthly debt payments (your monthly floor)	
High-interest debt total (15%+, priority target)	

COACHING PROMPT

What surprised you in this phase? Was it better than you feared, or more complicated than you realized? Write down the three things that most surprised you — those are the three things you most need to discuss with an attorney or financial advisor.

Checklist: Sources for Hidden Accounts

- ☐ Tax returns (Schedules B and E) — lists all interest, dividend, and rental income
- ☐ Bank statements — look for automatic transfers to unknown accounts
- ☐ Your credit report at AnnualCreditReport.com — lists all debts in your name
- ☐ Email searches for “statement,” “bank,” “account,” “investment”
- ☐ Incoming mail — financial statements for unknown accounts may arrive on paper
- ☐ Life insurance policies — check all policies for cash value

PHASE Four

Debt Optimization Strategies

Days 11–12

Exploring Your Options Before Finalizing Anything

THE WORK

Now comes the phase that separates women who go through divorce from women who go through divorce strategically.

You now have a complete picture of what you spend, what you earn, what you own, and what you owe. That picture gives you something most women entering divorce don't have: options.

The decisions you make — or don't make — in the weeks and months before you file can have lasting financial consequences. Some strategies are significantly easier to execute while you are still legally married. This phase helps you think through your options before you commit to anything.

Important: before implementing any strategy in this phase, consult with a divorce attorney in your state. This is educational information, not legal advice.

THE ATTORNEY'S PERSPECTIVE

Timing and Strategy Before Filing — Financial decisions made during marriage can affect divorce proceedings. If you use marital assets to pay off individual debt, or make large financial moves that disadvantage your spouse, courts can consider this “dissipation of marital assets.” Get legal advice before making significant financial moves. Protecting your access to funds is legitimate — establishing your own individual credit, opening a personal bank account, and securing your own emergency fund are generally considered prudent steps, not manipulation. Most attorneys recommend you have access to your own funds before filing. Document everything from this point forward: the financial picture that exists at the time of separation (or sometimes at filing) is often the picture that matters most in proceedings.

A NOTE ON SAFETY FIRST

If your fear about this process is about your physical safety — not just financial uncertainty — please contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 (thehotline.org) before taking any of the steps in this phase. They can help you build a safety plan first. Your safety always comes before your paperwork.

Day 11: Debt Consolidation Analysis

Debt Strategy Options

Strategy	Question to Consider	Your Notes
Home Equity	Could a HELOC pay off high-interest credit cards?	
Home Equity	Would a cash-out refinance reduce monthly burden? Estimated savings:	
Home Equity	How would this affect housing post-divorce?	
Asset Liquidation	Are there investments to sell to pay off debt?	
Asset Liquidation	Are any assets more trouble than they're worth?	
Credit Optimization	Could you transfer to lower-rate credit options?	
Credit Optimization	What debts could be paid off with available cash?	
Credit Optimization	Eliminating a payment would save per month:	

Day 12: Pre-Filing Priority Checklist

Steps Generally Advisable Before Filing

- ☐ Open an individual checking account in your name only at a separate bank
- ☐ Establish or verify your individual credit — confirm you have accounts in your name
- ☐ Set aside an emergency fund in your individual account — 3 months of your Total Monthly Expenses number from Phase One, if possible
- ☐ Photograph or document high-value personal property (jewelry, art, collectibles)
- ☐ Make copies or secure digital versions of all financial documents gathered in this guide
- ☐ Secure copies of the last 3 years of tax returns
- ☐ Note current balances on all accounts — this establishes your baseline at separation

Consult an Attorney Before Doing These

- ☐ Any large financial transfers between accounts
- ☐ Liquidating retirement accounts or investments
- ☐ Taking out new debt in your name
- ☐ Removing your name from joint debt
- ☐ Closing joint credit card accounts
- ☐ Selling any marital assets

COACHING PROMPT

What is your biggest financial vulnerability right now — the thing you are most worried about if your spouse were to move first? That's the thing to discuss with an attorney immediately. Don't let fear of conflict leave you financially exposed.

PHASE Five

Gap Analysis & Your Path Forward

Days 13–14

From Information to Strategy

THE WORK

This is the phase everything has been building toward.

You now know what your life costs. You know what income you can count on. You know what you own and what you owe. You know the strategies available to you. Now it's time to put the complete picture together — and to move from information to strategy.

THE ATTORNEY'S PERSPECTIVE

What an Informed Woman Looks Like in Negotiations — I want to tell you something from my years of legal practice: the women who come to divorce proceedings with organized financial information are treated differently. When you can hand your attorney a clear, organized summary of your monthly expenses, your income, your assets, and your debts — when you can answer their questions without guessing, when you can point to documentation for every number — you communicate something powerful: "I am a woman who understands her situation. I am not going to be steamrolled. I am not going to accept a settlement out of fear or confusion." That posture changes negotiations. It changes the offers that come to you. It changes the outcome.

Day 13: Your Complete Financial Foundation Summary

Master Worksheet: Your Financial Picture — Section 1: Monthly Expenses

Category	Monthly Amount
Housing costs	
Family and personal support	
Household operating expenses	
Total debt payments	
Post-divorce health insurance (if different from above)	
TOTAL MONTHLY EXPENSES	

Section 2: Monthly Income (Post-Divorce)

Income Source	Monthly Amount
Your employment income	
Social Security / pension	
Investment income (assets you'll keep)	
Potential spousal support (estimate only)	
Other	
TOTAL AVAILABLE INCOME	

Section 3: Your Gap Analysis

	Amount
Total monthly expenses	
Total available income	
MONTHLY GAP (positive or negative)	

Section 4: Net Worth Summary

	Amount
Total assets	
Total debt	
NET WORTH	

Day 14: Your Strategic Path Forward

If You Have a Monthly Income Gap

You are not powerless. You have specific information about exactly what you need to bridge.

- ☐ How large is the gap? $_____ per month
- ☐ Can spousal support reasonably close it? Yes / Partially / No
- ☐ What income can you develop within 1–2 years? $_____
- ☐ What expenses can you legitimately reduce? $_____
- ☐ What assets could provide short-term bridge income? _____
- ☐ What is your most urgent financial vulnerability? _____

If You're in Better Shape Than Expected

You have the luxury of choice. Use these questions to think strategically:

- ☐ Which assets are most important to your long-term security? _____
- ☐ Can you afford to keep the marital home? Should you? Yes / No / Need analysis
- ☐ How can you best structure asset division to serve your income needs? _____
- ☐ What does your retirement picture look like with your share of assets? _____

Your Pre-Divorce Financial Confidence Checklist

By completing The Second Act Financial Foundation Framework™, you should be able to answer yes to every one of these questions:

- ☐ I know exactly how much I need each month to live independently.
- ☐ I can clearly explain my complete financial situation to anyone who needs to know it.
- ☐ I understand the difference between our household income and my personal income.
- ☐ I have a complete inventory of all marital assets, including some I discovered during this process.
- ☐ I have a complete inventory of all debts, including whose name each is in.
- ☐ I know what my net worth is and what my share of marital assets could reasonably be.
- ☐ I know what financial protection steps I need to take before or immediately after filing.
- ☐ I have identified the questions I need to ask a divorce attorney.
- ☐ I feel informed enough to make strategic decisions about my future — not reactive ones.

GETTING READY FOR COUNSEL

What to Tell Your Attorney

A Practical Preparation Guide for Your First (or Next) Legal Consultation

Before the Meeting: What to Bring

Your attorney's time is expensive. The more organized you arrive, the more productive your consultation will be.

Financial Documents

- ☐ Your completed Financial Foundation Summary
- ☐ Last 2 years of tax returns (all pages)
- ☐ Last 3 months of bank statements
- ☐ Most recent retirement account statements
- ☐ Your credit report
- ☐ Mortgage statement and property tax bill

Personal Information

- ☐ Date and location of marriage
- ☐ Dates and current ages of all children
- ☐ Length of time in your current state
- ☐ Brief employment history for both spouses during the marriage

Your List of Unknowns

- ☐ Accounts you believe exist but can't find
- ☐ Assets you know about but can't value
- ☐ Debts you suspect exist but haven't verified

Questions to Ask Your Attorney

Topic	Question	Notes/Answer
Your state's laws	Is this an equitable distribution or community property state?	
Your state's laws	What factors does our state use for spousal support?	
Your state's laws	What is the typical range for support in cases like mine?	
Your state's laws	Is income imputed to non-working spouses here?	
Your situation	Given my financial picture, what are my strongest assets in negotiation?	
Your situation	Are there assets I should prioritize requesting?	
Your situation	What protective steps should I take before filing?	
Your situation	Do I need a forensic accountant?	
The process	What is the typical timeline for divorce in this county?	
The process	What happens to health insurance during the process?	
Retirement	Will we need a QDRO? Who prepares it and what does it cost?	
Retirement	What are my options regarding my spouse's pension?	

LEARN FROM OTHERS

Common Mistakes to Avoid

“Relying on your spouse to share information voluntarily.”

In a cooperative divorce, this may work. In a contentious one, information you haven't documented may disappear. The legal discovery process can compel disclosure, but it takes time and costs money.

“Keeping the marital home out of loyalty or emotion.”

The home may feel like stability, but if you can't afford the mortgage, taxes, insurance, and maintenance on your post-divorce income, it will become a source of financial stress rather than security. Run the numbers honestly.

“Accepting the first offer out of exhaustion or urgency.”

The desire to just have it over can lead women to accept settlements that disadvantage them long-term. Know your numbers. Know what you need. Don't sign what you can't live with.

“Forgetting about taxes.”

Different assets have different tax treatment. A $50,000 investment account and $50,000 in a 401(k) are not equal — the retirement account will be taxed on withdrawal. Make sure you understand the after-tax value of what you're accepting.

“Not planning for health insurance.”

If you've been covered under your spouse's employer plan, that coverage ends at divorce. COBRA is available but expensive. Factor this into your expense planning and negotiate with it in mind.

WHEN IT FEELS LIKE TOO MUCH

Common Obstacles — And How to Move Through Them

“I can't find all the documents.”

Start with what you can access. Bank statements, credit card statements, and tax returns will give you the majority of what you need. For anything you can't locate, contact the institution directly. Your accountant has tax returns. Don't let the absence of a paper document stop your progress.

“The numbers are worse than I thought.”

You are not creating problems by discovering them. The debt was there before you found it. The income gap existed before you calculated it. What you're doing by facing these numbers is giving yourself the ability to address them — which you cannot do from a position of ignorance.

“This feels overwhelming.”

Take it one day, one section at a time. Each number you find is not a problem — it's information. On days when the work feels like too much, do just one thing: fill in one worksheet, pull one bank statement, make one call. Progress matters more than speed.

“I'm not good with numbers.”

This framework requires basic arithmetic, not complex financial analysis. If you can balance a checkbook or follow a recipe, you can do this. Use a calculator. Take your time. If you get stuck, ask a trusted friend to sit with you — not to do the work, but to provide company while you do it yourself.

“My situation is too complicated.”

Complex situations need this analysis more than simple ones. A business, multiple properties, unusual assets — these add complexity, but they don't change the framework. They may mean you need additional professional help, but the foundational information you're gathering here supports all of that work.

A NOTE ON SAFETY FIRST

“I'm afraid of what he'll do when he finds out I know this much.” Knowledge is not aggression. Organizing your own financial information is not an attack. In a legal proceeding, both parties are required to disclose financial information — you are simply preparing to do your part accurately. If your fear is about safety, please contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 (thehotline.org).

QUICK REFERENCE

Terms Worth Knowing

You've encountered these terms throughout this guide. Here's a plain-language reference to flip back to whenever you need it.

Equitable distribution	The approach most states use to divide marital property — fairly, based on the circumstances, but not necessarily equally.
Community property	The approach used in nine states (AZ, CA, ID, LA, NV, NM, TX, WA, WI), where marital assets are generally divided 50/50.
Marital property	Assets and debts acquired during the marriage, generally subject to division regardless of whose name they're in.
Separate property	Assets owned before marriage, or received individually as a gift or inheritance and kept separate — may not be subject to division unless commingled with marital assets.
QDRO (Qualified Domestic Relations Order)	A court order required to divide a 401(k) or pension without triggering early withdrawal penalties or taxes.
Imputed income	An earning capacity a court can assign you based on your education, work history, and local job market — regardless of what you're currently earning.
Dissipation of marital assets	Using marital funds for individual benefit, or making financial moves that disadvantage your spouse, in a way courts may penalize in the settlement.
Discovery	The formal legal process attorneys use to compel disclosure of financial information a spouse hasn't shared voluntarily.
COBRA	A federal law letting you temporarily continue your former employer-based health coverage after divorce — typically at a significantly higher cost than an employee premium.
Forensic accountant	A financial professional who investigates hidden assets, traces funds, and values complex holdings like businesses for divorce proceedings.

CONTINUE YOUR JOURNEY

What Comes Next

This framework gave you clarity on where you stand today. The next two guides in The Second Act series pick up from here — one helps you turn this financial picture into a negotiation strategy, the other helps you rebuild once your divorce is final.

The Informed Woman's Pre-Divorce Strategy Guide
Takes the numbers you've just gathered and helps you build an actual negotiation strategy — what to ask for, what to let go of, and how to protect yourself at the table.

The Starting Over Playbook
For after the papers are signed: rebuilding credit in your own name, resetting your budget, and establishing the financial independence this framework was the first step toward.

Find both at www.realmomlife.com

Your Empowered Second Act Begins Here

You have done something most women never do.

You sat down with the truth about your financial life — not the version you hoped was true, not the version you feared was true — and you looked at it clearly. You gathered the documents. You ran the numbers. You did the hard, unglamorous work of knowing.

And knowing changes everything.

You are no longer a woman who is afraid of what she might find. You are a woman who found it, faced it, and built a foundation from it.

The Second Act Financial Foundation Framework™ is not just a pre-divorce tool. It is the beginning of a different relationship with your own financial life — one built on clarity, knowledge, and the confidence that comes from understanding exactly where you stand.

Whatever your next step is — a consultation with an attorney, a conversation with a financial advisor, or simply giving yourself time to process what you've learned — take it from this foundation.

You've got this. And now you have the numbers to prove it.

— Christine Moriarty

Attorney · Author · EmpoweredAgingWomen.com · RealMomLife.com

This guide is for educational and informational purposes only and does not constitute legal or financial advice. Laws governing divorce, asset division, spousal support, and related matters vary significantly by state. Nothing in this guide creates an attorney-client relationship. Please consult a licensed attorney in your state and a qualified financial advisor for guidance specific to your individual situation.
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