

Dr. Cohen:

Welcome to the divorce doctor podcast. I'm Dr. Elizabeth Cohen, the divorce doctor. I'm dedicated to breaking the stigma of divorce through my work. Divorce can be so isolating. Your friends and family might not understand what you're going through, but you're not alone. And divorce is not a failure on this podcast. I speak to real people who've gone through divorce and thrive through it. I talk about the struggles and the successes we explore with my guests, how the pain of divorce brought them realizations about themselves and their situations they wouldn't have had without this experience. I can't tell you how many clients have shared with me that being reminded they're not alone has allowed them to get up in the morning and keep on keeping on. I hope listening to these people's stories will help you feel less alone with my 15 years of experience, as a clinical psychologist, working with people going through divorce.

I know the ins and outs of divorce and love talking about all of it. I'm thrilled you are here and are ready to get the support you so deeply deserve. So let's dive in, my frustrated and overwhelmed divorcing people. Wait, how did I know how you felt? Do all people going through a divorce feel overwhelmed by both taking care of others and coping with the loss of a relationship? I certainly felt overwhelmed and heartbroken when I was going through my divorce, but you don't have to feel this way anymore. I have created just for you the ultimate divorce toolkit, you will be led by yours truly, a clinical psychologist, who has taught thousands of people how to thrive post-divorce. If you want to know exactly what to say to your ex, to get what you want, affirmations to help you heal from the pain of your divorce tips on how to talk to your friends without feeling needy, and a bonus step-by-step guide on how to have the best sex post-divorce.

Don't wait another minute to download this free ultimate divorce toolkit and get started. It's a game-changer. Just go to drelizabethcohen.com/divorcetoolkit to get it right now. Wishing you joy, confidence, and optimism in this next chapter.

I'm so happy today to have Tina Swithin here. She is the author of *Divorcing a Narcissist* and the One Mom's Battle series. She's the founder of One Mom's Battle. She continues to champion children's rights through her family court advocacy. She works to raise awareness of the issues in the family court system and to educate the general public on post-separation abuse and narcissistic personality disorder. Tina provides a variety of support services to those healing from narcissistic abuse. She's remarried and resides in California with her husband and two daughters, but she's about to take a road trip and do a long cross country amazing advocacy trip. Tina, thank you so much for being here.

Tina Swithin:

Thank you.

Dr. Cohen:

I'm so happy to have you. So I like to start out the podcast by just asking you to tell me a little bit about when you first started having that little voice in your head that separation or divorce might

be an option because I like to explain that usually, it can take a long time until we listen to that voice. So I'm just curious when you, when it first popped up,

Tina Swithin:

Probably about two years before my actual separation, I think I started emotionally checking out of the relationship a full two years. It was just so confusing, my marriage, everything, you know, looking back, it started with the "Prince charming" type and then to where we got, you know, where the pendulum had swung in the other direction. And I describe it as a fog. And so, you know, I do feel kind of a protection, self-protection. I started distancing myself. I remember going to dinner one night and saying, you know, I feel so unloved and uncared for that I don't even know how I would handle it. If someone hugged me, like, I just felt so desperate for connection that I wasn't getting.

Dr. Cohen:

And I love Tina that you brought up this idea of self-protection because so many people listening, and that we both work with, blame themselves for pulling back or questioning. Did I try hard enough? And it was protective for you to pull back.

Tina Swithin:

Yeah. And I know part of that, I know my own, you know, I have childhood trauma, abandonment issues. So I think I have a tendency to do that. Anyway. That's part of me that I've kind of, now I'm more self-aware back then. It was kind of an automatic thing, but I think it was just my natural instinct that I knew things were not healthy and I knew things were not normal. And so I just started trying to extract myself.

Dr. Cohen:

Yeah. And in some ways, you know, we talk about on this podcast, how, if we didn't go through these experiences, we wouldn't know things we know now and have the life we have. And in some ways, if you hadn't gone through that, you wouldn't have probably had the trauma healing that you've had that taught you that that was related to your trauma, right. You would have just probably continued to withdraw from the relationship and the relationship would have just become more and more distant.

Tina Swithin:

Right. And I, you know, a huge part of my own healing has been reflecting and identifying, you know, how I ended up in an unhealthy situation and, and really keen into that because I think we end up sometimes whether it's a friendship or relationship, you know, because of our own past baggage. And so I do believe in taking responsibility for what I brought into the equation. And so that's a lot of my healing journey has been along those lines.

Dr. Cohen:

Yeah. I think that's one of the common themes of the people on this podcast that I've interviewed is this acceptance of figuring out how they can understand how they got here. I

know that was my experience because we are the only people we can control. We can't control the other person. So this deep level of looking inside, which is not easy is possible when you go through something like this. And a lot of people talk about this limbo time, like between separation and divorce. I'm just wondering, how did you manage that? And how was that for you? So you've decided you're going to separate, but you know, it's a long time until the divorce,

Tina Swithin:

Right? So I am such a trooper. I will hang in there until the very end, because the old me, I can fix anything. If I just love harder, do better, you know, show up and be a little bit nicer, all of those things. And so, you know, my story is actually interesting because I wasn't the one that pulled the plug. Uh, we went to marital counseling for the last six months. And it was when the marital counselor started kind of looking, leaning into him a little more and questioning him. He said, "I'm done". So I think it was his own protection mechanism, whatever. And so I actually wasn't the one that said I'm throwing in the towel. I was, you know, when it happened, I was so relieved too though, because I do hang in there till the bitter end.

Dr. Cohen:

Yeah. You're not alone. I mean, so many women I talk with and men to really wait and feel like they can manage anything or hunker down. And I, my guess is that's also a trauma response. Right. Stick it out and try to fix it. And then you hear that the other partner asked for the separation and this relief and that's so, so poignant because it means, wow, I didn't feel back then the agency that how I was feeling mattered.

Tina Swithin:

Absolutely. And I think that for me, I, you know, my daughters were so little back then they were two and four. And so I was of the mindset, you know, I'm going to hold the family together. I'm going to, you know, all of that weighed into it a lot.

Dr. Cohen:

Absolutely. I'm so glad you brought that up because there is the impact on other people. And when you happen to be someone who usually puts other people's needs first, which I know you, you did, the kids are on that list too. Yeah. So during that limbo time, did you live together? Did you have separate homes? And what was that like? I know the divorce process was really challenging, but if you could tell me a little bit about that limbo.

Tina Swithin:

So the limbo time was very much, well, he worked four hours away for a lot of that time. So I remember saying to my dad, one day I can pull this off until the girls turned 18. He's only home two days a week. Right now I can, I can pretend, you know, I don't want to put my kids through a divorce. The thought of them bouncing between two homes. So I was really resigned too, I can pretend two days a week. So we did, you know, we did share the same house. It's so hard to put it into words. You know, it was such a fog truly. When I look back that I was just going through the motions every day, like absolutely miserable.

Dr. Cohen:

I think it's so important. You're the second interviewee that said, it's so hard to remember, or I was in a fog and I just want to say to people who are in it right now, at one point you will say, then it's hard to remember it. Some of the things that are happening now today, today that feels so painful and unimaginable, you move through them. They just become a part of the story that is complicated and a little foggy and that's okay. Right. So, cause I think back then, I know, I felt like everything I did had this like consequential feeling.

Tina Swithin:

Yes,. And I remember it was at the very end my brother came to visit and I thought I was putting on such a good show and things are fine. You know, everything's fine. My brother and I were, the whole family was on a walk, and my brother and I had walked up ahead and my ex-husband was behind us. And my brother said to me, what's going on? You know, I don't even recognize you two. Your spark is gone. You know, I, I truly, you are not doing a good job of hiding whatever's going on behind the scenes. And it was such a moment for me where I kind of went, okay, it's that apparent to people he's only been here two days and I, I think I'm doing a good job. So, you know, for me that means I'm not showing up as good as I possibly could be for my daughters, for myself, you know, it was kind of a huge moment.

Dr. Cohen:

Yeah. And I think a lot of us have those moments. I think I needed a lot of them. Right. I had a couple of ones who would say, is this, are you okay? Oh, I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine. I needed a lot of it. So I just want to say that, you know, until it's ready to land, we don't hear it. But I think you're right. I think if we open our, our hearts and minds up to what other people are saying, yeah. We're going to hear a lot reflected back. Absolutely. So I know you teach all about how to help women going through their divorce experience because of yours. So can you share a little bit about what that was like? I think that there's a misconception that it's going to either look like law and order or movies where, you know, it's very easy. So can you just share a little bit about what your experience was like logistically, but also emotionally going through the actual legal case?

Tina Swithin:

Yeah, so it was at the very end of my marriage when my therapist said, I think you might be dealing with someone who's narcissistic, you know, can't diagnose him, don't know, but you know, some of the things you're telling me lean towards that, I didn't know what that meant. And back then, in 2009, there was really no information out there on that word. And so in a lot of ways, I feel thankful that I didn't have the resources because I think it would have scared me to death, um, to go on and start Googling what that means. Um, and so for me, I just, I'm somebody who I avoid conflict at all costs and I'm very optimistic, Rose-colored glasses. And so I really envisioned that we would have a great co-parenting relationship. I didn't really understand the depth of the dysfunction at that point.

I feel like I was in the denial part of the fog. And so I was actually very hopeful that he would step up to the plate and be a good parent. He had never really had to parent the girls and I thought, Oh gosh, you know, this is going to be his chance to, to be a parent. And that I will have a partner in this and really naive thinking. My divorce started off as you know, I call it a category, five divorce hurricane. I went from living in a gated community, driving nice cars and having a business and a pretty nice life to the women's shelter where I had volunteered for years. And so it went from zero to a hundred overnight and financial abuse. I had no money to hire an attorney. He had basically locked down everything. Wow. And so I remember filing paperwork from the women's shelter on my laptop and they didn't have internet. And I still remember the night my kids had gone to bed and I had the laptop crooked in the window sill trying to catch other people's internet because I needed to get my court documents filed the next day, and it's just this memory that stands out in my mind. And it was truly a couple of the darkest days.

Dr. Cohen:

I can imagine that it's also such a sign of, even in your darkest days, like the worst days your bravery was coming through with, with that laptop. Yeah. If you're describing it, it couldn't seem darker, but you were still fighting. That's what's so amazing to me about, that's why I call the women in my program, superwomen, because of this bravery, and even if you were just doing it for your kids, because maybe at that point, you couldn't even be doing it for yourself. Right. That's such bravery, even in the midst of such darkness.

Tina Swithin:

I think that is so true. But when you're in that moment where you just feel desperate and hopeless and, but to look back, I can see it clearly the way you're describing it. Yes. But when you're in it, that's not how you're feeling.

Dr. Cohen:

Exactly. It feels endless. And also, I just want to say, and this is something I work on in my program is that you were also dealing with the grief of losing the relationship. Right. No matter how difficult and abusive it was, there's grief.

Tina Swithin:

That's right. For the future that I wanted for my kids, for, you know, the life I thought I had, it was a facade, you know, you're, you're going through and it's layer upon layer of grief, right.

Dr. Cohen:

When you're supposed to in so many areas. Right. And when you're supposed to be the most focused on all these specifics and you were representing yourself, so you were like a lawyer, you were the lawyer while also processing all of this. Yes. Wow. Yes.

Tina Swithin:

And I, I remember, you know, walking into the courtroom and, you know, completely out of sorts because I have thrown stuff into a bag to take us to the women's shelter at 6:00 AM in the morning and, you know, and walking into court and being someone who hates conflict. And I always say, if you're angry at me, I will literally be awake at 3:00 AM worrying about it. So I am conflict avoidant. And so to be thrust into this court system, having no idea what I was doing, you know, so hopeful that they're just going to do what's best for my kids. And, you know, the naive view that I look back on while I am actually glad that I didn't have the big picture, you know, you're forced to kind of do things one day at a time, one foot in front of the other.

Dr. Cohen:

Yeah. That's such an important reminder for those who are going through it right now. It doesn't have to be a long-term plan. And I remember sometimes my lawyer would talk law terminology and I would just kind of zone out. Cause I would just think, Oh, I can focus on how to get through today. And really all life is, is, uh, a bunch of today's piled on top of each other. So I felt that was good enough. Yeah. So you're you were representing yourself. And when did you start seeing that this experience or feeling that this experience was going to change you for the better, even as it was painful? Like when did you start feeling?

Tina Swithin:

I think when I started connecting with other people, you know, I went from feeling like I was the only one in the world going through this. I had known a lot of people who went through a divorce. I didn't know. It had to be so hard and so nasty and so dirty. And so for that, I wasn't prepared. And when I started connecting with other women and some men, but other people who were also going through such a high conflict divorce, and started feeling like I could help them, maybe they were walking two steps behind me or, you know, and started sharing stories and feeling like I wasn't the crazy one that other people were having this experience and feeling that there was some purpose to what I was going through that, you know, we were supporting each other, we were connecting. That's where I started to feel a shift.

Dr. Cohen:

Yeah. I love that. And both of our work involves groups. Right. And bringing women together. And I think you're talking to the power of seeing other people going through this and being able to support another person and indirectly supporting yourself. So believing that you were there for a higher reason

Tina Swithin:

Right? No. And I remember the first day it happened and I was sitting, I used to go to the court and just sit and watch proceedings because I wanted to learn the ropes. I wanted to learn, you know, how attorneys submitted evidence or how people, you know, address the judge. And so I would go anytime I had a two hour break, I lived about six blocks from the court. I would just go sit there. And I remember one day watching court proceedings and another mom, and I could tell it was like her first week there that she, you know, that deer in headlights look. And I remember following her out into the hallway on a break and saying, you know, here's my card. I

think we have some things in common if you want to go to coffee. And, and that was the first connection I was kind of being the person I wished I had had two months before when I was burning out. And so it just started that way, you know, developing this little network of moms.

Dr. Cohen:

So I could tell she had just started, she was a deer in headlights first few weeks, cause it's reminding me. And I think the listeners think that this is a process, just like you get better at riding a bike or being, you know, doing your taxes. You get better at managing the stress of divorce. It's still challenging, but it shifts, you have more experience and to see a mentor, which is what you were to this woman, someone who I call wayshowers, who's shown you the way so that you can move through is so incredibly, incredibly powerful. So what's the part that you could never see coming, but really has made you feel more embodied in who you are. Like, what's something that you just couldn't have imagined was going to be part of this.

Tina Swithin:

My career that has got to be, I was going to say, being known for this, I guess, um, just the fact that, you know, the looking back, some of my darkest points in this journey, I can look back now and understand why things unfolded the way they did for me anyway. And that's not, um, not to say it's for everyone, but just that there was purpose to what I've been through. Yeah. It's hard to put into words. It's kind of evolved into something that I could have never imagined. And the healing that I've, you know, walked through as a result of being known for this, you know, I, I never thought in my darkest moments that, you know, I have the whole lemons to lemonade theme and it's very much my life taking lemons and making lemonade out of it and helping others

Dr. Cohen:

And giving people lemonade who are so thirsty, right. So, so sharing what you've learned in such a... you do this with such an open and generous heart that you could never do this work. I mean, as a clinician, who's studied narcissism. Like I can't teach people to do the strategies that you teach from having lived it. I just can't, I can talk about it from an ivory tower. I can talk about it a little bit more, a little more grounded, but you can just talk about it from being in the field on the ground. And that is, that's so essential for people.

Tina Swithin:

When I started this journey, I didn't even know what a boundary was, which is why I ended up with a narcissist. So I had a target right on my forehead. And that has evolved to the point where, you know you to do this work, you have to have solid boundaries. And you know, some of my positive personal growth has come from those learning experiences.

Dr. Cohen:

Yeah, that's so great. And that's also something to think about that you wouldn't have known about setting boundaries. If you hadn't been in this situation, you would have probably stayed in the fog, lived in the fog. And so I'm so glad you're not there anymore. And all of us get to benefit

from you being present. And here, this is one of my favorite questions to ask, which is what message would you give your past self when she was venturing down this path? So let's say you could just pop in, she's sitting there in the court. What would you say to her?

Tina Swithin:

It's an ultra marathon and be guided by strategy and not emotions because, you know, that's, I feel like the first two years without understanding the realities of the court system, you know, just one of the ways, describe it nature intended for me to protect my kids. That is how I was created. That's how we are created as parents. And when you walk into the doors of the court system, it's almost like they tie your hands behind your back. And in a lot of situations, it kind of makes you go into this fight or flight mode and people don't present well in court when they're in that mindset. And so for me, it came down to really compartmentalizing, you know, what nature intended for me to do. It's kind of, I had to over the years start to think of it strategically versus emotionally because, you know, unfortunately it's so important in court. And so I would have said to my younger self, you know 10 years ago, it's a marathon, you know, it's not a 5k, it's not a 10 K. Sometimes it's an ultra marathon and you have to pace yourself.

Dr. Cohen:

Of what you're also saying. I love what you said. I was just thinking about a client. I have who's in high conflict. That what the court thinks of you is not who you are. Right. So to not go in there with some sort of emotional desire to look actually accurate, that the strategy is to get what you need and what you deserve is that right?

Tina Swithin:

Yeah. You know what I like to remind people because when I'm sitting in court, just watching cases, I don't know either party. And that's what people have to remember. The judge doesn't know either of you for all the judge knows you could be a pathological liar. And so, you know, the burden is on you over time to show up operating from your authentic truth, you know who you are. And that's why, you know. one of the things I help other people do is if you are so focused on maintaining rock solid boundaries with this person and all of that, you're not going to show up as who you authentically are in the court system. You may come across as rigid and uncompromising and not flexible, and that's not what they want to see. And so for me, it was really, you know, despite who he is, you know, he is who he is. I have to show up and rock my role as a co-parent as a litigant in court from my authentic place of truth. And when people step out of that is where it becomes a problem.

Dr. Cohen:

It does. It does. It does. It's such a great reminder of being authentic and strategic,

Tina Swithin:

Right? Yeah. Right.

Dr. Cohen:

Balance. Yeah. Yeah. Balance. And I think that there's so many strategies and I imagine you teach these, and I know I teach them of, you know, mindfulness and grounding and getting the support. You need to really get yourself in the mindset where you can be both of those things, but it takes work. So don't think if you, if you're hearing this and think, Oh, I can't do this. Like, I didn't know how to do it either. It's a practice,

Tina Swithin:

Right? Yeah. I would say the first two or three years, I looked like that deer in headlights constantly and was so overwhelmed that I was barely functioning. And it was, you know, after that three year Mark where I started, you know, because a lot of it for me was watching court proceedings, desensitizing myself to the whole system, the whole process, and then started going, you know, there's actually strategy involved in this and I can still show up and be authentic, but being strategic

Dr. Cohen:

So that's what I was going to ask you also, if there's anything else that you want to share for people who are listening at different stages, any little piece of information, feel free. Yeah.

Tina Swithin:

I know it's one day at a time, it's almost like I equate it to like Google diagnosing yourself, but I got a couple of symptoms and start researching those on the internet. I could convince myself by the end of the day that I have terminal cancer. And, you know, even in my own support groups that I run, I tell people there may be a week at a time where I don't even go on to my own Facebook page because I know when to push pause. And it's so easy to get so entrenched in all of the stories and the worst-case scenarios and, you know, the horrors that we hear about in the family court system, that it is important sometimes to really check in with yourself and take a step back and go, is this serving me right now? Am I going down the what if path? I would tell people to get off the what if the path that has nothing but anxiety at every crossroad. BNring yourself back to the here and now, because otherwise, it's just nothing positive comes from doing that to yourself. I love it.

Dr. Cohen:

That reminder so helpful. And I think it's so important, you know, this idea of the pause. I like to think of it as like a sacred pause, especially when you're in a system like family court with if anyone knows any lawyers, which is just urgent. So just so you know, the pausing is going to have to be like Uber charged because there's this motion, this forward motion. And so you can do it, but you have to probably do it even more than you think more self care, right. More slowing down. Yeah. Great. So Tina, thank you so much for being so vulnerable and sharing your beautiful story and for the work you do and for how you're changing the world. And so if people wanted to find you, what's the best way to find you?

Tina Swithin:

Uh, One Mom's Battle is my website and we also have family court awareness month.com AU. Is that right? Either of those.

Dr. Cohen:

Yeah. Right. And I'll add your information to the show notes. So thank you so much for being here. It's been an honor to listen to your story. Thank you.