The shock usually hits in the middle of the case, not at the beginning. You open a motion your spouse filed and see the line near the end:

“Plaintiff respectfully requests that Defendant be ordered to pay Plaintiff’s counsel fees.”

If you are already struggling to pay your own Divorce Lawyer In Maryland, the idea that you might also be ordered to pay your spouse’s lawyer can feel impossible and unfair.

Maryland law does allow fee shifting in divorce, custody, and support cases. That means in some situations, a judge can require one spouse to pay some or all of the other spouse’s attorney’s fees. Whether that will happen in *your* case depends on facts, timing, conduct, and the judge’s view of fairness.

This is not a theoretical question. I have watched fee requests change the leverage in a settlement conference, derail mediation, and, in a few cases, save a lower earning spouse from being steamrolled. The key is understanding how Maryland judges actually approach counsel fees, not just what the statute says.

The legal basics: when Maryland courts can shift fees

Maryland is not a “loser pays” state in family law. You are not automatically on the hook for your spouse’s lawyer just because you lose a motion or your spouse gets more of what they asked for.

Instead, Maryland courts have *discretion* to award attorney’s fees under several sections of the Family Law Article, mainly:

- Section 7-107: divorce and annulment
- Section 8-214: disputes over marital property
- Section 12-103: alimony, child support, and custody or visitation proceedings

The language in these statutes is slightly different, but the core test is the same. Before ordering you to pay your spouse’s counsel fees, a judge must look at three things:

1. The financial resources and needs of each party.
2. Whether there was substantial justification for bringing or defending the case.
3. Whether either party acted in good faith or bad faith.

Those factors sound abstract, but they drive almost every fee decision in practice.

What “forced to pay” usually looks like in real life

Clients often picture a judge ordering them to write a giant check on the spot. That almost never happens.

When Maryland judges order fee payments, it tends to fall into a few patterns.

Sometimes, a lower earning spouse has almost no access to money, and the higher earning spouse controls the accounts. The court may order the higher earner to advance a portion of the other side’s fees so both parties can participate meaningfully in the case. That is a need based award.

In other cases, a spouse drags out discovery, disobeys court orders, or files weak motions in bad faith. Here, the judge may order that spouse to reimburse some of the other side’s counsel fees as a form of consequence.

And sometimes, at the end of a contested divorce, the court will look at the overall litigation, the financial circumstances, and the reasonableness of each side's positions, then shift some fees to the spouse who is better able to pay or who caused the case to cost more than it reasonably should have.

So yes, you can be "forced" to pay your spouse's lawyer through a court order. The question is not "can it happen" so much as "how likely is it given your facts, your conduct, and your financial picture."

How judges actually weigh the three main factors

If you want to understand your risk, you need to know how those three statutory factors play out in front of a real judge in a Maryland family courtroom.

1. Financial resources and need

This is usually the starting point. Judges ask: Who has the money, and who actually needs help with fees?

They look at income from all sources, not just salary. That can include bonuses, rental income, investment accounts, and sometimes imputed income if a spouse is voluntarily underemployed. They also look at necessary expenses, existing debt, and whether each party has access to cash or credit.

A stay at home parent with no income, no access to bank accounts, and no credit cards is in a very different position from a professional who earns $200,000 a year. In that first scenario, an award of interim counsel fees so that the lower earning spouse can hire a Divorce Lawyer In Maryland is not unusual, especially in cases involving children or complex assets.

On the other hand, if both of you work and have similar incomes, or if your spouse has substantial assets they can tap, a fee award becomes less likely, even if they asked for it.

2. Substantial justification

This factor is about whether the case, or a particular motion, was legitimate to bring or defend.

If your spouse files for custody because they are genuinely concerned about your parenting decisions or safety issues, that is substantially justified even if you end up with shared custody. If you file a motion to enforce child support that is clearly overdue, that is justified even if the other side has some excuses.

Fee awards start to creep in when one side brings clearly weak or retaliatory claims. For example, a party who files repetitive emergency motions with no Divorce Lawyer In Maryland real emergency, or demands full custody on flimsy grounds as a pressure tactic in a property dispute.

Judges are human. They see the pattern. When a case that should have settled in six months drags out for two years because one side wants to punish the other, the fee request starts looking more compelling.

3. Good faith and bad faith

This is where conduct matters. The biggest mistake during a divorce, from a fee perspective, is to treat the litigation like a personal battlefield.

Maryland judges pay close attention to:

- Whether you complied with court orders.
- How quickly and completely you responded to discovery.
- Whether you hid assets, ran up marital debt, or cut your spouse off financially.
- The way you handled parenting issues during the case, including whether you followed existing custody schedules.

I have watched a reasonably straightforward divorce become a fee shifting case simply because one spouse refused for months to turn over tax returns and bank statements, then ignored a discovery order. By the time of trial, the judge had little patience left, and the other side's fee request, which might have been denied in a calmer case, was granted in part.

On the flip side, a spouse who behaves rationally, pays support voluntarily at reasonable levels, and cooperates in discovery is far less likely to be hit with fee awards, even if they earn more.

Interim, pendente lite, and final fee awards

There is a difference between a one time award at the end of a case and temporary fee help during the case.

Interim or pendente lite fee awards are designed to level the playing field, particularly when one spouse has control of the money and the other does not. The court may order a lump sum toward the other side's attorney's retainer or monthly payments toward ongoing fees.

Final fee awards are decided at the end of the case. The court might order one party to pay a percentage of the other party's total counsel fees or reimburse specific costs tied to bad faith conduct. Judges usually look closely at the reasonableness of the fees, not just the raw number. If you are wondering how much does a divorce lawyer cost in Maryland, hourly rates in many counties fall between roughly $250 and $500 per hour, with retainers often in the $3,000 to $10,000 range for contested cases. Those fees add up quickly, which is why a fee award of even $5,000 or $10,000 can significantly change your financial picture.

When are you most at risk of paying your spouse's lawyer?

It helps to identify red flags early. If two or three of these apply, your risk is higher and you should talk urgently with your attorney about strategy and behavior.

1. Large income or asset gap with you on the higher side.
2. You control most of the liquid accounts or have cut off your spouse's access to money.
3. You have ignored or delayed responding to discovery or court orders.
4. You have filed multiple weak or retaliatory motions that mostly lost.
5. The judge has already expressed concern or frustration with your conduct on the record.

Notice how most of these are within your control. You cannot change your income level overnight, but you can absolutely change how you comply, communicate, and litigate.

"Can my husband cut me off financially during separation?" and how that affects fees

One of the most common questions I hear, especially from wives, is whether a higher earning spouse can simply shut off the money during separation. Often it comes in the form: "Can my husband cut me off financially during separation?" or "What should a wife not do during separation to avoid being left with nothing?"

Legally, a spouse is not supposed to use financial control as a weapon. Courts take a very dim view of a higher earner who abruptly stops paying the mortgage, utilities, or basic support, then uses that pressure to force a lowball settlement.

If that happens, your attorney can seek:

- Pendente lite alimony or child support.
- An order for interim counsel fees so you can retain representation.
- Temporary use and possession of the family home or car.

Judges connect the dots. A spouse who weaponizes money to starve out the other side often finds themselves facing not just support orders but fee awards, particularly if the case drags out unnecessarily. On the flip side, if you are the higher earner, making reasonable voluntary payments and documenting them can both protect your children and reduce your risk of a later fee award.

How the new divorce law in Maryland fits into the picture

Since October 1, 2023, Maryland's grounds for divorce changed significantly. Limited divorce was eliminated, and fault based grounds like adultery or desertion no longer appear as separate categories for absolute divorce. Instead, you now have three primary grounds:

- Irreconcilable differences.
- Six month separation (living apart without interruption for six months).
- Mutual consent with a written settlement agreement.

What is the new law for divorce in Maryland doing to fee issues? In practice, a few things.

First, without fault based grounds as a formal battleground, many cases are shifting focus to financial issues, parenting plans, and the nuts and bolts of separating. That can actually reduce some of the worst fee inflation, because people are less tempted to litigate "who was the bad spouse" just to secure a ground for divorce.

Second, judges are even more focused on efficiency. If a case could clearly be resolved on one of the new no fault grounds and one side insists on unnecessary discovery or motion practice, the fee risk for that party increases.

Third, mediation and settlement have become more central. Which leads to another fee risk: what you say and do in mediation or settlement conferences.

What not to say in divorce mediation if you want to avoid fee trouble

Mediation is not just a box to check. It is part of the story the court sees about you. When parties want to know what not to say in divorce mediation, I tell them a few core principles that matter for fees.

First, do not threaten to "drag this out so you go broke." That sentence has a way of coming back, whether through a mediator's impression, a stray text, or an email. Judges who sense that one party is deliberately trying to drive up costs may respond with fee shifting.

Second, avoid taking obviously unreasonable positions simply to punish. Demanding that your spouse receive nothing when they clearly are entitled to a share of marital property or refusing any parenting time when there is no safety concern, often looks to judges like bad faith.

Third, do not use mediation to conceal assets. If you lie about a bank account, a pension, or a 401(k), you are risking both your credibility and potential fee awards. The question "Is my wife entitled to half my 401k in a divorce?" often has a nuanced answer, but hiding the account never improves it. Typically, the marital portion of retirement accounts, pensions, and 401(k)s is subject to equitable division, and trying to conceal that fact can backfire.

What assets are untouchable during divorce, and how does that impact fees?

People sometimes ask, "What assets cannot be touched in a divorce?" or "What assets are untouchable during divorce?" In Maryland, "non marital" property generally includes:

- Assets you owned before the marriage and kept separate.
- Gifts and inheritances received by one spouse alone, kept separate from marital funds.
- Property excluded by a valid pre or postnuptial agreement.

Even non marital assets are not completely invisible. Courts cannot divide them as marital property, but they can consider them when deciding alimony, child support, or, in some cases, counsel fees. If one spouse has a large non marital inheritance and the other has very limited resources, the court may weigh that in deciding whether to award fees.

That is why "How to protect money before divorce" is a delicate question. You are allowed to keep true non marital assets separate. You are not allowed to start transferring or hiding marital assets once divorce is on the horizon. Judges are quick to penalize dissipation or concealment, sometimes by awarding a larger share of marital property to the innocent spouse and, in some cases, by granting their fee request.

Credit card debt, pensions, and other financial traps that invite fee requests

Another way people end up paying for their spouse's lawyer is by stepping into predictable financial traps.

Take the question "Am I responsible for my spouse's credit card debt in divorce?" In Maryland, whose name is on the card matters, but so does how and when the debt was incurred. If one spouse secretly runs up marital credit cards at the end of the marriage on luxury items or a new partner, the court can treat that as dissipation and adjust the property division. That kind of conduct can also influence the judge's view of fairness in a fee request.

Retirement is another area full of landmines. Questions like "Does my wife get half my pension if we divorce?" or "Is my wife entitled to half my 401k in a divorce?" show up in nearly every consultation. Typically, the marital portion of those accounts, meaning the part accrued during the marriage, is subject to equitable division. If one spouse stonewalls on providing pension statements, refuses to cooperate with a QDRO (qualified domestic relations order), or withdraws funds in violation of court orders, the other side often has a strong argument for fee shifting related to those issues.

The theme repeats: the more you behave in ways that force your spouse to spend money on their Divorce Lawyer In Maryland to chase information or enforce basic obligations, the more likely you are to be ordered to shoulder part of their legal bill.

Why moving out and "never leave the house" advice ties into fee risk

You may have heard the phrase "Why is moving out the biggest mistake in a divorce?" or "Why should you never leave your house in a divorce?" There is a lot of half truth in that advice.

Leaving the marital home does not automatically mean you lose the house or lose custody. Maryland courts look at many factors for both property and parenting. But moving out without a solid plan can trigger several consequences that ripple into fee questions.

First, if you move out and leave your spouse with all the bills and no support, you increase the odds of being hit with temporary support orders, and possibly interim fee awards, especially if there are children or a big income gap.

Second, if you move out in a way that disrupts the children's routines or shows poor judgment, you may create custody disputes that otherwise might not have existed. More disputes mean more attorney hours and higher risk of fee requests.

Third, who has to leave the house in a separation in Maryland is usually resolved either by agreement or by the court through use and possession orders. If your conduct makes it more likely the court will grant your spouse use and possession, you may simultaneously be strengthening their hand for fee requests if they lack income and you have it.

The real mistake is not simply "moving out." It is moving out impulsively, without a plan for support, parenting time, documentation, or how it will look to a judge who later has to sort out both custody and finances.

How to present yourself in court when fees are on the line

Once you are in front of a judge, small details matter. People sometimes ask odd but revealing questions like "What colors do judges like to see?" or "How to impress a judge in family court?" The short answer is that professionalism and credibility matter far more than wardrobe shades, but appearance is not meaningless.

To show the court you are a good parent and a reasonable litigant, focus on a few fundamentals:

Arrive early, dress conservatively, and treat Divorce Lawyer In Maryland the judge, opposing counsel, and your spouse with respect. Judges remember litigants who roll their eyes, argue over their attorneys, or interrupt constantly.

Tell the truth, even when it hurts your case in the short term. Nothing kills a fee defense faster than getting caught in a lie about income, assets, or parenting time.

Show that you understand your children’s needs and schedule. If you are asking for substantial parenting time, be ready to explain how your work schedule, transportation, and home environment fit that plan. Judges favor parents who prioritize stability over ego.

Be able to articulate your budget and financial reality. When the court weighs whether you can pay your own lawyer and your spouse’s, your credibility about your income, expenses, and debt becomes critical.

When a judge believes you are honest, prepared, and child focused, you are far less likely to see them use their discretion to make you pay the other side’s fees, except perhaps in narrow, need based situations.

Practical steps to reduce your risk of paying your spouse’s legal fees

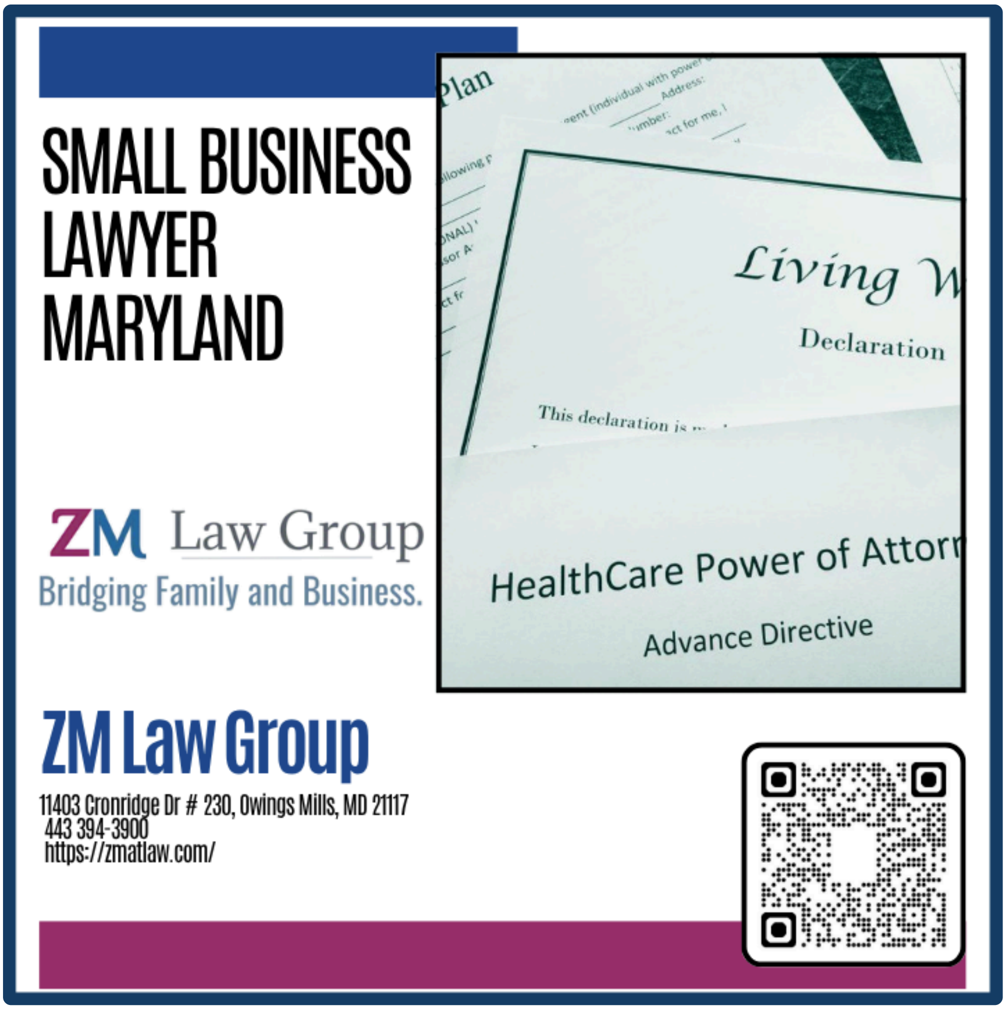
There is no magic formula for how not to get screwed in divorce. But there are concrete steps you can take that directly affect fee risk.

First, get educated early. What to know before you divorce includes not just your rights to property, custody, and alimony, but also your exposure on counsel fees. A consultation with a seasoned Divorce Lawyer In Maryland can give you a realistic range, both for “Who pays for a divorce in Maryland?” and for “How much does a divorce lawyer cost in Maryland?” in your county.

Second, control what you can control: your conduct. Comply fully and on time with discovery. Follow temporary orders. Keep your communications with your spouse factual and free of threats. Do not use the children as bargaining chips. These are not just vague behavior tips; they are the same facts a judge will later use to measure good faith.

Third, stay organized financially. Gather account statements, tax returns, pay stubs, retirement plan information, and debt records early. The better your disclosure, the less your spouse’s lawyer has to dig, and the weaker their argument that they needed to spend heavily to uncover the truth.

Fourth, be strategic about settlement. You do not need to cave to unfair demands, and sometimes you genuinely need a trial. But fighting purely on principle, without regard to cost, is where people most often end up paying for both lawyers in the end.



Finally, choose counsel carefully. People often ask, "Who is the best divorce attorney in Maryland?" The better question is: who is the best attorney for *your* facts, budget, and temperament. A lawyer who can explain trade offs, who is candid about risk, and who is willing to settle when it is smart and litigate when it is necessary is far more valuable than a self proclaimed "shark" who delights in endless conflict and leaves you staring not only at your own fee bill, but at an order to pay part of your spouse's as well.

Maryland law gives judges real power to shift fees, but it also gives them flexibility. Your choices, your preparation, and your honesty heavily influence how they use that power.

ZM Law Group
11403 Cronridge Dr # 230, Owings Mills, MD 21117
4433943900