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Breaking the news

You're getting a divorce. You've talked to your spouse. Now how do you tell your children, friends, and family? Should you tell your co-workers and your boss? Here's how to minimize the damage when you break the news.

By Meg Mathur

In her book entitled *The Good Divorce* (Harper Perennial, \$18), author Constance Ahrons identifies five stages in the divorce process. The first three -- the decision, the announcement, and the separation -- cause the most confusion and turmoil. "Deciding to divorce, telling your spouse and your family, and leaving your mate form the core of the emotional divorce," she notes. "These three transitions are characterized by ambivalence, ambiguity, power struggle, soul searching, and stress."

There's no question about it: the decision to divorce causes great upheaval. During this difficult time, you'll want and need the support of your family and friends more than ever. But how do you tell them the news that your marriage is over without creating undue stress for yourself or them? And when -- and how much -- should you tell the folks at the office? How you approach this subject depends on a couple of factors: the nature of the separation, and who you're announcing it to. Realize first, however, that there are no hard-and-fast rules to follow when you're breaking the news. What follows are some basic guidelines: modify them to fit your unique circumstances.

Family and friends

When you announced your intention to marry to your loved ones, you probably had a pretty good idea of what their reaction would be: happiness, excitement, and congratulations. Unless your spouse was an unbelievable jerk, your family and friends probably haven't been looking forward to hearing about your marital breakdown, and their reactions are likely to be unpredictable, to say the least. Telling them is going to be painful and awkward, to greater or lesser degrees.

If the separation is non-adversarial, you and your spouse could consider sitting down together with each of your families to tell them about your breakup. But if your split is acrimonious, don't break the news together, warns Larry Nissan, director of the Psychotherapy Institute in Toronto. It may spark yet another fight between you two, only this time in front of your family. "They'll resent the two of you for it," he says.

Whether you make the announcement alone or with your spouse, it's a good idea to practice what you're going to say first and how you want to say it. Decide how much you're comfortable with telling them, and which details are appropriate to share with which people, then try not to be pushed into giving additional information. There is danger in giving too much information about fights or infidelities: it can leave your listeners angry and depressed with no outlet for their feelings. And if you eventually reconcile with your spouse, all those sordid details can make it hard to believe -- or accept -- that the two of you are back together.

Be gentle when you tell your loved ones, but don't start off with a long preamble: you'll spare everyone some anxiety if you just come out and say it, and then explain the situation as tactfully as possible. Nissan suggests that you start with "whomever you're closest to, whether it's your brother or your bowling team." He explains that starting with the people who you think will be the most supportive will help you get through this difficult time. Don't expect any particular response; there's no guarantee to how people will react. They may be shocked and upset at first, but will usually come around with offers of love and support once they've gotten over their initial surprise.

If your marriage wasn't a healthy one from the start, your friends and family may actually react positively to the news. But "healthy" may be a relative term in this case. If they disliked your spouse, they'll think that having him or her out of the family picture is a good thing. You, on the other hand, probably had a major struggle deciding whether or not to end the relationship, and their easy acceptance may shock you.

If your family has had a loving relationship with your spouse, however, they may feel torn between their loyalty to you and their bond with him or her. Unless your ex was secretly abusing you during your marriage, try not to demand that your family sever all ties with him or her. If you have children, make every effort to create a positive relationship with your ex-inlaws -- and encourage your family's good relationship with your former spouse. Your children will reap the benefits.

Beth Joselow, who divorced in 1991 after a 20-year marriage, makes these suggestions in *Life Lessons: 50 Things I Learned From My Divorce* (Avon Books, \$12):

- Ask for support from your family, but don't try to dictate their behavior toward your former mate.
- Be conscious of your family's history with your former mate and of how they may be suffering the loss of your marriage along with you.
- If family members seem insensitive to you, it may be because they're trying to work out their own feelings about you and your former mate. Let them know that you feel hurt, and give them a chance to rethink their attitudes.

"Divorce is a surprisingly public event," says Joselow. "You may find that people who wouldn't ordinarily comment on the private matters in your life suddenly feel duty-bound to tell you what they think of your decision, when, of course, you hadn't asked." And you may not be able to accurately predict the reaction of each of your friends when you tell them about the divorce, she warns. "Some friends will drift away from you, some may become staunch allies of your former mate, some may make you feel so bad each time you talk to them that you talk to them less and less often," Joselow says.

If this happens, try to take it in stride. "Take a closer look at the nature of your relationships with the people you once regarded as friends and who now seem to have disappeared," advises Mel Krantzler in his book *Divorcing* (St. Martin's Press, \$6.99). "This is your time for reevaluating your connections with them. Ask yourself how many of them were habitual acquaintances rather than true friends, persons you knew because they lived in the same neighborhood and had lifestyles similar to your own, based on being married and having children ... These were the people with whom you never shared your innermost thoughts, or felt that they cared deeply for you. Losing them is really the loss of an old habit rather than the loss of true friendship."

At the office

Divorce is such a personal issue that you may wonder why you would need to tell your boss and your co-workers about your situation. There are some advantages to breaking the news to the right people, such as your boss, however. Your work schedule may have to change due to appointments with a marriage counselor, a mediator, or a lawyer, and your boss will be more supportive if he or she knows about your difficult situation. They may also be more understanding if your productivity decreases for a few months because you're feeling especially depressed and distracted.

It's also a good idea to tell your human resources department about your separation or divorce. You may be eligible for some extended health benefits (such as therapy) that will help you through this difficult time, and the human resources department will have the information you need. There may also be pragmatic reasons to let your company know about your split: your tax status may have changed, and the payroll department may need to adjust your pay check.

You may also want to break the news to some co-workers. "Be cautious of who you reach out to," advises Scott Fagan, a counselor and account manager at Warren Shepell Consultants, a Toronto company that provides confidential employee counselling for organizations. Some of your closest friends may also be your co-workers, but not every person you come in contact with at work needs -- or wants -- to hear every last detail, so limit what you say and stick with the facts. "It's not the business of the company to know your personal business unless it affects your work," Fagan says.

If some gossip hounds at work are having a field day with your situation, Fagan suggests you sit down with them and address the problem as directly as possible. Tell them that your divorce is your business only, not theirs. On the other hand, your divorce will affect almost everyone in your life to some extent, so expect people to talk. In that case, Fagan says, "Focus on what's important to you, and realize that you're feeling more sensitive than usual." If it isn't damaging your work or reputation, just let the gossip pass.

Answering questions

Inevitably, you're going to have to answer questions about your divorce. You have two options here, says Nissan. Be honest and direct, or answer with "I'd rather not say" or "I'd rather not talk about it right now." Some people, even your family, may be inclined to ask uncomfortable questions ("Did she cheat on you?" or "Was it his gambling?"). If you want to answer those kinds of questions, go ahead. "Be explicit," says Nissan, but if you're uncomfortable responding to any questions, "be explicitly unwilling to answer as well."

People may have more than just questions; they may make some negative comments about you or your spouse. Realize that you can decline to respond to such comments, too. Politely but firmly tell these people that you are unready or unwilling to discuss the matter right now.

"I well remember breaking the news to my parents that I thought my marriage was in deep trouble, and my next sentence: 'I don't want to hear a bad word about him,' a request they honored," says Ashton Applewhite, author of *Cutting Loose: Why Women Who End Their Marriages Do So Well* (HarperCollins, \$24). "Finger-wagging is unwelcome and hindsight gives an unfair advantage, but unconditional support is a blessing."

Their two-cents' worth

Beyond questions and comments, you'll probably have to field some unsolicited advice. Some people still fall into the sexist trap of offering advice like, "Go buy her something" or "Just make love to him, honey; it'll help the relationship." Nissan suggests answering to this type of misguided advice the way you would uncomfortable questions: "I don't want to talk about that right now." For the more supportive, yet unsolicited advice, you could say, "I appreciate your concern, but I'm not ready to deal with that yet." Remember: a response made out of irritation or frustration could be misconstrued, and you could regret opening your mouth.

Try not to let your family and friends fan the flames with negative comments about your ex such as "I never liked her" or "He was never good enough for you." Their negative opinions and suggestions may actually widen the gulf between you and your spouse, making a civilized divorce difficult to achieve.

You may also hear comments like "My sister's friend got everything, and her husband is now penniless." Don't let this scare -- or excite -- you. According to M. Sue Talia, a lawyer and author of *How to Avoid the Divorce from Hell* (Nexus Publishing Co., \$12.95), "Rarely are court decisions or settlements so grossly one-sided ... It's hearsay, and they only know as much as they were told. [The] source probably has few if any, of the actual facts ..."

If your spouse's behavior ranges from irritating to abusive, some people may also say, "I wouldn't put up with that kind of behavior," according to Talia. "The implication is that you are being a chump if you don't follow your friend's advice. The problem with this analysis is that no one else is inside your skin. Your friend, however sincere, has absolutely no idea how he'd react to that situation until he's had to face it himself."

Telling Your Kids

How you tell your kids depends on their age and developmental level. "Young children between the ages of three and five, for example, will really need concrete information," says Joan Sinclair, a social worker, family mediator, and counselor in private practice in Toronto. "They'll need to know they'll be taken care of, they'll be safe, that they'll have their toys with them, and that their needs will be met." Remember: keep it simple. Your children really don't need to know -- and they won't understand -- a lot of the more personal details of your divorce, so don't burden them with any unnecessary information. "It's not that you want to hide anything," Sinclair says. "Just tell them what they need to know."

How you and your spouse handle this difficult discussion with your children is a possible sign of how well you'll handle co-parenting. "It may be difficult, but if you can [break the news] together with grace as a team, it will show your kids you will always be together as parents," Sinclair says.

Telling your children the news requires a lot of homework ahead of time. Children's concerns are largely of a practical nature: they'll want to know where they're going to live (and with whom), where the dog will live, and whether they'll still be going to the same school. Before you tell the kids, work out a temporary visitation

plan and find a new place to live, if necessary. And having a room ready for the kids in your new place will help to put them at ease about their future living arrangements.

Stan Benner, a counselor and family mediator with offices in Toronto and Brampton, says that assuring kids repeatedly of your love for them is the best way to cushion the news: "Tell your kids that your love for them is not going to change until they understand that -- and then tell them again!" he emphasizes.

A Kid's Point of View

Once you break the news, it will filter throughout your social network. This includes your children's circle of friends. Zoe Stern, 15, and her brother Evan, 13, have written a book with their mother, Ellen Sue, about how children can cope with divorce. In their book, *Divorce Is Not the End of the World* (Tricycle Press, \$8.95), they offer advice to kids about telling their own friends about the divorce. "You might not know what to say or worry about how your friends will react," says Zoe. "You may even feel like a loser or a failure -- you wish you weren't one of those people who has to say those words, 'My parents are getting a divorce.' But the more people you tell, the easier it gets. Tell your close friends first. Start out slowly or practice in front of the mirror. Or ask a friend to tell some of your other friends."

Time Heals

This is an extremely difficult time for you, and you may feel compelled to tell everyone or no one at all about your situation. Remember that by telling your loved ones about your divorce in the most gentle way possible, you are surrounding yourself with positive love and support -- not rallying the troops for a battle against your ex. Divorce is a big transition for you and the people you care for, so give yourself and them time to process this news and come to terms with the changes that are about to occur. It won't be easy, but patience, support, and trust can ease the transition for everyone.