

Telling Your Spouse You Want a Divorce

By *Sam Margulies*

Created Nov 12 2009 - 9:07am



You have been unhappy with your marriage for years. And for the last two or three years you have been thinking about divorce, even fantasizing what life would be like if you were free. You have distanced from your spouse and have been in separate bedrooms for a year. Although there is civil dialogue between you there is no warmth and an occasional flare-up in which whatever the issue, it gets pushed down rather than resolved. For the past year the only thing that has held you in the marriage is your guilt about the children but you have been working on that with your counselor. And you have finally reached a decision. Even with all its disadvantages and all the dislocation and problems it will cause you have determined to get a divorce. So now all that is left is to tell your spouse. (From this point on to make the writing easier I am going to treat the divorcing spouse as the wife. As about three quarters of divorces are initiated by women it is not unrealistic to do so.)

The Beginning

How you tell your husband and what you tell your husband is of critical importance because it will shape how the divorce unfolds. There are several things to consider. First, how surprised will he be when he hears the news? In most cases he will, like you, be dissatisfied with the marriage. He has wished for a long time that things would get better but has not known how to make that happen. He is probably aware that you are unhappy but is also not probably aware that you are so unhappy as to want a divorce. In a few cases, he is so oblivious that he actually thinks everything is fine. So by analyzing what you know you can make an educated guess how surprised he will be. The more he is surprised or shocked by your revelation, the longer it will take him to accept the divorce. And the less he accepts the more he will try to talk you out of your decision.

You choose a time when the two of you will have some uninterrupted time. Turn off the phones and make sure the children are elsewhere and fully attended. Your statement could be some variation of the following:

"Don, I have some difficult news to share with you. I have decided that this marriage cannot continue and that I must seek a divorce. This is something I have been struggling with for a long time and I suspect that you are at least aware that we have been having a hard time together. But I have reached the limits of my pain threshold and just cannot go on any longer. I know this will be a difficult and painful process for all of us. But I believe that we can do it with decency and reasonableness and hope you will come to believe that as well."

When you tell him you should be prepared for a lengthy discussion or a series of discussions. If he is not yet ready for the divorce, and chances are good that he is not, his first impulse will be to talk you out of it, tell you that you are wrong or even express anger that you would do this to him or to the children. His tone may even become quite angry and he may accuse you of all sorts of terrible things. All of these responses are normal and predictable. Now is when you start making choices about what kind of divorce you will have.

Do not Defend

If his commentary is accusatory or critical you will be sorely tempted to strike back. You want to tell him how his behavior and neglect, his insensitivity to your needs, his deficits as a husband, father, provider and a man all justify your decision and you should have done this years ago. If you say these things you will have a mess. Despite your intuitive and reflective impulses it is vital that you do not defend yourself and that you do not critique his failures and deficiencies. You must listen quietly and not interrupt. Hear him out. He is in acute pain. If you have ever learned anything about active listening now is the time to use it. Not only do you not try to shut him up, you encourage him to talk more. It will be useful if you summarize your understanding of his feelings so he feels understood.

In thirty years of mediating divorces for thousands of couples I have never succeeded in helping a couple agree on history. There is no chance that the two of you will do so. Instead of recounting who did what to whom, you must simply say that the marriage has not worked for a long time. You no longer believe it can be fixed and divorce is the only alternative you can see in the future. You must acknowledge that both of you have contributed to the erosion of the marriage and that it is pointless to try to figure out who is more to blame. In fact, it is a discussion that you will not have. You are willing to talk about how to build a future for the family so that you all come through the process able to rebuild and thrive. If he tries to draw you into a discussion of fault and recrimination you must refuse to have that discussion. You can repeat what you have already said emphasizing four points. Your decision is irrevocable and you will not change your mind. You are determined to have a civilized and decent divorce in which everybody's needs are addressed including his. You will not engage in a discussion about fault. You are only willing to talk about how to organize the divorce. You are also aware that he needs time to accept the situation and you will give him all the time he needs. You are aware that the two of you will have to negotiate many decisions and that you will work with him to get a fair and reasonable resolution. But this is not the time for those discussions. That will come when he has had the time he needs to reflect and feels ready to begin. You also say that you will not precipitate any kind of legal action and that you hope to minimize contact with lawyers and the courts.

Ending the First Discussion

This is all you have to say for the first discussion. There will be many more. There are some things you should not do in this first discussion. He may be very anxious about economic issues or he may be anxious about his contact with the children. So he may begin with provocative statements like, "Well don't expect me to move out. I'm not going to be one of those pathetic dads who lives in a flea bitten hole in the wall while you keep everything for yourself. And don't expect me to pay you alimony. If you want this you go support yourself." Here you reassure him that you will be fair and that you are confident that the two of you will work out a reasonable agreement. But tonight is not the time to do it. Don't take the bait and don't have any discussions for which you are not both ready and that can be resolved quickly. Reiterate what you have already said and end the discussion. Reassure him that you empathize with his feelings and that you will work with him as he becomes ready. Then end the discussion.

Source URL: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/node/34808>

Links:

- [1] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/taxonomy/term/7>
- [2] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/bedrooms>
- [3] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/beginning-divorce-0>
- [4] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/civil-dialogue>
- [5] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/counselor>
- [6] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/critical-importance>
- [7] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/dislocation>
- [8] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/divorce>
- [9] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/divorces>
- [10] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/educated-guess>
- [11] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/flare>
- [12] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/guilt>
- [13] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/long-time>
- [14] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/marriage>
- [15] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/revelation>
- [16] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/telling-about-divorce>
- [17] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/three-quarters>
- [18] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/uninterrupted-time>
- [19] <http://www.psychologytoday.com/tags/warmth>