

Divorce Etiquette 101

Learn how to gracefully navigate the end of a close friend's or family member's marriage

By [Denise Schipani](#) Posted September 28, 2011 from [WomansDay.com](#)

There's no denying that divorce is hardest on the couple and their children. But its effects can ripple out into the splitting spouses' social spheres as well, often causing disruptions when friends and family members aren't sure about what they should say or do when it comes to interacting with the now-split couple. Why is divorce etiquette so tricky? "A lot has to do with our own emotional reaction to a close friend or family member's divorce," says Margot Swann, founder and director of [Visions Anew](#), a nonprofit divorce resource for woman. "We don't like the picture changing, which makes us feel awkward." Plus, she adds, it might bring up uncomfortable feelings about our own marriage (If it can happen to them...) Here, nine issues that often arise when someone you know divorces, and how to handle them with grace.

A good friend just told you that she's getting a divorce and you don't know the right way to respond.

The best thing you can say in this situation is simply, "I'm here for you." In a way, supporting a divorcing friend is not unlike supporting a grieving friend, because divorce—even if she wanted it, even if it's relatively amicable—evokes similar feelings of loss.

"She needs your support and friendship more than anything else," says Swann. The easiest way to provide support is to take your cues from her: If she wants to just spend time with you without talking about her ex, do that. If she needs a few late-night sessions to vent and work through her grief, be there for her. If she just wants a little company, offer to take her along on your morning walks or to the gym; come by with coffee (or a bottle of wine!) if she can't get a sitter. Don't forget she may need practical help, too: Offer to drive her kids places or ask your husband to help out with chores like mowing the lawn or getting the oil changed in her car, suggests Swann.

Your sister is getting a divorce, but you think she's making a mistake.

In truth, you don't know—and never will know—if her divorce is truly a mistake because none of us really understands what goes on behind closed doors. Even if you are aware that she had an affair, for example, you still don't know what caused her to stray. Keep in mind, too, that just because the news comes as a shock to you, the same might not apply for her; she may have been thinking about it, and discussing it with her spouse, for years before the announcement. One thing that is certain: Berating her for making a mistake won't help, says Swann. However, you might want to ask if she's tried couple's counseling, says [Darlene Lancer](#), JD, MFT, a former attorney who's now a licensed marriage and family therapist and the author of the forthcoming *Codependency for Dummies*. "Even if they don't ultimately reconcile, counseling can help the couple work through their divorce." The bottom line: "Steer clear of offering advice that's not asked for. Stick to support," says Lancer.

The couple you and your husband always go on double dates with is now divorcing and you two don't know whose side you should be on.

Presuming that the four of you are all friends, try your best not to choose sides or leave either of them out in the cold.

"Divorcing spouses often find they lose friends and are excluded from events they normally attended, which is a shame," says Swann. Remember, it's not your job as a friend to take sides as much as it is to support and be there for her and him. If the

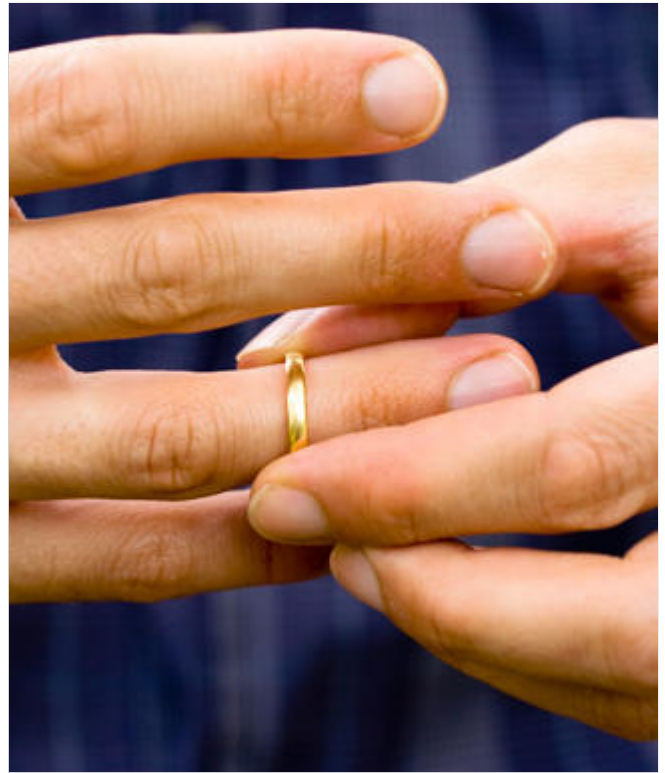


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female half of the couple is asking you to drop her ex from your friend list, tell her—as kindly as you can—that you’re there to be her friend, but you’re not actually angry with her ex, says Lancer. By the same token, be sensitive to both of their feelings by not telling either of them about the time you may have spent with the other person and ensure both of them that anything discussed when you are with them will always be confidential.

Your brother is getting a divorce but you've grown close to your former sister-in-law and want to remain friends with her.

There's no reason why you can't stay pals with a friend's or family member's ex, but the social etiquette can get thorny. Whereas before, you'd hang out with your sister-in-law at family functions, now it's better to plan a girls' night out for just the two of you—away from your brother and other family members. Swann also notes that you'll likely have to alternate invitations while the divorce is still a sensitive subject, by having your brother and the kids over for a big family BBQ one weekend and then asking his ex to come over with the kids for a play date the following weekend, for example. If your brother is upset that you are still friendly his ex, be respectful of his feelings. “You can say, ‘I’m sorry you feel that way, but I still enjoy spending time with Jane. I hope you understand,’” suggests Swann. If he's adamant about you breaking it off, you may have to decide if the friendship is worth risking your relationship with your brother, adds Lancer.

Your best friend has become sensitive about the topic of money post-divorce; instead of discussing the subject, she avoids making plans with you.

You may find that your friend is in tighter financial straits immediately after her divorce, particularly if she was a stay-at-home mom during the marriage, or has had to move because she could no longer afford the mortgage. This sudden change in lifestyle may make her retreat a bit more from her social life. If she declines to go out, try to be sensitive to her situation and generous when you can, says Swann. Dream up different things to do together that don't involve spending cash, such as nature walks, free concerts and dinners at home. If there are group outings that you know she would love to go to—like dinner with a group of your girlfriends—“offer to pick up the tab now and then,” says Swann. “You don't want her to feel isolated right now.”

Family friends are getting a divorce and all the kids involved have a lot of questions about it.

If your families have always been close, you may find yourself in the position of being your friends' kids' confidant. “Their children may talk to you before they talk to their own parents,” notes Swann. Reassure them that their parents still love them, and that the divorce is absolutely, positively not their fault (often a child's biggest fear or suspicion). But resist trying to answer specific questions about “what happened.” The truth is that you don't know the details. Your own kids may also be full of questions, such as why their friends' dad (or mom) isn't living at their house anymore or whether you're on the road to divorce, too. Answer their specific questions as they arise (“Yes, Jen and Joe's dad lives in a different place now, but he still loves them very much”) without trying to over explain. Saying something like, “Sometimes, families have problems that mean the mom and dad can't live together anymore, but it has nothing to do with how much they want their kids to be happy and loved” goes a long way, says Lancer.

A divorce amongst your circle of friends is leading to a lot of ugly gossip about the separating couple.

Do your best to not go there. Whether your husband wants to share the “ex's side,” your friend is prodding you for dirt on her ex or a mutual friend wants to dish about everyone involved, firmly opt out, says Lancer. It's just never a good idea to indulge in negative divorce gossip, for everyone involved (particularly the couple's children). Say to people other than your friend that you'd rather not be caught in the crossfire of any gossip for fear it'll come back to you (He said that you said...). While it's natural that your friend will want to talk about her divorce, because you care about her and are concerned about her emotional wellbeing, avoid the urge to tell her the latest rumors about her ex or trash talk him. “Say to her, ‘I don't think talking to you about Frank is good for you, and it's not good for our friendship, which I value,’ and change the subject,” says Lancer. If you truly can't resist telling someone or feel you need to relieve the pressure of knowing too much, share your news with a disinterested third party so no one gets hurt.

Your recently divorced friend is dating again—and you think it's a terrible idea.

Hold your tongue, at least at first, even if you think it's too soon or that she's making a mistake—because who's to say if it is a

mistake? Not you! Swann notes that sometimes newly divorced people like to feel desirable again and getting back into the dating pool is the easiest way to do this. She may just be testing the waters, flexing her dating muscles or looking to have a bit of fun. Even if you're convinced she's making a mistake (by dating someone who is totally inappropriate, for example), "She's not going to listen to you, anyway," says Lancer. Instead of (fruitlessly) trying to dissuade her from dating, be supportive and positive. "Emphasize how dating in this period of her life is, or should be, a way to learn more about herself and what she eventually wants from a new relationship," says Lancer.

You have big relationship news but aren't sure if you should share it with a friend who's going through a divorce.

As long as you're not rubbing your good news in her face—for example, calling her every day with updates on your wedding plans—a good friend will want to know what's going on with you. Even if she can't be a cheerleader for love and romance, she will at least be happy for you. Plus, she may feel isolated or left out if she discovers you've hidden something from her. With news like an engagement, approach the friend sensitively and don't feel slighted if her reaction is muted. Be upfront, suggests Swann: "Say, 'I know this may be hard for you, and I'd be so happy if you'd come to my bridal shower, but I understand if it isn't something you feel up to right now.'" That gives her the option of congratulating you one-on-one without having to share in the public celebration.