

How To Talk With Your Adult Children About Your Upcoming Separation or Dissolution of Marriage

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(To avoid the clumsiness of using “child/children”, I have intentionally used “children” throughout this article.)

The following are some tips for you as you prepare to talk with your adult children. It is clear that you care about doing the best you can for your children, because you are reading this article. Give yourself permission not to be perfect. No one is. Remember to keep taking slow, deep breaths...you and your children will get through this difficult time.

1. Schedule a time when you can speak with your children together and preferably in person. Siblings need the support system that they can provide each other. When you are scheduling the time to talk, tell them that you have something important to discuss with them and assure them that no one is sick or dying. If they ask you what you want to talk about, tell them that you prefer to discuss it in person when you are all together. If it isn't possible to speak in person due to residing long distances apart, then schedule a time to speak via Skype, Face Time or another video chat program. Avoid telling them via telephone or email. It is too impersonal. Divorce is a major life crisis for all family members and should be treated as such. Children who were adults when their parents divorced consistently report that the news of their parents' divorce “rocked the very foundation” of their world!

2. Plan your presentation to your children in advance. Make some notes about what you plan to say and review them so that you are familiar with what you intend to say. Anticipate what they may say to you. You can have the notes in front of you, if you wish, and simply say, “We have made some notes because what we are going to be talking about is very important for all of us and we don't want to forget anything.” Remember that your children will likely be in emotional shock after you tell them your intentions to separate and/or end your marriage and they will not be able to absorb everything you say this first time. Be prepared to have the same conversation with them numerous times. Their shock and grieving will interfere with them being able to fully take in all that you are sharing.

3. Tell them that the two of you have decided to separate and/or end your marriage because you have problems between you that you haven't been able to resolve. Avoid using the word “divorce” because it is laden with negative connotations.

4. Avoid blaming each other. This is the time for the two of you to have a united front with your children. Remember that this news will shatter their view of their family as they have known it. Blaming each other puts them in the middle of your pain and conflict, causes them to experience divided loyalty and feel that they need to choose sides, as well as feel guilt for loving both of you. Children who were adults when their parents divorced report that they hated being put in this position and feeling that each parent was attempting to form an alliance with them against the other parent.

5. Next, tell them what is going to remain the same. Tell them that you are all still family, that you will always be their parents and that your intention is to be amicable so that you can both attend family gatherings and not create tension for them and their significant others. If they are still in college, tell them how you will be continuing the financial arrangements you have had in place. Tell them if one of you intends to stay in the family home, etc. Assure them that they will continue to have the emotional support of both parents in the newly restructured family.

6. Next, tell them what is not going to remain the same. Tell them if you will be unable to continue the financial arrangements you had regarding college. Tell them if you intend to sell the family home. If you have been assisting them in paying off their college loans and won't be able to continue doing so, tell them that. Assure them that you will do everything you can to assist them financially, as you have in the past, while at the same time acknowledging that there will be some economic impact as the family restructures. It's important to be neutral and factual. Resist being a victim or martyr. It will only make them feel guilty.

7. Remember that you are still their parents. It is your job to put their feelings above yours and provide them with the support they need to hear, feel and understand. Acknowledge that you realize the announcement is a shock and that their feelings (anger, sadness, grief, shock, etc.) are normal. Focus on and be empathetic with THEIR feelings. Don't talk about your feelings, e.g., how you haven't been happy for years, how you deserve to be happy, etc. Having just received such painful news, they will be unable to express their happiness for you, and it is unreasonable for you to expect them to do so. Remember, their familial foundation has just been rocked and their family history has been rewritten. They have become members of the "lost nest" generation. There will be no "family nest" to return to at the holidays.

8. Tell them that you still believe in family and that you hope they will too; that this doesn't mean that they will not be able to having a strong and happy relationship. Tell them that you don't expect them to take care of you emotionally or physically, that that is your job, not theirs. Tell them that you have, or plan to have, your own support system separate from them and that you want them to establish a support system for themselves as well. For example, yahoo groups has a group for adult children whose parents are divorcing. The books *A Grief Out of Season: When Your Parents Divorce in Your Adult Years*, which is out of print, but available at libraries, and *The Way They Were: Dealing With Your Parents' Divorce After a Lifetime* will help them realize they are not alone.

9. Avoid telling them that you stayed together or delayed restructuring your family because of them. This will make them feel guilty for your unhappy marriage. They will already be recalling their childhood memories and wondering: "What was real and what wasn't real? Were you really happy on those family vacations? Has my whole life been a sham?" Divorce destabilizes the family system and inevitably shakes every family member's perception of their past, their present and their future.

10. Assure them that this will be a process for all of you to move through, at your own pace and in your own way. Assure them that you will always love them and that you will always be there for them in whatever ways will be most helpful to them. You want them to know that they aren't alone so they don't become isolated and depressed. Encourage them to speak with a counselor about their feelings. Tell them you have spoken with or intend to speak with a counselor as well, because you have learned that, for all family members, the end of a marriage is a major life stressor, second only to the death of a loved one... This too shall pass.

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