

# How To Tell Your Spouse You Want a Divorce

*(When you're terrified to say it outloud)*

A step-by-step guide to staying safer, calmer, and clearer when you are ready to leave a marriage.

**By: Liz Merrill,**

Divorce Mediator and Coach  
Open Space Mediation, Colorado

*This guide offers information and education. It is not legal, financial, or mental health advice, and it does not create an attorney–client or therapist–client relationship. If you are concerned about your safety, please contact local law enforcement or a domestic violence advocate right away.*

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For informational purposes only. Not legal advice. Contact an attorney for legal guidance.

# How to use this guide

If you are reading this, you are probably carrying a lot:

- You believe your marriage is over, or close to it.
- Your spouse does not agree, or you have never truly said what you want.
- You are worried about their reaction, your kids, and your future.

This guide will not tell you what decision to make. It will help you:

1. Check for safety concerns.
2. Get clear on what you really want and why.
3. Plan the conversation in a way that is as calm and safe as possible.
4. Choose the words you want to use.
5. Decide what to do after you have said it.

You do not have to fill out every page at once. Take small steps. Print the pages that feel helpful. Write in the margins. Use sticky notes. This is your workbook.

Throughout the guide I sometimes say “he” or “husband” because most of my clients are women in relationships with men. If you are a man, or in a same-sex relationship, please know that this guide is for you as well. Where you see “spouse,” read it in whatever way fits your life.



# BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE: SAFETY CHECK

## Step 0: Safety first

Before you plan a conversation about divorce, pause and check in honestly about safety.

Put a small check mark by anything that feels familiar:

- My spouse has threatened to hurt me, the kids, pets, or themselves.
- My spouse has pushed, grabbed, blocked a doorway, thrown things, or driven dangerously while angry.
- I feel afraid of my spouse's anger.
- I feel like I have to "walk on eggshells" to keep the peace.
- My spouse controls most of the money, transportation, or access to friends and family.
- My spouse monitors my phone, email, or social media.
- I am afraid of what will happen if I say I want a divorce.

If you checked any of these, it does not automatically mean you are in physical danger. It does mean you should treat safety as a serious part of your planning.



### **If you feel you might be in danger**

- Consider contacting a trusted friend, therapist, or advocate before you talk with your spouse.
- You can call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or visit [thehotline.org](https://thehotline.org) for confidential support and safety planning.
- If you or your children are in immediate danger, call 911.

You are allowed to plan quietly. You are allowed to get information before you say the words "I want a divorce." Safety planning is not manipulation. It is wise.



# CLARIFY YOUR “WHY”

## Step 1: Get clear with yourself

When the conversation happens, emotions will be high. The clearer you are with yourself now, the less likely you are to get pulled into old patterns, guilt, or arguments.

Use these prompts to write out your thoughts.

### 1. What has brought me here?

- What are the patterns or events that made me realize I cannot stay in this marriage?

### 2. Write a few sentences:

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### 3. What have I already tried?

- Counseling, conversations, boundaries, separation, self-help work?

4. 

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### 5. What do I want life to look like in one year?

- For me? For my kids? For our home life?

6. 

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**7. What am I no longer willing to live with?**

- Dishonesty, contempt, screaming, stonewalling, affairs, substance abuse, loneliness?

8. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**9. What am I afraid of if I stay? What am I afraid of if I leave?**

Stay – fears: \_\_\_\_\_

Leave – fears: \_\_\_\_\_

***You do not need to show this page to anyone. It is here to remind you that your decision did not come out of nowhere. It is the result of many moments, small and large.***



# YOUR CORE MESSAGE

## Step 2: Write your core message

When nerves kick in, you may lose your words. Having one or two simple sentences to come back to can help you stay grounded.

Use the templates below to draft your own.

### Template A: Clear decision

“I have thought about this for a long time, and I have decided that I want a divorce. I know this hurts to hear. I am not saying it to start a fight. I am saying it because I have made a decision.”

### Template B: Emphasis on not debating

“I understand that you do not want this, and I know this is painful. I am not asking for permission. I am telling you where I am. I am willing to talk about how we move forward, but I am not going to debate whether I should stay married.”

### Template C: If you are still clarifying

“Something has to change. I am seriously considering divorce, and I need us to face that reality. I want to talk about what that would look like and what our options are.”



**Your core message (write it here):**

First sentence:

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Second sentence (optional):

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Try reading this out loud a few times when you are alone. Notice what feels true and what feels off. Adjust until it sounds like something you could actually say.



# PLAN THE CONTAINER

## Step 3: Choose the time, place, and support

There is no perfect time to tell a spouse you want a divorce. There are times that are noticeably better or worse.

### Better options

- When the kids are out of the house or with someone you trust
- When neither of you has been drinking or using substances
- A time when you both have some privacy and at least 30–60 minutes
- When you have your own transportation and a place you can go afterward

### Times to avoid if you can

- Holidays, birthdays, and major family events
- Late at night when everyone is exhausted
- Moments of crisis, like right after a job loss or medical emergency
- In the middle of a big argument



## Who is on your support team?

Before you talk, write down the names of people you can reach out to afterward.

- Friend or family member I can text or call:

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- Professional support (therapist, coach, mediator, advocate):

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- Safe place I can stay if I do not want to be in the same house that night:

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Knowing you have support lined up can reduce the feeling that everything depends on how this one conversation goes.



# SAMPLE SCRIPTS FOR DIFFERENT SCENARIOS

## Step 4: Choose language for your situation

These are example scripts. You can adjust them to match your personality and your relationship.

### Scenario 1: Your spouse is likely to be sad but not dangerous

"I have been unhappy in this marriage for a long time. I have thought about it, talked about it, and tried to make things work. This is very hard to say, but I have decided that I want a divorce. I care about you and I care about our kids. I do not want constant fighting. I want us to find the calmest and fairest way to separate and create two homes where the kids feel loved and safe."

### Scenario 2: Your spouse argues, minimizes, or tries to talk you out of it

"I hear that you do not want this and that you are upset. I understand this is painful. I am not saying this to punish you. I am saying it because I have made a decision after a lot of thought.

I am willing to talk about how we move forward and how to make this as fair as possible. I am not going to argue tonight about whether I should stay married."

If they keep pushing:

"I am not going to re-argue the last ten years. My decision is made. We can talk about logistics, or we can take a break and talk with a professional present."



### **Scenario 3: Your spouse may become very angry or threatening**

In high-risk situations, talk with a professional or advocate before using any script. You might decide not to tell them alone.

If you do speak with them, you might use something brief like:

“I have decided that I cannot stay in this marriage. I am starting the process of separating. I am not going to stay and argue. We will need to work this out through professionals and the court system.”

Your safety is more important than saying the perfect words.



# WHAT NOT TO DO (COMMON TRAPS)

## Step 5: Things that usually make it harder

When emotions are high, it is very easy to slip into old patterns. Here are some things that usually make the conversation more explosive or confusing.

Try to avoid:

- Announcing “I want a divorce” in the middle of a fight.
- Dropping the news and then immediately back-tracking or apologizing.
- Threatening divorce over and over as a way to gain leverage.
- Using the kids as messengers or shields.
- Sharing every detail with the kids before you have a plan.
- Sending the message by text, email, or social media when you could do it in person or by video with support.
- Letting the conversation go on for hours while everyone becomes more exhausted and dysregulated.

It is okay to say:

“This is as much as I can talk about tonight. I need a break. We can pick this up later or with someone neutral present.”



# AFTER THE CONVERSATION

## Step 6: What happens next?

Your spouse's reaction may fall into one or more of these categories.

### If they are calm and sad

- Acknowledge the pain: "I know this hurts. It hurts me too."
- Suggest a next step: talking with a mediator, counselor, or financial planner.
- Agree on what you will say to the kids and when.

### If they explode or shut down

- Do not match their volume.
- Repeat your core message once or twice.
- End the conversation if it becomes yelling, threats, or name-calling.

You can say:

**"I am not going to keep having this conversation while we are both upset. I am going to take a break. We can talk when things are calmer or with someone neutral present."**

Afterward, reach out to your support people. Write down what happened, while it is fresh, especially if there were threats or concerning behavior.



# WHEN TO GET PROFESSIONAL HELP

**You do not have to navigate this alone**

There are three common points where people reach out for support:

## **1. Before the conversation**

To plan what to say, check safety, and make a step-by-step plan.

## **2. Right after the conversation**

To process what happened and decide how to respond to your spouse's reaction.

## **3. During the divorce process**

To stay organized, reduce conflict, and make thoughtful decisions about money, parenting, and the legal process.

In my work as a divorce mediator and coach, I help people in Colorado:

- Prepare for high-stakes conversations like this one.
- Understand the basic divorce process in this state and what to expect.
- Communicate with their spouse in a way that lowers the temperature rather than raising it.
- Explore mediation and other out-of-court options that can save time, money, and emotional wear-and-tear on the whole family.



## **If you would like help with your next steps**

If this guide describes your situation, you do not have to figure it out in your head at 2 a.m. on your own.

Here are two ways I can support you:

### **1. Confidential strategy session**

A focused session where we look at your situation, clarify your priorities, and map out your next three concrete steps. This can include practicing what you want to say and planning for different reactions.

### **2. Ongoing divorce coaching and mediation**

For Colorado couples who want to separate as calmly and fairly as possible, I offer flat-fee mediation packages and coaching support.

You can learn more or schedule a call here:

<https://www.openspacemediation.com/free-15-minute-divorce-consultation/>

or visit [openspacemediation.com](https://www.openspacemediation.com)

If you are outside Colorado, I may be able to support you with coaching around communication and planning, but I cannot give you legal advice about your state's laws. You deserve local legal guidance and local safety resources that fit your situation.

