

Don't Even Think About Divorcing Until...

By Elizabeth Weil

Here are tips for how to save a marriage and avoid divorce from 13 extraordinary people who believe in doing whatever it takes to sustain the biggest love of your life.

Whatever it takes

There you are, trucking along in your life, your marriage. Maybe you're six months out from the altar, or two years, or 12, or 20. Your husband is unaccountably late coming home from work again. Or he's distant or cranky again. Or, as in my case, he leaves his rancid gym clothes on the clean bedspread again. Or he butchers an entire pig in your kitchen again (yes! He's taken the whole know-where-your-meat-comes-from thing to the extreme). And you think, no matter how happy or in love you felt just yesterday, *Good grief, wouldn't all this be easier without YOU?* Marriage is long and hard. It's no picnic, yet at times it feels like a joke: Millions of us are trying to move — and grow, and breathe — while shackled to another person, as if in a three-legged race. Wouldn't it be easier to div — ?

And yet, the D-word. It's so dire. No person stays committed forever without at least contemplating life solo, but do you really want to amputate your sometimes better half? Here, a panel of wise authors, therapists, artists, lawyers, and scientists makes the case for sticking it out. Even if your union is rosy right now, consider this required reading. Use it to appreciate, nurture, and take a mental snapshot of what you have. Some day you may find yourself (or a dear friend) on the brink, and you'll want the best tools possible to help you remember what's at stake and salvage what you've got. With that in mind, try these tips to save your marriage before you sign the divorce papers.

Don't divorce until you...

...try writing down your thoughts and sharing them with your spouse. There are things you can't say but that you *can* write, if you carve out a space of solitude and give yourself time to reflect. Your spouse might be able to hear you for the first time too, because writing takes you out of the realm of combat. You can elicit what's behind the anger. Often, it's sadness.

— JANE MCCAFFERTY, AUTHOR OF THE NOVEL [*FIRST YOU TRY EVERYTHING*](#), ABOUT A DIVORCING COUPLE, AND RECIPIENT OF TWO PUSHCART PRIZES

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...compare the cost of good marital therapy, and meaningful (even extravagant) investments in your marriage, to the price tag of divorce. Just one meeting with an attorney could buy you and your spouse a weekend at a nice spa. One month's legal bills could buy you a full course of couples therapy and countless date nights. If you're juggling work and parenthood, you might be able to save your marriage just by devoting the resources you'd put toward divorce toward staying together instead.

— ELISABETH J. LAMOTTE, COUPLES THERAPIST IN WASHINGTON, DC

Don't divorce until you've...

...done enough honest self-examination to find out why you want to divorce in the first place. Because you would never want to take on something as monumental as a divorce unless you're going to change and grow from it. So ask yourself: "How did I get myself into this situation? Why did I pick this person to marry? What did I do to create terrible communication or anger or deadness?" Until you're willing to look at that, you'll just end one situation and pick up right where you left off in the next. Even if there is no next marriage, you'll re-create the dynamic in relationships at work, or in friendships, or with your children. Most marriages aren't black-and-white. Almost always, when things deteriorate, both people have contributed mightily to the demise. — ELIZABETH LESSER, COFOUNDER OF THE OMEGA INSTITUTE FOR HOLISTIC STUDIES IN RHINEBECK, NY, AND AUTHOR OF [*BROKEN OPEN: HOW DIFFICULT TIMES CAN HELP US GROW*](#)

Don't divorce until you...

...let go of the fantasy that you're going to find someone who's perfect in all the ways your husband is not. People think they're going to find whatever is missing in their marriage. But with divorce, you trade off one set of problems for another. Imagine seeing your ex at a soccer game flirting with another woman. Imagine how that would feel. Because if you get divorced, people are going to be setting your husband up with women — appealing women who will find him fascinating. I'm not saying you should stay with someone if there are real problems. But if you're just sort of feeling like, "Well, I don't know. He doesn't inspire me. He's not interested in my book club selection..." think again. — LORI GOTTLIEB, AUTHOR OF [*MARRY HIM: THE CASE FOR SETTLING FOR MR. GOOD ENOUGH*](#)

Don't divorce until you...

...try touching. I've found that a lot of couples stop touching long before they split up. When I suggest it, they go, "But I can't even *talk* to this person!" And I tell them there's no talking required. Just touch in silence. Be quiet. This can mean sitting next to each other so your bodies are touching while you're watching TV. The first time's going to be awkward, so give it a few tries. Then move on to hand-holding. Then a massage — just the hands or feet. Then spooning in bed. Touch increases the hormone oxytocin and makes couples feel closer. It takes away that urge to attack. It helps you remember what attracted you to your partner in the first place. Because you can't tell an angry or disconnected couple to go have sex. Uh-uh. But touching in silence can help you find that little flicker, and then you can try to increase that little flicker, and if you can do that, chances are you'll be able to reconnect emotionally, too. — HILDA HUTCHERSON, M.D., OB/GYN AND PROFESSOR AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY AND REDBOOK'S "INTIMATE ANSWERS" COLUMNIST

Don't divorce until you...

...can vividly imagine your partner kissing somebody else, and you don't care. We've evolved three distinct brain systems for mating and reproduction. One is the sex drive. The second is

romantic love. The third is deep feelings of attachment. Before you divorce, you need to be at the point where you feel no sexual interest in your partner, no feelings of romantic love at any time, and no deep attachment. You really don't? Then you're free. — HELEN FISHER, PH.D., BIOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGIST AT RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

Don't divorce until you...

...spend the next year treating your spouse as curiously, respectfully, and gratefully as you would a mysterious stranger. Henry Miller once said that a man's friends were his worst enemies because they believed they knew who he was — and they limited him to it. How much truer this is for spouses! We think we know our partner's deepest identity. But if we spent half the effort courting him as we might an exotic-accented stranger, he'd likely prove twice as grateful and at least as interesting. — CRISTINA NEHRING, AUTHOR OF [*A VINDICATION OF LOVE: RECLAIMING ROMANCE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY*](#)

Don't divorce until you're...

...clear that you are making an examined, not rash, decision. Some people divorce in a state of intense reactivity — for example, on the heels of being betrayed, lied to, or cheated on. When you're hurt and angry and upset, and in shock, you're in your reptilian brain. You're in fight-flight mode. Better to wait until the shock has passed, until you can breathe and contemplate your life. — ESTHER PEREL, AUTHOR OF [*MATING IN CAPTIVITY: UNLOCKING EROTIC INTELLIGENCE*](#)

Don't divorce until you've...

...left no stone unturned. Before you end something, you need to make sure you can walk away saying, "We did everything we could do." I'm divorced, but my ex-husband and I, we're family. We're soul mates. "We're best friends. I think it takes as much work to have a happy divorce as it takes to have a happy marriage. You have to be respectful of the other person and what they're going through. You have to be insightful about your own issues, what you may be projecting onto that person. You have to stop making everything about how *you* feel. Before you think about getting divorced, you need to step outside yourself. Gain some distance. Establish a level of respect. Then work like hell at figuring out who you two were meant to be to each other. Maybe it's not a married couple. But obviously, your paths crossed; you developed feeling. Now find the shelf where it best fits." — FRAN DRESCHER, CO-CREATOR AND STAR OF THE TV LAND SITCOM *HAPPILY DIVORCED*

Don't divorce until you...

...consider that, with the possible exception of permanent disability and long-term imprisonment, there are few financial calamities more devastating than divorce. Both spouses will need retirement savings sufficient to cover a household. People may need therapy. And there's a good chance careers will be damaged because you'll be distracted and may decline promotions or transfers. All these things can limit your financial prospects. — RON LIEBER, "YOUR MONEY" COLUMNIST FOR *THE NEW YORK TIMES*

Don't divorce until you...

...stop and realize that your spouse might marry somebody you could have issues with. Are you going to be responsible and grown-up enough to embrace that person? To see them as your family? Because if you have children, you'd better be. Are you sure you're going to be tolerant of someone you've never met, or maybe don't like, being directly involved in your kids' lives? Listen, I have a wonderful second marriage and a great relationship with my ex and his wife, but it's a very serious thing to get divorced. You need to be flexible, open-minded, and full of goodwill if you're going to do things right relative to your kids. And you need to be all of those things immediately, when you're hurting. Because being angry or mad or bitchy about your ex-husband or his new wife, your kids' stepmother, is doing them no favors. Now, when my ex-husband comes to see the children, he stays in our house and my husband and I leave — because that's what's best for the kids. That's called tolerance. A lot of people say, "Oh, my God, I could never do that." But how could you be in my situation and *not* do that? The minute you break up your family, you need to start repairing it, and you have to bend over backward to do it. In divorce, you have to be even better at compromise and change than in marriage. And it's better for the kids if you do it with a smile — a real one. — ISABEL GILLIES, ACTRESS AND AUTHOR OF THE DIVORCE MEMOIRS *A YEAR AND SIX SECONDS AND HAPPENS EVERY DAY*

Read more: [How to Save a Marriage - How to Avoid Divorce - Redbook](#)