

Chapter

4

Saying It Out Loud



SAYING IT OUT LOUD

One night, I met my sister in the city, as we were traveling to our parents' house together. We stopped to get some crisps [potato chips], and the shopkeeper said in passing, "Have a great day—life is about having fun," and I said to my sister, "You know what? I'm not having fun." And then I told her everything that I had kept from my family. That night I stayed at my parents'.

—SANDY

Before beginning the emotional work of getting over your loss, you're going to need to unravel the complex quilt that was your wedding. If you are early in the planning process, you'll "only" have to deal with telling people. If you are close to the wedding day (say, two weeks out, as I was), you'll have the added joy of contacting vendors.

Lucky for you, the Almost Brides have been there, and we've got some wisdom for you.

TELLING FAMILY

I dreaded telling my family that Mark and I were having serious problems. I had the irrational fear that my parents would somehow blame me for not being good enough for Mark or serious enough about marriage, or think I had somehow "ruined" a perfectly good thing. One afternoon, over the phone, the rabbi walked us through the wedding ceremony. When he got to the part in the Jewish ceremony where the groom pulls the handkerchief out of the rabbi's hand, symbolizing that he is entering into marriage of his own free will and signaling that the ceremony can proceed, the rabbi asked if I wanted to have the same opportunity, as ours was to be an egalitarian ceremony.

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“Yes,” I told him. Then I thought: I’m not going to be able to pull that handkerchief.

That night, I broke down and told my older brother that it didn’t look like we were going to get married. Irrational fears still in place, I suggested that Mark was the only one with the doubts. David promised me that he’d help me break the news to our parents.

Still, I waited. Mark and I were in full calling-it-off talks when we went home to his parents’ city for a celebratory dinner with their friends and my parents. We hung out with Mark’s family the afternoon of the dinner, and I felt absolutely brakes-slammng-world-ending sick. When they got into town, my parents called from their hotel room and I stretched the phone cord taut into the living room, shut the door, and told them. Again, I neglected to mention my feelings on the issue.

“Oh everyone gets cold feet!” my mother assured me. “Even your dad!” I really don’t think that’s what it is, I told them. And when they saw my face at dinner that night, they knew. My father told me later that after that dinner, he and my mother were just waiting for the phone to ring with news the wedding was off.

I didn’t call. Instead, a few days later, I hopped a plane home.

Weeping, I told my story to my sympathetic seatmate, (she actually said, “I know those tears,” before I started in, but I didn’t even need the opening). She told me how much better off I was—the first of many times I would hear that.

My parents agreed. Together, we all breathed a sigh of relief while some of us (me) cried like babies. To say my parents came through would be a huge understatement. They stayed up late, telling me just how lucky I was. When women e-mail me and say they are afraid of telling their parents and

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costing them all that money, I lay it on the line. Our parents only want us to be happy. Yes, Almost Brides have told me of parents being less than sympathetic, but the fact is, if your parents don't get it now, they will get it later. If they can't be happy for you, your own happiness will have to suffice. And *any* amount of money lost is worth a mistake being averted. *Any amount.* If you don't believe me, write this in large letters backwards on your forehead and stand in front of the mirror until the message gets through to you:

Any amount.

Do you know how expensive divorces are?

TELLING FRIENDS

Despite our talk of relief, my parents didn't want me to spread the word. They sort of hoped we'd figure it out in the irrational way you think your plane will maybe take off in a blinding snowstorm. I knew it was over, of course. I gave them a day, and then, in decidedly un-Miss Manners fashion, I sent a mass e-mail. I assured everyone I was fine, but I regretted having to tell them that Mark and I weren't getting married. I told them I was home with my family and I'd be in touch soon. My very closest friends called, and everyone else, respecting my privacy, sent e-mails telling me how much they loved me. As far as etiquette goes, you're supposed to send out formal cards that say,

Mr. and Mrs. Greatly Relieved
announce that the marriage of their daughter
Darling Airhead
to Mr. Fortune Hunter
will not take place.¹

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And we did that, too; it just took a few days. But I knew my friends cared only that I was okay, and the flood of replies full of love helped me immensely.

TELLING COWORKERS

I called Andrea, my supervisor, from the airport and calmly told her the wedding was off. When she exclaimed, “Oh My God! How are you?” I burst out crying. She, cool woman that she is, told me to take as much time as I needed and to come crash with her and her fiancé if I needed to. She even took my picture of Mark out of the frame on my desk and replaced it with a magazine clipping of ex-Washington, D.C., mayor (and convicted drug user) Marion Barry, to give me a laugh upon my return. Can’t ask for much more support than that.

What she didn’t do was tell the rest of the office. She understandably felt that this was my news to disseminate as I chose. I understandably wanted her to alert everyone and then tell them to leave me alone. (I just forgot to ask her to do so. Be sure to make *your* needs clear.) I had called one work friend, Mike, near the end of the engagement, so when I didn’t show up to work two weeks before my wedding, he knew what was up. But, like my supervisor, he didn’t think it was his place to “gossip” about me. This left another friend, Jim, nearly frantic, pressing Mike for details. Was I hurt? Was my family okay? Mike stood mute, a Mona Lisa of loyalty.

All this tact and diplomacy left me in the unenviable position of telling those coworkers I wasn’t close to that the wedding was off—over and over. I had many conversations like this:

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Reid: So how's the planning going?

Me: Well, actually, we've called it off.

Reid: (Smiling blankly.)

Me: Really.

Reid: (Smiling quizzically.)

Me: Really. It's okay. I'm okay. We just called it off.

Reid: (Smiling uncomfortably.)

Me: I'm fine. I'm cool. Do you have that document for me?

It could have been worse. It certainly was for Elizabeth:

My coworkers were the most difficult, especially with the second breakup. My family started calling me the "runaway bride," which really did hurt, but I just kind of let it roll off my back. My second fiancé had proposed on my birthday at my company Christmas party. There were about four hundred people there and all eyes were on me as he got down on one knee and proposed, and then we had a dance. For the next four weeks, people that I had never talked to before came up to me, giving me well wishes and bottles of champagne.

Then came the breakup. I was sent home from work on a mandatory leave of absence—I was too distraught to work. When I returned to work about five days later, a lot of people noticed that I didn't have my ring on anymore. It was difficult to explain to people why we weren't getting married, especially considering the circumstances. When people asked how he broke it off, I constantly broke into tears, telling them that he [had] called me from the airport on his way to California. Everyone knows how a corporate office works, especially around the water cooler: my life was up for

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public viewing. People always looked at me as “that poor girl” and that was the last thing I needed, like I didn’t feel bad enough as it was.

HEAD BACK, CHIN UP

While you can crumble in front of family and friends, try your best to keep your cool at the office. See if you can get a few days off before you have to face the Real World again. I took off five days. My friend Debbie urged me to take more—hell, why not take my frequent flyer miles and jet off to Europe? I was planning to take a three-week honeymoon anyway, wasn’t I?

But I felt strongly—and still do—that it’s important to get back into the mix (and I wanted to *enjoy* the next trip I took; not walk the cobbled streets sobbing). When Debbie asked why I didn’t take more time, I told her, “Even mourners only get a week, and, in this case, nobody died.” (In the Jewish religion, we mourn exclusively for seven days.)

When you do have to answer the questions and respond to the pitying looks, keep a small smile on your face. I found that kept people at bay, even more than the oft-repeated exclamations of, “Hey, I’m fine.” Sure it sucks that your private life is crashing headlong into your professional one. And, yes, people are going to talk for a while (till the next Big Gossip comes along). The best way to handle it is to keep ’em guessing. It’s your breakup and you’ll cry if you want to—just save the tears for the privacy of home.

I asked Almost Brides to describe their experiences spreading the word:

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My family knew I was going to break it off, and they were very supportive. They did not want me to get married to him at all. —SAMANTHA

As far as telling people, I didn't really tell too many people we had split up. We hadn't made an "official" announcement; nor had we set a date. [When people] did ask, I told them, "It didn't work out." —AVERY

Telling my friends we broke up was relatively easy. I had e-mailed two of my closest friends and asked them if we could meet for dinner to talk—before we broke up. I wanted to discuss it with them, so they knew it was happening. I used to [send] a weekly "Wedding Planning" e-mail to many friends, so I e-mailed them the week after we broke up with the title "The Final Update" and explained that we had broken up. My parents told my extended family, who all rang me and asked me way too many questions. I didn't want to hear anyone say, "I knew it" or "I thought you'd end up divorcing." —SANDY

I told him he would have to make all the calls to the venues and our mutual friends and I . . . forced him to tell my parents. I didn't think he would go through with it. I was sitting in his kitchen when he told me [he had], and I started hyperventilating. His mother came in at that moment and said, "Don't mind me, I'm going to make a cup of tea."

That's when the anger started. I couldn't see or breathe, I was so angry at him. —ZOE

STAYING FRIENDS WITH HIS FRIENDS

Can you stay friends with his friends?

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MY STORY

I couldn't wing it. Truth be told, I wasn't crazy about most of them, and I didn't really miss the ones I liked and lost. The way I see it, friendship is loyalty, and my friends wouldn't have even considered staying friends with my ex, so why should his friends try to stay friends with me?

Mark had a good friend with definite designs on him. At our engagement party, she stood very close to him when she wasn't moping around, and she wouldn't speak a word to me. My friend Jill offered to take her outside and rough her up. Mark denied that his friend felt "that way" about him. Much later, we had an incredibly unproductive discussion of my own making about "last flings" and he admitted that if we had them, he'd like his to be with her. I knew I was well on my way to being over Mark when I realized two months after the breakup that they very well might be sleeping together and I didn't care. (And then I went on to date the friend I had said would be *my* last fling, if we had them. Are you keeping up?)

Mark did have one friend I really liked and admired, and as soon as we called it off, she, mensch that she is, e-mailed me, sent her condolences, and expressed her desire to stay friends. And I, klunkhead that I am, totally botched it.

Seeing her reminded me of him, and, as this was days and weeks after we broke up, I was still pretty raw. And I didn't hide it very well. She once said to me, "Rachel,

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you can't speak poorly of him with me—he's my friend, too. Just like he can't speak poorly of you to me." As I was in that world-revolves-around-me haze we all go through after a traumatic event, what I heard was, "Blah, blah, blah, he's talking smack about you."

So much for that. (Sorry, Amy.)

WELL, YOU'RE RID OF THEM

The Almost Brides surveyed all came out against staying friends with his friends. Almost Bride Samantha put a positive spin on it: "Staying friends with [your] ex's friends: No. I met these people and saw these people through him, so I never saw them again (yay!)."

Almost Bride Sandy explains the difficult dynamics:

Personally, I think it's really hard to stay friends with friends of your ex, unless you're staying friends with your ex. After my breakup, I cut all contact with my ex and therefore had to cut contact with all of his friends. His friends would e-mail me and I'd have to say, "I'm sorry, but I don't really think we can be friends, because of 'ex.'" One of my closest friends chose to remain friends with my ex, and because of his violence and so on, I had to cut her out of my life. It was a horrible experience and I felt completely let down and lonely through that. We've since become friends again, but I'll never completely trust her as I used to. It's very sad and hard for us both. We've discussed it and she now realizes how hard it was on me, but the damage has been done, unfortunately.

A few months after the breakup, I was working at an exhibition when I saw one of my ex's closest friends. He came straight over to me and started chatting. Although I had moved on with my life, it was very hard

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for me to not wonder what my ex was up to—and that is damaging behavior, in my opinion. I told him very little about my life, we exchanged pleasantries, and that was about it. My friends have run into my ex in the city. They've smiled at him; he nods to them and walks off. I think he's trying to behave around them and not ask questions about me.

Other Almost Brides agreed that it is hard to run into their ex's friends and be reminded of their ex.

If your ex has really solid friends and you'd sincerely like them to be your friends *also* (no poaching!) and you don't have ulterior motives (no hanging out with them so word will get back to him about how great you are doing—this isn't seventh grade), give it some serious time. Drop them an e-mail six months from now and hope for the best. And realize that you run the risk of hearing how great he's doing then.