



BJ Mann is a Family Mediator in private practice in Rochester who helps people reduce conflict and improve relationships.

If you have a question on relationships, family or personal, please be sure to send BJ your question to Connections@RochesterWomanMag.com

I have a close friend going through a divorce with her husband. I have been supporting her through this process, but feel overwhelmed by her day-to-day troubles. On top of that, my husband and I are friends with both of them. How do I step back without hurting her feelings?

Divorce is a traumatic time for people, and it is natural to turn to friends for support. As you are experiencing, providing that support can be overwhelming emotionally and in terms of its imposition on your own time.

One way of stepping back is to minimize or avoid giving tangible advice. Most individuals who are in deep distress are actually not looking for solutions, but rather to vent and to be heard. So when Mary says, "How am I going to have enough money when I am on my own?" you might consider reflecting her worry by saying something like: "It must be scary to worry about how to make ends meet." Offering suggestions like getting a job, or asking for more money, and other well-intentioned problem-solving ideas can promote despair rather than support. And you'll likely hear detailed reasons about why each of those suggestions will not work. On the other hand, you might connect her with someone you know who has "made it" financially after a divorce and whom you know would be willing to share her story and serve as an inspiration.

Another way of creating boundaries is to ask: "How can I be useful to you? What

do you need specifically from me? Your friend may say, "Just to talk." That's fine, but it's important to gently, but firmly be clear about how long you are available to chat.

Maintaining a relationship with both parties can be dicey. Not being a messenger or mediator is essential. Be clear that you and your husband intend to be supportive to both of your friends. If your friend "wants you to choose," then be honest and let her know that you care about both people and you are not going to judge or choose sides. Then it's up to your friend. She may choose her anger (at her husband) over her friendship with you. This is particularly evident when people host a gathering and are asked about who is invited, implying that if you invited him/her, then "I'm not coming." The best response is to explain that each invitee needs to make their own decision and that you do not want to choose among friends.

Finally, it is helpful to understand how your friend is connected with support systems. Is she seeing a therapist? Is she getting good information from a mediator or attorney regarding navigating the divorce process? Is she aware of the peer support groups in town such as Neutral Ground? Does she have a financial planner or tax accountant to help with finances? Understanding her support team will let you defer to their expertise. As her friend, your main role is to be a good listener - within the limits of your own capacity.

Several months ago, I lost my job in a small company and initially my husband was supportive. But now with no job prospects in sight and bills looming, he has turned and said I had self-sabotaged my last job by not playing office politics. How do I keep the tension at home at bay while feeling panicky about trying to find a new job?

Unemployment is one of those major factors that affect the whole family system. Each person --Mom, Dad and kids-- has their own feelings and worries. Emotions often range from helplessness and fear to embarrassment and worry. One thing that's

pretty certain is that you and your husband are each feeling the same emotions, but not always at the same time. So in the beginning, you may have shared more of your feelings about why you lost your job and you both vented your anger and frustration toward the same company. You felt that you were heard and that your husband understood and agreed with you. Now, neither of you have the company to target, and you've moved on to feelings such as worry and responsibility. Unresolved conflict turns into resentment, and when people have resentments they often snipe or criticize each other.

You can minimize the tension by setting up a time with your husband to discuss your intentions about finding a job and to share what the obstacles seem to be. Be sure that the conversation does not start on the heels of an angry exchange. It's best to find a time in a calm moment, without distractions, to talk about your job search and job worries. Likewise, you need to invite your husband to share his concerns.

There are most likely two big issues (1) how best to find and retain a job and (2) what changes can be made to jointly ease the financial burdens on the household. Staying focused on which issue you are addressing will help solutions emerge. The hard part is not hearing each other's expectations as criticism. Ask questions like: How would that work? What might I do differently? How can we save money now?

Most important is to summarize what you heard each other say and that you are clear about what each has agreed to. For instance, you may say that you will actively seek work and define exactly how you will go about it. He may summarize how you both intend to change spending habits. Be clear about your expectations and don't assume you have a plan if it is too vague. And finally, you'll want to arrange a time to meet at regular intervals for a calm discussion of the progress you're making, and to brainstorm what changes may still need to be made. Making a commitment to regular communication diffuses the tension related to wondering what's going on and worse yet, making assumptions about what the other person is feeling or doing.