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Miss Manners: How to Best Acknowledge a Divorce

Plus, another Gentle Reader wonders where to place one's soup spoon between sips.

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Each week, Miss Manners answers questions exclusively from the MSN audience on all of your etiquette dilemmas. (Have an issue you want help with? Send in a question today or talk about your own problems on our Miss Manners message board.) Read on for this week's hot topics:

Dear Miss Manners,

You hear or read an acquaintance is getting a divorce. Do you play "dumb" until they say something? Do you contact them offering sympathies and/or best wishes on new directions? Send a note or card? Weddings, birthdays, deaths, etc., have well established protocols, but I'm ignorant of the "separation/divorce" protocol.

Gentle Reader,

That there are established conventions for such events, including divorce, does not mean that people are following them.

Ask those who are on the receiving end of "So when are you getting married?" or "Wow, I see you're pregnant." It is charming to remember a birthday and thoughtful to acknowledge having heard of a death, but divorces, along with engagements and pregnancies, should not be guessed or anticipated by outsiders.

Another problem is that the recipients of proper remarks might argue back, challenging their well-wishers by declaring that the pregnancy was an accident or the death a relief. This is especially true when responding to the announcement of a divorce by expressing, in writing or speaking, the sympathy and good wishes you mentioned.

That is the right thing to do, and Miss Manners asks you not to let it throw you if the response is, "But I couldn't be happier to get rid of that monster."

More from Miss Manners
Previous column: The problem with cell phones
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Dear Miss Manners,

During the course (i.e. between sips) and when finished, what is the proper placement of one's soup spoon?

Gentle Reader,

Ah, here we have one of those distinctions that seem designed to drive anyone crazy who expects logic and consistency from what is, after all, as much of etiquette is, folk custom.

A soup spoon should never be left in a soup bowl, not even for a minute between sips, much less when one is finished.

Yet knowing that this is a crime has led otherwise careful people into the lesser known error of parking their soup spoons on their place plates when the soup has been served in a soup plate-- a large, low bowl, but one with a flat rim. In that case, the spoon is left in the soup plate.

Miss Manners advises not trying to make sense of this, but just doing it.

Send Miss Manners a question

Judith Martin's latest book is No Vulgar Hotel: The Desire and Pursuit of Venice. She is also the author of Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior (Freshly Updated). She and her husband, a scientist and playwright, live in Washington, D.C. They have two perfect children, of course.

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