

BONDS | AUGUST 9, 2011

# To Save a Marriage, Split Up?

*Separating Is Difficult, Success Is Hard to Predict; But for Some, It's a Last, Best Resort*



By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN



Amanda Koster for The Wall Street Journal

Get Breathing Room: Jeanine and Mark Earnhart, walking on the beach in San Juan Island, Wash., were barely speaking when they split up after 35 years of marriage.

After 35 years of marriage, Mark Earnhart came home one day and told his wife, Jeanine, that he wanted a separation. He said he was tired of the bickering and tension, the lack of communication, how they never did anything together anymore.

His wife sadly agreed that the marriage seemed broken. So Mr. Earnhart, a chiropractor, moved out of their home to a furnished apartment on the other side of San Juan Island, in Washington.

Three months later husband and wife were back together. They have been married now for 42 years.

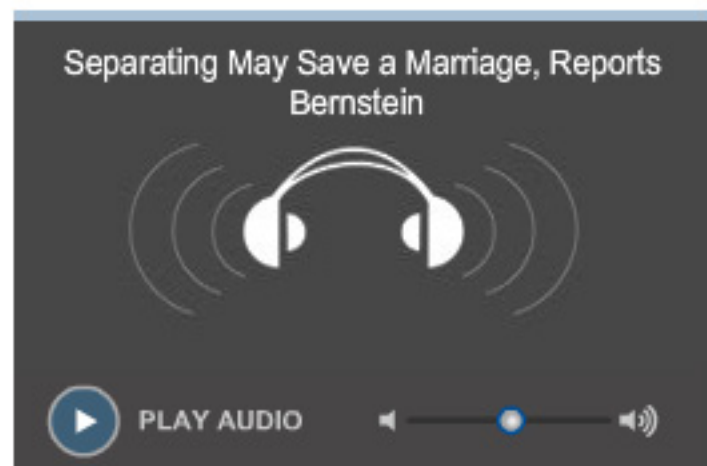
It seems counterintuitive: How can a separation save a marriage? When a couple splits—even for a trial period— isn't that just a pit stop on the way to divorce?





Earnhart Family

Recall Better Times: They were teen sweethearts on their wedding day in 1969. The Earnharts began to irritate each other over the years.



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Share Sparingly: The Earnharts discussed their plan to split, and their reasons, with their family, shown on a recent visit. Therapists suggest sharing details only with those closest to you who must know.

## Taking a Marriage Timeout

Some issues to consider before trying a separation:

- **Get a marriage therapist.** A trained professional can help mediate between the two parties.

Surprisingly, many marriage therapists recommend a separation, albeit as a measure of last resort. They say that if both spouses set specific parameters, the space and time to think that a trial separation provides just might be what is needed to save the relationship. Still, there are few, if any, statistics that show whether it works or how many couples try separating.

Sharon Gilchrest O'Neill, a marriage and family therapist in Mount Kisco, N.Y., has helped about 40 couples arrange trial separations over the past 20 years and says that about half reconciled and remained married.

Ms. O'Neill recommends that a separation shouldn't just happen—after one partner storms out, say. The couple should decide who will move out and where that person will live, how the finances will be handled, the care-giving of the kids, what to tell friends and family, and—very importantly—how long the separation will last. She believes that six months is ideal, and most experts agree. It's long enough to set up a second household and gain perspective, but not long enough to seem permanent.

If a couple has experienced infidelity, they should deal with that issue in therapy before planning a separation, says Ms. O'Neill.

Marriage therapists say that by the time most couples show up in therapy talking about divorce it's often too late to salvage the relationship. There's so much anger, hurt and mistrust that the partners can't work out their issues.

But what if the partners took a break before the hatred set in? It wouldn't have to be the formal separation that is often a legal precursor to divorce, but an informal break to give the spouses some space to breathe, think and calm down.

Often, the reality-check that marital separations provide—the prospect of unraveling finances, facing dating again, fully grasping the collateral damage done to the kids—is enough to make people resolve to work harder on the marriage.

"Sometimes having a dress rehearsal for divorce makes them realize they don't want to do it," says Richard Levak, a psychologist who works with couples in Del Mar, Calif.

Linda Lea Viken, a divorce attorney in Rapid City, S.D., and president of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, says it's important for each party to understand the other's motivation. She has seen cases in which one person isn't really interested in reconciling, but wants to use the separation to buy time to rearrange or dispose of assets.



- **Consult an attorney** specializing in family law. Find out how the terms of the separation could affect any eventual divorce. A consultation sometimes scares people into working harder on their marriage, once they face the reality of what divorced life will be like, says Linda Lea Viken, a divorce lawyer.

- **Agree on logistics.** Who will leave and where will that person go? Who will pay the bills? Who will take care of the kids and how much time will the other spouse be able to see them?

- **Consider email your friend.** Writing to each other, rather than meeting or talking on the phone, can be a way to defuse the tension.

- **Put your agreement in writing.** This doesn't require a lawyer. A therapist can do it. It protects one spouse from taking advantage of the other.

divorce, you should keep as much to yourselves as you can, otherwise it may come back to haunt you if you stay together," Ms. O'Neill says.



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The couple separated for three months then reunited.

Ms. Viken also warns couples that the arrangements made during a trial separation, such as who pays the bills and where the children live, may have a big impact on an eventual divorce, if there is one. It will be hard, for example, to convince a judge to award full custody of the children to one parent if in the separation period the couple had agreed to a 50-50 split. For this reason, she suggests that each spouse consult a divorce attorney.

Then there's the fraught issue of whether each party is allowed to see other people during the separation. Some therapists believe that dating is OK, as long as both parties are truly comfortable with the decision. Ms. Viken disagrees. "If one of the parties wants to date, this is not a trial separation, it's the end," she says.

Another tricky issue: What to tell family and friends? Experts say couples should decide together what the party line is, then tell only those people who really need to know. "Until a marriage is going to go down the path of

The Earnharts, who are both 61 and live in Friday Harbor, Wash., decided to separate in 2003. They say they had gotten to the point where they barely spoke. He spent his spare time golfing, and she went shopping or to lunch with friends. They ate dinner in front of the TV without talking, gave each other the silent treatment for days on end, and rarely had sex.

By the time Mr. Earnhart decided to move out, the couple had read numerous self-help books, taken separate vacations and gone to see two marriage therapists. Nothing helped. Ms. Earnhart wrote down a list of things that irritated her about her husband. At the top: The way he chewed, monopolized a conversation and walked like a duck.

"We repelled each other," Mr. Earnhart says.

"I thought, 'Why not do what you want to do?' " adds his wife. "Life is too short and I don't like you anyway."

So he moved to a condo, yet continued to pay the couple's bills. She stayed in their house. They told their adult son and daughter why they were separating and were relieved when their kids said they understood.

And they talked regularly, at first on the phone. Then Mr. Earnhart started coming over to the house with a bottle of wine. They would sit outside, look at the water and discuss how to divide up their assets in a divorce. They talked about how they could communicate better and be less judgmental.





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Mark and Jeanine Earnhart, with their daughter, Laura Holden, center, cooking at their home in San Juan Island, Wash.

After awhile, they realized they missed their friendship. They talked about the memories they shared—how they'd bought a house and built a life together—and wondered what they were doing by throwing it all away. One night, they ended up in bed together.

"It was kind of like falling in love again," says Ms. Earnhart. "He would come over for some silly reason, and we would have a heck of a conversation and a really good time."

"When you are apart, you have time to reflect, first on all of the things that were upsetting in your life with each other," says her husband. "And then you realize that you've allowed things that maybe aren't really important to take on a life of their own."

After three months of living apart, Mr. Earnhart moved back in. Now, the couple tries to talk out problems as soon as they arise, often leaving each other polite, little notes about an issue, like the one that Ms. Earnhart recently left her husband, telling him she felt he had been rude and didn't want to stew on the issue. He left her a note, apologizing.

They also entertain friends and travel, taking road trips to California and Alaska. Mr. Earnhart cooks dinner each night, and the two often eat while watching—and discussing—whatever is on the Food Network. They have self-published a book about marriage, called "Marriage Works."

"You can get to the point where you feel that there's no way that you will ever fall in love with this person again, but you can," says Ms. Earnhart. "He still waddles like a duck, but now I love him for it."

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