

Staying on the A-List, not the D-List: 5 Tips to Avoid Wedding Day Drama

By

As wedding season begins, many people may still remember the spectacle caused by Meghan Markle's father a year ago, just days before her marriage to Britain's Prince Harry. It was touch and go drama, and ultimately her father did not attend, nor walk his daughter down the aisle at the St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle. Most families don't have a parent who will stage and sell paparazzi photos as Thomas Markle Sr. is said to have done. Still many wedding days will be wracked, *even wrecked*, **by parental feuding, sibling estrangements, and in-law jealousies**. The drama that Megan Markle and Prince Harry endured isn't that unusual.

So how do you **hold down wedding day drama, stop the "unwanted guest"** from arriving, and prevent brides and grooms from **wishing they'd eloped** instead of walking down the aisle?

There are some practical and legal solutions. We have outlined 5 tips to avoid wedding day family drama.

1. Don't be the Unwanted Guest

There are many complicated family situations, and one of the most common is caused by divorce and the **presence of divorced parents at the wedding**. Brides and grooms usually want to have both of their parents at their wedding. The problems arise when the two ex-spouses harbor many resentments, still don't get along, and can't be trusted in each other's presence. The bride and groom, and other family members, may worry that one of the exes will act abusively or **cause a scene at the wedding**. There have been times when an ex arrived at a wedding, despite appeals not to attend, only to be served with an **outstanding arrest warrant**.

If you are serious about not having a relative or ex spouse at the wedding, we advise that you let that person know that if they appear on the premises of a private club, hotel or home, they **will be trespassing** and that you will call security or police to have them arrested. Then inform security of the person you fear may trespass so they can be prepared. Not only do you want to be on the guest list, you don't want to **end up on the arrest list**. So take care of your business, and if there are legal issues between you and another potential guest, such as **court judgments, restraining orders, child support and alimony arrears**, address them and don't let those matters make a spectacle and bad memories. This should be about happy beginnings. *No one wants a mug shot among the many photographs taken on their special day.*

A divorce is a difficult time for families, and that's why if you can, go through that process as amicably as you can so that one day you will be able to attend your children's wedding, walk your daughter down the aisle or dance at the wedding reception. The best tip to not becoming the unwanted guest, is to **live up to your divorce terms** as best as you can.

During the divorce process we often refer clients to counselors, therapists or coaches to help them get through the emotional piece. If you don't have a strong grasp on the emotional, it will almost always be the downfall to the legal process. This can have such a long lasting impact, that your adult children might not want you at their wedding.

On the day of your child's wedding, **stay away from your ex**. Physically keep apart and some distance away. You can sit with other members of the family or friends of the bride or groom. The bride and groom may want to put other family members between their divorced parents or to place them at different ends of the wedding party seating. Many couples are now being seated at their own sweetheart table so that divorced parents don't have to be at the same head table.

2. Settle Religious and Cultural Differences

Many couples are inter-faith or inter-racial, and their families want specific traditions to be followed at the wedding. You can **get to the altar in peace, without family friction, legal woes or expensive surprises**. The key here is to resolve religious differences long before the wedding day, so you can make sure there is that appropriate goblet, candle, canopy, prayer or other important religious element. *Anything that has been simmering during the planning, could easily come to a boil during the wedding.*

3. Put the Family Feud on Hold

When families come together to a wedding, they often **bring past resentments, rivalries or jealousies**. There can also be feelings of family inequality. If there are **stay away orders** or **protective orders**, terms need to be followed.

Just because you and your ex spouse have verbally agreed to make an accommodation to both be present at your child's wedding, be careful. It is common and desirable for someone to say let's just agree to put our differences aside for this special day. Someone may be bound by an order, for example, to stay more than 100 feet away from an ex spouse or family member, but they agree to put differences aside just for the wedding. If someone becomes angry at the person or the person bound by the stay away order becomes belligerent, even though you thought they agreed to put the order aside, you could be arrested for harassing an ex and found in violation of a stay away order. **Stay away means stay away**, and agreeing to put it aside for the wedding, could be a set up. To avoid that consider adjusting properly by written contract or court proceedings, if need be, to permit appropriate participation. Do so well in advance of the wedding day.

A wedding is the couple's special day, and they should establish, at many intervals during the planning process, and even on their wedding day, **appropriate boundaries** and the expectations that they want so that there is as little stress as possible and everyone acts on their best behavior.

Weddings are big financial undertakings, and the **financial commitments** can cause family strife and hostilities. There may be anger because the groom's family would not or could not pay for the rehearsal dinner. In divorce situations, there may be disappointment that an ex did not pay for more of the wedding or paid far more for the wedding than any other aspects of the child's life.

4. Avoid Surprises

Today, there are **many untraditional families and couples**. The good news is that there are now many possibilities to personalize a wedding. The drama often arises when there are surprises. One surprise to avoid is **not knowing that an ex is bringing his or her current romantic interest**. Couples should decide in advance if their divorced parents can bring their plus-ones, even if some people in the family don't like the person they're dating. In a second or third marriage, it should be determined far in advance if the **children from earlier marriages** are invited. *Waiting too long to make those types of decisions, raises the pre-wedding day drama.*

Couples have many **options in terms of walking down the aisle**. It can be a bride and her mom. It can be the bride's father, half way, and the bride's step father or other relative the rest of the way. Or she can walk down the aisle herself. How that is going to be handled should be explained to anyone in the family who will feel offended because it is not going to be done as they would expect.

There are instances where **weddings are called off at the last minute**, and that leaves many decisions to be resolved. For instance: who gets the gifts? Who goes on the honeymoon? Whoever paid for it? Who should be reimbursed for expenses such as the dress, space, invitations, flowers, music, décor, gifts, and registry?

One solution is an **agreement prepared separately** and in advance that spells out what will happen **if the wedding doesn't happen and who is on the line**. If you're the father of the bride, you may want to see the couple enter into that contract. Otherwise, you may end up paying for it with no real expectation of being reimbursed.

Ever wonder why it's a rare occurrence that we hear about the details of certain pre-wedding festivities from those in the public-eye? It's because **athletes, politicians, and celebrities** think to ask guests to sign **non-disclosure agreements** agreeing not to discuss, post or share details or photos of bachelor parties, showers, or the wedding ceremony or reception. These can also require guests not to use drones

to take photos.

5. Resist Venting on Social Media

Social media can be an excellent way to share photos and news of happy occasions. It can also be the **wrong platform to air complaints or to vent about unresolved family matters**. Just because you don't like members of the bride or groom's family, or you're upset that you weren't invited to the wedding, the rest of the world doesn't need to know. You don't need to bad mouth your ex, their new spouse, your in-laws, or your relatives on social media. Remember, when it comes to social media and divorce, a **judge may end up reading** what you're posting. If you are worried social media misbehavior might be a problem, ask your guests to **leave their phones** in a special basket or with an attendant. *It is the couple's special day, and only the happiness you feel for them and their joy should be expressed and celebrated.*

Tracey J. Coates and Carlos Lastra are Co-Chairs of the Family Law Practice at Paley Rothman in Bethesda, Md. Tracey hosts the popular podcast The Divorce Chronicles.