To tell or not to tell

MANY cringed when actress Gwyneth Paltrow and Coldplay lead singer Chris Martin announced their “conscious uncoupling” over the Internet in March 2014. But according to experts, while it may not be a good idea to publicly broadcast the demise of your marriage, letting others around you – including your employer and a few trusted colleagues – know about your divorce will help you cope better during the difficult time.

“Informing your employer about the divorce, for one, can enable you and your employer to come up with strategies to manage your work responsibilities in light of changes in your personal life,” says Women’s Aid Organisation’s advocacy and communications officer Tan Heang Lee.

If you do decide to inform your employer, it does not mean that you need to share deeply personal details, such as the reasons for the divorce, says Tan.

“Instead, you should share information about the divorce in relation to your work, for example, what obligations you need to attend to during the divorce proceedings, what your employer can expect during this period, what support you need from your employer,” says the expert.

Employers can support employees by being flexible with work arrangements as well as leave approvals, she adds.

“This is important, as employees who are going through a divorce may need to meet lawyers, attend court hearings, work out new living arrangements, and so on. Additionally, employers can also provide counselling support to help employees cope with the challenges and stress that arise from divorce.”

Malaysian Employers Federation executive director Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan agrees that it is important for employees undergoing divorce to inform their employer about what they are going through.

“Normally employers would put in place procedures and mechanisms for employees to update their personal particulars including their marital status.”

He adds that a caring employer would give all the necessary support to the employee facing a personal crisis.

“Some enlightened employers would offer counselling services. Some would allow such an employee to move on to a flexi hours system so that she or he is able to better adjust to the new situation.

“It is not the employers’ duty per se but little things done by the employer to show that they care for the wellbeing of the employee will go a long way to create better relations between the employer and employee,” he notes.

Concurring, organisational psychologist Hetal Doshi says this is where every seed that you have planted at work will bear fruit for you.

“So if you’ve always had a very, very good relationship with your superiors and if you’ve always done a good job, then there will be a great deal of empathy and compassion.
Shamsuddin: Little things done by the employer show that they care for the wellbeing of their employees.

towards what you are going through.

"And it will be much more easier for you to converse with your superiors what is going on with you – you will have a different level of emotional investment when it comes to work, regardless of what you're going through in any kind of crisis – because you have a great relationship with your superiors, and you have a great connection with your job as well," she says.

Hetal, however, does not believe that it is important or necessary to announce your divorce at work.

"If there is any need to inform anyone at work, you'd probably want to work backwards: first, what is the purpose of informing anyone at work about divorce?

"Is it to get any kind of support on time-out, flexibility, a little bit more understanding, a little bit more leeway...? Then you can work out what it is that you need to say and how you can say it and who might be the right person to speak to about it or who are the ones who need to know," she says, stressing that it is vital to make sure that you have the most mature level or way of understanding it before you begin to converse about your divorce.

Crucially, she advises divorcing employees not to air their dirty laundry in the workplace.

"Remember that when it comes to divorce, what you tell people, what people hear, cannot be unheard.

"So be very careful about what you say because that can lead to other repercussions if you're very candid about your experience and relationship problems."

As she puts it, although it is 2019, social stigma around divorce is still prevalent.

"At the same time, the stigma that you attach to the word divorce for yourself makes a huge difference," says Hetal.

So how do you deal with the stigma of divorce?

First, you need to deal with what is internal, which is your belief to why this divorce happened, she notes.

"If you believe that it was a failure on your part or the other person's part, you're going to be swinging like a pendulum between blame and anger. And you will not have that internal balance nor resilience to deal with it."

The most important thing about social stigma is to go through over and over again the reason for why you got or are getting divorced – think about what you believe and what has happened in your divorce, she adds.

"Once you can see that the divorce is an important and right thing for you, and that it is something that you can learn from, you will begin to speak and carry yourself differently.

"And how you carry yourself can make or break how anybody else sees you – regardless of what it is that you've gone through."

Once you have a strong sense of belief, not only will there be less social stigma, but you also won't really care about any social stigma whatsoever, says Hetal.

"In fact, you'll be walking around a lot more confident, with a lot of aspiration going forward in your life."