

The First 72 Hours

What to do — and mostly what to stop doing — in the three days after your wife says she's done, needs space, or isn't in love with you anymore.

READ THIS PART FIRST

If anyone in your home is being hurt or threatened, or if you're having thoughts of hurting yourself, this guide is not what you need right now. The numbers on the last page are free, they're open right now, and one of them is answered by people who talk to men every day.

Everything else here assumes you're safe, she's safe, your kids are safe, and you're scared.

IF YOU READ NOTHING ELSE, DO THESE FIVE THINGS

- 1 Don't send the long message.** Leave it in drafts.
- 2 Don't press her for an answer.** She hasn't made one.
- 3 Say your one calm statement once.** Then stop saying it.
- 4 Tell one safe person. Sleep and eat.** Six hours, two meals.
- 5 Decide nothing major this week.** Nothing permanent.

The rest of this document explains each one.

The one thing to understand tonight

In the first seventy-two hours, almost nothing you can do will improve your odds. Several things can badly damage them.

That's not despair. It's the most useful sentence in this document. Right now your instincts are pointed in exactly the wrong direction, they feel like love, and they are costing you.

This period is not about winning her back. It's about not making it worse, and getting yourself steady enough to think.

You are going to want to do something. The doing comes later — not because later is better, but because right now you'd be doing it out of panic, and she can feel the difference.

SECTION ONE

STOP — the seven that do the most damage

Not “reduce.” Stop.

1

The long message.

Almost every man writes one in the first forty-eight hours — everything you’ve realized, everything you’ll change, everything she means to you. It feels like the truest thing you’ve ever written.

What it actually does is hand her everything you’re carrying and ask her to hold it, at the moment she has the least capacity to hold anything. If you’ve written it, leave it in drafts. If you already sent it, don’t send a second one explaining the first.

2

Asking where you stand.

Any version of it. *Do you still love me. Is there someone else. Are we going to be okay. Is there any chance.*

Every time you ask, you’re asking her to make a decision she hasn’t made. Nobody makes a good decision under that. And you don’t actually want the answer she’d give you tonight.

3

Bringing up the marriage more than once a day.

Ideally not at all this week, unless she raises it. This will feel like giving up. It isn’t. It’s the difference between a man she has to manage and a man she can be in a room with.

4

Recruiting people.

Her mother. Her best friend. Your pastor calling her “just to check in.” The mutual friend who’ll put in a good word.

She will experience every one of those as pressure arriving from a new direction, and she’ll conclude she can’t talk to anyone. It also tells her you’d rather organize a campaign than sit with what she said.

5

Checking her phone, location, accounts, or messages.

This is the one that ends marriages that might otherwise have survived.

You will tell yourself you just need to know. There’s no version of this that ends well. If you find nothing, you’ll check again tomorrow. If you find something, you’ll have found it in the way that guarantees the conversation goes as badly as it can. And if she discovers you did it, the conversation is no longer about her leaving. It’s about you.

6

Grand gestures.

Flowers. A trip. A ring. A surprise. Showing up somewhere.

Right now these read as pressure wearing love’s clothes. She has to respond to a gesture. Making her respond is the thing you’re trying to stop doing.

7

Threats. Even once. Even said badly, in the worst hour.

Fine, I'll leave. I'll take the kids. You'll regret this. I can't live without you.

These are remembered for years. They get repeated to friends, to family, sometimes to lawyers. One sentence said at 1 a.m. can define how you're described for the rest of this.

SECTION TWO

STABILIZE — five things, in this order

You cannot think clearly on three hours of sleep and no food. Most of what feels like a marriage emergency at 2 a.m. is a marriage emergency plus a body that has been running on adrenaline for four days.

1

Sleep. Six hours minimum.

If you can't, that's a doctor conversation this week, not a willpower conversation. Don't drink yourself to sleep — it costs more than it gives.

2

Eat two real meals a day.

Sounds trivial. It isn't. You've probably stopped.

3

Tell exactly one person.

One adult who can be called at 2 a.m. Not her family. Not a mutual friend who'll report back. Not everyone at church. One.

Carrying it completely alone is how men end up sending the long message at midnight.

4

Move your body once a day.

A walk counts. This is not self-improvement. It's a way to stop your head running the same eight minutes on a loop.

5

Go to work.

Structure is doing more for you than you realize. Don't tell your employer more than you have to.

SECTION THREE

Say this once — then stop saying it

There is one thing worth saying. Calmly, in person if you can, in under a minute. And then not again. Something close to this, in your own words:

"I've heard you. I'm not going to argue with you about it or keep bringing it up. I love you and I want this marriage. I also know that's my choice to make, not something I can ask you to feel. I'm going to work on myself either way. If and when you want to talk, I'm here."

Say it once. The power of it is entirely in not saying it again on Thursday. Don't memorize those words — use yours. If it doesn't sound like you, she'll hear that it doesn't sound like you.

DO NOT SAY

I'll change. · Just tell me what you want me to do. · What did I do wrong? · Are you sure? · Think about the kids. · After everything I've done for this family.

And stop relitigating history. Whatever happened in 2019, this week is not when it gets settled.

SECTION FOUR

Contact, and life at home

Necessary contact — the rule

You still have to talk. Kids, money, schedules, logistics, whose turn it is. Answer what needs answering. Warmly, briefly, completely. Then stop.

The test: would this message make sense if the marriage were fine? If not, don't send it.

"Picking up Ella at 4, I'll bring her bag" passes. "Picking up Ella at 4, I'll bring her bag. I miss you." doesn't.

IF YOU'RE LIVING TOGETHER

- Normal courtesy continues. Greetings, thank-yous, ordinary logistics. Cold is not the same thing as respectful distance.
- No relationship conversations in shared space unless she starts one.
- Don't perform sadness where she can see it. That's pressure wearing sadness's clothes.
- Keep your own routine visibly intact. Not as a tactic. Because you need one.

IF YOU'RE LIVING APART

- Agree a contact rhythm for the children and hold it exactly. Exactly.
- Don't turn up unannounced. Ever.
- Don't use pickups and drop-offs for relationship conversation. That's the one place she can't leave.
- No messages passed through the kids, in either direction.

PROTECTING YOUR CHILDREN

- No adult information given to a child. Not "your mother is leaving." Not a softened version of it.
- Age-appropriate and minimal, and if you can manage it, both of you saying the same thing: "We're having a hard time. It isn't your fault. We both love you."
- Keep routines identical. Bedtime, school, meals. Their sense of safety is built almost entirely out of routine.
- Don't use the children as a reason she should stay — not in her hearing, and not in theirs.
- Don't ask them what she said.

SECTION FIVE

Decide nothing this week

Not one of these:

Moving out · filing anything · draining or moving money · quitting or walking out of a job · telling your employer more than necessary · posting anything online · deleting or archiving anything that might matter later · a tattoo, a truck, or a gym membership you can't afford · contacting a suspected affair partner · "just one drink."

Every one of these feels like action. None of them is.

SECTION SIX

Two things to be honest with yourself about

Anger

Have you punched, thrown, or broken anything? Frightened anyone in your house? If yes, that's a safety conversation, not a marriage-strategy conversation, and it comes first. There's a number for it on the last page. Making that call is not an admission that you're a monster. It's the thing a man does.

Driving

If you've been driving while you can't see straight, stop. Sit in the car for ten minutes first.

SECTION SEVEN

When you need something other than this

If there's a court order, protective order, or no-contact order

Obey it. All of it. Every time, whatever you think of it.

That isn't a legal opinion — I can't give you one of those, and I'll tell you to talk to a lawyer about anything the order actually says. It's the practical answer: violating an order is the fastest way to turn a marriage problem into a criminal one, and it will be the only thing anyone remembers about how you handled this.

If an order forbids contact, then contact is off your list. That doesn't end the work. It removes one item and leaves everything else — sleep, steadiness, your own conduct, your kids where the order allows it, and what kind of man you are at the end of this. None of that needs her participation, and none of it is blocked by a piece of paper.

Don't look for the edges of what the order allows. Don't send a message through someone else. Don't decide a rule doesn't count because she texted you first. If you're unsure what's permitted, that's a question for your lawyer, not for me and not for a forum.

An order is her boundary with a court's weight behind it. Treat it the way you'd want your own boundaries treated.

GET A LAWYER IF

- anything has been filed or served
- there's an order
- anyone is leaving the state with the children
- money is moving
- she has counsel
- you're being asked to sign something
- custody is being decided in a hallway

Worth an hour of somebody's time this week.
Nothing here substitutes for it.

GET A CLINICIAN IF

- you can't sleep or function
 - you're drinking to cope
 - you're not okay in a way that a plan won't fix
- Coaching sits alongside that. Never instead of it.

KEEP THIS ONE

The checklist

Print it, or screenshot it. Put it somewhere you'll see it at midnight.

STOP

- ☐ No long messages, letters, or emails
- ☐ Don't ask where you stand
- ☐ Don't bring up the marriage more than once a day — ideally not at all
- ☐ Don't send anyone to talk to her
- ☐ Don't check her phone, location, or accounts
- ☐ No grand gestures
- ☐ No threats, not even once

DO

- ☐ Sleep six hours
- ☐ Eat two real meals
- ☐ Tell exactly one person
- ☐ Move your body once a day
- ☐ Go to work
- ☐ Answer necessary messages briefly, warmly, completely — then stop

SAY ONCE, THEN STOP SAYING IT

- ☐ Your one statement, calmly, under a minute

DECIDE NOTHING

- ☐ Don't move out, file, move money, quit, or post

What happens after seventy-two hours

Nothing magic. Day four looks a lot like day three.

What changes is that you'll have stopped digging. Most men in your position spend the first two weeks making the hole deeper and then start from there. You won't be starting from there.

What comes next is the harder part: deciding what you're actually going to do for the next thirty days, and learning how to read a stretch of time where she gives you nothing back and it means nothing either way. That's the part almost nobody gets help with, and it's the part where men quit.

If you want help building your personalized next 30-day plan, that's what I do.

One private session. You leave with three things to do, three things to stop, and a written plan for the next thirty days. Your wife doesn't have to participate in any of it.

Apply for a Marriage Crisis Planning Session

marriagecrisisplan.com/apply.html

If you never take it, this document still works.

One last thing

You didn't get here because you're weak. You got here because you're scared of losing your family and you did the only thing that makes sense when you're scared, which is try harder. It's just that trying harder is the exact wrong tool for this particular problem.

You can't control her decision. You can stop making the mistakes fear is telling you to make, get steadier, and change how you respond. Doing those things gives this marriage its strongest honest chance.

That's the whole promise. Anyone offering you more than that is selling you something.

— **Colt**

If you need help right now

In the United States, call 911 if anyone is in immediate danger.

Outside the US, use your local emergency number and your country's crisis services. The lines below are US services and don't cover every country.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call 988 or text 988, or chat at 988lifeline.org. Free, 24/7. Spanish available.

Veterans Crisis Line

Dial 988 then press 1, or text 838255. You don't have to be enrolled in VA care. veteranscrisisline.net

National Domestic Violence Hotline

Call 1-800-799-7233, or text START to 88788. Free, 24/7. It serves men. thehotline.org

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline

Call or text 800-422-4453. Free, 24/7. childhelphotline.org

If you're the one who has been frightening her

If you've punched something, blocked a door, taken her keys or her phone, or she's said she's afraid of you — that's different work and it comes first. Start here:

thehotline.org/resources/intervention-programs-for-abusive-behavior

Marriage Crisis Plan is coaching and education. It is not therapy, medical advice, or legal advice. Colt Waagner is a coach with a ministry background and graduate training in counseling. He is not a licensed therapist or counselor and does not provide counseling or mental-health treatment.

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