

conscious uncoupling: the new face of separation



If you've been conscious the past few weeks, then most certainly you've heard the term "conscious uncoupling" as it pertains to the separation of celebrity parents Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin. And you may have asked yourself the same question I've been scratching my head over since the couple's announcement: Wait, isn't this just "divorce"?

Relationship expert Katherine Woodward Thomas says couples have been separating incorrectly for years. In fact, she says, we shouldn't

even use the word "divorce" to [describe the breakup of a marriage](#) [1]. On her [website](#) [2], she explains her theory of conscious uncoupling, which Paltrow and Martin are following: "Modern society, Hollywood and your well-meaning parents and friends have taught you ways to break up that are actually destructive and deeply painful mistakes."

According to Woodward Thomas, if you break up in a way that converts negative energy into positive energy, you will avoid harming your children. She contends that couples can even "lovingly end" a relationship.

This may be true, but does it really matter what we call it?

Dr. Miranda Goodman-Wilson, assistant professor of psychology at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, who studies attachment issues in infants and children, says no. The terminology makes no difference; divorced, separated or "consciously uncoupled," it's all the same. What matters and what will have the biggest impact on the kids involved is how amicable the split is.

"'Conscious uncoupling,' which seems to be predicated on maintaining a respectful relationship between the parents and putting the needs of the children above all else, would be far more desirable

than [highly contentious divorces]," Goodman-Wilson says.

In other words, call your separation whatever you want, but do your best to make it as civil as possible for the benefit of your children.

April Masini, of [Ask April](#) [3] fame, is a relationship expert and author who surmises that it's the ambiguity of the phrase "conscious uncoupling" that makes it so attractive to Paltrow and Martin and therefore advantageous for their kids.

"The term 'conscious uncoupling' softens the blow that a marriage has failed. In fact, it's not clear that it has when a couple uncouples. Does that mean separate bedrooms? Separate houses? Kids at the playground won't understand your children's explanation of a family split when they say, 'My parents are uncoupling consciously.' Maybe that's for the best," Masini postulates.

Dennis Lerner, a marriage and family lawyer in Syracuse, New York, has a different view of what conscious uncoupling may mean to the celebrity parents who have popularized the phrase.

"'Uncoupling' is cute," he says. And it generates buzz, as evidenced here. But Lerner asserts that this approach to divorce is really nothing new.

"I practice a form of out-of-court divorce called [Collaborative Divorce](#) [4]," he says, which basically means that the dividing of assets is determined with care and consideration as opposed to being treated like a competition. According to Lerner, collaborative practices have operated in dozens of countries for more than a decade.

In the end, whether conscious uncoupling is just a new way to redefine divorce or a brand-new approach to ending a relationship, one thing is certain: [Doing what's best for the children](#) [5] should be the goal of any couple's conscious anything.

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