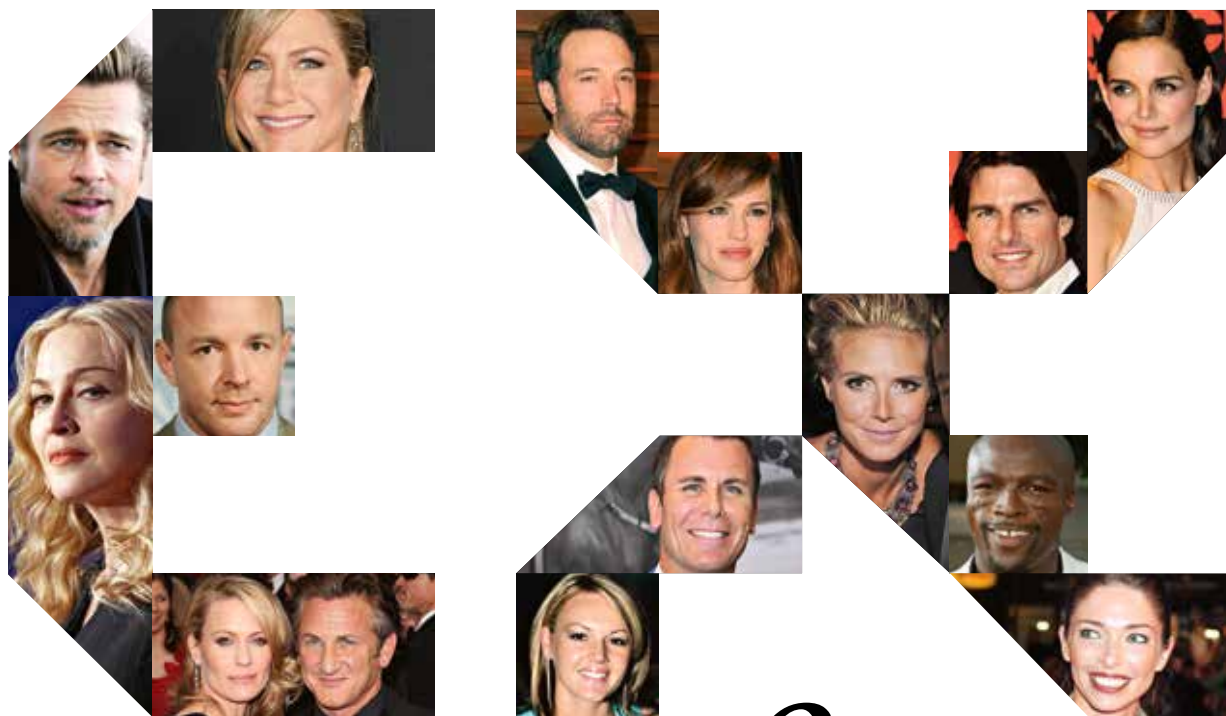


# THE



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## IS IT EVER OK FOR A FORMER PARTNER TO DISH THE DIRT ABOUT THEIR EX? **JESSE FINK** SPEAKS FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

It was somewhat unexpected when notoriously private star Jennifer Garner fronted *Vanity Fair*'s March issue with the perky coverline: "On the Rebound!" Almost exclusively photographed by the paparazzi in her "busy mum" role, dressed-down and bespectacled, running errands or dropping off her children, her advertised "Frank talk about kids, men and Ben" was dignified – but didn't disappoint. It included revelations such as, "He's the love of my life. What am I going to do about that? He's the most brilliant

person in any room, the most charismatic, the most generous. He's just a complicated guy. I always say, 'When his sun shines on you, you feel it. But when the sun is shining elsewhere, it's cold.'" Affleck responded calmly to *The New York Times*: "It's fine. She's allowed to talk about it," and later praised Garner as "a superhero mom". With similar gracious, yet soul-baring honesty, former North Melbourne footballer Anthony Stevens spoke out last year about his wife Kelli's extramarital affair after 13 years of silence. To add to the scandal,

her affair partner had been his friend, teammate and club captain, Wayne Carey. As someone who had been through a similar experience and written a memoir about it, I understood Stevens's pain. Here was a typically stoic, emotionally inscrutable Aussie bloke doing his best to articulate a jumbled mess of feelings he had kept private for more than a decade. Infidelity in a marriage is hard enough for any party involved, yet Kelli's response was to accuse her ex-husband, and father of their two children, of being "selfish".

I was similarly accused in some quarters of publicly revealing too much private information, as my book involved not just me but others: my ex-wife, our daughter, family members, women I had been involved with after the split – all bearing pseudonyms. Yet my response to these detractors was unwavering and straightforward: it was my story and, as I was soon to learn from the hundreds of letters I received from men and women around the country, it was the story of so many other people, too. Roughly 50,000 couples divorce each year in Australia. We all have a right to share our experience.

Or do we? Plainly, there's far more to this issue. Does the end of a relationship give you the right to talk about it publicly, whether in print, on TV and radio, or, most of all, on social media, where no public utterance can ever be truly erased? Legally, unless you signed a divorce settlement with a confidentiality provision (as Katie Holmes reportedly did with Tom Cruise), you are free to pretty much say what you like, short of defamation. Morally, it's much thornier.

"Some people have personality types that find drama in every situation, and will need to share that drama with anybody and everybody," says Dr Savannah Ellis, an Australian clinical psychologist at the Infidelity Recovery Institute in Nevada. "A break-up with this [histrionic] personality type will be equivalent to nuclear disaster. A narcissist will never take responsibility for the end of a relationship, blaming and shaming their ex for the demise. They do not care for the effect their words have on their children."

Estranged couples, she says, even the most bitterly warring ones, need to look ahead. Time can heal wounds (as I can attest, having recently remarried). Airing secrets publicly can aggravate existing ones.

"Public emotional outbursts are regrettable at best and, at worst, damage the confidence and self-esteem of children and teens," she points out. "People end up getting back together, so bitching to friends and relatives causes the family and friends to hate the person – and then the fighting begins again. Family never forgives."

When Brad Pitt posed for a photographic feature titled *Domestic Bliss* with Angelina

Jolie for *W* magazine in July 2005, Jennifer Aniston, who had filed for divorce from Pitt that March, told *Vanity Fair* of her ex, "There's a sensitivity chip that's missing," though she tempered that comment by saying, "I will love him for the rest of my life." After a 10-year romance, Pitt married Jolie in 2014, and Aniston married Justin Theroux in 2015. But other celebrity splits haven't been so clean-cut. Sean Penn and Robin Wright had more separations and reconciliations than Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, before parting ways for good in 2010. Madonna and Guy Ritchie recently took swipes at each other's parenting via lawyers in a custody battle over their son Rocco. Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger had a divorce worthy of the War Of The Roses. Taylor Swift has made a career out of transforming the detritus of her failed relationships into song lyrics.

When Heidi Klum and Seal split in 2012, they issued a statement that their

"Children cannot understand the complexity of adult relationships, especially young children. Sometimes parents will use [a relationship breakdown] as an opportunity to punish the other parent. It's in the child's interest for that parent to be strong, contain their emotions and present the other parent in a way that will promote a healthy parent-child relationship," she adds. "Long-term, they'll be better off if they have two parents that care about them very much and who they feel connected to. That's the ultimate goal. It is a challenge in the modern world to do this."

Yet leading US psychologist and author, Dr David J. Ley, a columnist for *Psychology Today*, argues for sharing information with children – within limits. "Every relationship and situation is different. I encourage divorcing parents to be extremely mindful that they should never 'badmouth' the other parent to the kid, because it creates conflicting loyalties and demands on a child.

**"IT'S CHILDREN WHO ARE IN MOST DANGER OF BEING COLLATERAL DAMAGE AFTER RELATIONSHIPS END"**

separation would be "an amicable process". But soon Seal was accusing Klum of sleeping with bodyguard Martin Kirsten, memorably quipping: "I would have thought Heidi would have shown a little more class and at least waited until we separated first before deciding to fornicate with the help." She responded tactfully: "I cherish all of the great memories Seal and I created together over the years." (Truth being in the eye of the beholder, the singer's new partner, James Packer's ex Erica Packer, has called him "a very beautiful and magical soul".)

Undoubtedly, as Madonna and Ritchie can attest, it is children who are in most danger of being collateral damage after long-term relationships end and there is temptation to publicly apportion blame.

"I don't think it's in the children's interests to be given information about what actually occurred, even if they're in their teens," says educational and developmental psychologist Dr Fiona Martin, director of the Sydney Child Psychology Centre.

But keeping secrets from kids about divorce is almost as bad as telling them too much, as the children will invent outlandish things to fill in the gaps. It's desperately important that in these situations, parents remember they are the adults and it's their job to give the children the right amount of information in developmentally appropriate ways."

Rather than being too concerned over whether we have the right to talk about the end of relationships, perhaps we should put much more effort into addressing the symptoms of destructive behaviours, including cheating. Actions, says Dr Savannah Ellis, can be more damaging than words. "A cheating parent says to a child, 'The world is not safe, relationships are not safe, nothing is forever.' I hear all the time: 'I swore I'd never be like my father.'"

Whatever side of the fence you're on in this ongoing and complicated debate, it's fair to say we all want better outcomes. **S** Jesse Fink is the author of three books and is writing a fourth for Penguin Random House. **F** FOLLOW JESSE ON TWITTER @JESSEFINK

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