

Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin's 'conscious uncoupling' 10 years ago made the breakup term mainstream

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Gwyneth Paltrow announced that she and Chris Martin were “consciously uncoupling” in 2014 after 10 years of marriage. (Christopher Polk/NBC/NBCU Photo Bank/NBC)

We can think of no celebrity breakup announcement in the last decade that received the snickering that Gwyneth Paltrow’s March 25, 2014, “conscious uncoupling” from Chris Martin did.

Heads spun over the divorce announcement, posted to Paltrow’s website Goop. While the actress didn’t coin the term — formulated by sociologist Diane Vaughan and popularized by marriage therapist Katherine Woodward Thomas — it was a very Gwyneth way of saying there would be no public mudslinging with the Coldplay frontman for the benefit of their “two incredibly wonderful children,” Apple and Moses, as well as the fact that they loved and respected each other.

That didn't stop the media analysis, late night punch lines and Twitter takedowns. Paltrow called the backlash "brutal," with "the world turning on us" for saying "we just want to be nice to each other and stay a family." But the pair "worked really f***ing hard" to follow through as loving co-parents and friends. Paltrow now feels "proud" when people approach her and thank her for making the concept a topic of conversation when she used it to describe their split, she said in April 2023. "I'm very happy that we were able to play a small part in that cultural shift."

Paltrow 'ridiculed' for divorce announcement

"Gwyneth was ridiculed for using the phrase 'conscious uncoupling' to describe what most people consider a terrible life event: divorce," Los Angeles [top family law attorney](#) Christopher C. Melcher of [Walzer Melcher & Yoda](#) tells Yahoo Entertainment. "No matter how well Gwyneth and Chris were getting along during their breakup, it felt to some that she was trying to characterize the end of their marriage as a decoupling experience that was natural and healthy. In other words, her divorce was magically perfect and the rest of us are just out of step."

He continues, "But Gwyneth was not being self-righteous. She was using the word 'conscious' in the sense of being aware of each other's feelings and a commitment to going through the divorce process with dignity. It's a beautiful sentiment that was worded without being conscious of how it would be perceived. ... Gwyneth just wanted to send a message that this wasn't going to be a messy divorce. And she was right."

The exes have spent holidays together, and even their new partners — she was remarried to TV producer Brad Falchuk in 2018, and Martin has been in a relationship with actress Dakota Johnson since 2017 — get along.

When does a conscious uncoupling work?

"I feel like it still is mocked," New York divorce attorney Nancy Chemtob of Chemtob Moss Forman & Beyda says of the phrase popularized by Paltrow. However, "it's a good term" and plan of action for couples who want to end a marriage or long-term relationship and they aren't carrying anger or bitterness.

"If there's this conscious uncoupling ... it means: We're not going to have a battle royale," she says. "We're not going to go to court and drag it through the mud. I'm done, you're done. We're going to do this as friends. We're gonna do this as healthy and happy as we possibly can, letting go of anger and negative energy, [while] looking for emotional freedom. Let's just figure out: How do we separate the money? How do we deal with the kids and custody in a nice way?"

Paltrow and Martin met in 2002, and they married in 2003, just ahead of the birth of their daughter, Apple. Their son, Moses, was born in 2006.

When there's no major rift — cheating, abuse, the theft of money or another betrayal — and the couple is just looking to move on, that can work. However, it's not for everyone.

“It's a very mature way to do it if both parties are on the same page,” Chemtob says. “What I [often] deal with is this disastrous uncoupling, when there's just a lot of anger and hurt. I'm so used to going to court and having the fights. It would be great if people could just very nicely separate and get divorced.”

Though not great for business, Chemtob laughs. When she's giving advice to couples, including her three sons, it's to “have more relationships” before settling down. Don't marry the high school or college sweetheart without testing the waters. “Have the breakups. Get back together. Fall in love,” she says.

Her “antenna always goes up” when “somebody comes in and they start telling me they've been with a person for so long and never really had another relationship,” she says. “I kind of just know that they're gonna get divorced.”

Does Paltrow deserve credit for the ‘cultural shift’?

“I would say she would be the ‘grandmother of conscious uncoupling,’ where people know there's an alternative,” Chemtob says of Paltrow.

She continues, “It's like: OK, we're getting divorced. Are we going to court? Are we doing depositions? Or can we take a page out of Gwyneth Paltrow's book and say: Here's a celebrity, has a family, knows the relationship isn't working, and she's not going to make it into a disaster for herself, her kids, her family. She's going to go to therapy. She's going to acknowledge that they should separate, knowing that there's going to be sadness for the family [and] kids. And let's not be those people who don't talk to each other. If we loved each other enough to get married and have kids, then we should be able to be friends and reflect on why we got married in the first place.”

Chemtob estimates she hears the term “conscious uncoupling” four times a year — though admittedly when people call it “nonsense,” she laughs. “Someone will come in and say, ‘This conscious uncoupling isn't really working. ... I'm angry. I want to kill my spouse.’”

Bitterness makes it hard to consciously uncouple

While there has been a shift toward nicer uncouplings, it does not apply to all celebrity couples. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie are still duking it out over custody and their winery, almost eight years after ending their marriage. Last year, Kevin Costner's divorce battle got messy, while Sophie Turner filed (and later withdrew) a child abduction lawsuit against Joe Jonas. Just last week, Gavin Rossdale talked about raising three sons from his marriage to

Gwen Stefani, which ended in 2016, saying, “It’d be nice if there was more of a connection with the person who made them with me.”

“That’s the thing — there is so much bitterness” in your average divorce, says Chemtob. In a lot of cases, “I almost feel like the love wasn’t there ... or it’s a jilted lover. ... That’s what becomes bitter.”

A lot of divorce drama can be averted if couples have a prenup or postnuptial agreement in place.

“Literally, a prenup should be called a conscious uncoupling,” Chemtob says. “It’s a road map to how a divorce will play out before the couple is even married. The only thing that would change is if there are children” and defining the terms of custody.

For celebrities, like Paltrow, navigating a divorce can be even trickier because they aren’t afforded privacy.

“They feel the same hurt as everyone else, but their breakups are fodder for the media,” says Melcher. “Imagine going to the store while in the depths of a breakup and seeing the tabloids of your life on display. I advise my high-profile clients to decide how they want the story of their divorce to be told. If they don’t, it will be told for them.”