



Got a case of the jitters?

How to know when it's time to call things off and get on with your life.

THE COUNTRY WAS GLUED to the TV in May when Jennifer Wilbanks, the so-called Runaway Bride, turned up, in New Mexico, unscathed and with a really bad haircut. But while her story unearthed deeper issues than a mere case of cold feet, it got other brides-to-be talking. What's normal when it comes to the jitters? How do you know when to put on the brakes?

We asked New York psychiatrist John W. Jacobs, M.D., author of *All You Need Is Love and Other Lies About Marriage* (HarperCollins), for advice on helping nervous brides (and grooms) identify their feelings—and what steps to take when a pair of frozen feet can't be thawed.

WARNING SIGNS

Aside from general feelings of uncertainty—common to brides and their partners—there are some seri-

ous signs to watch for. First on Dr. Jacobs' list: persistent doubt about a conflict between you and your fiancé. "If you're concerned about some aspect of your relationship that doesn't work now, and which you can't resolve, it could be an important warning sign," he says. Such concerns rarely get better after a wedding—in fact, they usually get worse. "For example, if your fiancé says he's not interested in sex but promises he will be interested after the wedding, don't believe him."

Since your wedding is supposed to be one of life's most joyous events, being withdrawn or grumpy can also indicate second thoughts that you aren't articulating. Another sign of trouble might be indecision—you're unable to choose a caterer, dj, or china pattern. That's what happened to Gina*, a Boston bride who can-

celed her weddings after she'd planned the entire reception, but still hadn't been able to find a gown. "To me, the dress actually represented the marriage more than the reception—that was just a party."

Also take note if you're suddenly having trouble with commitment-oriented expenditures, such as a car or mortgage. It may indicate apathy toward building a future together. Lack of interest in wedding plans is something else to be aware of. In many instances, the bride takes the reins and pulls the event together, but your fiancé should, at the very least, demonstrate some excitement about the wedding. If you're getting "I don't want to deal with it" responses, take notice.

ANALYZING THE ANGST

"When you're having anxieties, you need to make sure they're just about closing the door on your options [meaning other romantic relationships], and not about >>

MARTHA RICH. *SOME NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED.

marrying someone who won't make you feel secure and loved for the rest of your life," says Dr. Jacobs. It's critical to take a good, hard look at your stress-provokers. Ask yourself: **Can you resolve your differences?** Experts say that the indicator of a good relationship is not whether you have problems, but how capable you are of solving them together.

Have you sowed your wild oats? If you dread the idea of being committed to the same person for the rest of your life or feel too inexperienced to settle down, you may need more time to date other people.

Are you stressed about the wedding, or about the marriage itself? Feeling anxious about dealing with budgets, vendors, and families is normal. But if your stomach turns at the thought of life after the wedding, that could spell trouble.

GETTING GUIDANCE

Premarital counseling may very well help a couple iron out their differences, but go into therapy with your eyes wide open, advises Dr. Jacobs:

Think you're making a mistake?
It's far less painful to get out of
an engagement than a marriage.

"It weeds out the problems—and along the way ends about thirty percent of engagements." Start counseling as early in the planning stages as possible—before, say, invitations are ordered. (But don't pass up getting professional help even if it is late in the game.) Laura, of Sacramento, CA, was utterly blindsided when her fiancé, Ron, admitted his misgivings and broke up with her just three days before the ceremony. "He never let me know that he was having serious doubts," recalls Laura. "Had we tackled the issues early on, we might very well have ended up in the exact same place, but it wouldn't have been nearly as traumatic for me."

BREAKING THE NEWS

No matter how you cut it, backing out won't be easy. "You're going to feel foolish or embarrassed, and, yes, you're going to seriously hurt the other person's feelings," says Dr. Jacobs. "But if you truly think you

are making a mistake, know that it's far less painful to get out of an engagement than a marriage." Tell your fiancé the news in private and with all the kindness and humility you can muster. "He's probably going to be shocked and hurt, and he'll ask you for specifics," says Dr. Jacobs. "Give as much detail as possible, without placing blame for the break-up—even if you think it's his fault."

Next, you should let your parents know. (You may want to inform them first, if you feel you're going to need their support in telling your fiancé.) Explain your actions, and give them as many concrete examples as possible ("I just don't feel peaceful with William—we've been fighting constantly when we're alone") so they can better understand your decision. Be prepared for them to try to pass off these feelings as no more than trivial wedding worries and to attempt to change your mind. "You have to hear them out and let them speak, but be very strong at the same time," explains Dr. Jacobs.

As for dealing with the rest of the world? Not your problem. If you constantly try to meet the expectations of others, you'll surely lose control over your own life.

"Remember, to most people your wedding is important for maybe a week, or maybe even just a day," Dr. Jacobs points out. "When they learn that you aren't going to get married this Saturday, by Thursday they'll have made other plans."

Rely on your closest friends and family for emotional comfort and to get you back on your feet. They're the ones who will remind you that life does indeed go on. ○

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

Tips for when you need to undo the "I do's":

- **Officiant** Call and explain the situation personally. He or she will likely offer comfort and counseling and help you get through the hard days ahead.
- **Florist, caterer, etc.** First, check your contract to see if it offers refunds if you cancel by a certain date, advises Rachel Safier, author of *There Goes the Bride: Making Up Your Mind, Calling It Off & Moving On* (Wiley & Sons). Try to work out a deal—they might be willing to keep your down payment for a future date or give you a partial refund if they find a replacement booking.
- **Bridal party** You call your girls; he calls his guys.
- **Guests** If there's enough time and it's a formal wedding, send printed cards announcing the news. If time is short, each guest should be called and personally told the news. No e-mailing or leaving messages on answering machines—you don't want anyone showing up unwittingly at the church.
- **Wedding announcement** Phone the local paper to cancel it. If you can't reach someone, send an e-mail or letter; ask for a confirmation.
- **Gifts** Send them back with a short note of thanks. You don't need to give an explanation other than "the wedding has been canceled".