When you get that phone call or email letting you know that a wedding has been cancelled, your heart breaks for the formerly happy couple. You remember that beaming bride bouncing in her chair, elated at your suggested wedding details. You remember her smile, the sparkle in her eye, how she looked at her fiancé with pure love, how she hugged you upon each meeting, so grateful for your devotion to her wedding dreams.

And now you can only imagine her curled up in a ball on her couch, red-eyed and sobbing — or pacing angrily, if the circumstances of the broken relationship would lead to more fury than sadness. This bride you cared about so deeply is hurting deeply, perhaps changed forever with a long road of recovery ahead of her. It’s not the future you hoped for her.

According to our recent survey of 1,500 brides, when asked if they’ve ever been engaged and then canceled their weddings, 13% said yes. That’s quite a large percentage, one that points to the possibility — or the probability — that you’ll one day get that phone call, email or text with the heart-wrenching message: “The wedding’s been cancelled. We’ll be in touch.”

As a wedding professional, you’re used to regular drama and swirls of emotion in your everyday business function. Orders that don’t arrive on time. Difficult personalities. Firing staff members. And as a successful professional, you’ve learned to plant your feet on the ground firmly and not get carried away by the emotions of each situation. The same must apply to this circumstance of a cancelled wedding, or you too could wind up injured, damaged and financially hurt by this one broken relationship. And then you’d be the one curled up on the couch surrounded by damp tissues.

Here’s what to do when that dreaded ‘wedding’s off’ call comes to pass:

**Don’t ask what happened.** If the bride, groom or relative offers the story, listen well and empathize during the call. The wedding may be cancelled for gentle reasons like ‘we made a mistake’ or ‘we rushed it,’ or they may be the result of infidelity or some other betrayal. We’re trained by social media to need the gory details, but as a professional, it’s better for your reputation to offer gentle understanding and refrain from calling the groom a string of insulting names. Even broken-hearted brides share stories about their wedding professionals with their friends — who may someday be clients — so you want to be the one they describe as not prying for details.

**Collect what is due.** Calling that heartbroken bride with a request to pay (whatever your contract stipulates), or

By Sharon Naylor and The Wedding Report

Cancelled weddings are part of being in the wedding business. Here’s how to (sensitively) ensure you get your just compensation.
ON SECOND THOUGHT
According to a Wedding Report survey of 1,500 brides, collected through Google Consumer Surveys, 13 percent of individuals have been engaged but called it off. That means around 270,000 couples each year cancel their wedding.

H ave you cancelled a wedding?
87.2% No
12.8% Yes

answering her plea for a refund, is the tough but necessary work of a professional. Draft a letter now — while you’re not emotional or steeped in sympathy for the bride — that you’ll send to the client with your required next steps for the completion of your contract. Avoid using terms such as, “As the contract clearly states,” which can be taken by an emotional bride as a big insult. Instead, write, “According to our contract, refunds are not offered when a cancellation takes place within X number of days before the wedding,” which is a bit gentler. The letter should express your empathy for the bride and her family, and lead into your terms for cancellations, listed in bullet format for easier absorption by a reeling bride.

Invest in the wisdom of a legal professional to get every word and phrase of this missive right on the mark. You might still be taken to small claims court by a bride or family who thinks they can prevail, but an iron-clad contract and your iron-clad letter of refund refusal or invoice for final payment will help your cause. Your own liability insurance will also come into play here, so review your policy and perhaps strengthen it via your attorney.

Pre-arrange your policy for refunds and upcoming payments, deciding if installments would be wise, or if they’d hurt your cash flow. A bride who’s lost thousands on a canceled wedding may not find it easy to pay you the hundreds she still owes on her contract. Remember, it’s not personal, it’s business. As much as you can understand the bride’s heartbreak, as upsetting as her pleas for extra repayment time can be, just how much extra time can you afford to give her? Think of your staff and their families who depend upon their income. This is one moment when you have to stick to a firm decision on fair repayment or payment.

Pound the pavement. Think about what you’ll do with that empty block on your events calendar. If the wedding was cancelled far enough in advance so that the payments you thought you’d get won’t be coming in, try to sell that open wedding date. Get on the phone with wedding professionals you know to say, “I have an open date,” and your time and efforts might earn a referral and booking. You might also take to social media to announce an open date with a reasonable discount rate attached, especially for a short lead time of less than six months. A bride might see that and snap you up, filling your coffers again. Or, perhaps you decide that taking that now open date to work on your marketing or other business-strengthening strategies would return great results for your goals and financial gain. That now open day is yours to create, so decide now what you’ll do with your free days after cancellations. Work or play? A bit of both?

Sharon Naylor is a best-selling author of more than 35 wedding books and is regularly featured in leading bridal publications and lifestyle television shows, including Oprah and Good Morning America. The Wedding Report, Inc. is a research company that tracks and forecasts the number of weddings, spending and consumer trends for the wedding industry.