

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS MATTERS

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BREAKING UP - IT'S HARD TO DO

Breaking Up, Separation, and Divorce Can Be Devastating - But May Also Provide the Opportunity For Self-Examination and a New Beginning

There is nothing easy about ending a love relationship. Breaking up is seldom the ideal resolution to problems within relationships, but all too often is the outcome, despite our best efforts to prevent it. Over the past two or three decades, about half of all marriages have ended in divorce, and the statistics for cohabitation (or living together) are higher than this. The person who was once your best friend and your companion for life, the one who knew you better than anyone else, has now in some ways become your enemy. You cannot believe that this has happened. How could that love have been destroyed? The breakup of a relationship is one of life's most emotionally painful experiences. The depth of pain depends on many factors - how sensitive you are to the meaning of your life experiences, how much you have idealized the relationship, and how much you depended on your partner to make your life worthwhile.

A broken relationship shatters much that we have known and dreamed about. Our relationships, especially intimate relationships, help us define who we are. Our values, our views of the world, and how we define our most intimate feelings are all embodied within our love relationships. When our relationship comes to an end, our lives enter a chaotic period for which we may be unprepared. We suddenly find ourselves dealing with



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a host of emotions and thoughts – grieving, despair, anger, revenge and retaliation, hoping for a miracle, negotiating, feeling out of control, hoping for happiness again and not knowing how to get there, fear, and loneliness – and little of it seems to make sense. (And where is your partner when you need him or her the most?) Most of us have never acquired the tools to deal with a loss of this magnitude. When we entered the relationship, we put our energies into building a life with our partner. We put little effort into learning to be alone again. A breakup forces us to jump into an overwhelming, and often dreaded, world of new experiences.

It is comforting to learn that this time of craziness will come to a close. The sun will shine again. The pain of a breakup, if it is approached constructively, can propel people to confront personal issues and to discover who they are at this stage of life. Many people look back on the time following their breakup as the best time in their lives. It may be painful, but it is also a time when a person can feel fully alive and impelled to look within to determine their strengths, abilities, and challenges.

The ending of a love relationship follows a predictable set of experiences. It is helpful to recognize the feelings associated with each stage of a breakup and to know that these feelings are normal and expected. If you have difficulty in handling the negative feelings that accompany the phases of the process, it will probably be a challenge to cope effectively as you move toward the completion of the breakup. If you accept your painful feelings and explore why things are difficult, you become better able, as a more integrated person, to see your way to a happier resolution.

Let's look at a few of the predictable stages commonly experienced by those in the process of a breakup.

DENIAL

Denying the truth of the breakup actually helps us to postpone the pain, so denial certainly has a place in the process, at least initially. A problem occurs when we experience so much denial that we are unable to come to terms with the reality of the task before us. There comes a day when "this is not happening to me" is no longer an effective way of coping. Ending the denial stage involves a major shift in our thinking about ourselves, what our partner means to us, and where we must go from here.

FEAR

Most people experiencing a breakup are forced to come to terms with a number of fears. What will people say? Whom can I trust to talk to? How can I handle my partner's anger toward me? How do I deal with my own anger? Am I a complete failure? How can I be a single parent? What about money? Can I do the banking and buy groceries and pay bills and fix the car? Can I handle my loneliness? Am I completely unlovable? Will I ever love anyone else again? Do I have the energy for this much change? When we are dominated by our fears and feel unable to do anything about them, we increase the likelihood that these will be the very areas where we experience trouble. The best way to handle fear is to confront it head on, with awareness, planning, and support – and this takes courage.

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LONELINESS

The loneliness a person experiences at the time of a breakup may feel overwhelming. The finality of ending the relationship, uncertainty about the future, as well as the knowledge that your partner will no longer be there to comfort you or to spend time with you, all contribute to an empty feeling that seems as if it will not go away. While you were in the relationship, you defined yourself as being partnered and you felt that you always had someone there to share your experiences. And now you don't. The clue to dealing with this is to change loneliness to aloneness. *Loneliness* suggests a longing to be with another person. *Aloneness* can be a time to see who you are – you have the opportunity to explore your independence and challenge yourself to do things on your own. It can be a valuable time of self-exploration and self-enhancement. Aloneness might not last long, or at least not long enough, so it can be seen as a valuable opportunity.

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FRIENDSHIP

The breakup is a true test of just who your real friends are. It is important to draw on the emotional support of friends during this time. Unfortunately, many of your friends were those who knew you as a couple and they may have to choose between you. Those who try to stay neutral may find it difficult. Some may feel that your breakup somehow threatens their own relationships, and some friends may now find it difficult to relate to you as a single person. Not only that, but you may find it difficult to trust others during a breakup. Getting out, feeling free, trusting wisely, and opening up to others becomes a major goal of healthy adjustment.

GRIEVING

It is normal, and indeed necessary, to experience a period of grieving over the end of the relationship. You may feel depressed for some time and experience changes in your energy levels, as well as your sleeping and appetite patterns. You may dwell on negative thoughts for a period of time and find it difficult to find pleasure in everyday events. If your negative thinking turns into self-destructive thoughts, you should find a professional therapist who can help you. As unpleasant as this period of grieving may feel, comfort yourself with the knowledge that this is most likely a temporary phase and it is how you are saying goodbye so that you can move on to a healthier and happier future.

ANGER

People ending their relationships usually say that they never knew they could have so much anger. The rage seems overwhelming at times. Think about it – you have just lost one of the most important things in your life and your partner may seem like your enemy. You have a lot to be angry about. Use this opportunity to look within – explore your anger and find out how it helps and hurts you. **One rule: don't engage in any behavior you will feel sorry about later on!** Because it may be difficult to contain your anger at this time, your partner is not the appropriate target for your anger. Instead, process your anger by talking about it with a trusted friend or therapist. Anger is helpful in the sense that it helps us end the loyalty and trust we used to feel for our partner, and this allows us to move on.

Think of the ending of your relationship as a journey, which you take one step at a time. Some of these steps are challenging. Not only do we have to confront all of the stages listed above, but we must also deal with

making the final break emotionally, understand what really went wrong, learn to feel comfortable with ourselves again, see ourselves as single people, make new friends, forge new purposes and goals, and learn again about trust and love. As painful as this journey may seem at first, it can lead to a life which is better – and it can be much better.

Dumpers and Dumpees

A breakup seems easiest for couples who decide mutually to end the relationship. In most cases, however, as suggested by Bruce Fisher and Robert Alberti, in their book, *Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends*, a breakup involves a *dumper*, the party who takes the initiative to end the relationship, and a *dumpee*, the one who wants the relationship to continue. Sometimes, when one analyzes the nature of the relationship, it may be difficult to decide just who is the dumper and the dumpee. In general, however, the dumper is the one who says it is all over, and the dumpee is the one in shock who begs the other not to leave. Dumpees often say they were taken completely by surprise by their partner's announcement.

The breakup experience is often very different for each of the two parties. The dumper usually began preparing for the end well before the final announcement, and the actual parting often comes as a relief for the dumper. The primary emotion experienced by the dumper is *guilt*. The dumpee, on the other hand, is usually hit by surprise and with a great deal of pain. The turmoil of the breakup itself is usually much more intense for the dumpee, but it is this pain that can motivate more personal growth. The main task of the dumpee is to work through feelings of *rejection*. Both parties usually experience a great deal of pain as their relationship comes to an end, although the pain of guilt is different from the pain of rejection. For a healthy adjustment it is important to recognize which role has been assumed, dumper or dumpee, and to work on the issues appropriate to that role.

THE BACK PAGE

HOW LONG DO I WAIT UNTIL I GET INTO ANOTHER RELATIONSHIP?

Expect that it will take at least a year before things begin to feel at all normal again. For most of us, depending on the length and the nature of our previous relationship, it will take two or three years. This may seem like an eternity, but in reality this is a wonderful and precious opportunity to find out who you are as an unattached individual. A word of warning is in order – *don't expect to involve yourself with someone else immediately!* You are on the rebound. To attach yourself prematurely in a love relationship is unfair to you and to the other person. You must deal with important personal issues when your previous love relationship comes to an end. Living through the transition and exploring these issues can be painful – and falling in love again may seem like the perfect way to end the pain. But if you attach yourself again too quickly, before you have a chance to explore the issues which led to your breakup and to start to feel comfortable again as a single and independent individual, the other person becomes a replace-

ment object, and that is not what a healthy relationship is about. You will probably carry into this replacement relationship the same issues that helped to lead to the demise of your former relationship – and similar events may very well happen again.

Your real goal is to discover who you are and to explore what happened. When you are at the point of being able to have a happy and fulfilled life as a single person, then you can choose when, or even if, you should involve yourself in another love relationship. When you know that you have that choice, you may be ready.

Recommended Reading

Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends (Third Edition), by Bruce Fisher and Robert Alberti, 1999, \$14.95, ISBN 188623071X.

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