

Self-Care Following a Relationship Break-Up

Disclaimer: These notes are intended for information only, and should not be seen as a substitute for professional advice

“I THOUGHT WE WERE MEANT FOR EACH OTHER”

Life is ever changing and this includes relationships! Age, life's experiences and our connections with a range of people all influence our adjustments. It is not possible to foresee these changes and their effects on a relationship. The public appearance of a relationship does not always reflect how a couple behave when they are alone.

The emotional response to the ending of a relationship is not always linked to the length of the relationship. The emotional impact of the ending of a relationship of only a few weeks can be as strong as one of several years. All circumstances are different and the meaning of the relationship to the individual can vary.

The loss of a relationship is an **event** which can bring a range of emotions. Many people are shocked and disappointed while others may be relieved and optimistic.

Many people refer to the ending of a relationship as a “*failure*”. In many cases, the ending of a relationship is a healthy choice, especially when there is little chance of an improved connection between the couple.

Other general **beliefs** include:

‘Love is eternal’

In reality, love is capable of both growing *and* fading.

‘I can't survive alone’

This statement usually arises from a very emotional phase of life. The fear of losing a relationship brings to mind the many uncertainties of life without a partner. There are many excellent publications on adjusting to life alone and choosing another partner.

‘I'll never meet anyone else’

This is another emotionally laden statement. When the shock and grief of a lost relationship have been addressed, most people will consider finding another partner. This is an opportunity to consider other qualities and characteristics that you would like in a new relationship. It may also be a time to enhance some of your own ways of relating and communicating.

‘It's bad to hurt someone’

Most people do not want to intentionally hurt another person. However, hurt is often inevitable with one or both parties when a relationship ends. In the long term, it may in fact hurt a person *more* to remain in a relationship that one does not really want, than to be honest about needing to move on.

HELPFUL TIPS

Read the following list and see how many of the key characteristics to a **Healthy Relationship** occur in your own relationship:

- Both partners feel ‘special’ to the other.
- Both partners are loyal to each other.

- Each partner asks for what she or he wants.
- Both partners protect & nourish the relationship and make it a priority. They learn how to balance their work, family and social commitments with caring for each other.
- Both partners communicate honestly about wants, needs, feelings and emotional issues with little or no shame. Some emotional issues can feel difficult to discuss and this is taken into consideration by each partner.
- There is fun in the relationship. The couple feels nurtured and comfortable with each other.
- There is humour and jesting but not at the expense of anyone's feelings being hurt or put-downs.
- Both partners readily attend to the needs of the each other. There is 'give and take' without keeping score.
- The sexual relationship works well and is mutually satisfying. The sexual bond is not the critical link in the relationship.
- Arguments, disagreements or fights do *not* lead to abuse or threatened break-up. Conflict or differences are managed without despair or threats.
- Both partners are able to say 'no' when necessary without feeling guilty or responsible for the other partner's feelings. Each can tell the other when something does not feel right or hurt them.
- Partners are not abusive to each other, whether physically, emotionally or sexually.
- Each partner is aware they need to be responsible for his/her behaviour and communication in the relationship.
- Each partner is aware of the other's need for acceptance, attention, approval & affection.

The **STAGES OF GRIEF**¹ associated with loss have been well researched. Whether the end of relationship or the death of someone close, the following emotions are fairly universal. They do not always occur in this order: and it is possible to re-experience some stages.

- (a) Shock and denial – difficulty believing this has occurred and often having some physiological changes, for example weight loss, sleeplessness, feeling tired and without energy or motivation.
- (b) Anger – this may be directed to the other person, yourselves or third parties.
- (c) Guilt, Bargaining – thoughts which begin with "*If only I had done ...*" or "*If only I hadn't said ...*" are examples of being in a stage of bargaining. The point of this stage is to feel as though you may have been able to influence a different outcome.
- (d) Depression – this is the sadness that often precedes the final step in overcoming grief. Feelings of depression are the beginning of acknowledging that the relationship will not reunite. For many people this stage is managed quite well and they overcome it and move on with their life. Some people require professional support for depression.
- (e) Acceptance – there may still be some residual painful feelings by the time one reaches acceptance. However, the future begins to look more optimistic and a renewed energy for life returns. The sense of '*letting go*' will be happening now.

These are not the only steps towards personal fulfilment after the end of a relationship. Dr Bruce Fisher outlines a 19 step programme, which although focuses largely on divorcing couples, may be relevant to other relationships.

BALANCE

It is important that any grief you feel does not overtake your life. Even though the motivation to do new things may be low, it is important to move forward. While some quiet time alone to think through what has occurred is necessary, it is also important to balance this with work & play. For example:

- Keep contact with good friends and have some fun together. Remember, friends are likely to have had a relationship break-up and will be empathic.
- Set small tasks to complete that you have thought about for a while.
- Start a fun activity that you have been promising yourself!
- Keep a private journal if you want to express yourself but don't feel like speaking with someone.
- Exercise regularly. Thirty minutes daily exercise is recommended for a healthy lifestyle and the physiological benefits can help improve mood.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Get adequate sleep.
- Practice relaxation and meditation.
- Ask friends for any ideas which they have found useful.

“CAN WE STILL BE FRIENDS?”

Think about who your friends are, what you talk about and what you do together. Is it likely that you will want to include a former partner into your life in the same way you include good friends?

For most people the answer is usually 'no'.

There is a difference between being '*friends*' and being '*friendly*'. It is certainly possible and usually advisable to be amicable to a former partner when you meet them later on. However, this does not necessarily equate with them being 'a friend'. Some people do manage to establish a friendship, whether months or years later on, but usually only after a substantial period of time has passed and their respective lives have stabilised.

BEGINNING A NEW RELATIONSHIP

This is an opportunity to refine what we want from a relationship. Identify what you accepted in the previous relationship and think about how a new relationship could be different. Barbara de Angelis² states there are six common mistakes in beginning a new relationship:

1. We do not ask enough questions.
2. We ignore warning signs of potential problems.
3. We make premature compromises.
4. We give into 'lust blindness'.
5. We give into 'material seduction'.
6. We put commitment before compatibility.

Once we know somebody a little better, Barbara De Angelis² suggests we review the relationship with the "*Sixty Second Compatibility Test*"

- Would I want to have a *child* with this person?
- Would I want a child *just like* this person?
- Do I want to become *more like* this person?
- Would I be willing to spend my life with this person *if s/he never changed from the way s/he is now?*

A 'no' answer does not automatically discount the future of a relationship. However, it may mean more consideration is required as to how suitable the partner is for you.

WHEN CHILDREN ARE INVOLVED

The separation of parents has an impact on children. If you and/or your partner require guidance or support in managing during this time the Family Court of Australia provides a mediation service for all separating couples:

Family Court of Australia

Mediation & Counselling Service 9224 8248
Internet www.familycourt.wa.gov.au

Community programs exist to help separating parents negotiate their relationship in the benefit of their children. The following link to the Parent Help Centre opens their up-to-date Community Courses Guide:

<http://www.community.wa.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/3769DC54-170F-466E-BF47-FDD4BD406385/0/DCDGUICoursesGuideTerm12007.pdf>

SPECIALIST HELP

A range of agencies exist where one or both parties would like professional support.

Staff & Students at Curtin University are eligible for counselling from the **University Counselling Service**

Building 109. Telephone 9266 7850

External Agencies

Relationships Australia 1300 364 277

Kinway Relationship Counselling 9263 2050

Centrecare 9325 6644

Or, consult your GP for a referral to a therapist who is suitably qualified in assessing and treating relationship problems.

FOOTNOTES

1. The naming of these stages is generally attributed to the late Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross who recognised the cycle of grief in her work with terminally ill patients.
2. *Are You The One For Me?* by Barbara de Angelis, 1992, Thorsons, New York.

LINKS

Click on the following links for additional information:

- *Relationships Australia* <http://www.relationships.com.au/advice/building-better-relationships>
- *Kinway Relationship Counselling* <http://www.kinway.org.au/KinwayRelationshipEducCalendar.htm>
- *Relationship Addiction* <http://www.sss.uq.edu.au/index.html?page=1312&pid=21965>
- *Relationships & Study* <http://www.sss.uq.edu.au/index.html?page=1315&pid=21965>
- *Boyfriends, Girlfriends, Lovers & Partners* http://www.anu.edu.au/counsel/resources/boyfriends_girlfriends_lovers_partners.pdf

RECOMMENDED READING

Getting The Love You Want: A Guide for Couples
Harville Hendrix. 1990. New York: Perennial Library.

Keeping The Love You Find
Harville Hendrix. 1992. London: Pocket Books.

Rebuilding When Your Relationship Ends
Dr Bruce Fisher. 1992. San Luis Obispo: Impact Publishers.

The Practice of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy: Creating Connection. 2nd Edition.
Susan Johnson, 2004. New York: Brunner-Routledge.