

“Breaking Up is Hard to Do”: pulling yourself together

Adapted from Romancetips.com, Heather Tomasello, Staff Writer



The end of a relationship can be a very painful thing, whether it was a mutual decision, you initiated it, or your former boyfriend or girlfriend suggested you break up. You may have invested a great deal of yourself in that other person. You may have thought you were going to spend the rest of your lives together. You may find that you are losing not only a boyfriend or girlfriend, but someone you considered a best friend. If this was your first “real love” the breakup can be particularly difficult since you are in uncharted water. On the other hand, if this is one of several breakups you may feel even more discouraged, depressed or devastated.

Grieving the Relationship

It is important to remember that the end of any relationship gives us cause to grieve. Breaking up with someone is like experiencing a death – the death of the relationship, of you being loved by that person, of your hopes and dreams for the future with that person, and a loss of that special feeling when you were together and all the memories you have with this person. This sounds very bleak, and it is important to remember that it is also the start of new things for you. I say that breaking up is a death so you remember that it is okay to grieve. However, one of the hardest things about a breakup is that the person is still around, you may see them frequently, and worst yet, may see them with someone new.

Grieving is a normal process and you must go through it, not avoid it, deny it or treat it the same as if you were having some kind of emotional breakdown – “if I let myself feel the loss I will open the floodgates and drown”. You might feel fine one day. “Finally!” You think. “I am over her!” Then you hear “your song” on the radio, or your friends talk about her, or you find an old note from her...and you feel hurt and sad and even a little bitter all over again. Give yourself time. Permit yourself to cry if you need to cry. If you feel angry, feel it and let it go. Do not be confused because you have “mixed or contradictory feelings.” Grief is tough, over a death or the loss of a lover. Do not, however, dwell on your misery – playing “your song” over and over again, or pulling out the old box of love letters (or texts/Facebook comments) every day. Instead, here are some powerful suggestions:

Talk about your feelings, write them down/journal, create a poem or song etc, -- acknowledge them.

- 1) Reflect on all the great memories, special times, things said and shared. This is why it is so hard for you to let go of the person – you fear you are required to let go of all the good memories. This does NOT mean you are trying to make yourself forget them. The point is you will always have these special memories, and the relationship can be an important part of helping you learn about yourself, what you need in a relationship, who is a good fit for you (and who isn't), how you grew as a person and/or lover from the relationship – in essence you are focusing on all the good in that relationship and acknowledging that it does not go away just because that relationship is over.
- 2) Realize you had a great experience on your continuing road through life, learning and growing from each relationship. Part of finding the “silver lining” is the ability to see the good in what seems like a bad situation. But you have a choice, to learn and grow in a healthy and constructive fashion, or stay stuck in your negative emotions and twisting your view of yourself, others and the world into an ugly reality – but only your reality.
- 3) Accept, as any mental health professional can tell you, most of how we feel is based on how we think about life. Take the road that leads you into a more mature, self-aware and better person/lover. It is up to you. Start NOW.
- 4) Stop idealizing the other person. Even if you messed up and did things you regret, or didn't do things you know you wish you had (or they said you should have), a relationship always involves at least two people. It is never all your fault, no matter what the other person told or tells you, or what you are filling your own head with. He or she was not the greatest thing since sliced bread, and you are not the devil incarnate.
- 5) Understand that everyone has warts or “issues” or hangups. Some people hang on to an unhealthy relationship way too long and their self-esteem deteriorates leading them to be “thankful for the crumbs they threw your way,” or the relationship was so toxic that you actually came to believe everything was your fault and the other person was always just responding to your screw-ups. Stop and think for a moment. How did you actually feel when the other person did or did not do certain things to you? Were you really honest in admitting how those things made you feel? Were other people always trying to tell you that what the other person was doing was not right, you shouldn't put up with _____?” The point is not to demonize the other person to get you to stop being so hurt. The point is to realize that all of us make mistakes in relationships – you made some and they made some. You are not losing Mr. or Ms. Wonderful, and no they are not the only wonderful person you will ever know or love.
- 6) Saying goodbye inside. As you work through the ideas above (sometimes over and over until it comes together), you will eventually need to do the hardest, but most important thing – SAY GOODBYE. You are not saying goodbye to the person, but to the feeling of stuckness inside you. This is your coming to the point, after following the steps above, and accepting the loss, basically letting yourself move on. It is not anything you need to actually say or send to the ex. For most people, the most therapeutic form of this goodbye is to put it in writing of some kind. You can even start off, “Dear _____” Now pour it out, all the things you valued, learned, will miss, and are upset about. End it with “and now I need to let you go, and move on with my life.” Yes, this may seem impossible, but it is also incredibly freeing and important to your mental health. This may also be the greatest feeling of power, self-empowerment you have had, certainly in the relationship.

Avoid the Rubberband Effect

You've heard before of rebound relationships. I'll mention them again, because people continue to make this mistake time and time again. Do not bounce back into a relationship immediately after a break-up. Do not go around "hooking up" with casual sex, or revenge sex, thinking this is an antidote to loneliness or a way of getting back at or controlling others when you feel so powerless.

It is a very vulnerable and emotional time for you. If you meet somebody that you're certain is Mr. or Ms. Right, wait! If they're right for you, then they'll be right for you four months down the road. You don't want to start a relationship with someone just because you are lonely and hurting. It isn't fair to them or to you.

Enjoy the time alone and enjoy being yourself for a little while. It is remarkable how few people actually are comfortable spending time with themselves. If you are not comfortable with yourself, you place an unfair burden on someone else to "complete you" or give your life meaning. After all, if you don't know or like yourself, what are you contributing to the relationship, to the other person's wellbeing? Second, take time to build friendships.

Build strong friendships. Some people avoid the anxiety of building friendships by rushing into sex/romance with someone else. Others have abandoned their friends and become hyperfocused on their significant other and now feel particularly "alone." Friends are often with you for a lifetime. You will need their support and advice if you get into a romantic relationship in the future. But more importantly, plenty of research in mental health points out the emotional and physical health benefits of a strong social network-friends/clubs/hobby groups, etc. Looking for a place to start? Check out the list of organizations at CofC. They are waiting for you to call!

<http://www.cofc.edu/campuslife/clubsandorganizations/clubsandorganizationslist.php>

When the time is right, start dating again. You will know when the time is right.

Peer Counselors are available M – Th, 5-9pm and are trained to listen and help with special training and experience dealing with relationships.

Call (843) 953-7411, CHAT on our website: www.cofc.edu/peercounseling