

Coping with a Divorce or Relationship Breakup:

A GUIDE TO GRIEVING AND RECOVERY



When you lose a close friend or love relationship, you are likely to feel great sorrow and heartache. Even when a bad relationship ends, there can be deep pain and grief. Coping with a divorce or relationship breakup of any kind can be very painful, and most people go through this experience at some point in their lives. But the challenges posed by such a deep loss can be turned into opportunities, enabling you to not only survive, but also thrive. Learn to understand your feelings and develop tools to cope with your relationship breakup or divorce.

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Relationship breakup is one of life's most painful experiences

Breaking up a relationship is difficult – especially if it's not your choice. Grief can be experienced even when an unfulfilling relationship ends, because, at the very least, you have lost the emotional investment you made in that relationship. There may be a sense of failure, hopelessness, loss, despair, fear, or desperation. In many cases, the length of the relationship compounds the pain of loss – a divorce after half a lifetime together can seem like the end of the world. Partly, it depends on how much you had vested, spiritually, emotionally and financially. But even short-term relationships can involve an investment in fantasy and in hopes for the future, and their loss can be similarly heart-wrenching.

The loss of a partner through death is an obvious source of grief, but relationships end for many other reasons. Couples grow apart in general because they:

- don't care about or want the same things – differing values and interests
- don't know how to sustain a mutually fulfilling relationship – not surprising if you haven't experienced positive role models
- have problems that the other can't abide – compulsive or abusive behavior or illnesses that severely limit the relationship

Loss in relationship breakups and divorce is experienced both physically and emotionally

Why do relationship breakups hurt so much, even when the relationship is no longer good? Whatever the reason for a breakup or divorce, coping can be a challenge, because even a disappointing relationship starts out with an emotional investment in what could be. Serious relationships begin on a high note of excitement and hope for the future. People invest time, energy, plans, dreams and hope for the future in love relationships. When these relationships fail, we experience profound disappointment, as well as grieve the physical loss of someone important in our lives.

Grief is the outcome of loss that includes:

- loss of companionship and shared experiences – which may or may not have been consistently pleasurable
- loss of a hoped for dream – can be even more painful than practical losses
- loss of needed support – financial, intellectual or emotional

Early life memories can also contribute to the pain of relationship breakups and divorce.

Past relationships can make current breakups more painful

Sometimes the end of a love relationship can bring up powerful, even frightening memories of earlier separation or loss. Whatever the trigger – from the childhood memory of a last hug and kiss before Mommy or Daddy left for work, to first-hand recovery from a painful divorce – the current crisis you are experiencing can prove more difficult as that earlier fear surfaces. To read more about early life developmental trauma, see related articles below,

Childhood wounding can complicate the pain of a breakup

- Abandonment:**
 - Death of a loved one early in life
 - Absentee or alcoholic parent(s)
 - Being deserted somewhere when you were supposed to be picked up
- Rejection**
 - Adoption or other separation at birth
 - Conception was an 'accident' or frowned upon by others
 - Not being the gender wanted by one or both parents
- Shaming**
 - Being told you were too fat, too skinny, etc.
 - Being teased or made fun of mercilessly by other kids or siblings
 - Getting blamed for others' mistakes
- Abuse**
 - Physical: bruises, welts, isolation or starvation
 - Sexual: exposed to sexually explicit material or touched inappropriately
 - Mental: lies and mind games; no personal privacy

In crisis there is opportunity. Although your current breakup can trigger unresolved memories that add to your pain and grief, the availability of raw memories gives you an opportunity to revisit unresolved past hurts, reevaluate and heal them.

For more about the impact of earlier life experiences on current relationships see Helpguide's articles on Relationship Help.

Grieving a relationship loss may lead to depression

Grief is a normal and healthy response to loss, not an illness. Its symptoms are painful, but they serve an adaptive purpose. Most grief runs its course with the support of friends and family. But sometimes grief can trigger depression or even unresolved past trauma.

When grief triggers depression, the sadness can be unrelenting and overwhelming. Some people describe it as "living in a black hole" or having a feeling of impending doom – that is never interrupted by moments of pleasure. Even when participating in activities you used to enjoy, you feel as if you are just "going through the motions." You may also feel numb, lifeless and empty.

Additional symptoms of depression may include

- Appetite or weight changes** Significant weight loss or weight gain – a change of more than 5% of body weight in a month.
- Sleep changes** Insomnia or oversleeping (also known as hypersomnia).
- Psychomotor agitation or retardation** "Keyed up," unable to sit still, anxious, restless or sluggish, slow speech and body movements, lack of responsiveness.
- Fatigue or loss of energy** Physically drained. Even small tasks are exhausting. Can't do things as quickly as you used to.
- Self-loathing** Strong feelings of worthlessness or guilt. Harsh criticism of perceived faults and mistakes.
- Concentration problems** Inability to focus. Difficulty making decisions. Can't "think straight." Memory problems.
- Aches and pains** Depression can cause or exacerbate many physical symptoms, including headaches, backaches, diarrhea or constipation, abdominal pain, and aching joints.

For more information and help with depression see Helpguide's articles on Depression.

Thoughts of Death or Suicide

If you are considering suicide see Helpguide's Coping with Suicidal Thoughts and Feelings or call 1-800-273-TALK now!

Easing the pain of relationship breakups and divorce

How do you heal from devastating losses? There is no one answer to this question, but two things that can provide support during the grieving process are:

- **Experiencing your emotions in your body.** Numbing or avoiding painful feelings can interrupt healing. And going over and over the details of what happened, why it happened, what you could have done to prevent it from happening is also not productive. To gain a greater ability to experience and manage your emotions see Helpguide's Quick Course in Raising Emotional Intelligence
- **Having the support of other people.** Even if you aren't comfortable talking about your feelings under normal circumstances, it's important to talk about them when you're grieving. Knowing that others are aware of your feelings and understand your grief will make you feel better, less alone with your pain, and will help you heal. Support from others can also be found in a divorce recovery group or a twelve-step program

A note about repeating your story to others

After a while repeating your story in its entirety can grow tedious for you and for others who have listened repeatedly to the same story. But this doesn't mean that you have to pretend. You can briefly express your feelings to a good friend without having to explain further: "I'm still not my old self," "I still miss him or her," "I still feel sad, angry," etc. Not having to be dishonest helps you feel better. Friends will also benefit from the good feelings they get from seeing that they have helped you -- just by listening.

Additional ways to take good care of yourself

- Eat regular, balanced meals – Letting yourself get run down physically makes you feel even worse.
- Exercise daily – more than once a day if possible. Even if you have to force yourself to do it, exercise releases endorphins that will fill you with positive feelings.
- Avoid alcohol and other mind-altering chemicals. Blocking your feelings won't make them go away and will only prolong suffering.
- Consider having a divorce ceremony or other ritual. Rituals help some people create meaningful symbolic ends to their relationships.

Consider Professional support if

- Feelings of isolation and loneliness persist – even though you are getting helpful information and support from others.
- The intensity of your grief seems not to be diminishing – for example, if you continue to have trouble with eating and/or sleeping, persistent feelings of guilt, or impairment of ordinary life functioning, you need professional assistance.
- You are experiencing physical symptoms that include: chest pains, sweating or shortness of breath, nausea or lightheadedness, dramatic changes in weight or physical appearance, or sleep disturbances.

Gaining strength from facing the challenge of a breakup

You can use divorce or breakup to engage in healing and empowering processes of self discovery. What matters in the healing process is your ability to make sense of your divorce or breakup. Challenges faced are opportunities to:

- Learn more about your beliefs, habits and needs.
- Build more powerful and effective interpersonal skills.
- Acknowledge past losses and recover from them, as well as your current loss.

The work of grief is to let the emotions flow, not attempt to block or judge them. Acceptance of the reality of current circumstances can lead to a renewed hope for the future, even though it is different from the one you used to imagine.

Through this opportunity, you are free to focus on other pursuits:

- Your friendships (and children if you have them).
- Helping others in need.
- Doing the things you've always wanted to do, but didn't because your partner was not supportive.

Resolving practical challenges

Breaking up may involve practical matters that require your attention. Even those who weren't married might own property together or have children. Perhaps you and your ex work at the same office or belong to the same gym. You probably have friends in common, or may own pets. So who gets what in the aftermath of your breakup?

- **Belongings:** Two commonly recognized difficulties are hoarding and disputing. Eventually you will have to deal with each other's personal belongings. An exception might be mementos that would be meaningful to someone else, such as love letters or wedding pictures for your children to view once they're grown.
- **Legal matters:** If you try to make important decisions when your emotions are flaring up, you might end up having regrets later on. Instead, if your partner is reasonable and willing, explore alternatives to costly and

emotionally draining litigation, such as conflict mediation or arbitration.

- **Parenting:** While its important to express feelings such as anger, frustration or deep sadness with a trusted adult or a support group, confiding in your child can be damaging. Strive to use constructive language about your ex (not put-downs or complaints) in front of your children. Communicate directly with your ex, instead of passing messages through children. Also, keep your children's routines as normal as possible.
- **Friends:** When a couple has friends in common, those people often are put in the difficult position of "choosing sides." You can make it easier on yourself and everyone else by being aware of the problem and understanding it from your friends' point of view. If possible, talk to them about it. Try not to pressure your friends to go against your former partner, and don't hold it against them if they attempt to maintain friendships with both of you.

To Learn More...

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| Children and Separation / Divorce - Helping you child cope | Parenting and Attachment – Bonding for secure attachment |
| Helping / Supporting Someone Who is Grieving | Relationship Help - Building great relationships with emotional intelligence |
| Depression: Signs, Symptoms, Causes, and Treatment | |

Related links for Coping with Divorce

Coping with Separation and Divorce - **Tips to help in going through separation or divorce.** (Mental Health America)

Separation and Divorce - **Things you can do to get emotional support in separation or divorce.** (Canadian Mental Health Association)

Jaelline Jaffe, Ph.D., Robert Segal, M.A. and Joanne Segal, Ph.D. contributed to this article. Last modified on: 9/28/07.