Surviving a breakup



The end of any relationship is tough, but the end of an intense romantic relationship – even a rocky one – can be devastating. It's not uncommon to hear people say, "I'm not over him/her" or "I'm not ready to move on" months, even years after a breakup. Why is the end of a relationship so hard to bear?

Love is a drug

Humans are social beings. We're hardwired to bond with others. When we fall in love, several "feel good" neurochemicals flood our brains, including adrenaline, dopamine, norepinephrine, serotonin, and if the bond is extremely strong, oxytocin. We're euphoric. We're high on love.

When that bond is broken our bodies seem to go into withdrawal. Just thinking about an ex can activate key areas in your brain associated with craving and pain. These reactions can be so strong that some people will do just about anything to make the hurt go away - and that can lead to destructive behaviours such as alcohol or drug abuse.

Friends and relations

A breakup often affects other relationships. We can feel anger towards our ex but also anger with family and friends who took his/her side. They may also feel anger towards us. The friendships we had with other couples are now changed forever and we often feel unready and afraid to forge new friendships alone. It can be a lonely and confusing time.

The virtual world

Although no breakup is easy, the psychological damage is made much worse when the breakup is disrespectful and dishonourable. No matter how damaged the relationship, a breakup should always be done face-to-face – not by text, email, tweet or post. Unfortunately, impersonal, electronic "dumping" is becoming more prevalent - especially with teens. A 2016 survey by Pew Research found that 24 percent of respondents aged 13 to 17 felt it was fine to break up with someone by texting and 26 percent admitted to doing so.

Adding to the hurt is being unfriended or even blocked on social media by friends and family members who have taken sides – and of course, having to let the world know by changing our status from "in a relationship" to "single." Not only do we have to explain the end of our relationship in the real world but again, in the social world.

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Many of us struggle with breakups because we're not taught how to cope with them in healthy ways. So what can you do? The first step is realizing that you're grieving and that involves several stages, including shock/ denial, bargaining, anger, depression and eventually acceptance. In other words, what you're feeling is normal.

Here are some other ways to cope:

- **Go easy on the guilt and blame.** It's normal to blame yourself for a relationship failing or regret choices you made. It's also normal to blame your ex for everything. Remember that neither of you began the relationship with the goal of making it fail or hurting each other. Focus instead on what you gained and learned from that relationship.
- **Take care of your physical health**. You may not feel like it but focus on eating a healthy diet, staying active and getting enough sleep. Avoid unhealthy coping strategies such as drinking excessively, relying on prescription or illegal drugs, over or undereating, self-harm or working excessively.

- **Don’t do it alone.** Sharing your feelings with friends and family can help you get through things. If people are not available or you don’t feel comfortable discussing private thoughts, write your feelings down – it can often give you a different perspective about your life. Consider counselling or joining a support group where you can talk to others in similar situations.
- **Don’t isolate yourself.** Yes, you need time alone but isolating yourself can increase your stress, deepen depression, and damage other relationships. Spend time with friends, volunteer in your community, sign up for a class, get back to playing your favourite sport or join a club.
- **Look forward.** Know that new dreams will eventually replace your old ones and that new friendships and experiences are now possible. This relationship may have failed because an even better one is waiting.

Most importantly, know when to seek help. If you’re feeling socially and emotionally paralyzed or unable to cope, contact your family doctor. Your Employee Assistance Program can also provide invaluable information, resources and access to counselling.