

A LINE ON LIFE

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Breaking Up Is Hard To Do *

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A Yuma reader wrote to me last month, asking me to write an article on "*breaking up after a relationship*." Since the beginning of a new year is seen as a season for many changes — even painful ones — it seems to be a timely topic.



As high as you may feel when you find someone you love, most of us will feel just as desolate and depressed if that relationship breaks up. Since most breakups are not by mutual consent, one of the partners typically suffers more than the other. There are no easy ways to dissolve a relationship. However, there are ways to lessen the pain.

**The death of a relationship can cause intense pain,
but there are ways to reduce this pain.**

Psychologists Hill, Rubin and Peplau (1976) conducted a two-year study of 231 college couples. The average couple had been dating for eight months, and three-fourths were dating each other exclusively. At the end of the study, only 128 couples were still together. In the two years, 103 couples had broken up. Over half (51%) of the breakups were initiated by the women, 42% by the men, and 7% were mutual. (As an aside, if the man initiated the breakup, the chances were greater the couple remained friends. Women seem to deal better with male-initiated separations, rather than the other way around.) Here are some recommendations for making a breakup less painful.

If you initiate the breakup:

Be sure that you want to break up. If the relationship is unsatisfactory, it may be because conflicts or problems have either been avoided or confronted in the wrong way. Instead of being a reason for breaking up, such conflicts or problems can be a rich source of personal development. These conflicts can create even closer bonds — if they are worked out. Some people use the threat of breaking up, when they only want the relationship to change. Such threats may lead two people to dissolve a relationship that they both want.

Acknowledge the fact that your partner will be hurt. As with any loss, it is only natural that your partner will feel pain. There is nothing you can do that will erase the pain that your partner will feel. You may hesitate to break up, because you "*don't want to hurt*" your partner. However, this may be a poor excuse for not wanting to be honest with your partner — or with yourself.

Once you break up, do not continue to see your former partner as "*friends*" until considerable time has passed. "Being friends" may only be a devious strategy to continue the relationship on terms wholly advantageous to you — but not your partner. Since your partner is likely to be more involved in the relationship than you, it will tend to make things more painful for your ex-partner. Before becoming friends again, it may be best to wait until your ex-partner is involved with someone else.

Don't change your mind. Ambivalence and loneliness are typical feelings in any breakup. Especially if you followed the first recommendation, these feelings are not a

sign that you have made the wrong decision. Both feelings indicate that the relationship was valuable to you.

If your partner breaks up with you:



Realize that the pain and loneliness you feel are natural. Even though the pain may be intense and you feel like you are being torn apart, these feelings will diminish in time. They are part of a grieving process that occurs with the loss of any important relationship. These feelings are not necessarily signs of love.

Understand that you are still a worthwhile person — whether you are with a partner or not. Even worthwhile people make mistakes, but making mistakes

does not reduce their worth. Instead of isolating yourself, spend time with your friends. Share your feelings with them. They care. Instead of sitting in your room alone feeling sorry for yourself, do things that you like to do. Be kind to yourself.

Don't try to see your former partner. If you broke up once, even if you get together again, the chances are that you will break up again. If you try to continue to see your former partner as a friend, it will prolong your distress. As painful as it may be, it is better to go "*cold turkey*."

Keep your sense of humor. It helps to remember the old cliches, even though they may not seem to apply at the time. "*No one ever died of love.*" (Except you, of course.) "*There are other fish in the sea.*" (Who wants fish?)

Any loss is painful. If the loss is greater, the period of grieving is longer and more intense.

In this new year, we hope your desired relationships will last. But if your relationship turns out to be one that does not last, following these recommendations should make the parting less painful.

* Adapted from Bryan Strong and Christine DeVault's *Understanding Our Sexuality*, West Publishing, 1988, pages 221-222.