



How to have a good break-up

The end of a relationship is always painful, but there is such a thing as a better break-up. There are even rewards in store, discovers Hannah Borno

Photographs by Jillian Edelstein

When Julia, 37, was suddenly left by her husband of six years, the old cliché that the whole world had fallen apart seemed suddenly, painfully true. ‘When Jeremy told me he was leaving, I felt winded. I couldn’t speak, I couldn’t even cry,’ she recalls. ‘It was as if he had died. Everything was destroyed. When you think you are going to be with someone forever, and then discover that’s not the case, your present is wiped blank and your future has to be entirely reimagined.’ As Julia can attest, the break-up of a long-term relationship is, alongside bereavement, one of the most stressful life experiences.

A new beginning

When a relationship ends, we feel as if our whole emotional infrastructure has been swept away. Attachment theories argue that, when you fall in love, you form a ‘primary emotional attachment’ to that person. ‘You internalise a sense of yourself as having a base in the world founded on this person, and when you mentally project forward into the future you assume that base will be there,’ says Professor Janet Reibstein, author of *The Best Kept Secret: How Love Can Last Forever* (£8.99, Bloomsbury). ‘When this ends, your security and all your predictions about your life are destroyed.’

What you are coping with is not just the loss of your partner, but the loss of your self. ‘In the course of

my research people have said things like “I don’t know who I am anymore”. They define themselves as a “non-person” or as “depersonalised”,’ notes psychologist Dr Gary Lewandowski.

Primal grieving phases

Yet, Lewandowski believes, there are strategies to limit the damage. ‘A break-up can be an upsetting experience, but it ultimately provides

‘When love comes to an end, your security is destroyed’

an opportunity to grow as a person,’ he says. ‘When asked how their break-up influenced them, 33 per cent of people I researched replied “negatively”, but 41 per cent were positive. In fact, 71 per cent expe-

rienced above average personal growth following a break-up.’

According to Lewandowski’s research, the first step towards a good break-up is accepting from the outset it’s over. Just as if your partner had died, Lewandowski believes we must view the relationship as something that can’t be returned to. ‘Persisting with the idea that it is possible to win back your former partner is a strategy that runs counter to personal growth.’ It took more than a year for Joanna to realise that her ex-husband Gary wasn’t coming back. ‘I would ring him all the time and arrange to meet up,’ she says. ‘I was convinced he would see sense. It took the utter shock of him meeting someone else for reality to sink in.’

It is completely natural to try and claw back a lost relationship, says

Accepting that it’s over

1 Know that there will be a mourning period during which you will be inconsolable. You will need as much support as possible. Keep a journal to monitor your progress through grief to anger and then finally to detachment.

2 It’s highly likely that you will want to make contact with your ex, and you will need help to minimise this desire. You will need protection from going into pursuer mode so again, ask friends to help distract you.

3 If, after a few months, you feel you are not moving on, it may help to see your GP and book a short course of grief counselling or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy – this is very helpful for adjusting after divorce or the end of a long-term relationship.



Reibstein. This mirrors the withdrawal and pursuit dynamic which characterises the way we love. ‘Even in a healthy relationship, you’ll find that when one partner withdraws, the other starts to pursue – it’s a fixed and primitive response,’ she explains. When we are left, we yearn for contact. Even if the relationship went through a difficult phase before the split, we idealise and fixate on the withdrawing partner. But the longer we pursue, the slower our ultimate recovery.

Those partners who leave aren’t immune to feelings of loss either, says Lewandowski. ‘The leaver’s primary emotion is likely to be guilt, rather than hurt, but they still experience the loss of the relationship, even if they have had longer to prepare for a world without their partner,’ he says. A common mistake that the leaver makes is to try to alleviate this sense of loss by spending time mourning with their ex-partner before moving on.

‘Intense mourning is usually the first phase in any break-up,’ Reibstein explains. ‘You believe that no one can take your attachment figure’s place.’ In your grief, you accentuate their positive traits and overlook any negatives, which is why it can be so dangerous at this stage to spend time together. When Claire, 44, was left by Nick, she couldn’t resist the compulsion to call him, almost daily, and often late at night when she was feeling most alone. ‘He tried to be kind,

which just made me miss him more. Then he got angry, and ended up sounding cold and contemptuous, which made my already fragile sense of self crumble to nothing.’

Helen, 41, indulged in long, drawn-out ‘mourning sessions’ with the men she was trying to

The next phase for the person who has been left is one of disappointment and anger. ‘You’ll say “how could you do this?” and there is a withdrawal from the idealised ex-partner,’ says Reibstein. ‘The loved one has to fall off their pedestal before you can recover. Anger is an essential part of the detachment process.’

When our partner leaves, we automatically want to pursue

leave. ‘I have had relationships with several men which weren’t right, and, yet, whenever I tried to end them, I became extremely upset and went back to them,’ she says. In this situation, you are actually giving your ex-partner hope and slowing down their recovery, says Lewandowski.

The stages of detachment

It can be tempting to make contact, to prove to your ex that you are over the relationship, but, instead, it is time to draw strength from those parts of your life that are separate from the life you had together.

You may need distance at this stage from mutual friends shared with your ex-partner. Also, don’t rush into another relationship at



HOW TO LEAVE

Psychologist Professor Janet Reibstein gives this advice

● Your partner may not want to accept that you are leaving, so there is a need for absolute clarity and clear-cut boundaries. Only have the break-up conversation once, explain yourself fully and then leave. You can't move swiftly into friendship. You need a period of at

least a few months where there is as little contact as possible.

- You may want to honour the relationship, but spending time mourning with your ex-partner is not the way to do it. In order to salvage a long-lasting friendship, it is vital to begin with time apart, so you can become ordinary to each other.
- Allow your ex-partner to negotiate the terms on which you will communicate in the future, if at all. They are the wounded party, and must be allowed the means to regain control.

this stage, advises Reibstein. 'Above all, you need to develop an independent security base that isn't fashioned around your ex.' For Tanveer, 37, this meant re-establishing contact with her acting friends. 'Brian couldn't stand the group of friends I made in my acting days at university, and we'd gradually lost touch,' she says. 'I'd let go of an important part of my life and it felt liberating to reconnect with them after so long.'

Expanding possibilities

Key to a good break-up is taking action to reclaim your identity. 'Positive outcomes are more likely for those who spend time rediscovering aspects of themselves that were inhibited during the relationship,' advises Lewandowski. 'Rather than

As time passes, your ex will become just another person

focusing on what you've lost, focus on what you've gained.'

For Susan, 47, her 'it's not all bad' moment came five weeks after her partner left, when she stumbled into the kitchen one morning and opened the fridge. 'It was full of fruit, champagne and my favourite foods, instead of the endless junk-food dinners Paul liked. I felt a moment of pleasure and satisfaction that I'd regained my space.' This is time to create a new reality. 'Life as you know it has been shattered, so to feel secure again you need to develop

new rituals and daily routines that aren't dependent on another person,' says Reibstein.

The final phase of a good break-up is spent psychologically reconfiguring the relationship. According to Lewandowski's research, it is at this point that we can establish which parts of us were nourished by the relationship and which parts were held back. If, as with most failing relationships, you had stopped growing within the partnership, then breaking up is, he argues, an essentially positive step. 'We have an innate desire to improve ourselves. You are now free to achieve personal growth, and we have found that this process following a break-up tends to conjure up an array of positive emotions,

including relief, optimism and new levels of energy.'

As time passes, your once irreplaceable ex-lover will gradually become just another person to you, someone you can choose to see, or not. Two years on, for Julia, that moment has finally arrived. 'I was inconsolable for more than a month. Eventually I started crying less and sleeping better. I started hating him for what he'd done to me after all the promises he'd made – and that made me feel a lot better. I started going out more, and suddenly, the world seemed full of opportunities. Now I no longer hate him. I just see him as a man with flaws and weaknesses of his own. And I'm now with someone I adore – something I never dreamed possible.' ■