

# PSYCHOLOGIES

FOR A RICHER LIFE

MAGAZINE

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# The art of optimism

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**NEW!**

# What becomes of the broken-hearted?

**E**loise Laing, 34, met her partner Charlie when she was nine years old. Twenty years later, they finally got together. 'We were brilliant,' she says, 'the best of friends.' They moved in and spent four happy years together. But Charlie balked at the idea of marriage, and abruptly ended the relationship a year ago. 'I'm in limbo,' says Eloise. 'I know in my gut he is the person for me, and however much I try to move on, I can't. I desperately want a second chance.' Since they split up, Eloise has found a new job and new interests. But, she says, 'When I get home, I still think about him. We've stayed friends, and whenever I get a text or email from him my heart leaps and I spend hours scrutinising the message for a sign that he wants to get back with me. When I heard recently that he'd been on a date, I felt physically sick and had to take a day off work. My friends say I'll get over him in time, but the longer it goes on, the more I care for him and the harder it gets.'

Break-ups such as this are so common it's easy to forget just how devastating the end of a relationship can be. Friends rapidly develop compassion fatigue: I once spent a Saturday afternoon with a couple, pouring out my bottomless grief until I realised that Jane's

boyfriend had gone. When I asked why, she explained gently that while she wasn't bored listening to me talk about my ex, he was and had scarpered.

But when you're the person who's grieving, your hurt feelings may be all you feel like discussing. 'You're talking about a death and it is a really big deal,' says relationship coach Michael Myerscough. 'In a relationship we have dreams, we've made promises; and when it ends, those dreams die.' We may even experience chemical changes within our body as a partner's physical touch is withdrawn and our anxiety levels soar.

Rejection can rock the very foundations of your personality and many women blame themselves for the relationship ending rather than facing their former partner's faults. Psychologist Dorothy Rowe says that, if we blame ourselves, our guilt becomes a way of declaring control over the situation. We might reason that we could have prevented him leaving, if only we had done the right thing – been a better cook, sexier, less demanding, more demanding or just plain different.

We can experience the loss of a relationship as the action replay of all the rejections we have ever been through, says Rowe. 'Perhaps your father left your mother, and little girls experience that as the rejection of themselves,' she says. 'You might believe that all the men you love will end up rejecting you. But you're forgetting that it's you who selects the men you have relationships with.'

It is difficult to accept such unpalatable truths while the raw pain of a rejection is still fresh. Susanna Abse, a psychotherapist at the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships, says her patients often feel they have

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offered up the most vulnerable aspects of themselves, and their lover has taken a good long look then said, 'no thanks'. A common reaction to this is anger; others internalise their feelings and become depressed.

The danger is that you can become stuck. Abse says that some women may never recover from a break-up. 'I have a patient whose mother really is Mrs Haversham. Forty years after he left, she still talks about her husband. It can become a comfort to hang on to grief and loss, and it keeps you safe because you don't have to go out and experiment with new relationships.'

But while some become stuck in their fantasies, others remain angry and continue to act this out by sending poisonous emails, burning photographs or taking their ex through the courts. 'Some people can't move on from a stage of anger and longing into an acknowledgement that something's been lost,' says Abse. 'By being angry, you can go over and over it endlessly in your mind.' Paula Hall, a Relate counsellor agrees. She often sees people stuck in the earliest stage of losing a partner, which is to deny the relationship has ended.

It may also be tempting to seek out signs that your ex still needs you. One of Hall's clients swore her partner would come back because he had left his favourite pair of socks behind. For some, the ex can collude in this by offering tantalising signals that they may indeed return. Jill Dawson, a 39-year-old sales executive in Nottingham, was distraught when her husband left her and their five-month-old daughter. 'I didn't sleep, I didn't eat, I would wake in the middle of the night and sit on the end of my bed wondering what I was going to do with my life,' she says. 'At the new mums' group I felt shrouded in ice as they talked about themselves and their partners. I couldn't tell them the truth – I pretended we were still one big, happy family.'

Jill has moved and started dating again, but her husband still exerts a strong pull. 'Whenever I've been on dates he'll call and say he still loves me. On our last wedding anniversary he texted me, sent flowers and asked me to dinner. I was hoping he'd say we should get back together. When he didn't, I was devastated again.'

Now, nearly three years since they split, Jill knows she needs to move on. 'I've started divorce proceedings, because, while I'm like this, I'm never ever going to stop thinking he'll come back.'

Despite this, Jill fears that her husband will not go through with the divorce, or that she herself won't be

**'EVEN AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, I FEEL SAD EVERY SINGLE DAY'**



## The stages after a break-up

AS WITH BEREAVEMENT, the end of a relationship brings with it several identifiable emotional states. Psychologists Dr Bruce Fisher and Dr Robert Alberti compare the healing process to the slow but steady ascent up a mountain. Their method of adjusting to the loss of love involves 19 steps, from denial through grief, anger and letting go towards the eventual goal of personal freedom.

The first very common reaction is to deny that the relationship has ended. You may look for signs that it is still alive or fantasise about your lover coming back. This is followed by the fear that they won't return, which can motivate you to begin to adapt to your new situation. In this stage, you may learn how to enjoy spending time on your own again without being lonely. Friendships

### resources

For further information about Moving Forward, call 0800 093 5711 or visit the Relate website at [www.relate.org.uk/takecharge](http://www.relate.org.uk/takecharge)

You need to express your grief fully before you can let go of the relationship and start to move on

able to. 'I can't envisage a future without him,' she says, 'or ever being ready to introduce another man into my – or my daughter's – life. Because we are still in touch, I'm ever hopeful that he's going to change his mind.'

When you lose a partner, you may also find yourself cut off from his social network. 'Your self image as part of a couple needs huge adjustment. That's why people want to remarry and have other children; it's as if you have to start over again and get it right,' says Abse. 'If this is your second partner or if you've had losses in your childhood, it can open up lots of deep primal stuff,' says Hall. 'It's about the fear of being alone and the self-doubt that goes with it.'

But rushing into another relationship before you've had time to grieve for what you've lost or understand why it ended, may not be the best solution. Most psychologists suggest that you need to take a long break from your former partner and before starting a new relationship so that you can begin to accept a new life without them. You may need to feel anger and grief

before you can let go of your past, develop a new sense of self-worth outside of your old relationship, and learn to trust yourself and others again.

Getting over a long-term relationship can take months or even years. Friends are vital to this process but if they have reached the limit of their sympathy, it might be time to seek out new friends or consider professional help. 'Even after all these years, I feel sad every single day,' says Jill Dawson. 'I know there are people who cope with far worse things, but when it happens to you it feels like the end of the world.'

Relate's guide to Moving Forward (see below) suggests that you're finally free from your past when you can feel happy being alone, making your own decisions and appreciating the joys of your independence. 'We lose pieces of ourselves in most relationships and we need to rebuild that,' says Michael Myerscough. 'Once you get to a place where you're happy with yourself, and you have a good social network and there's no sense of need, then you're there.' ▷

may change as you re-evaluate those who are unable to be supportive or feel loyal to your ex, and you may find new friends who can be more empathetic.

### Rebuild the foundations

Whether you were the 'dumper' (the one who ended the relationship) or the 'dumpee' can affect your reactions at this point. The 'dumper' may grapple with guilt, while the 'dumpee' may struggle to absorb the shock of the relationship ending.

At the next stage, you may start grieving for what you have lost. This sadness may then give way to a tide of rage, and this can prevent you from moving forward unless you learn to channel it into positive action. You may then begin to let go of your relationship as you invest it with less time and energy. You

can then start to rediscover your sense of self-worth. You may begin to love yourself again and to rewrite negative messages about yourself.

When you have rebuilt these foundations, you may allow your mask of competence – which takes a great deal of energy to sustain – to slip. It may then become easier to ask for support. This is when you relearn to trust other people, though it may take months or even years. During this period, you may have transitory relationships that will help move you on to the next stage.

This might be the time when you suddenly begin to feel attractive to and attracted by the opposite sex again. But it's important to first meet your own emotional needs before you're fully ready to relate to another partner. Finally, you may begin to make goals for yourself,

looking forward with optimism towards the future rather than backward into the pain-laden past. Only in this final stage are you ready to develop a new love relationship because you are now a fully Independent person.

### Moving forward

These building blocks are used in Relate's one-day life skills course, Moving Forward, in which people recovering from a break-up learn how this model applies to their own lives. They meet in a group to discuss the emotional impact of their loss and the practical steps they can take to regain control of their lives. The participants may even form an informal support network afterwards, either meeting or talking over the phone regularly to chart each other's progress.

## How to move on

You may feel you will never get over the pain of your break-up or ever find someone else. Most people do eventually move on from the initial pain, but it is important to face up to it first. Here are a few ideas to help you get there

**1 Allow yourself to grieve. This means first accepting the fact that the relationship is over. Give yourself time to cry and to feel sad, which are entirely appropriate responses. The break-up of a relationship can be as devastating as losing someone through death. Claire Lewis, a flautist in her late forties, has been both widowed and divorced. She says, 'Divorce is worse. At least with death you feel he didn't want to leave you.'**

**2** Taking a long break from contact with your ex is something you should think about. Greg and Amira Behrendt, authors of *It's Called A Breakup Because It's Broken* (£10, Harper Element), recommend a complete break of at least 60 days. This may sound impossible – your ex calls, it's comforting to hear the familiar voice and before you know it, you've agreed to meet. But as the Behrendts say, 'You wouldn't go back every day to a job you'd been fired from just to feel bad about yourself.' You may want to stay friends, but you still need a break so you can both fully acknowledge that the relationship has ended and lay down new boundaries between you.

**3** Of course, if you have children together, a 60-day break may well be unfeasible. If this is the case, keep contact cordial, as minimal as possible and strictly limited to talking about the children.

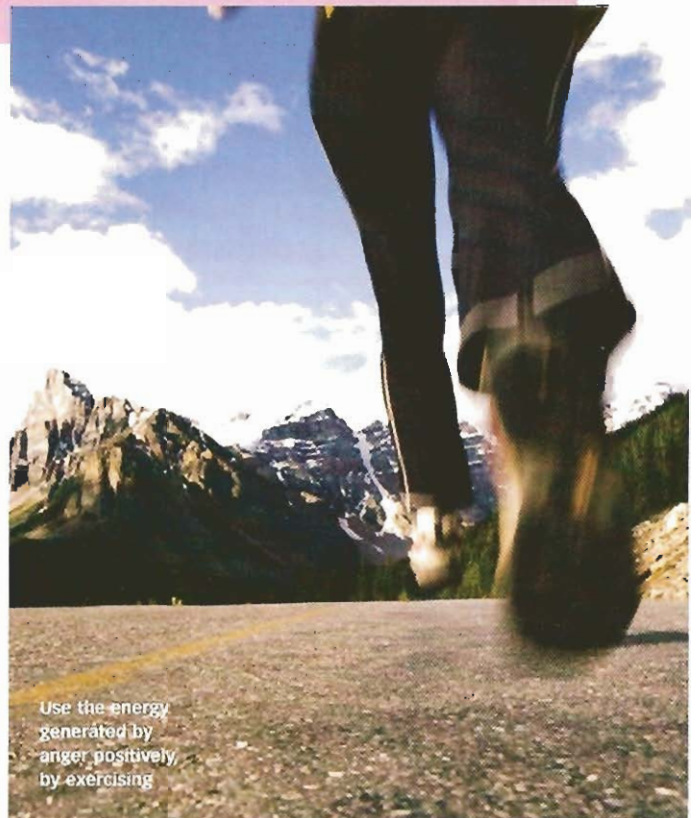
**4** Allow yourself to hate your ex's guts. Like sadness, feeling rage at the way you've been treated is another step towards healing the wound. But anger can be vented on the wrong people.

Denise Knowles of Relate says, 'Anger is very energising, so use that adrenaline by exercising – stride out, swim, go to the gym. If you keep waking up in the middle of the night seething with anger, try diaphragmatic breathing, where you breathe in for a count of four, and out for a count of seven, building up to counts of seven and 11. This triggers the brain's relaxation response. Alternatively, try writing down how you're feeling.'

**5** Give it time. A good rule of thumb, says Michael Myerscough, is to wait one month for every year you were with your ex before dating again. But don't criticise yourself if you do start a new relationship sooner. After a break-up, it's normal to feel vulnerable and lonely. If someone comes along offering lots of attention and affection, it can be very alluring, says Knowles. 'A new relationship can be very comforting, but don't be concerned if it doesn't look like it's going to be long-term.'

**6** If your friends are showing signs of compassion fatigue, seek help from a professional, whether it's a counsellor, your local pastor, a psychotherapist or friendly GP. You may need objective help that you can only get from someone who isn't directly involved in your life. Listen to how you talk about yourself in the context of your previous relationship. According to psychologist Dorothy Rowe, if it sounds as though you feel you deserve to be compensated for the terrible loss you've suffered, you may need to talk to a professional.

**7** Try to understand why the relationship ended, so that you



Use the energy generated by anger positively, by exercising

### resources

- The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (020 8938 2353; [www.tccr.org.uk](http://www.tccr.org.uk))
- Divorce Aid ([www.divorceaid.co.uk](http://www.divorceaid.co.uk))
- Michael Myerscough ([www.therelationshipgym.com](http://www.therelationshipgym.com))

don't repeat the pattern. If you're always falling for the same type of man and being rejected, you may need to work out why these men are attractive to you.

**8** Do things that build up your self-esteem, whether you take up knitting, sign up for a kickboxing course or learn how to become a public speaker. Since your life has not ended with the end of your relationship, getting back out into the world is a sign that you are reclaiming it – along with your sense of self-worth.

**9** Seek out new interests that bring out an undeveloped side of your personality and learn to enjoy being on your own. No matter how happy you were together, all relationships involve compromise. Now you don't have to – so why not enjoy the fact that you're free to do exactly what you want? As Michael Myerscough points out: most of us forget, while we're in it, that singledom is a luxury.