

Healing after a divorce or breakup

Why do breakups hurt so much, even when the relationship is no longer good? A divorce or breakup is painful because it represents the loss, not just of the relationship, but also of shared dreams and commitments. Romantic relationships begin on a high note of excitement and hope for the future. When these relationships fail, we experience profound disappointment, stress, and grief.

A breakup or divorce launches us into uncharted territory. Everything is disrupted: your routine and responsibilities, your home, your relationships with extended family and friends, and even your identity. A breakup brings uncertainty about the future. What will life be like without your partner? Will you find someone else? Will you end up alone? These unknowns often seem worse than an unhappy relationship.

Recovering from a breakup or divorce is difficult. However, it's important to know (and to keep reminding yourself) that you *can* and *will* move on. But healing takes time, so be patient with yourself.

Coping with separation and divorce

- **Recognize that it's OK to have different feelings.** It's normal to feel sad, angry, exhausted, frustrated, and confused—and these feelings can be intense. You also may feel anxious about the future. Accept that reactions like these will lessen over time. Even if the marriage was unhealthy, venturing into the unknown is frightening.
- **Give yourself a break.** Give yourself permission to feel and to function at a less than optimal level for a period of time. You may not be able to be quite as productive on the job or care for others in exactly the way you're accustomed to for a little while. No one is superman or superwoman; take time to heal, regroup, and re-energize.
- **Don't go through this alone.** Sharing your feelings with friends and family can help you get through this period. Consider joining a support group where you can talk to others in similar situations. Isolating yourself can raise your stress levels, reduce your concentration, and get in the way of your work, relationships, and overall health. Don't be afraid to get outside help if you need it.

Source: *Mental Health America*

Allow yourself to grieve the loss of the relationship

Grief is a natural reaction to loss, and the breakup or divorce of a love relationship involves multiple losses:

- Loss of companionship and shared experiences (which may or may not have been consistently pleasurable)
- Loss of support, be it financial, intellectual, social, or emotional
- Loss of hopes, plans, and dreams (can be even more painful than practical losses)

Allowing yourself to feel the pain of these losses may be scary. You may fear that your emotions will be too intense to bear, or that you'll be stuck in a dark place forever. Just remember that grieving is essential to the healing process. The pain of grief is precisely what helps you let go of the old relationship and move on. And no matter how strong your grief, it won't last forever.

Tips for grieving after a breakup or divorce:

- **Don't fight your feelings** – It's normal to have lots of ups and downs, and feel many conflicting emotions, including anger, resentment, sadness, relief, fear, and confusion. It's important to identify and acknowledge these feelings. While these emotions will often be painful, trying to suppress or ignore them will only prolong the grieving process.
- **Talk about how you're feeling** – Even if it is difficult for you to talk about your feelings with other people, it is very important to find a way to do so when you are grieving. Knowing that others are aware of your feelings will make you feel less alone with your pain and will help you heal. Journaling can also be a helpful outlet for your feelings.
- **Remember that moving on is the end goal** – Expressing your feelings will liberate you in a way, but it is important not to dwell on the negative feelings or to over-analyze the situation. Getting stuck in hurtful feelings like blame, anger, and resentment will rob you of valuable energy and prevent you from healing and moving forward.
- **Remind yourself that you still have a future** – When you commit to another person, you create many hopes and dreams. It's hard to let these dreams go. As you grieve the loss of the future you once envisioned, be encouraged by the fact that new hopes and dreams will eventually replace your old ones.
- **Know the difference between a normal reaction to a breakup and depression** - Grief can be paralyzing after a breakup, but after a while, the sadness begins to lift. Day by day, and little by little, you start moving on. However, if you don't feel any forward momentum, you may be suffering from depression.

Reach out to others for support through the grieving process

Support from others is critical to healing after a breakup or divorce. You might feel like being alone, but isolating yourself will only make this time more difficult. Don't try to get through this on your own.

Reach out to trusted friends and family members. People who have been through painful breakups or divorces can be especially helpful. They know what it is like and they can assure you that there is hope for healing and new relationships.

- **Spend time with people who support, value, and energize you.** As you consider who to reach out to, choose wisely. Surround yourself with people who are positive and who truly listen to you. It's important that you feel free to be honest about what you're going through, without worrying about being judged, criticized, or told what to do.
- **Get outside help if you need it.** If reaching out to others doesn't come naturally, consider seeing a counselor or joining a support group. The most important thing is that you have at least one place where you feel comfortable opening up.

- **Cultivate new friendships.** If you feel like you have lost your social network along with the divorce or breakup, make an effort to meet new people. Join a networking group or special interest club, take a class, get involved in community activities, or volunteer at a school, place of worship, or other community organization.

Taking care of yourself after a divorce or relationship breakup

A divorce is a highly stressful, life-changing event. When you're going through the emotional wringer and dealing with major life changes, it's more important than ever to take care of yourself. The strain and upset of a major breakup can leave you psychologically and physically vulnerable.

Treat yourself like you're getting over the flu. Get plenty of rest, minimize other sources of stress in your life, and reduce your workload if possible.

Learning to take care of yourself can be one of the most valuable lessons you learn following a divorce or breakup. As you feel the emotions of your loss and begin learning from your experience, you can resolve to take better care of yourself and make positive choices going forward.

Self-care tips:

- **Make time each day to nurture yourself.** Help yourself heal by scheduling daily time for activities you find calming and soothing. Go for a walk in nature, listen to music, enjoy a hot bath, get a massage, read a favorite book, take a yoga class, or savor a warm cup of tea.
- **Pay attention to what you need** in any given moment and speak up to express your needs. Honor what you believe to be right and best for you even though it may be different from what your ex or others want. Say "no" without guilt or angst as a way of honoring what is right for you.
- **Stick to a routine.** A divorce or relationship breakup can disrupt almost every area of your life, amplifying feelings of stress, uncertainty, and chaos. Getting back to a regular routine can provide a comforting sense of structure and normalcy.
- **Take a time out.** Try not to make any major decisions in the first few months after a separation or divorce, like starting a new job or moving to a new city. If you can, wait until you're feeling less emotional so that you can make better decisions.
- **Avoid using alcohol, drugs, or food to cope.** When you're in the middle of a breakup, you may be tempted to do anything to relieve your feelings of pain and loneliness. But using alcohol, drugs, or food as an escape is unhealthy and destructive in the long run. It's essential to find healthier ways of coping with painful feelings.
- **Explore new interests.** A divorce or breakup is a beginning as well as an end. Take the opportunity to explore new interests and activities. Pursuing fun, new activities gives you a chance to enjoy life in the here-and-now, rather than dwelling on the past.

Making healthy choices: Eat well, sleep well, and exercise

When you're going through the stress of a divorce or breakup, healthy habits easily fall by the wayside. You might find yourself not eating at all or overeating your favorite junk foods. Exercise might be harder to fit in because of the added pressures at home and sleep might be elusive. But all of the work you are doing to move forward in a positive way will be pointless if you don't make long-term healthy lifestyle choices.

Learning important lessons from a divorce or breakup

In times of emotional crisis, there is an opportunity to grow and learn. Just because you are feeling emptiness in your life right now, doesn't mean that nothing is happening or that things will never change. Consider this period a time-out, a time for sowing the seeds for new growth. You can emerge from this experience knowing yourself better and feeling stronger.

In order to fully accept a breakup and move on, you need to understand what happened and acknowledging the part you played. It's important to understand how the choices you made affected the relationship. Learning from your mistakes is the key to not repeating them.

Some questions to ask yourself:

- Step back and look at the big picture. How did you contribute to the problems of the relationship?
- Do you tend to repeat the same mistakes or choose the wrong person in relationship after relationship?
- Think about how you react stress and deal with conflict and insecurities. Could you act in a more constructive way?
- Consider whether or not you accept other people the way they are, not the way they could or "should" be.
- Examine your negative feelings as a starting point for change. Are you in control of your feelings, or are they in control of you?

You'll need to be honest with yourself during this part of the healing process. Try not to dwell on who is to blame or beat yourself up over your mistakes. As you look back on the relationship, you have an opportunity to learn more about yourself, how you relate to others, and the problems you need to work on. If you are able to objectively examine your own choices and behavior, including the reasons why you chose your former partner, you'll be able to see where you went wrong and make better choices next time.