

How to Cope with Relationship Loss

It's never easy when a marriage or significant relationship ends. Whatever the reason for the split, it can turn your whole world upside down and trigger painful and unsettling feelings. A divorce or breakup is difficult because it involves 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 can bring uncertainty about the future. What will life be like without your partner? Will you find someone else? Will you end up alone? Sometimes these unknowns can actually seem worse than an unhappy relationship. While recovering from a breakup or divorce is difficult, it's important to know (and to keep reminding yourself) that you *can* and *will* move on. The following are some suggestions for ways you can cope (as well as grow into a stronger and wiser person) during this difficult time:



◆ **Recognize that it's okay 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 relationship 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 someone you can trust—such as a friend, family member, mental health professional, etc.—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.

◆ **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—companionship, shared experiences, support (financial, emotional, intellectual, social, etc.), and hopes, plans, and dreams that you had while in the relationship. Allowing yourself to feel the pain of these losses may be scary, but keep in mind 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.

◆ **Don't fight your feelings.**

It's normal to have lots of ups and downs and to 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.

◆ **Make time each day to nurture yourself.**

Help yourself heal by scheduling daily time for activities you find 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—whatever helps you to feel calm and collected.

◆ **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 go about making decisions calmly and rationally.

◆ **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.

◆ **Remember that moving on is the end goal.**

Expressing your feelings can be very liberating, however 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.

◆ **Take this opportunity to learn more about yourself.**

In order to fully accept a breakup and move on, it helps to understand what happened and acknowledge the part you played. It's important to understand how the choices you made affected the relationship. At the same time, try not to dwell on who is to blame or beat yourself up over any mistakes you might have made. As you look back on the relationship, you have an opportunity to learn more about yourself, how you relate to others, and the issues you may 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 more clearly what went wrong so that you can make better choices next time.