

surviving a relationship break-up

Surviving a relationship break-up can be one of the most difficult things we ever do and on an emotional level can be one of the most painful processes in our lives. Losing a boyfriend/girlfriend or a husband/wife can feel like your heart is literally being torn out. It is not unheard of to talk to students on campus who express suicidal thoughts or thoughts of self-harm at the ending of a relationship. At UWS-Counselling and Clinical Services relationship issues are one of the top three reasons students seek counselling, many of whom are going through break-ups.

People are not well equipped to deal with break-ups, because we rarely are taught anything about healthy coping after a break-up. This handout is designed to give you helpful strategies to cope with your break-up in the healthiest way possible.

By using these suggestions, it will not stop you from experiencing the pain of the loss, but instead, will help you move through the grieving process as quickly as possible and let you move on to ultimately have more satisfying relationships in the future.

coping strategies

1 don't fight your feelings

A break-up is often accompanied by a wide variety of powerful and negative feelings including sadness, anger, confusion, resentment, jealousy, fear and regret, to mention a few. If you try to ignore or suppress these feelings, you will likely only prolong the normal grieving process, and sometimes get totally stuck in it. Healthy coping means both identifying these feelings and allowing ourselves to experience these feelings. As hard as it is, you cannot avoid the pain of loss, but realize that by experiencing these feelings, they will decrease over time and you will speed up the grieving process. The stages of grieving frequently include: shock/denial, bargaining, anger, depression and eventually acceptance. Extreme grief feels like it will last forever, but it doesn't if we cope in some healthy ways.

There are several conditions that will likely intensify your negative feelings, including:

- Not being the one who decided to break up.
- Not seeing the break-up coming.
- This being your first serious relationship.
- Your ex being your only real close friend.
- Continuing to run into your ex.
- The relationship having made you feel whole or complete.
- Your ex starting to date someone right away.
- Thinking about your ex being sexual with their new partner.
- Believing that your ex is the only one in the world for you.

2 openly discuss your feelings

Talking about your feelings related to the break-up is an equally powerful tool to manage them. As we talk to supportive friends and family members, we can come to some new understandings and relieve some of our pain. Holding all of these negative feelings in just doesn't work, although there may be times when this is necessary, such as in public settings, at work, or in class. As we talk to others, we usually discover that our feelings are normal and that others have survived these feelings. Above all else, don't isolate yourself or withdraw from those people who can give you support.

3 write out your thoughts and feelings

In addition to talking to others, it can be very helpful to journal your thoughts and feelings related to the break-up. People are not always available when you need to get out your feelings and some feelings or thoughts may be too private to feel comfortable sharing with others. The act of writing your feelings out can be very freeing and can often give you a different perspective about them.

4 understand that break-ups are often an inevitable part of dating

Remember that many of our dating relationships will end up in a break-up. This is the very nature of dating. Until we find our best match, we are going to be moving in and out of relationships, so expect it. This way, we won't feel so devastated when it does happen. Relationships usually end

for some good reasons and they should end if we want to find our most suitable partner. Of course, no match will be perfect and we have to decide how long to keep looking and what we can live with. Finding a complementary partner is more than about love and therefore, it is going to likely take many dating relationships to find.

5 don't personalize the loss

It is natural after a break-up to blame yourself, but try not to personalize the loss for too long. Much of the pain of a break-up comes from seeing the loss as your fault and regretting the choices you made while in the relationship. This process of self-blame can go on endlessly if you let it.

It is far more helpful to see the ending as a result of conflicting needs and incompatibilities that are no one's fault. Each person in a relationship is trying to get their own needs met and some couples are able to help fulfill each other's needs and others are not. One of the biggest issues is being able to communicate and negotiate those needs. It's not easy to learn, so don't blame yourself and try not to blame your ex. He or she is likely also doing the best they can, given their personalities and life history. No one goes into a relationship with the goal of making it fail, or hurting the other person.

6 prioritize basic self-care

Self-care refers to ensuring that your basic needs are being met, despite the fact that you may be feeling upset and depressed due to the break-up. You may not feel like eating but do it anyways, and try to make some healthy choices in what you eat. Give yourself ample time to sleep, particularly since this may be difficult for you. The short-term use of some herbal alternatives or sleep medications may be necessary to ensure you get the sleep you need. Sleep deprivation will only compound your suffering. Keeping up or starting an exercise routine can also make you feel better both physically and psychologically. Remember, exercise causes the release of endorphins, which can make you feel better.

7 get back into a routine

Since going through a break-up can create a sense of chaos in many areas of your life, continuing on with your routines will give you a better sense of stability or normalcy. Although taking some expectations off yourself temporarily can help, returning to routines shortly after the initial blow can help calm you down and give you a returning sense of control. This might include routines around wake-up and bedtimes, meals, school or work related activities, exercise, and time with others to mention a few.

8 indulge yourself

If there was ever a time to pamper yourself, it is after a break-up. You need to do something that will actively make yourself feel better. Indulgence can take many forms, depending upon what you really enjoy, but could include: going to a special restaurant, going to a movie with a friend, having a hot bath, trying a massage, going on a short trip, buying something new, taking the weekend off, taking a yoga class or reading your favorite book.

9 give yourself some slack

Expect that you are not going to be functioning at full capacity for a time due to the distress you are experiencing. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to lighten your load for awhile. This might mean allowing yourself a break from studying for awhile, or studying less than you usually would. It could also mean withdrawing from a class if you're really struggling or working a lot less in a part-time job for awhile. Although some of these options may sound drastic, they will give you more time to adequately process your loss. It may also mean expecting that your grades will go down a bit and not judging yourself for this.

10 don't lose faith in people or relationships

Since you may be feeling very hurt after a break-up, it is easy to assume that people are bad or untrustworthy, but this just isn't true. By holding on to this belief, you will be denying yourself all kinds of opportunities for a great relationship in the future. We can't over-generalize from our limited relationship history and assume that it will never work out. Keep shopping! The more people you meet, the greater the chance you will find your best match.

11 let go of the hope you will get back together

Unless there is some very strong evidence that you will reunite with your ex, try to let go of this possibility. Bringing closure to the relationship is impossible if you continue to hold onto the hope that the relationship will be resurrected. This means don't wait by the phone for a call, or try to e-mail or text them to try to have a little more connection, or beg to get back together, or make threats to get them back (i.e., you will commit suicide). These options will only perpetuate your emotional distress in the long term and make you come across as desperate, which will further impact your already shaken self-esteem. Life is too short to wait for someone to come back to you after a break-up.

12 don't rely on your ex for support or try to maintain a friendship

It's not helpful to depend on your ex after a break-up, especially to help you overcome the pain of the break-up. It makes it a lot harder to get over someone if you're continuing to see them or trying to maintain a friendship. After a significant period (i.e. months) of no contact, a friendship might be possible, but wait until you're feeling very emotionally strong again.

13 avoid unhealthy coping strategies

There are several ways of coping with a break-up that are considered quite unhelpful and will likely only compound your problems. These include such choices as drinking excessively, doing drugs, overeating, self-harm, gambling excessively, or becoming a workaholic. You may be tempted to do whatever you can to avoid feelings of loneliness and pain, but it is essential to find healthier ways to cope.

14 make a list of your ex's annoying qualities

If you have been feeling bad because you keep thinking about how much you miss your ex or how well suited you were to them, it can be helpful to make a list of all of their less endearing qualities. Particularly if you didn't initiate the break-up, it's easy to focus on everything about your ex that you will miss, which can only magnify your suffering. If you spend some time reflecting, you may come to see incompatibilities in the relationship that make it easier to let go and come to see that there is likely a better match out there for you.

15 avoid the temptation to take revenge

The idea of retaliating against someone who you feel may have hurt you significantly is very tempting, but making this choice may have unforeseen consequences. Depending on how angry you are, these consequences could lead to criminal charges if you did something like keying their car, stalking them, or damaging other property. As much as this might feel like a good idea in your height of passion, it only makes you feel more out of control. Closure is promoted when contact of any kind is minimized.

16 examine what you can learn from the relationship

We can learn a lot from all the relationships we have been in, particularly ones that are painful. It's very helpful after a relationship ends to spend some time thinking about and

writing down what you have learned so that you can have better relationships in the future. However, don't use this as an opportunity to beat yourself up or blame yourself for the relationship not lasting. Learning promotes growth, while self-blame (i.e. feeling you're a failure) only extends your suffering.

17 make a list of all the benefits of being single

Although being single again may be an unwelcome event, if you were not the one who chose to break-up, it is worth reminding yourself there are some definite benefits to being single. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- You are now much more able to put your own needs first.
- You will soon have the excitement of dating again, even though this may feel a little scary.
- You will have more control over your daily routines, not having to negotiate these with someone else.
- You can spend more time with friends and family, who may have been feeling neglected.
- You can do some traveling, that you might not have been able to do with your partner.
- You can choose jobs outside of the immediate area, because your partner isn't affecting your choices.
- You can eat what you want, when you want to.
- You can go to bed and get up on your own schedule.
- You will be able to meet lots of new people, since you now have more time to do so.
- You may now be free of criticism.
- You will have much more individual freedom.
- You have the whole bed to yourself.
- You now have more time to study.
- You can be as messy as you want.

18 perform a closure ritual

At some point in the process of letting go and grieving the loss, it can be very helpful to have a closure ritual. This symbolic gesture can be very meaningful if it is well thought out and considers the right timing. This could involve such things as: writing a letter to yourself or to your ex with your final words regarding the relationship, removing all of the photos you have of your ex, or burning some reminders of your ex in a ceremonial fashion.

19 remember that you can survive on your own

It is important after a break-up to remind yourself that you were able to survive on your own before you entered the relationship and you will be able to survive on your own now that you're no longer together. Relationships do not and should not make us whole, even though they are a part of our life and our happiness. We all need to be able to stand on our own and meet our own needs, regardless of the status of any one of our relationships. Remember, the healthiest relationships are with two people who are able to meet their own needs.

20 start dating again

Although it is often hard to decide when the best time to date again is, don't jump right back in and don't wait forever. You do need to grieve the loss and discover what you can learn from the past relationship, but you also have to move on, which means beginning to date again. Keeping the dating more casual at first might be wise, rather than jumping right into a deep, meaningful, long-term relationship. Dating can help you see that there are lots of other possible connections out there, if you open yourself up to this possibility. More dating will mean more risks, but there is no alternative unless you're content living your life without a partner. Some people can be content in relationships with just friends and family, but most people need more than this to feel completely fulfilled.

* Created by U of A Counselling and Clinical Services. For additional resources, visit: uofa.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mentalhealth

