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# Coping with Relationship Breakdown

A LIFE EFFECTIVENESS GUIDE

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All Case Histories in this text are presented as examples only  
and any comparison which might be made with persons either  
living or dead is purely coincidental

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# Introduction

When problems develop in a relationship, it can be the cause of great distress. Most of us wish to have committed and fulfilling relationships and the breaking down of an important relationship can create feelings of anger, sadness, grief, and isolation.

People going through a relationship breakdown are more likely to experience mental health problems (especially in the form of anxiety or depression), poor physical health, and reduced productivity at work.

# Warning Signs of a Relationship Breakdown

One of the most useful recent research findings is the work which has identified the early warning signs of deterioration of an intimate relationship. Based on these signs, researchers have been able to predict with a very high degree of accuracy (about 90%) which relationships are likely to end within a few years. This information is crucial in accepting when your relationship is in seriously in need of more attention or help.

Dr. J. Gottman and colleagues at the University of Washington have found that there are four specific signs of deterioration of an intimate relationship. In order of increasing danger, they are listed below:

- **Criticism** - instead of merely complaining, the person attacks and blames their partner's personality and/or character, such as "you are a selfish uncaring person";
- **Contempt** - feedback with the intent to insult and/or psychologically abuse the partner, such as "you are more than stupid: a total idiot ";
- **Defensiveness** - not being willing to listen to anything your partner has to say to you, out of fear of them hurting or attacking you; and
- **Stonewalling** - ignoring, avoiding and distancing from your partner.

Dr. H. Markman and Dr. S. Stanley at the University of Colorado have also identified four warning signs of deterioration:

- **Escalation of negativity** during the couples' interaction - an increase in complaining and criticism;
- **Invalidation** of each other - not making attempts to understand each other's points of view;
- **Negative interpretation** of neutral or positive events - when one person does or says something which is clearly meant to be neutral or even positive, but their partner interprets their intentions as being hostile or negative; and

- Avoidance and withdrawal from partner.

These research findings are very similar, despite completely different couples and research agendas. **If you notice that your relationship is experiencing two or more of these signs, your relationship needs some extra help and attention.** An ounce of prevention can save an incredible amount of emotional, financial and physical pain.

This guide is designed to show you how you can heal the resentments from the past and create a more loving, close, healthy relationship that will last a lifetime. And if your relationship truly is at breakdown point, it suggests some things you can do to heal your pain or make important decisions.

# Various Stages Within a Relationship

There are a variety of stages within a relationship, where in the initial stages the mixture of emotional excitement brought the couples together, six or sixteen years later the love that has evolved is very different. The various stages that transpire within a relationship are quite normal, and are necessary for growth and development. Every relationship has its teething periods, but the problem really isn't 'what' happens but rather how you handle and deal with those issues that matters. Conflict is to be expected in every relationship. Everyone has their own belief systems and personal habits which have been learnt from young and some of these may irritate the other person, no matter how much love there is. In healthy relationships, couples are able to settle their differences whether it be by compromising or acceptance. For others, where there is no resolution, tension and frustration sets in, causing the couple to become detached within the relationship and leading emotionally distant lives. There is now a relationship breakdown, and at this point a decision needs to be made to either make the relationship work, or to end it.

Finishing a relationship can be very difficult, no matter how right it is for you to do so. It is normally the choice of one person to end a relationship, rather than the couple together, although the decision affects both persons concerned and their immediate family. It is important to truthfully assess whether the situation is so bad within a relationship that there is no other option.

- Are there possibilities for changes in the relationship?
- What steps can be taken towards improvement?
- Are there any advantages in ending the relationship, and if so, what are they?

# Developing Problem Solving Skills

When we are having problems in our relationship, we can feel overwhelmed and have difficulty in seeing a way forward. Developing the ability to apply logical, critical, and creative thinking, enables us to find effective solutions. Problem solving is a process that involves a number of steps that you can follow.

- identify the problem
- break the problem down into parts - one small step at a time
- explore the problem - consider a variety of solutions and strategies
- set a goal - what would you like to achieve?
- choose a solution and put it into action
- evaluate - what went well?
- evaluate - what could you do differently next time?

# Communication

## **Lack of communication**

This is a common problem and the one that probably needs most attention. One partner or sometimes both simply don't know how to put into words what they feel. They may have grown up in a family where personal feelings were never shared openly, and so they lack the confidence to be open with their partner for fear of looking silly or being rejected.

## **Enhancing Communication**

When problems arise in relationships, it is often as a result of poor communication. In order to communicate our desires and needs to our partner, we need a healthy sense of our own identity. A successful relationship is dependent upon there being two individuals with a strong sense of self and clearly defined, healthy, personal boundaries. An appreciation of our own qualities enables us to see and value them in another and increases our capacity for intimacy and commitment.

Increasing our understanding of who we are and how we have developed as well as learning practical skills in communication and problem solving, can lead to more satisfying and harmonious relationships, and to personal fulfillment.

There are some basic principles that are worth following if we want to have good communication with our partner.

- be clear about what you want to communicate - if you don't know, they won't either
- use "I" statements, stating what you want or feel rather than making "you" statements about your partner
- don't blame or label your partner
- choose a time when you have their attention and there are no distractions
- take time to listen to what your partner is saying and resist the temptation to interrupt
- if you are unclear or upset about what they have said, check for accuracy before you respond
- be encouraging and supportive
- be willing to negotiate



### **Unresolved emotional differences**

These can put a very firm brake on the development of communication and intimacy in a relationship. Anger, hurt or resentment of one partner by the other, along with a lack of trust or a sense of not being appreciated by their partner, are examples.

### **Practical difficulties**

These can reduce the level of intimacy in some relationships at different times. Examples might be financial concerns, pressures at work, difficulties with children, or just being too busy to really connect with each other.

### **Childhood experiences**

These are often at the root of some people's difficulty establishing intimacy. A person who has experienced a great deal of hurt as a child will often find it hard as an adult to trust their partner, however much they may be in love. Examples of childhood pain that affects adult relationships include long-term conflict between parents, physical or sexual abuse, or a loss or death that was never properly accepted and grieved.

Such experiences can lead to a child having poor self-esteem, a basic doubt about whether or not he or she is worthy of love. These doubts can be carried into adulthood, making it very difficult for the person to open up to someone else in case they are rejected and their doubts are confirmed.

Intimacy does not happen by magic. It must be built up over time. This takes some people longer than for others. Often the harder you work at intimacy, the more valuable and rewarding it is. The following are some steps that may help.

**Be positive about what you have in your relationship** and let your partner know what you value about him/her and about the relationship. Put it into words, don't assume they already know. Everybody likes to be told that they are appreciated and loved.

**Create opportunities for intimacy** - times when you can be alone together in a situation where you can focus on each other and on your relationship. The harder it is to do this because of the children, work or other commitments, the more important it is that you do it! Try to plan a regular evening, day or weekend for the two of you to be alone.

**Practise making "I" statements about how you feel.** This avoids putting your partner on the spot, and may help him or her do the same. For example "I feel hurt you didn't ask me before you decided" instead of "Why didn't you ask me first?"

**After an argument look at the deeper feeling** behind the anger, hurt, anxiety, or sense of being let down. Talk to your partner about these feelings.

Achieving intimacy is not always easy, and sometimes help is needed. Try doing a course or workshop for couples. There are many courses available that combine activities couples complete together with opportunities to discuss important issues about their relationship.

### **Letting Go and Moving On**

For some of us, our best efforts are not enough, and our relationship comes to an end. Rebuilding your life after a relationship has ended can be a painful and challenging process. The end of a relationship can result in disruption to the extent that we need to create a whole new way of life - often with a different place to live and with different relationships with family and friends. Finding our feet in these circumstances can be very difficult indeed.

### **Not Repeating the Old Patterns**

Each of us is unique. We have learned how to be who we are through the particular circumstances of our family, and the society in which we live. Unfortunately, some of our early conditioning may result in us having feelings and behaviours that no longer serve us well, reduce our capacity for spontaneity and individuality, and our ability to relate well. Low self-esteem, poor personal boundaries, difficulties with intimacy, and feelings of shame and guilt impede our capacity to relate.

**Letting go of this negative conditioning is possible.** We tend to hang on fondly to old patterns of being and relating, fearing change or of being confronted with aspects of our personalities we prefer to keep at the blurry edges of our awareness. Whilst dipping into the unknown can be anxiety-provoking, it can also be exciting and enlivening, opening up possibilities only previously dreamed of. Consider embarking on a journey toward something better.

# Relationship Healing

It is important to create a healing environment within the relationship – even if there is anger, criticism or condemnation, as it is this very environment that may calm the atmosphere and allow clarity and purpose of vision to thrive.

You know you have created an environment of healing when you show respect to one another and feel free to show physical affection. Partners use supportive language and messages with one another and are willing to confront their disagreements with open, honest communication. Both partners feel they are equal in the relationship and do not experience power struggles for emotional control. Neither will play the role of victim nor that of martyr because they feel they have a chance to reform or change if the situation requires such.

Receiving critical feedback without becoming defensive or jumpy is crucial as is seeking to be out in the open, giving and receiving direct feedback about each other's personal functioning and performance. Each partner is able to forgive past abuses or hurts.

Each partner will feel they are in a relationship open to healing when both are encouraged to admit their feelings of fear, anxiety, or depression and are supported as they explore their past and families of origin for the roots of any dysfunctional behaviour. They trust one another enough to admit their problems, concerns, faults, and feelings and feel secure, cared for, and accepted. Also the fear of retribution or condemnation for mistakes, shortcomings, or backsliding (past or current) is not evident in the relationship. Self growth and relationship growth is encouraged and each give love and receive love unconditionally.

# Obstacles to Creating Relationship Healing

Even if you have a desire to create a healing environment, you or the others in the environment may be unable to do so because of an inability to forgive and forget or an unwillingness to accept personal responsibility or to accept the consequences for one's actions. An unwillingness to admit to personal mistakes, failures, faults, or errors can create misunderstandings, arguments and often feelings of anger or helplessness.

An inability to let go of anger and hostility over past hurts and pain creates an atmosphere of fear of backsliding, of being hurt again, of being taken advantage of and/or losing more in the long run. An inability to understand the need for forgiveness and forgetting, or being unwilling to do so, creates confusion over what is going on and causes inability to see the changes taking place.

It may also include:

- a lack of creative thinking skills to deal with the problems, looking at each issue objectively
- an unwillingness to accept apologies and the admission of wrongdoing by others
- a stubborn holding to the idea that 'my way of doing things and no other way will do'
- name calling, belittling, ignoring, condemning and harassing of others
- a lack of belief in the other's generosity, good will, and offers of cooperation; a lack of trust
- severe depression or other mental health problems so debilitating that participation in a healthy give and take is impossible
- an inability to accept that your relationship is not a fantasy and is not the way you think it 'should' be
- a lack of belief in one's ability to meet the challenge to change and grow
- fear of taking a risk or of accepting change
- fear of failure or fear of success

- preferring to be a martyr rather than a healer, a caretaker rather than a nurturer
- a lack of communications skills, i.e., inability to
  - listen to feelings
  - respond to others at a feelings level
  - read the nonverbal communications of others
  - solve problems verbally

# Beliefs Needed to Establish Relationship Healing

To heal your relationship, there are several beliefs you need to have in order to move forward. Beliefs such as 'I may be hurt again, but the risk is worth it' or 'it is not always easy to forgive and forget the past hurt and pain, and it may happen again, but if I don't let go of the past I won't be able to live the present or future to its fullest' are amazingly useful in changing the pattern of the way you have been thinking.

Each partner needs to know that they are worthy, fully accept that they deserve a chance to heal within the relationship and have nothing to gain by holding on to a grudge.

Other beliefs to establish healing may include:

- I will give reformations a chance to take hold and give the other person a chance to say, "I'm sorry"!
- Be aware of positive changes; reward and reinforce them.
- Laugh and let the others see your smile and sense of humour.
- Accept a 'yes' when you are given it, and learn to say 'thank you' with no qualifications.
- Accept others for who they are rather than how you would like them to be.
- Use humility, patience, generosity, and honesty as tools in the healing process.

## **When creating a relationship healing is needed**

If any of the following problems exist in your relationship, the relationship is in desperate need of healing for the return of health and vitality. Problem environments exist where the member(s):

- Come from high stress or dysfunctional family backgrounds.
- Have an addictive problem with alcohol, drugs, food, sex, gambling, money, shopping, etc.
- Have rigid beliefs in the religious, political, or social arenas.

- Is workaholic, perfectionist, or obsessively compulsive in getting things done.
- Have been unfaithful to the other.
- Have a relationship in which the parties are neither growing nor being nurtured.
- Are rigid fundamentalists who hold to absolute beliefs of right or wrong.
- Have not been allowed to think or act independently and have lost all sense of personal autonomy.
- Are withdrawn, silent, and unable to deal with personal problems.
- Are immobilised by blaming, bickering, fighting, arguing, yelling, nagging, threatening, name calling, belittling, and other negative behaviour.
- Are troubled, refuse to admit to personal problems and remain unwilling to get help for the problems.
- Are in need of ongoing peer support programming, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, or ALANON (for family members of alcoholics), and the others in the environment encourage such participation.
- Admit to contributing to the conflict in the environment, and ask for support to continue working on growth and change.
- Personal rights are ignored.
- Desire change but feel 'stuck' or immobilised.

# Four Steps to Create a Relationship Healing

**Step 1:** Before you can create a healing within your relationship you need to identify the concerns. Answer the following questions in your journal:

- What problems in your life bother you greatly?
- Is your partner willing to work with you on these problems? How?
- If they are not willing to work with you, are you willing to stay in the environment with this person? If yes, why? If no, why not?

**Step 2:** If your partner is willing to work with you, you have the elements necessary to begin the creation of healing. Answer the next questions in your journal with your partner:

- Why do we need a healing in order to address our problems?
- What healing behaviour needs to be developed in order to address our problems?
- What new beliefs need to be developed to have a healing within our relationship?

**Step 3:** Now that you have identified the need for a healing, you can proceed together to develop an action plan for maintaining a healing environment. Record this plan in your journal.



# Relationship Healing Action Plan

We agree to the following healing environment action plan:

Our problem is: .....

The solution(s) to it include:

We will treat each other with the following healing behaviours:

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We will seek the following outside help for our problems by:

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We will handle all setbacks, relapses, or backsliding in the following way(s):

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We will assess our progress at regular intervals. Date of evaluation of our plan:

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We will revise our action plan, create a new one, or continue with the present plan on the evaluation date.

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We agree that the plan will be deemed successful when we accomplish the following:

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We hereby commit to the above action plan to heal our relationship.

(Signatures) .....  
.....

**Step 4:** If you fail to create a healing environment after the action plan has been in operation for several months, return to Step 1 and begin again. Get outside, objective help if necessary.

# Intimacy and Sex

People generally seem to have two conflicting needs in relationships.

1. We want a sense of space and autonomy, of being allowed to do our own thing. Our independence is important to us.
2. We also want to be close to someone else, to know that we are loved and accepted for who we are, despite our faults. We need to know that we matter deeply to someone else, and that we are valued by them. In other words, we long for intimacy.

Intimacy strengthens how we value ourselves, reassures us that we matter, and enables us to face the world with confidence.

As children, we achieve this sense of intimacy with our parents. As adults, we seek to achieve it in close relationships and with other adults - in friendships, in family relationships, and with a partner.

Intimacy is important in relationships, but is not always easily achieved.

The following provides information to help couples share their thoughts and to explore together ways of making their relationship happier and more fulfilling and to possibly save their relationship from total breakdown.

It does not attempt to give answers, because what works well for one couple may not work well for another. Instead, issues which trouble most couples at some stage in their relationship are described, as well as possible ways of tackling these issues are suggested.

Intimacy is about being emotionally close to your partner, about being able to let your guard down, and let him or her know how you really feel. Intimacy is also about being able to accept and share in your partner's feelings, about being there when he/she wants to let their defences down.

We all have an internal world of feelings and experiences, the world of our dreams, hopes, fears, hurts and memories, the world of our 'inner-most' thoughts. To be able

to share our 'inner-world' with a partner we love, and to be able to share our partner's experiences, is one of the most rewarding aspects of a relationship.

Intimacy often doesn't need words, but being able to put feelings and experiences into words makes intimacy more likely to occur. Intimacy involves being able to share the whole range of feelings and experiences we have as human beings - pain and sadness, as well as happiness and love.

Most of us, however, find it easier to share some types of feelings than others. For example, are you and your partner able to let each other know how you feel about each other?

Saying 'I love you' is important. Assuming your partner knows about your love because of the way you behave is usually not enough.

How do you feel when you are sad, a little depressed, in need of some comforting and reassurance? Are you able to let yourself be dependent and to receive some nurturing? Is this balanced in your relationship, or is one partner the 'strong one' who never needs to show any vulnerability? If so, is this really how you want things to be in your relationship?

How do you feel about yourself when you've taken a bit of a knock and are feeling 'small' and 'put down' or when you've achieved something that makes you feel good about yourself?

How do you feel about sex? What do you like and don't like in your love-making, and about how your sexual relationship could be made more enjoyable for you? Do you really know what your partner thinks and feels, or do you have to guess and 'mind-read'? Are you able to be open with your partner, or do you feel that your partner would not be able to accept some of your feelings?

Intimacy is a journey of discovery in a relationship. Many couples start out their relationship sensing they have achieved a new dimension of intimacy which they have not experienced before. They are in love, it is exciting, and they cannot imagine a greater degree of intimacy.

Yet as the years pass and they go through some of the highs and lows in their relationship, they discover a series of deeper levels in their intimacy. Each discovery makes the relationship more rewarding and fulfilling.

For most couples, one of the times when they are most aware of being intimate is when they are making love. This is not surprising - sexual activity involves trust and taking the risk of being vulnerable with each other. It is a time when, both physically and emotionally, partners let themselves get close to each other.

Making love can then lead to intimacy. Indeed, this is one of the purposes that sex serves in relationships - bringing the couple back into emotional closeness with each other. A good experience of sex in the relationship often makes it easier to remove the risk involved in talking about other experiences.

Sex cannot, however, carry all the burden of intimacy in the relationship. Being able to share feelings of anger, hurt, sadness, pride - the full range of emotional experiences - is also necessary. Without this, some couples find that after a while they begin to feel lonely and unappreciated. It is sometimes necessary for a couple to learn how to be close and express affection for each other without this leading straight on to lovemaking.

This is particularly difficult for some men, who may have been brought up to believe that showing their feelings is somehow a betrayal of their masculinity. When they feel sad, as we all do at times, they can only deal with their sadness by being angry. And when they feel close to their partner, they can only express affection through sex. The more a couple is intimate with each other in ways other than sex, the more rewarding their sex life usually becomes. So, sex and intimacy are not the same, but they are closely related and easily influence each other.

Intimacy is one of the high points of a relationship. But because of the ways that our busy lives intrude, relationships can't run on a high all the time. Space is also necessary so that each partner can develop as an individual. Separateness, being able to be an individual, makes the coming together of intimacy deeper and more special.

So ask yourself these questions. Are you able to have a part of your life to yourself? Are you able to do things on your own that give you satisfaction, or are you totally dependent on your partner for happiness?

Real intimacy is when two independent people choose to come together. The words of Kahlil Gibran from the poem "The Prophet" are often quoted about the balance of intimacy and separateness in relationships.

'Let there be spaces in your togetherness ... Love one another, but make not a bond of love ... Sing and dance together and be joyous, but let each one of you be alone ... And stand together yet not too near together; For the pillars of the temple stand apart, And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other shadow.'

Some couples find it difficult to achieve intimacy in their relationship. Others can find that, after achieving intimacy, it seems to slip away. There are many reasons for such difficulties, and each couple's story is unique. There are, however, some common themes.

# Unemployment Pressures

Unemployment not only has the effect of causing financial hardship but also lowers self esteem, creates isolation and limits the ability of families to lead fulfilling lives in the community. Similarly, at the other end of the spectrum, other families, due to financial pressures and fear of losing employment are working longer hours with a consequent reduction in time for family. This in turn places additional stress and pressure on family life.

Poverty associated with lack of adequate employment is a pressing issue. Unemployment, underemployment and the changing nature of paid work from full time permanent toward casual employment all contribute to reduced financial security, lowered expectations, isolation and disharmony for some families. These uncertainties limit the ability of families to purchase homes, have access to credit or lead fulfilling lives in the community. This pressure has a strong impact upon the well being of their relationships and children growing up in such families frequently have lower expectations of stable economic futures.

## **Financial Strains**

Financial strains are a major factor in family breakdown. Families are spending less time together and the inability of various family members to communicate effectively with each other is an outcome of this. This is exacerbated by some employers who refuse to recognise that workers have family responsibilities.

## **Social Pressures**

The difficulties which couples face in dealing with social pressures can exacerbate relationship problems. For example, the economic demands of long periods of unemployment can prove too great for some. Work practices which are 'family unfriendly' can reduce the ability of couples to resolve differences. The pace of change, combined with high levels of uncertainty about the future of jobs etc. can be very destabilising.

# Relationship Goals

*"Our destination is never a place but rather a new way of looking at things." Henry Miller*

If you have made the choice to work at the relationship, even though it appears to be breaking down at the moment, it is important to make communication your top priority. Setting goals in all areas of your lives may help to identify where your journeys have diverged and may be a starting point for reconnection.

In order for a relationship to be fruitful and satisfying, those involved in it must set clear goals. Most people go into relationships with a vague idea of what they want out of it. When pressed, they often are unable to specify their goals for the relationship. This is a great area to look at if your relationship is nearing breaking point but both parties wish to try to save it.

Goals can be stated or written, but they should be agreed upon by the partners at the beginning of the relationship, or in this case, at the beginning of the repair of the relationship. Goals sometimes are documented in a behavioural contract format and signed by both partners similar to the above exercise of healing your relationship. The goals stated should be only those on which both partners agree and can claim ownership. The relationship goal contract should be kept in a safe place and reviewed annually. During the annual review the goals can be modified, and the objectives to be achieved for the next year can be identified. Relationship goals should be long range, but they should be general enough to give the partners latitude. Annual objectives based on these goals can be more specific and short term, motivating the partners to successfully achieving them within the year. Relationship goals should be developed to cover key issues involved in the relationship, but they can cover any area of human behaviour.

## **Suggested relationship goal issues**

Relationship goals need to cover the whole of the relationship including such areas as:



### **Mutual support goals**

Nurturing and support  
Communication  
Problem solving  
Individual growth  
Fun

Dependency on each other  
Intimacy  
Each other's rights  
Relationship growth  
Family and friends

### **Problem solving goals**

What model to use  
Irritation  
Resolution of issues  
Seeking help  
Creating win/win situations

Handling differences  
Handling arguments  
Freedom to fight  
Agreeing to disagree  
Fun after fighting

### **Growth in the relationship goals**

Mutual growth  
Responsibility for growth  
Use of our unique personalities  
Mental health  
Jealousy/Resentment

Individual growth  
Assertiveness  
Burnout  
Physical health  
Fun

### **Structural goals**

Individual friends  
Time/Schedules  
Relationship maintenance  
Church/Hobbies/Sport/Outside interests

Individual interests  
Goals  
Fun

### **Financial goals**

Career  
Moves interstate  
Training and education  
Cars  
Handling finances  
Luxuries  
Insurance  
Retirement

Transient jobs  
Social roles  
House/Neighbourhood  
Additional assets  
Budgeting  
Credit cards and purchases  
Investments  
Superannuation

### **Family goals**

In-laws and relatives  
Adoption

Children? When? How many?  
Discipline

Education	Family life
Religion	Moral values
Role models	Family style
Emergencies	Fun
Growth	Stay at home or work
Childcare	

## 7 Steps how to decide on relationship goals

- Step 1:** Review the section on suggested relationship goal issues together and discuss how they apply to your relationship.
- Step 2:** Discuss the significant issues in depth.
- Step 3:** In your journal, list at least five goals for each of the areas. In writing down your goals, use the following guide:

### Relationship Goal Characteristics:

- Specify that each partner is responsible for ensuring the goal is reached.
- Different goals require different time frames and different flexibility for attainment – from a day up to 5 years from when the goal is written.
- Are reasonable with a realistic chance of being attained.
- Are written in clear, understandable language, easily understood by both partners.
- Are agreed on by both partners; each partner can commit to ownership of the goal.
- Guarantee respect for the rights of each partner.
- Ensure the health of the relationship.
- Are oriented to each partner's growth in the relationship.

**Step 4:** Once you have five goals for the first area, develop goals under the next area until you exhaust all of the topical areas.

**Step 5:** You should have approximately thirty goals identified after Step 4. Record these goals in your journal.

**Step 6:** Both of you should sign the relationship goal contract and keep it safe for your annual goal review. At that time, evaluate your progress in

reaching your long term goals. Revise your goals if needed and set up short term objectives to continue working toward the long range goals.

**Step 7:** If you and your partner still have difficulty setting goals, review this Goal Setting Chapter with a Life Coach or Counsellor.

# Learning From a Relationship Breakdown

A divorce, separation or, in general, any loss of an important relationship is a painful experience. Such pain can seriously diminish our peace and happiness. We can, however, use this inner discomfort for our spiritual benefit. If we are thinking of separating, there are many lessons we need to examine before we can come to the conclusion that we must separate from someone. But if the other leaves us, or if this separation has already happened, we might be able to benefit from the following. Robert Najemy, author, lecturer and founder of the Centre for Harmonious Living suggests that our first lesson is to examine our behaviour to see how we might have contributed to the problem. Only in this way can we create a new, healthy relationship if we choose to.

- We may have been seeking constant affirmation in ways that may have been tiring for the other.
- We may have been over-critical, complaining, rejecting or otherwise causing the other to feel unaccepted.
- Our fears may have been causing us to be over sensitive and annoying.
- Perhaps we were playing games of power, who is right or who is more successful.
- We might have been playing roles such as the child, the parent, the saviour, the holy one, the rebel, the teacher or some other role which may have affected the other's behaviour.
- We may have guilt feelings that were making us vulnerable to the other's words or behaviours.
- Perhaps we were not communicating our needs clearly and effectively as an adult.
- We may have been projecting onto the other our childhood or other experiences.
- The other might have been reflecting back to us our lack of self-esteem or self-respect.
- We may have attachments that were coming between us.
- We may have inner conflicts, which were reflecting back to us from the other.

Regardless of whether we stay with that person or not, we may need to learn to love the other in spite of his or her behaviour. Happiness, security and love are internal states that are always within us, if only we allow ourselves to experience them.

We can use this opportunity to develop greater inner strength so as to feel confident and able to face whatever may come to us in the game of life.

Most of us will need to change our self-image. We need now to learn to accept, love and respect ourselves more, so that we do not create the same problem in our next relationship or in life in general.

**The lessons to be addressed are separated into five categories:**

1. Learn to communicate more effectively, assertively and lovingly.
2. Let go of some attachments, which are increasing our conflicts with others and diminishing our happiness.
3. Examine our behaviours that might be annoying the other.
4. Free ourselves from subconscious programming, which limit our self-esteem and ability to attract the behaviours that we deserve.
5. Develop inner feelings of security, self worth and freedom. Once our happiness, security and love have become internalised, we can experience unconditional love.

Although we need to make every possible step to heal our relationships, if and when a relationship breaks down, there is still much we can learn.

# Choosing to End the Relationship

Every effort should be made to reconnect with and re-establish loving your partner, however, if the choice is to end the relationship, efforts should be made to end it amicably. Both individuals are then able to take the gained experiences and learn from them. There are ways of making the break up easier:

- **Choose the right time and place** – Choose a time and place where you have privacy to talk without interruptions.
- **Be truthful** – Whatever the reasons for the break-up, be very truthful about them.
- **Be clear** – It is important not to give mixed messages about getting back together in the future. Leave the future to the future!
- **Be prepared** – This may come as a surprise to the other person. Be prepared for them to be shocked, upset or angry, and also give them time to express how they feel.
- **Grieve the loss** – Allow some time to grieve in order to bring closure and be able to move on.
- **Get support** – Ending a relationship can be very distressing, but can be easier to manage with a close family member or friend to lean on.

If you are the person on the receiving side, here are some helpful tips that can aid you through this difficult time:

- **Get support** – Talk to people you trust about how you feel, whether it is family, friends or a professional advisor.
- **Grieve the loss** – Allow some personal time to grieve, and this may also mean not rushing into a new relationship.
- **Do not manipulate** – Do not make threats to try and make the other person stay, or try to take revenge.

The ending of a relationship is sometimes perceived as a negative, especially when using words such as “dumped” or “break up” etc. However, it can be a positive move if it takes you out of a relationship that is filled with unhappiness, dishonesty and disrespect.

Life has not ended, it has only changed. What may be seen as an ending, may in actual fact be just the beginning!

# Seven Tips for Dealing with a Relationship Breakup

1. **Accept your sadness and be kind to yourself.** Do not put undue pressure on yourself. Take time off from work if necessary. During this mourning period, learn to accept that this person was put in your path for you both to learn and grow and remember the good things and value them. Buy books or attend workshops that support the idea of letting go and feeling good about yourself. Seek grief counselling if that feels right.
2. **Formalise a farewell** to end the relationship. When someone dies we have formal funerals but when a loved one leaves we have no such comforting ritual. If you can, let go of things that remind you of what is no more. Letting go of the material goods helps to let go of the memory. Don't be tempted to keep souvenirs and pore over them – it will only make the memory want linger on.
3. **Treat and indulge yourself.** All the books and experts tell you that indulging yourself from time to time is good for you – but it is particularly good to do when you are feeling emotionally unstable or vulnerable. Food might be the first treat that comes to mind, but be moderate – indulging in food may make you feel worse later. Allow your body to tell you what to eat. Think of the type of exercise you would most love to do and start doing it. Buy some aromatic bath oil, light loads of candles and soak in a warm bath for as long as you need as often as you need or read a great uplifting book.
4. **Ask yourself each day what you have to be grateful for.** It is very healing to give thanks for all that is good and wonderful in our lives - a roof over your head, a job or friends and family that love you allows you to focus on what is possible and not on what is no longer.
5. **Make a list of all the things that are great about you** and tell yourself those things. Say to yourself: "What I like about me is:....." Make a list of all the qualities a new partner will get when they come into your life and re-read and add to them whenever you think of something else.



6. **Go on a personal development workshop** that will boost your positive self image. You'll also meet new people who are also trying to improve their lives and they are more likely to have positive attitudes.
7. **Surround yourself with people who give you hope** rather than who drag you back into the past or drag you down. Avoid people who pat you on the back and say stuff like 'oh how awful' and seek out people who say things like 'so, what's next – what wonderful people are out there for you to meet'.

And when you are looking back at yourself from having got over it, what would you tell yourself from there in the future that you have learned. Make it something worthwhile!

# Can We Be Friends?

It's the dreaded four-word phrase... "Can we be friends?" It's a classic break-up line, but it's also an issue that must be faced when a relationship hits the rocks. In reality, the questions ought to be "should we be friends?" And, if so, "how will we define that relationship?" Below are some points to ponder when facing the partnership to friendship dilemma.

## **Take Care of Self First**

Whether it's a marriage or a significant partnership, there are issues that you must manage when the romance ends. In the case of divorce, there is a legal process to manage. There may be property and assets to divide. Decisions may have to be made about mutual friends and whether those relationships can continue. Focus first on the "business" of ending your relationship. It is your responsibility to manage this process with knowledge and dignity.

Your first thought should not be about the place your ex will hold in your future. Focus on healing yourself. Take time to reflect on the relationship and learn the inevitable lessons that arise from that experience. Use your support network to heal emotionally. Use exercise, hobbies and your favourite activities to keep yourself physically active and vibrant. And in most cases, remember you can't rely on your ex to help you recover or to find closure.

## **Evaluate Your Intentions**

When approaching a friendship with an ex, take time to understand your motives for pursuing that relationship. Remember what defines a friendship: conversation, connection, support and mutual interests. Again, if your motive is to seek closure, "check up" on your former partner, rekindle your romance or inflict some sort of revenge on the one that wronged you, it is probably best to let more time past. If you are truly friends, time will not diminish that connection. Don't rush into something that is unhealthy or dysfunctional.

## **Assess Their Value**

From time to time, we all clean out our closets, getting rid of the clothes or household goods that no longer suit us. Too often, we don't do this with our friends and acquaintances. It is important that we fill our lives with people who bring value to our existence. Make a list of pros and cons to nurturing a friendship with your former partner. Realise that the same reasons that led to the relationship's end may be the factors that make a friendship with your ex unbeneficial. Be prepared to acknowledge the fact that someone who was a critical part of your past may not have a place in your future.

# Children and Relationship Breakdown

What happens for children when their parents separate?

Children can react very differently to separation or divorce. The way they react depends on a number of things, but two important factors are the age of the child and the degree of conflict and animosity between the parents. There is no doubt this is a stressful period for children, but most recover and end up leading normal healthy lives.

Children from separated families can develop and flourish just as well as other children. Their adjustment is enhanced when parents remain sensitive to the children's needs. Separation is often a surprise for children and they generally experience many of the same feelings as adults. Children can also grieve for quite a long time. They may be unaware of the problems their parents were having and they may feel shocked and confused when the separation occurs. They are also likely to feel insecure and worry whether the remaining parent will leave them as well. Some children may feel that they must have been to blame. Others may feel very angry with either or both of their parents and want to blame one of them. Sometimes children become unsure about whether they can still love the parent who left, and they can wonder what is happening to the absent parent.

Although parents are often upset and confused themselves at this time, it is important to try to understand what your children are going through and to consider their feelings as well. Remember, it can be far less harmful for a child to go through family breakdown than to go on living in an unhappy family where there is extreme tension and fighting in the home.

## **Ways you can help your children**

- When you begin to accept the separation then your children will be able to do the same - it is important that you get on with your life and not dwell in the past or hang on to any anger or bitterness.
- Ensure your children know you both still love them and that this will always be the case.
- Don't criticise the other parent in front of the children.

- Be positive about the other parent when talking to your children.
- Give your children the clear message that it is good for them to have an ongoing relationship with both of you.
- Let your children know that even though separating is upsetting, you are handling it and expect things to improve.
- Be aware that children often tell you what they think you want to hear and sometimes what they say should not be taken too literally. A young child who says, when questioned about his time with his father: "I don't like the food my daddy gives me to eat", may just want to reassure his mother that he likes living with her.
- Talk to the other parent about your children and their interests.
- Talk to your children's teachers.
- Give your children the time to think about and express their own feelings about the other parent, even if those feelings are not the same as yours.
- Avoid conflict and arguments in front of your children.
- Avoid asking them to give messages to the other parent.
- Turn to other adults for emotional support rather than your children.
- Help your children to discuss their feelings about the separation.
- Reassure children that they are not to blame - sometimes when parents are fighting some of the anger is directed toward the children who may then mistakenly believe that it was because they were bad or troublesome that led to their parent's separation.

# Recovering Gently

If you are not yet ready to do a lot of loving things for yourself that will make you feel better and help you inch back toward your pre-breakup level of self-esteem or better, you may be feeling self-destructive. That's normal. This section is about passing some time safely.

## **Drugs and Alcohol**

You know your limits better than anyone else, but it is also known that your judgment probably isn't at its best right now. Having several cocktails a few nights in a row in the wake of a breakup may be perfectly fine for some people, even great. For you, this might be reckless or worse. So take time to consider if you are making appropriate decisions about drugs and alcohol use.

Whatever choices you make, remember that it is completely normal for you to be in a lot of pain right now. Also keep in mind that in order to get through the pain, you have to feel it. Your brain is at work processing and accepting your heartbreak even as you are lying on the couch crying. But if you numb your brain with mind-altering substances for the next month, it won't perform its usual functions and you won't get any closer to feeling better.

## **Safe Places**

Imagine a place that is a safe happy place for you. It can be the cubby house in your grandparents' backyard where you used to play with your cousin. It can be your fantasy of a thatched hut on a tropical beach as the sun is setting. Now, how does it smell? What is there besides you? A hammock, a toy, the sound of lapping waves? Get acquainted with this place. And then go there in your mind whenever you start to feel panicky or overwhelmed with grief. Go there when you are sitting on the train, when you are in a crowded elevator, when you are at home alone and feel as if you are falling apart. Stay there in your mind until you feel a little better.

Now pick your favourite place in your home. It could be the bathroom with the bathtub full of bubbles or sitting in your favourite chair by the window - and then decide that this is your safety zone. That means that when you go to that place, things are all right, things are going to get better. Nothing bad happens to you in

that place. The next time YOU start feeling really bad, go to your safety zone. As many a late night infomercial will tell you, it's amazing how you can get yourself to feel better by using the power of your own mind.

### **Other Activities**

Sometimes you've just got to do nothing but lie in bed in a foetal position and be a miserable wretch. Try not to spend more than one complete day doing this. After twenty-four hours of said behaviour, you should try to move a little.

**Walking** ... for five minutes. You may not feel ready to get out of the house, or even out of bed, but a brief walk around the block and a little fresh air might make for a helpful time-out.

# Thinking about Divorce

There are alternatives, such as counselling, coaching or mediation that you could look at first. These services can help you to avoid splitting up, if that's what you want. Or they can make the split, if it does come, less painful and damaging for you and your family.

If you are concerned about your relationship and want to improve it, or wish to learn how not to repeat the mistakes of the past in a new relationship, you may consider coaching or counselling.

Relationship coaching or counselling can be of benefit even if you are not currently in a relationship, or if your partner is not able or willing to attend.

Sometimes the issues are too complex, or the feelings too painful or confusing, for talking together to be successful. Counselling or coaching can, at these times, be of great value.

A relationships counsellor acts as an independent guide to help the couple talk things through. The presence of the counsellor makes it possible to say the things that are otherwise too hard to put into words.

It makes good sense to spend a little time talking to someone about your concerns instead of waiting until things get worse.

## **Counselling**

A counsellor can help you discuss emotive issues and will help couples that want to save their marriage. Counsellors are professionally trained, though some offer their services voluntarily. They are trained to listen and to help you to work out your own solutions to relationship problems. They don't negotiate for you or tell you what to do.

Family support is counselling that can help the whole family to deal with problems and prevent relationships breaking down and families splitting up.

Tackling problems early is important in order to save a relationship. The longer a problem is left unresolved, the harder it usually is to deal with it.

Counselling can also help a family to accept what is happening to them and to deal with the emotional stress that separation or divorce can cause within a family.

Attempting to work things out through counselling or mediation could lead to better family decisions and long-term relationships after the divorce.



## **Coaching**

Coaching is different to counselling in that a coach will spend time with you, either individually or together, and determine where you would like to go with the relationship and help find ways to take you from where you are to where you want it to be. Coaching is not a choice to make if there has been abuse, severe trauma, or adultery in the relationship.

As with counsellors, coaches are trained to listen and to help you to work out your own solutions to relationship problems. They will not tell you what you have to do, but will suggest ways to improve the ways both sides are dealing with each other.

## **Mediation**

Mediation is different from counselling and coaching. It is more concerned with dealing with the practicalities of day to day life following relationship breakdown. It is more like negotiating an agreement and resolving a dispute without involving lawyers or the courts. You can ask a trained family mediator to act as an impartial third party; they will help couples come to an agreement without bias or being on anyone's 'side'. Public funding is available for those who qualify for legal aid. The funding is for mediation and for legal help, during and after mediation, for legal advice on any agreements reached.

The internet and your local telephone book will have a list of mediation services you could approach.

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