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Breakup Recovery Kit

When you're dreaming with a broken heart
The waking up is the hardest part
You roll outta bed and down on your knees
And for a moment you can hardly breathe…

John Mayer – Dreaming With a Broken Heart

Breakups are one of the most difficult experiences in life. For some people, breakups are associated with elevated risk of depression and long-term psychological distress.

I still remember my first major heartbreak. It was my first year of University. I woke up as if nothing had changed, only to be hit with the painful reality that we were no longer together. It felt like a kick to the stomach. Throughout the day I was constantly reminded of my ex, preoccupied with what he was doing, and if he was thinking of me (thankfully this was before Facebook existed!). I made sense of the breakup by believing that I was too needy and had lost my only chance at love. It took me a while to feel like myself again.

There is a Buddhist saying that "pain in inevitable; suffering is optional." Many of us want to avoid the pain of the loss through distraction or dating again. Rather than try to numb or avoid the pain, I believe that breakups are an opportunity for growth and healing. My hope is that you can go through this universal human experience with less suffering, while also learning from your pain. This kit is meant to provide support for the first few months after a breakup.

The only way out is through – Robert Frost

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Breakup Roadmap [1]	
1. Accepting the reality of the loss	o *Impact of the Breakup* handout o Frequently Asked Questions o *Self-Care Coping Plan* o Spending time with loved ones o See *Additional Resources*
2. Working through the pain of the breakup	o *Cognitive Therapy For Breakups* handout o *Who Am I Now?* handout o *Relationship Autopsy* handout o Engage in regular journaling
3. Re-investing energy in other pursuits and relationships	o Continue to invest in your social life and other leisure activities o Continue to work on personal issues o Consider dating again

[1] This chart is adapted from William Worden's Four Tasks of Grieving.

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Why Breakups Are So Difficult

Attachment

The desire to connect with others is one of the deepest human motivations. Evolutionary psychologists believe that bonding has helped us to survive harsh conditions by living in small, interconnected groups. Developing close bonds with caregivers is essential to a child's emotional and physical development. In fact, babies who are deprived of human touch can become sick and cognitively delayed, as found in Romanian orphanages.

When children are separated from a caregiver, they send out signals to keep their loved ones close. They may cry, become angry (protest behaviour), or anxious (separation anxiety). If the separation persists, children move into despair, and eventually detachment. Another way to describe the experience of being separated from a caregiver is called primal panic. From an evolutionary perspective, being separated from your caregiver could mean isolation and death, so it makes sense that this mechanism would be strong enough to hopefully lead to establishing reconnection.

As adults, many of us transfer our attachment needs onto a romantic partner. This means that when they are not available, we might send some of the same attachment signals as children. For example, if your partner does not pick up their phone, you may become angry, engaging in protest behaviour. If your relationship ends, you may go into a state of primal panic where you experience intense anxiety, intense impulses to re-establish contact, and a disruption of your body's stress hormones. That might be why the pain of rejection is so intense and similar to physical pain.

The intensity of our reaction to a breakup is also influenced by the quality of our early relationships with caregivers. If we have had a history of our needs not being met by caregivers, the breakup can trigger intense emotional pain related to our early attachment experiences. These are called attachment injuries.

In summary, breakups hurt so much is because they trigger evolutionary processes that were designed to help us maintain proximity to caregivers. Although you might feel like the despair and panic you feel means that there is something wrong with you, these reactions are natural with in the framework of attachment. This phase typically passes within a few weeks.

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Changes in Self Concept

Early in a relationship, it's natural to immerse yourself in the interests and identity of your new partner. When your relationship ends, it's also natural to feel a temporary loss of your sense of self (Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, & Kunak, 2006; Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel 2010).

When researchers asked participants to describe who they were after a breakup, they used fewer unique words to describe themselves (Lewandowski et al., 2006). While relationships can lead to a greater sense of self, breakups can lead to a smaller sense of self.

Another change that happens is that the recreational activities, friends, and other rituals can also be lost with a relationship (called self-concept content change). The more your day-to-day life is changed as a result of the breakup, the more challenging it can be to grieve the loss of the relationship because your lives are so intertwined. For example, if you and your partner worked out together at the same gym, went for drinks on Fridays with the same friends, the breakup is naturally going to be more disruptive to your routine.

Although it's natural to go through a phase of disruption of you identity, some things can make it more complicated. The less clear your identity was before, the more it may be disrupted by a breakup (called self-concept clarity). In one study, higher disruption of aspects of your life combined with lower levels of self-identity, predicted higher levels of emotional distress after a breakup.

What this all means is that it's normal to be confused about who you are after a breakup. In this kit, we have an exercise called *Who Am I?* that is intended to help you begin the journey toward defining yourself again.

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Memory

With any significant relationship, the interactions we have are stored into two memory systems called implicit and explicit memory. Implicit memory is an unconscious type of memory that develops just before birth. It includes nonverbal, sensory, emotional, and motor memory. Between 12-18 months, explicit memory develop, which enable us to be able to remember facts, timelines, and stories. As we develop, we continue to encode implicit and explicit memories together.

So what do implicit and explicit memory have to do with breakups? The memories we have encoded during the relationship are often brought up through reminders, which can lead to negative emotions. These are called triggers. Let's say you're walking down the street after your breakup and you smell your ex's fragrance. You become flooded with memories of your time together, and a wave of sadness passes over you. Chances are, you are probably recalling an implicit memory (the emotions you felt while around your ex), as well as an explicit memory (remembering the concert you went to when they wore that fragrance).

It's important to understand that emotional triggers are natural experiences during a breakup. It's your body's way of reminding you of something significant that you are missing. We can't control many triggers, but recognizing them and being kind to ourselves when they happen can go a long way. The triggers become less intense for people, or they might even be associated with fond memories of the time you had.

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Impact of the Breakup

In times of crisis, it is helpful to make sense of your experience. Researchers have found that putting emotions into words actually has a calming effect on the brain. For this exercise, please select the symptoms that you have been experiencing in the past few weeks.

Physical Symptoms	Emotional Reactions	Thoughts	Behaviours
o Difficulty sleeping o Digestive problems o Muscle tension o Racing heart o Dry throat o Nausea o Cold/flu o Shallow breathing o Restlessness o Fatigue	o Confusion o Rage o Irritability o Sadness o Depression o Hopelessness o Numbness o Longing o Panic o Self-doubt o Uncertainty o Righteous indignation	o Obsessive thoughts o Racing thoughts o Sexual fantasies o Analyzing conversations o Analyzing ex's actions o Self-blame o Blaming others o Wanting revenge o Difficulty concentrating	o Checking social media o Making self available to ex o Checking phone for messages o Asking for advice o Isolation o Constantly busyness o Eating too much/too little o Loss of routine

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o Increased energy			

When Professional Help Is Needed

For most people, these symptoms are natural reactions that fade over time. For some people, these reactions can persist and cause difficult with functioning. Here are some signs when it's recommended to seek professional support:

- o Formulating a plan for suicide – you might not be able to see your life without this person, but if you are seriously considering ending your life, contact professional support immediately (e.g., psychologist, doctor)
- o Planning to hurt others – it's normal to be angry at your ex, but if you are seriously planning to harm them or anyone else, contact professional support immediately (e.g., psychologist, doctor)
- o If your symptoms have worsened or not improved within 4-6 weeks
- o If the breakup involved infidelity, manipulation, or abuse
- o If your ex has made threats to harm you
- o You are turning to destructive coping strategies (e.g., drug or alcohol use)

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Frequently Asked Questions

1. Should I have contact with my ex after we breakup?

There are no easy answers here, but here are a few points to consider:

Overall, researchers have found that contact with an ex is associated with poorer post breakup functioning, prolonged distress, and prolonged longing for the partner (Field et al., 2009; Knox et al., 2000).

With social media, approximately one third to one half of people admit to looking through their partner's Facebook profile or pictures after they have broken up, with many keeping regular tabs on their partner (Chalk & Jones, 2011; Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, & Cratty, 2011). Overall, Facebook surveillance was associated with greater breakup distress, negative feelings, sexual desire, longing for the partner, and lower personal growth. This occurred when the exes were not friends (Marshall, 2012).

On the other hand, when people remained friends with their exes over Facebook, they reported lower negative feelings, sexual desire, and longing for their partner, but also lower personal growth (Marshall, 2012). This could mean that the exposure to their ex may have had a habituating effect, lowering their mystique and unavailability. Another explanation could be that the nature breakup was amicable, leading to lower negative emotion.

My general recommendation is **to gradually decrease contact** in order to make the process of withdrawal from your ex a little easier.

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The rationale for gradual withdrawing of contact is because this may lessen the state of primal panic (the overwhelming sense of anxiety and longing to connect with our ex). If we do not have some sort of way to connect with our ex, this experience can be overwhelming and re-traumatizing for some.

An exception to gradual disengagement from your ex is if they have been abusive or emotionally manipulative. In this case, it is recommended to cut off contact in order to disengage from the abusive cycle and allow yourself to heal.
If it's not appropriate to have contact with your ex but you are still struggling, one option is to maintain some sort of connection with your ex in a way that is not intruding on their boundaries. This may mean looking at pictures of them, or reading emails or letters they have written. This may help you to make sense of the loss and engage in the grieving process.

Overall, if seeing your ex is causing you confusion and delayed healing, you might want to consider ending contact entirely. You will experience a lot of emotional pain initially, but you will eventually start to feel better. If having some contact with your ex is able to help you to eventually grieve the loss and move on, then this option may work for you.

One thing to consider if that if you remain friends, how will you feel about dating or seeing your ex with someone? It's important to ask yourself if your friendship or contact might be prolonging your grief or making it difficult to move on.

What about contact with my ex's family?

There are no absolutes here, but ask yourself: What is your intention in keeping connected to your ex's family? If it's because they are an integral part of your life, it is understandable that you would want to keep contact. If your intention is to try to get information about your ex or try to influence your ex's family regarding the breakup, this might just cause further pain for everyone. Keep in mind that there are many additional losses that occur with a breakup, and your ex's family can be another difficult loss to grieve.

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They said they need some time. How long should I wait?

Some people who initiate a breakup say they need time in order to ease the finality of the breakup. I can understand that your ex needing more time can be a sign of hope in the midst of uncertainty. However, I would recommend adopting the mindset that the breakup is permanent, and begin moving on. If you happen to get back together in the future, you may be coming from a healthy place because you have been taking care of your needs.

When should I start dating new people?

I usually recommend taking a 6-12 month break from relationships to work on yourself and the issues that contributed to the breakup. If you date before you are ready, there is a chance that you may bring past resentment into your current relationship, or choose a person that replicates similar unhealthy dynamics. That being said, I've had clients get back on the dating horse right after a an urgency to start dating to make up for lost time, but I have worked with many clients who have met amazing partners later in life.

How do I handle things if I run into my ex?

This one is tough. It's tempting to brag about how amazing your life is, or maybe tell them how much they've hurt you. I would keep it respectful, kind, and short. Find a reason to exit the situation if you don't have one. Be careful about getting drawn back into unhealthy dynamics or romanticizing the relationship (e.g., "why did we breakup anyway?").

As Ron Burgundy says on Anchorman, "You stay classy, San Diego."

What if we share pets?

This is a complicated one, especially since pets become members of the family. I recently read a CBC article where a Saskatchewan judge stated that dog custody issues were a waste of court resources. If you take an animal custody issue to court, there is a chance that the judge may recommend that

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your animal be sold and the profits be split between you. I don't have any simple answers, other than to try to find a reasonable arrangement. If you have difficulty seeing your ex, can your spouse drop your dog off at another person's home? Some people have to make a difficult decision to let their pets go if it is too stressful on them. You might also want to consider trying to use a professional meditator to help you find a solution.

Will I ever get over this breakup?

Yes! Humans have the incredible ability to adapt to negative life events (researchers call the psychological immune system). Eastwick (2007) found in that college students over-predicted the negative emotions they would experience after going through a breakup. The inaccurate prediction of one's emotional state in the future (called an affective forecasting error), is influenced by our emotional state at the time of the bad news (called the initial intensity bias). However, it's interesting to note that the participants in the study were accurate at guessing how long it would take the negative event to dissipate. Overall, we tend to overestimate the negative impact that a breakup is going to have, but are fairly accurate in predicting the time it takes to get over it.

*Other factors that can make breakups **more** difficult:*

- Past experiences or betrayal
- Unreciprocated love
- Attributing the breakup to personal deficiencies that are fixed and stable
- A lack of self-identity
- Insecure attachment
- High investment in the relationship

Here's what can help to recover from a breakup:

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- If we believe that we can develop the skills and abilities to cope with and learn from adversity, this seems to lead to better outcomes (Carol Dwerk calls a growth mindset).The positive changes experienced by adversity have been called post traumatic growth
- Our ability to be develop self-compassion also influences how we cope with a breakup. Self-compassion can include: seeing your problems as part of the universal experience, practicing being in the moment (mindfulness), and making meaning out of your situation.

Self-Care Coping Plan[2]

Type	Recommendations	Goals (weekly)
Sleep	o 7- 9 hours per night o Consistent routine, even on weekends o No electronics 1-2 hours before bed	
Eating	o Eating real foods o Avoid sugar, caffeine, and alcohol	
Exercise	o 30 minutes, 3x per week (minimum)	
Socializing	o Connect with one person per day	

[2] This plan is based on behavioural activation, a evidence-based treatment for depression that focuses on changing your behaviours by scheduling activities. Typically the first 4-6 weeks are the hardest for most people.

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	o Schedule at least one outing per week o Time with nature and animals	
Boundaries	o Limit contact with ex o Avoid social media	
Other:	o Avoid making major decisions	

Progress Review for week: _____

Successes:

Challenges:

Learning:

Next steps:

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Cognitive Therapy for Breakups

Cognitive therapy is a popular form of psychological treatment based on the idea that our thoughts influence our mood and behaviours. Many of our thoughts negatively biased, creating errors in thinking errors (called cognitive distortions). When we believe these thought errors, we tend to feel more depressed and act in ways that don't support healthy development. The good news is that we can become aware of our cognitive distortions, to create more accurate and realistic ways of thinking.

Beneath our negative thinking patterns, there usually are negative core beliefs about ourselves, the world, and our future (called Beck's cognitive triad). For example, underneath the thought "No one will ever love me" is a core belief that you are not worthy. The overall goal of cognitive therapy is to adjust our thoughts so that they are more balanced and see the world in a more accurate way.

With breakups, Carol Dweck found that the hurt from rejection can linger if people see the breakup as revealing something fundamental about who they are as a person. When these participants viewed their personality as something that is fixed and cannot be changed, this led to greater struggles down the road in getting over the breakup.

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In this exercise, we're going to explore some of the common negative thoughts that occur during breakups. The left hand column represents the type of negative thinking error (cognitive distortion), the middle column represents the unhealthy thinking pattern (automatic thoughts), and the right column represents healthier thoughts. Select the unhealthy thoughts you have experienced since the breakup, then try practicing some of the healthy thoughts on the right hand side. It can take time and practice with different ways of thinking before it becomes a habit.

Cognitive Distortions	Unhealthy Thought	Healthy Thought
1. Black and white thinking	o My life was amazing when I was in a relationship o There's something deeply wrong with me	o Life has challenges whether I'm single or in a relationship o I have strengths and limitations but I can grow
2. Overgeneralization	o Nothing ever works out for me	o Rejection is a part of life and for everyone
3. Jumping to conclusions: *1. Fortune telling*	o I'll never find anyone again	o Many people find relationships later in life

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2. Mind reading	o One day they will come back o They never cared about me o If they only understood my side they would come back	o I can't put my life on hold anymore o The emotions we shared were real but things have changed o It's painful to accept this but I need to move on
4. Magnification **Minimization**	o This is the worst thing that could happen to me o Our problems weren't that bad	o This has been hard but I know I'll be okay o If I'm honest, there were major issues
5. Emotional reasoning	o I feel like a loser	o Everyone's ego takes a hit in a breakup but this loss doesn't define me
6. Should statements	o I should have seen it coming o I should have done something different	o Hindsight is 20/20 o I have learned a lot about myself for the next relationship

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7. Labeling	o I am ugly/defective/old	o There are things I can change if I work on them, but it's not helpful to put myself down
8. Blame		
1. Self	o It's all my fault	o I can only take responsibility for my part
2. Other	o It's all their fault	o Two quality people can be in a relationship, and it still sometimes doesn't work out

Who Am I? Self-Concept Clarity Exercise

As previously mentioned, when people go through a breakup they temporarily experience a disruption to their identity. However, Larson and Sbarra found that simply talking about the breakup regularly decreased breakup related intrusive thoughts and loneliness over a nine-week period.

The purpose of this exercise is mean to help you start to develop a sense of self without your partner. Please answer the following questions, using the room provided or write them in a journal or word document.

1. How well do I know myself?

2. What things did I like to do with my time before I met my partner?

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3. How would my friends describe my personality?

4. How would I describe my personality?

5. In what ways am I different than my ex?

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6. Who am I without my partner?

Relationship Autopsy (Expressive Writing Exercise)

Humans are natural storytellers. It's how we make sense of our world and ourselves. Telling stories also has an adaptive function because it links memory, thought, and emotion (Siegel, 2012).

James W. Pennebaker has conducted a number of studies with expressive writing and found that it has been beneficial for overall emotional health. If we can process our life experiences and understand what we can learn from them, to develop purpose and meaning. This type of reflection also helps us to avoid future mistakes.

Lewandowski found that participants who wrote about the breakup reported experiencing more positive emotions and less negative emotions.

Please answer the following questions, using the room provided or write them in a journal or word document.

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Part 1: Understanding

1. What factors led to this relationship ending?

2. Describe the breakup event. How did it happen?

3. How have you been feeling?

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4. What is the hardest part of this breakup?

5. What thoughts are you thinking repeatedly?

6. What unresolved questions would you like answers to?

7. What do you need right now?

Part 2: Lessons Learned

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1. What were some of the negative aspects of your relationship?

2. What were some of the positive aspects of your relationship?

3. What needs were not met in your relationship?

4. What parts of this relationship can you take responsibility for?

5. What things would you do differently for the next relationship? (e.g., work less, be less critical of my partner)

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6. How do you think this relationship has changed you for the better?

7. What do you want your next relationship to be like?

8. What do you need to continue to grow personally?

Stories of Hope

Dan, aged 50, attended counselling after his wife had an affair and ended their marriage abruptly. He was angry and heartbroken, and to make matters worse, she blamed him for her affair. Daniel and I worked on developing a good self-care plan, which included keeping up his exercise routine and spending time with his adult children. Then we helped him to process his grief and understand the parts of his relationship that were not working. We explored characteristics of healthy relationships and what he wanted at this point in his life. The last time I spoke to Dan, he was happily dating a lovely woman. He still felt anger toward his ex from time-to-time, but it typically passed quickly.

Jennifer, aged 25, attended counselling to cope with the breakup of her on-again, off-again boyfriend, Trevor. She couldn't understand why she still kept going back to Trevor, after he repeatedly cheated on her and was critical of her career. Jennifer learned that her reaction to her boyfriend mirrored her relationship with her father, whom had abandoned their family. This knowledge about the influence of her early relationships on

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her present relationship helped her to shed the shame and self-blame that she had carried for years. We then worked to help her resist her ex's attempts to pull her back into the relationship, while restoring her self-worth. Jennifer ended up dating a very kind man and learned that love doesn't have to hurt to feel good.

Jason, aged 32, recently went through a breakup and didn't see it coming. He found himself desperately wanting to maintain contact with his ex. To make matters worse, they just had recently purchased a house and bought a dog. Jason went through about six weeks of intense grief, where he felt a lot of emotional pain. He tried to make sense of the breakup, even though there were many unanswered questions. He gradually began to set healthy boundaries with contact so he could start to move on. During this time, Jason began reading about adult attachment and healthy relationships, and started dating again. He bought his own condo and had fun furnishing it on his own. Jason decided that in his past relationship, he had jumped into things too quickly, and was going to take time to get to know his next partner before committing to moving in together. Last I had spoken with Jason, he was dating a lovely young woman and was enjoying his condo.

I am so sorry that you are in pain right now, but please remember that you are not alone. Breakups are difficult but they can be opportunities to deepen our connection to ourselves and others.

I wish you all the best in your journey,

Christina

Additional Resources

Websites and Blogs

- Alana Mbana
- Katie Bogen
- JR Hughes
- Getting over a breakup (Huffington Post)
- Article: Foolproof ways to fix a broken heart

Apps

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- **o** Mend – a "personal trainer for heartbreak" program

Videos

- oVisit my website for a list of videos on breakups
- **o** Alan Robarge

Books (some are available in an ereader or audio format)

- o *Rebuilding* – Bruce Fisher + Robert Alberti
- o *The Journey from Abandonment to Healing* – Susan Anderson
- o *Rising Strong* – Brene Brown
- o *Splitopia* – Wendy Paris
- o *Attached* – Amir Levine + Rachel Heller
- o *Opening Up By Writing It Down* – James W. Pennebaker + Joshua Smyth

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