



**H**ow you grieve a lost relationship is a process unique to you. Different people (even members of the couple that have separated) will experience and demonstrate their grief in different ways.

The grief you feel after a break up may be complicated by prior experiences of loss, traumatic events surrounding the relationship (e.g., physical violence), a history of difficult relationships, or other social or personal factors (e.g., lack of social support). It can be especially helpful to seek assistance when a grieving process is complicated by other factors or events.

# When a Relationship Ends

## WHEN IT'S OVER...

When an important relationship ends it is one of life's most stressful occurrences. Grief is the most common response to this type of loss. In fact, grieving the end of a close relationship is adaptive; it is neither a weakness nor a thing to be avoided.

## ARE THERE STAGES TO GRIEVING A LOST RELATIONSHIP?

Many individuals report experiencing a period of numbness or shock immediately following a breakup. This may occur whether the loss was anticipated (as in the case of a mutual decision to separate after repeated discussions), or was unexpected (as in the case of one partner suddenly announcing the dissolution of the relationship).

Following this period of shock, people may experience a time of intense emotional upheaval, during which the full impact of the loss may be experienced. Here, your emotions may be overwhelming and temporarily interfere with your academic, social, or family life. The severity and duration of a grief reaction will vary from person to person.

For most people, the intense emotional pain of grief subsides. Eventually, energy is refocused on the future and new relationships. However, if your grief response does not gradually lessen in intensity or, over time, continues to interfere with your academic, social or occupational functioning, then you may benefit from receiving assistance.

## WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MYSELF COPE?

- **Give yourself some time to recover.** It's normal for it to hurt.
- **Work to identify and accept all of your feelings.** This is a difficult, yet vital, part of the grieving process.
- **Give some form of expression to your feelings.** Release jealousy, anger and sadness in ways that won't hurt you or others. Talking and crying about your experience can often help vent pain.
- **Maintain a positive view of yourself.** Another person's actions (e.g., decision to leave the relationship) are not a reflection of your worth. Loving and respecting yourself will help you heal and make healthy choices in the future.
- **Take action and make choices that are good for you.** For example, you may feel better if you put away reminders of the relationship (e.g., photos, mementos) and decide not to listen to sad songs.

## HOW MIGHT I FEEL?

Some normal reactions to the end of a relationship include:

### THOUGHTS

- disbelief
- confusion
- preoccupation
- misgivings
- second thoughts
- “what ifs”

### BEHAVIOURS

- crying
- social withdrawal
- sleep disturbance
- absent-mindedness
- appetite disturbance
- restless over-activity
- dreams of the other
- avoiding going to classes
- treasuring reminders of the other

### FEELINGS

- anger
- guilt
- relief
- anxiety
- sadness
- hopefulness
- loneliness
- resentment
- abandonment
- emptiness

### PHYSICAL SENSATIONS

- dry mouth
- chest pain
- lack of energy
- tightness in your throat
- weakness in your muscles
- hollowness in your stomach
- headaches

## WHERE CAN I GET HELP?

Student Counselling Services (966-4920)

Student Health Services (966-5768)

- **Decide if it's realistic or in your best interest to become “just friends”.**
- **Reassure yourself that it is normal for feelings to take an “up and down” course.**
- **Stay focused on yourself.** Over-focusing on your ex (e.g., ruminating about why she left, wondering if he is dating again) will drain you of the energy you need to help yourself feel better.
- **Be careful of “rebounding”.** In the early stages of grief many people feel lonely and anxious about being alone; most, however, are not yet emotionally ready to make a meaningful and satisfying connection with someone new.
- **Take care of your physical health.** Try to eat nutritious meals, get enough rest, and exercise moderately.
- **Seek and accept support.** Some people believe they need to be “strong” and independent. This, however, is an unrealistic expectation. Allow those around you to provide comfort during this difficult time.
- **Make a conscious decision to get through your grief.**
- **Give yourself permission to enjoy life, laugh and have fun.** Continue to do the things you like to do. An important part of recovery involves experiencing all of your feelings, including hope and happiness.
- **Take an honest look at yourself and your relationship.** Avoid burdening yourself with excess anger, blame and guilt. What did you learn? How did you really feel about yourself in your relationship? How do you want to be in your next relationship? What will you look for in a partner?
- **Get professional help if needed.** If you are finding it difficult to cope on a day-to-day basis, are using drugs or alcohol to deal with your pain, are being stalked by/are stalking your ex, if you fear hurting yourself or another, if there was violence in your relationship, or if you tend to sacrifice your identity for your partner.

## READY TO TRY AGAIN?

Once you feel ready to seek a new relationship, you may wish to consider the following questions:

- Are you feeling good about yourself? Do you like spending time with you?
- Are you engaging in activities that offer opportunities to establish new friendships and acquaintances?
- Do you assume that because someone is interested in you that s/he will be a good partner? Remember that you should be choosing, too.
- Are you giving yourself a chance to really get to know a potential partner? True intimacy develops over time.
- Do you use your instincts and listen to your own reactions about a person's suitability for you?
- Do you believe a new relationship will heal past hurts?
- Can you move on quickly and gracefully when you determine a relationship is not right for you?