

# When Intimate Relationships End

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## **Abstract**

**This article is written for anyone who has gone through the ending of an intimate relationship when that ending occurred as a result of a separation or divorce. It describes why people feel the way they do and what they can expect in such a situation and, most importantly, gives practical advice about what readers can do to help themselves feel better.**

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I don't know where we went wrong  
But the feeling's gone and  
I just can't get it back.

Gordon Lightfoot

## **About Early decisions**

A major factor affecting the particular kind and intensity of pain we feel when a relationship ends relates to the early decisions we made when we were young. If we were lucky enough to grow up feeling secure in our parents' love, we might have decided that we are lovable and that we deserve to be well loved. We are firmly entrenched in the existential position "I'm OK, You're OK," and we expect good things to happen between people. This decision forms the basis for a secure kind of loving, giving us the courage to enter into intimate relationships with an optimistic and hopeful feeling and attitude. Then, when we experience the painful feelings of loss that inevitably accompany the ending of a relationship, we are able to see that there is still a future ahead for us. We are likely to see the painful feelings as part of a necessary transition; we expect to grow from the experience, and we know that at some point we will be ready to try again.

On the other hand, if our attachment with our parents was insecure, or if they were not available to us emotionally, then we grow up with a different set of expectations about others and ourselves. We may decide, somewhere along the way, that either we are not OK or others are not OK. We may decide that we did not get our

parents' love because we are not lovable or that we are not deserving of another's attention or unconditional love. If we believe these things, it will be much more difficult to get through the feelings of grief and loss that most people feel at the ending of a relationship. We may not be able to see a future for ourselves, and we may use this ending as proof of our early decisions that, indeed, we are unlovable and undeserving.

When we interpret a relationship ending in a way that reinforces our early negative script decisions, we will feel really terrible. Instead of being able to see the end of our grief, we tell ourselves that this may be the end of our life. "Surely, no one will ever love me now," "I'll never be in a relationship again," or even "I might as well kill myself" are some of the false conclusions people come to when they are in a lot of pain. These conclusions are based not on reality but on the beliefs that one holds related to the early decisions that have been made.

The way out of the pain of the ending is to uncover those early decisions so that you can change them. This process will be very freeing and will allow you to get on with your life with a new set of expectations and skills related to obtaining the love and intimacy that you want.

## **What People Experience**

"I feel like a piece of garbage that's just been thrown away." This is what Elaine, age 60, told me, sobbing, as she relayed the fact that her marriage of 34 years had just ended. Elaine's self-esteem plummeted, she fell into despair, she believed that no one would ever want to be close to her again, and she pictured her grown sons taking their father's side and abandoning her. This is often how it is when intimate relationships end.

Ending a relationship can be a formidable task, whether you are breaking up after a period of exclusive dating, separating after living together, or divorcing after years of marriage. Our emotions can include a loss of self-esteem, fear, anxiety, anger, despair, and sadness or de-

pression. But ending a relationship can also give rise to positive feelings. We may feel relieved, freer to be ourselves, or excited about our future. This article will look at the different ways people feel when relationships come to an end, address some of the reasons why endings are so painful, and show you what you can do to feel better.

Sometimes we feel good coming out of a relationship that ends. For example, we may experience a tremendous sense of relief when we summon the courage to leave a relationship that has been hurtful or destructive. We may feel satisfaction in doing something right for ourselves. This sense of relief is felt most often when we have done our soul-searching and some grieving ahead of time. Then when we finally do decide to leave, we feel settled and comfortable with our choice. We may not necessarily be happy about the ending, but we are satisfied with our decision.

However, the feelings that we first experience will be different from those we feel as time goes by. For example, Peter's first feelings were of fear and depression when he realized he could no longer live with Sandra, his wife of 14 years and the mother of his two young sons. Later, as Peter succeeded in getting his life on track as a single father, he began to feel very angry with his wife for many of the manipulative things she had done during the last stage of their relationship.

Noriko, on the other hand, felt extreme guilt and remorse when she first left her husband, Bruce, after seven years of marriage. She felt that she was abandoning him when he needed her so much. As the months passed, however, she became more and more angry at Bruce for being so helpless and dependent on her; she had wanted a strong, nurturing, self-sufficient partner, someone more like her father. Later still, after 18 months of living on her own, she grew to feel truly appreciative of the friendship and caring Bruce offered her during the period following the separation. These examples show how our feelings can change over time and should provide some solace for those who feel terrible and fear that they will always feel that way.

#### **About Feelings**

What we learned in the past will color what we feel in the present. Before we look at the various feelings that are likely to emerge during the ending of a relationship, it is important to understand how we are often groomed from childhood to feel certain ways.

To understand your learned feelings from childhood, fill in the blank of the following sentence: "In our house, when the going gets rough, we feel \_\_\_\_\_." Is the feeling one of sadness, anger, frustration, guilt, or despair? This is the feeling that was modeled for you and the one on which you are most likely to fall back. It is probably your "most familiar feeling." You likely received strokes (whether they were positive or negative) when you felt this way. We are likely to feel these learned feelings more often than other feelings, become more stuck in them, and limit ourselves by excluding other less familiar feelings from our range of emotions. I will refer to these feelings as "learned feelings" to differentiate them from "pure feelings" —those that emerge spontaneously from deep down inside us as we react to events in our lives. (Learned feelings are often referred to in the transactional analysis literature as "racket feelings.")

Now we will look at some of the emotions people feel when relationships come to an end, including shock and disbelief, anger and rage, fear and anxiety, grief and sadness, regret and relief. Each of us will experience these feelings in our own unique and personal way; we will be influenced, most likely, by the childhood experiences we have had and the script decisions we made.

#### **Shock and Disbelief**

When we do not see the ending of a relationship coming, and it is our partner who decides to leave, we may feel shocked or stunned, caught completely by surprise. For James, who had been with his partner for three years while he ran a successful business and studied for his doctoral degree, news of the ending came over dinner:

*We hadn't seen each other for a while and we went out to dinner. So then she told me that part about two ships passing in the night. What I felt was shock. Total disbelief.*

*I thought "I am going to talk her out of it. I am going to do something. She may think she wants to do this, but it doesn't really mean it's over."*

When James felt shocked at hearing news he did not want to hear, his first reaction was to deny that what he was hearing was real. He wanted to believe that his partner did not really mean what she was saying.

Roseanne's experience offers another example of the feeling of shock. Although she was aware of her partner's dissatisfaction during their three-year relationship, she never thought that he would leave her. Roseanne had been unemployed for the past two years and felt entitled to his support; all the while, her partner grew more and more resentful. Roseanne describes her feeling of disbelief in this way:

*I was so blown away at that point I don't even know what I was feeling, I was spinning. Like my land had just turned into sand. Through a sieve. I was very unsteady at that point and I just freaked out.*

It is normal to feel some degree of shock or disbelief when it is your partner who decides to end the relationship. Even when people have known there were problems, they often express shock that "it has come to this."

### **Anger and Rage**

These boots are made for walking,  
And that's just what they'll do,  
One of these days these boots  
are gonna walk all over you.

Lee Hazelwood  
(sung by Nancy Sinatra)

Feelings of anger and rage can be the most complex emotions of all. Anger is felt in many different ways ranging from annoyance and irritation to outright rage. We experience anger differently at various times in the separation process. Each one of us is influenced in the type of anger we feel by a complex mix of inborn temperament coupled with what we learned during the early years of our lives.

Constructive anger allows you to feel strong and right when you have been treated badly or unfairly. It allows you to think: "No, I shouldn't ever be treated this way again. I deserve

something better." Destructive anger, on the other hand, can be insidious, dragging on and on, sapping energy from living and keeping you from looking forward to the better life that lies ahead. Chris, for example, when facing the end of a six-year marriage, wailed to anyone who would listen: "It's not fair! I hate the way life is! Things will never get any better. I will never have what I wanted." And when friends encouraged her to take some responsibility for what had gone wrong in the relationship, she blamed herself, saying, "Poor choices, poor choices, that's all I've ever made."

Chris remembers her mother's angry admonitions when Chris went through unhappy times as a young teenager. Unable to comfort her daughter, mother lost her patience and yelled, "Well, if you're that unhappy, it's your own damn fault!" This experience, repeated over time, led Chris to decide that her unhappiness was all her fault and that the choices she made for herself were always the wrong ones. But now her self-pity kept her stuck in bad feelings and made it hard for her to move on.

Elise describes the anger she felt when she separated from her boyfriend of four years. They had decided to take a three-month break from the relationship to think over whether or not they wanted to commit to each other in marriage.

*And then I had periods of anger when David and I spoke, which was pretty infrequently.*

*It was clear that what we had at the time was a separation. We had not definitely decided to split. But then every time we spoke he was so hostile and curt. It really made me mad. That is what made me sure that I wanted to end it for real.*

For Elise, anger was a result of what she was seeing in the present. There were not a lot of past experiences feeding into her feelings in the present. She did not like what she saw, and she became angry and decided to end the relationship.

Marty came to the United States from Sweden and fell in love with a man he met here. Having spent many years of his life in boarding schools, Marty was hungry for the love a relationship could provide. He was quite a bit younger than his partner and relished the sense of being taken care of that he experienced in the

relationship. He told me about the anger he felt, following his initial sadness, after he and his lover of two years split up.

*Now I'm getting angry. It's been three months. I was angry in the beginning but it was overshadowed by sadness. Now it's getting to the point that I'm furious with him. I'm angry because I feel betrayed. How could he say that I was the first person in his life that he ever loved and then leave me that easily? I feel like he lied to me and I hate him for that.*

Marty's anger is tied to feelings of betrayal. He trusted his partner and now feels that this trust was broken. Feelings of betrayal are often painful because they can lead one to doubt oneself with respect to whom one trusts.

Margaret tells of the anger she felt after she made the decision to leave her marriage of 26 years. She had done much soul-searching and knew that ending it was the right choice for her, but she still experienced anger.

*Even though I chose to end the relationship, I still felt so angry about the things that led me to that decision; I was angry at the "failed" marriage and angry that I was being blamed for the relationship not working. Even though I could understand his anger and desire for revenge, I was also angry at the absence or loss of his caring. I knew this was all part of grieving, but it was a very difficult part. I didn't like myself when I felt this way.*

The examples of anger presented here are ones that most of us can understand. At other times, however, the feelings of anger are so intense that people fantasize about hurting (or even killing) each other and often make elaborate plans about how to obtain revenge. Indeed, sometimes people do hurt or kill each other in the throes of relationships ending. Some plots of revenge use children as objects of battle, often leaving scars on those children that take many years to heal. Other times acts of revenge are smaller. I have heard many people talk about showing up at a party with an attractive new date on their arm to prove how well they are doing and to heighten the sense of loss for their former partner.

A good rule of thumb for anyone feeling rage is to treat your rage as you would any other

feeling. Pay attention to it. Try to understand where it comes from. Think about what you need to do to feel better. But do not act out of rage. Often those actions are like spitting into the wind. You are likely to end up hurting yourself and causing damage that you might later regret.

### **Fear and Anxiety**

When we face the ending of a relationship we are likely to feel some degree of fear. This fear can be mild or it can be intense. We all learn to live with varying levels of fear, and we learn to evaluate situations so that we know when we do or do not need to be afraid. Each person's experience of fear initially accompanying the ending of a relationship is unique.

For example, Peter, whose alcoholic parents were extremely negligent in keeping him safe as a child, was more prone than others to experience intense fear in his adult life. He had moved out of his wife's house and into a home of his own. Peter describes the terror he felt when the reality of the move hit him

*I remember waking up one morning in complete fear. It was such a high level of fear that I didn't know where I was or what was going on.*

Later a friend came over and helped Peter make a list of all the things he was afraid of. This is what the list looked like:

1. I will never meet anybody again.
2. I will be financially bankrupt.
3. I will always be single, living alone.
4. What will happen to my kids?
5. I will kill myself or start to drink again.

This story shows that fear and anxiety can be debilitating feelings during the ending of a relationship. Some of us become tremendously afraid and believe that we have nothing to live for. We believe that the emotional pain that we feel right now is pain that we will feel forever. Sometimes one may even consider suicide as a way to end emotional pain.

Later Peter described his own thoughts and feelings about suicide:

*I would go into these really disoriented states. I couldn't sleep and I'd get this heavy ringing in my ears. It was unbearable and I was thinking about killing myself or drink-*

*ing. But I had made a really firm decision not to do either one of those things. Somewhere inside me I knew I just wanted out of the pain I was in.*

Darlene, who felt less desperate when her relationship ended, describes milder feelings of fear. She tells us what it was like when she first moved her things into her new apartment and felt scared to stay there alone.

*I really felt strongly that I wanted to sleep there Sunday night because I hadn't yet spent a night there. But I wanted Ben to stay there with me. Somehow I felt scared, I was afraid to stay there alone. I felt so different with a capital "D." I felt that I just couldn't make that transition alone.*

Self-soothing is essential whether your feelings are mild or intense. Put forth your best effort to be nurturing to yourself. Use your Adult ego state to evaluate your situation and try not to let your fearful Child ego state take over completely. Often it is a good idea to ask a friend for support when you are feeling anxious or afraid.

### **Grief and Sadness**

Grief and sadness are what we feel when we lose the person we love or have loved. Many of us suffer deeply at these losses. The desire to feel emotionally close to someone is part of being human. When we are infants it is this bond that ensures that we will be cared for so that we will survive. When relationship bonds are broken later in our adult lives, we can still feel the loss as a threat to our survival and be fully grief-stricken.

Howard was shocked when he found out that his wife was leaving him; she was having an affair with his best friend. This is how he describes the intensity of his grief:

*I felt like crying but I couldn't. I still feel that gutted feeling in the morning. It's like when you clean a fish—you gut them—but this is all the way up to your heart. It's a physical-feeling. It's like your organs have been ripped out.*

Grief is often experienced as a physical sensation. People describe heaviness, a weight on their shoulders, or that “it hurts to breathe.” They may feel as if there is lead in their chest, that they are so tired they can hardly move or that

they are “trudging around in slow motion.” Beth was in her mid-forties and had not wanted to leave her partner of 11 years. But when painful patterns persisted and attempts at change failed, she finally decided that she could no longer live in a situation that left her so unhappy so much of the time. She describes her initial feelings of grief this way:

*I really felt like I was going to die. There was nothing for me to put feet on. I felt like the whole ground beneath me was gone. I would get up in the morning and I would cry. I would go to bed at night and I would cry. I'd come home from work and I'd close the curtains and cry. I just cried all the time. I wasn't depressed. I was really bereft.*

Grief can be persistent and needs to run its course. It is better to allow yourself to feel your feelings than to push them away. Eventually you will begin to feel better.

Peter describes having similar feelings of grief and sadness after he left his marriage:

*After the initial fear, I had months of real sadness when I cried a lot. I cried all the time except when the kids were around. And then, I started to feel better again. I think I did a lot of my grieving before I actually moved out.*

Looking back, Peter tells us how his script messages not to show feelings related to this sadness:

*As a kid it was not OK to cry. I had to be a "macho man," and I tried to live by these rules for so long. This time I had to just go through that sadness and just let myself be in it. Once I let those feelings pass through my body, it was like I could reclaim that part of myself again.*

We can all learn from Peter's experience. He let himself feel and express his emotions and he reclaimed an important part of himself. Then he began to feel better.

### **Regret**

Sometimes people feel troubled or remorseful

over something that happened or something that they failed to do. Regret is often the feeling that emerges when one holds on to thoughts of “what might have been.”

Tony tells us of his regret about losing his relationship with Karen. He realizes, now, that he had become so absorbed with his own personal issues that for a long time he gave very little to his partner or their relationship.

*I feel a lot of regret for the way I handled things. Why did it take me so long to realize what was going on and how important this relationship was to me? I wish I hadn't let all that stuff that was going on inside of me, all that stuff from childhood, absorb everything I had for months. It was bad timing. I wish it hadn't taken me so long before I was finally able to cope with things.*

Tony wishes he had been able to do things differently and wonders if that might have led him and his partner, Karen, to be happy in their relationship. He thinks about what might have been.

Steve and his wife, both in their late twenties, feel regret about the path they followed during their seven-year marriage. They were young and they loved each other. They were childhood sweethearts who thought they would spend their lives together. Now Steve explains his regrets:

*Together we made mistakes and wrong decisions. It's just the sadness of knowing what we know now. We would have done things differently. We both realize that now, and it's sad because we think that if we had made other choices, things would be different between us now. It's not placing the blame on her or on me.*

Steve and his wife are just 27 years old, yet they both show wisdom beyond their years. Both acknowledge that they loved each other. Neither blames the other. Each takes responsibility for the choices they made that led to the breakdown of their marriage. And still they wonder if there might be some chance for them to be together again in the future.

Feelings of regret can be constructive. Often people who feel regret learn from their experiences and make decisions to do things differently the next time around.

## Relief

If we leave a partner who treated us badly, we can feel relieved to be out from under that oppression. If we have lived in a household filled with tension or strain, we may be glad to be living on our own. Some of us feel responsible for our partners' problems or unhappiness and are relieved when we no longer feel compelled to take care of them. Or, if we have lost our sense of our individual selves in the relationship, we may feel intense relief and joy just to be free to be ourselves again.

Darlene describes how she felt weighed down by her boyfriend's unhappiness and the relief she felt when she was on her own again. When she and Ben got together six years earlier, they were both bogged down by depression and felt solace in each other's company. Through their unhappiness they felt close; they felt that they understood each other. A strong bond developed between them.

Because Darlene was depressed, she decided to try therapy. Over the next two years she worked to get over her depression, she stopped drinking, and she found more productive and healthier ways to live her life. She began to make plans for the future. Ben, however, remained unhappy and his discontent colored his work, his relationships, and his creative projects. He had visions of things he wanted to do but made little headway in actually getting them done.

There were problems in the relationship as well. Darlene consistently wanted more closeness, more talking, more intimacy, more planning for the future. Would they get married? Would they have children? When? Ben consistently pulled away. His work as a writer and musician led him to want more solitary time, and his depression prevented him from envisioning a future together.

After much personal struggle, Darlene decided to tell Ben that she wanted a trial separation. Their relationship ended six months later. Darlene describes her relief at being on her own again.

*I like being on my own, especially when I'm in a good mood! I like the autonomy. It's easy to forget when you are in a relationship that in addition to sharing all the good*

*things, you also share the other person's bad habits and bad moods and it affects you all the time. It's part of the give and take. But in my relationship with Ben, it felt like an increasing amount of space was taken up by his bad moods and depression. It feels like a relief to be away from that and to be on my own. It's been surprisingly nice. In a way, it makes me feel more myself.*

Beth, who left her 11-year relationship, tells us about the relief she felt even in the midst of her sadness:

*What I discovered was that even though I was completely bereft, at the same time I was relieved and I was excited to be seeing who I am. I was excited to be seeing what kind of person I wanted to be by myself. What plays would I go to? What books would I read?*

What better way is there to end a relationship than to see it as an opportunity to discover more about who you really are? As you peel back and discard the layers of unhappiness and feelings of misfortune, you, too, might discover parts of yourself that you have either forgotten or perhaps never knew!

### **What You Can Do to Feel Better**

"I know that it's over  
but I can't discover  
a way to erase how I feel. . . ."

John Denver

There are several things that people tell us help them get through the most difficult times. Consider trying any or all of these things as you move yourself into the next stage and on to feeling better. Here are some things you can do: (1) allow yourself to feel your feelings, (2) take some physical comfort, (3) rely on your friends, (4) change your space and make it your own, and (5) seek psychotherapy.

### **Allow Your Feelings**

The first part of this article has been about feelings. When you give yourself the opportunity to feel what you feel, you will be on the road to healing. Learning to understand where your feelings come from is also important. If you learn that you experience certain feelings more than others, you may come to discover

that you can let go of the learned feeling and move on to feeling better. When you figure out what your early decisions were and how those past experiences fuel certain emotions, you may be able to let go of some of the pain, specifically the pain linked to childhood beliefs.

You can learn to tell the difference between what you felt to be true as a child and what is really true now. For example, although you may have felt unlovable as a child, you may be able to reassure yourself that your partner's leaving now is not proof of your unlovability. Rather, it may have something to do with his or her difficulty with commitment or with that fact that you have not yet met your most compatible mate.

An important part of getting through feelings is to be able to use your Nurturing Parent when you are feeling badly. Saying accepting, compassionate things to yourself will help. Label the feeling—"You are feeling sad right now," for example—and give yourself permission to feel it: "It's OK to be sad." Come up with suggestions that might help you feel better just as you might for an upset child: "Maybe it would feel good to go for a walk (or have a snack, or take a warm bath)." Try to be kind to yourself and as helpful as you would be to a close friend.

James, a successful businessman now working on his PhD. in psychology, tells us how he handled the ending of his 23-year marriage.

*I tried to let myself face what the heck I was feeling, honestly. That is something I learned from people like you (his previous therapist). The next thing I did was to call one woman, thinking I'd feel better if someone else affirmed my desirability, and then I threw myself into my studies! I studied hard, and that distraction helped, too.*

Feeling your feelings and knowing how to soothe yourself, understanding your learned feelings, knowing about your early decisions and the emotional impact they have had on your life—all of these things can help tremendously as you work to move into a better emotional place.

### **Physical Comfort**

We know well that physical activity can be

comforting. When we want to soothe babies we often rock them or walk the floor with them. Children seeking solace often rock themselves, engaging in some repetitive physical motion that they find comforting. Many adults report that repetitive movement is soothing, too.

Aerobic activity can raise endorphin levels and contribute to a sense of well-being. Research has shown that aerobic activity can help to alleviate depression (see the article by James Allen earlier in this journal). It is not surprising then, that many people report that physical activity, especially repetitive, rhythmic movement, is helpful in healing. Walking is often the activity of choice for people who are suffering through the ending of a relationship. Running, swimming, and biking are also helpful. If you want to feel better, get out into the daylight and move.

Sean, a well-respected doctor in his late thirties and the father of three young children was distraught when he and his wife separated. His life had been his work and his family. He was a devoted and adoring dad. Having free time now, when the children were with their mother, left him feeling bereft, despairing, and lonely. He began an intense workout regimen, going to the gym at 5:30 AM so that he could work out before going to the hospital to do his rounds. He decided to train for a marathon. He describes his experience as follows:

*It was really great for me. I don't think I ever pushed myself that hard physically. But I needed to do it to keep my sanity. It was nice to see the other faces there everyday, even though they didn't know what was going on in my life. We were all training so intensely that we all supported each other. We started going on long runs on the weekends, 10, 15, 20 miles. The physical exertion saved me from depression, and the camaraderie helped me through some of the loneliest times. And I ended up being in better shape than I'd been in for years!*

Sean's physical activity helped improve his mood, increase his self-esteem at a time when he was feeling badly about himself, and provided him with new friends who could support him.

Sarah, who left her marriage of 26 years, felt intense anger at how her husband treated her and

how he drew their teenage daughter into the conflict. She tells us the meaning that exercise had in her life:

*Even though I've worked out for a long time, starting backpacking and setting new physical goals for myself were a part of getting back to myself and putting my own show back on the road. Suddenly I felt that I had a new determination to live a long and healthy life.*

This physical challenge gave Sarah a new lease on life. For her, it was not about improving mood or making friends; it was about reaffirming her optimism and vitality for living.

While some of us walk in a meditative way and others fly over the trails in the woods, and still others dance their hearts out either alone or on a crowded dance floor, there is an activity that will feel right to you. You owe it to yourself to find one that you will enjoy, because getting out and moving is one of the best things you can do for yourself.

### **Relying on Friends**

The first thing some of us do when we know that our relationship is ending is pick up the telephone and call a friend. We often look to friends in times of crisis and we count on their support. Sometimes, however, people are reluctant to do so because they feel embarrassed or ashamed or because they learned as children not to "air their dirty laundry" for everyone to see. Other people fear that they will be judged instead of supported. And many people think that their intense feelings will be more than their friend(s) will want to hear. But leaning on friends is one of the most important things you can do when you are dealing with painful feelings.

Peter, the man who experienced extreme fear when his marriage ended, tells us how his friends were important to him:

*The thing that helped me most of all was having friends to whom I could talk about what was really going on with me. It was OK for me to be in the worst place emotionally, and they would say that they had been in a similar place. I didn't have to hide what I was feeling. I could go through it and they let me know they would be there for me.*

Betty, also grieving and seething with rage (as she said, "I seriously thought about murdering

him, although I couldn't think about a way to do it and get away with it!"), tells us how much the support of friends helped her through her dark tunnel:

*My friends were a huge source of support. I have a women's group that I've been in for about five years. During the time we've been together, there have been marriages, babies born, divorces, new businesses started—the whole mix of it. We are definitely a creative source and we are there for each other. So these seven women were a HUGE part of my support when we were splitting up. They were very helpful both collectively and individually as friends.*

Sometimes friends do not quite know what to do to be helpful; in fact, sometimes what they offer may seem downright unhelpful. Tell them how you feel to help them get on the right track. For example, Marty tells us his experience:

*It got to a point where my friends were just angry with my partner. They would say, "See, we told you; he is not a good guy. Don't even think about him. It (the breakup) was the best thing that could have happened to you." Even though I knew they meant well, it was not what I wanted to hear because he was the man I still loved. It would have been more helpful if they had just focused on the way that I felt, but it was hard for me to tell them that at the time.*

As we see from this example, friends do not always come through in the "perfect way". Just as in any other relationship, we need to be thoughtful and direct in our friendships and to help our friends understand clearly what we need.

Often people are afraid that they are "wearing out their friends" as they rely on them for ongoing support. And indeed, after many months, a friend may tire of hearing of your misery. Try to remember to give something back. Thank the person for being there for you. Focus on his or her life sometimes. Or suggest an activity that allows both of you some pleasure so that you can remember what the friendship felt like in better times.

### Changing Your Space

"I'm making it my own" is a common refrain of people who are beginning to heal. Often this

move is the first constructive thing people do to help themselves move forward after a breakup. Through tremendous sadness and pain, or at times driven by a great sense of relief, comes a ray of energy and hope. We can use this energy to reshape our physical surroundings and to make them more reflective of our individuality. Sometimes the end of a relationship requires a physical move, and we must adapt to completely new living quarters, but often the end leaves us living alone in space that was once shared. People often say that they would prefer to move, to get a "fresh start" and not have to live in a place that reminds them of their ex and recent unhappy times. When people do stay in the old space, they often make changes that signify that they are moving on.

Jean, a schoolteacher whose husband of 24 years recently left her, tells us:

*I made some changes in the house and it feels great! I pulled the big easy chair over to the fireplace—my husband always hated it there, but it works perfectly for me! Now I can sit and grade papers and be completely warm and cozy by the fire. I can get completely absorbed in a good book. Reading has always been such a comfort to me.*

Jean was making her place her own. Because her finances were extremely limited, her new purchases were not grand or lofty, but they were carefully selected:

*I bought two new place mats for the kitchen and napkins and napkin rings to match. Now, when I walk into the kitchen in the morning, it reminds me that things are new and fresh.*

Later, looking toward her future, she bought herself another gift, one that carried greater psychological meaning. She bought herself a new, lacy bra, unlike any she had ever owned before. The lacy underwear delighted her and served as a reminder: She wanted to feel freer now and more accepting of her sexuality.

Jack's story is also about changing one's space. Two weeks after Jack's wife moved across the country, he was feeling devastated and depressed. The Jack with the gray look and

the frozen, sad face was the only Jack I had known, but one day he came to his session looking different:

*Well, I moved the house around this weekend and I cleaned everything I could get my hands on. I threw out eight big plastic bags of "stuff"—just garbage, just junk that had collected around the house for all those years. It was all Lisa's stuff, stuff she didn't even bother to take with her. And I even washed the walls! When she gets her place I'm going to ship the couch out to her—it's not my style. I'd rather get something that looks like me, not her. And then I was on such a roll that I went out back and cleaned up the yard. I took all that junk that was there from building that shed and I took it to the dump. I cut all the laurel hedges. The place looks GREAT! I was exhausted but I feel like I'm making it my own now.*

Changing your space sets the stage for you to see things differently both physically and psychologically.

### **Therapy Can Help**

There are many articles in this journal about how psychotherapy can help. Therapy can be a tremendous assist to help you get through the painful feelings related to a relationship ending. Your therapist can help you to understand your feelings and how to take care of yourself. Most importantly, therapy can help you discover your early decisions and how they influence your life

script. Learning about your early decisions can free you up to be in a more rewarding relationship in the future and prevent you from repeating patterns from the past. Consider making contact with a competent therapist near you.

### **Moving on to Better Times Ahead**

Keeping perspective helps us to move on to better times ahead. "I'll never do that again" is a common thought to have during the period of ending a relationship. When we are hurting so badly as a result of a loss, it is easy to think that we will never get so involved again. But often as the painful feelings fade, our natural desires to feel close reemerge. Eventually, we may find ourselves being interested in or even longing for a new intimate connection.

Whichever methods you choose to help yourself get over it and get your show back on the road again, I wish you the very best in your future and would welcome hearing about your experience.

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