

The Stages of a Break-Up

Lately, I have been reflecting on how similar breaking up with an intimate partner can be to losing a loved one through death. There are stages of grief that most people experience, although it is not usually a linear process. Nevertheless, it can be helpful to be aware of the general phases you might find yourself experiencing as you move forward from a break-up. One of the key elements of this process is not getting stuck in any one stage, but rather recognizing each one as part of the journey to peace and well-being.

First of all, people often experience **Shock**. You might wonder what has just taken place after your partner breaks up with you, and refuse to accept it. You might have trouble taking in all of the information, and you might feel a desperate need to have more information. This phase is often confusing, and you might have great difficulty believing that the break-up is actually happening. Denial can run rampant during this stage. It is essential to give yourself time to absorb what has occurred, and sharing the news with someone you trust could be very helpful. It is important to recognize that some behaviours, such as texting your partner throughout the day, will now need to change. Denying reality will not help you at this time. But, writing out your thoughts, exercising, and engaging in several reality checks with friends and family could propel you forward.

The next stage people frequently experience after a break-up is **Anger**. You might feel that your ex-partner had no right to treat you the way that he/she did. You might feel wronged, cheated, belittled or used, and want to lash out at whoever you feel hurt you. The key to moving through this period of time is acknowledging your reality, and accepting it. Working through your anger with a good friend or a mental health professional could be helpful, as well as drawing the line between emotion and action. Recognizing that this is not the time for acting on your feelings is essential.

At this point in the healing process after a break-up, people often experience **Isolation**. Now that you have accepted the reality of the relationship ending, you might find that you become lost in your thoughts about what happened and what went wrong. You might become overwhelmed by "what if" questions to which there can be no real answers. You might wonder about what you could do to get your ex-partner back only to realize once again that he/she does not want you anymore. At this time, you might feel that you just want to sit by yourself at home and do nothing. You might withdraw from your friends and family, and feel that no one will ever love you again.

The act of spending significant periods of time alone and ruminating can unknowingly move you into the next break-up stage of **Despair**. Everything might feel just too depressing and difficult to do, and you might feel that you will never get over your break-up. It is vital to remember at this stage that there was a time when you lived without this person and probably enjoyed life, so it is logical to assume that you can do it again. Creating a structure and/or a plan for each day,

focusing on productive tasks, taking care of your physical health, and spending time with people who care about you is essential during this difficult period. Enjoying time outdoors, and focusing on whatever you can that is positive in your life could also help you at this stage.

Sometimes, this can be the point in the process where psychotherapy is very beneficial. The stages of Isolation and Despair can be a catalyst for depression, and it can ignite many questions about meaning in your life. Therefore, finding a safer and confidential space through therapy could be extremely useful. You might have moments where you begin to contemplate a variety of changes in your life, but also feel overwhelmed by them. Talking these issues through with a trusted friend, family member or psychotherapist could help you. Creative media, writing, meditation, music, or physical movement could also provide viable ways to better understand your thoughts and feelings, and process your despair and/or depression. Taking action in any of these ways can help you to handle the often challenging feelings that accompany this period.

The final phase of a break-up is when some hope begins to shine on the situation, as you more deeply accept what has taken place and begin to realize the fruits of your labour. This is the stage of **Reinvestment**. You might find that you have a little more energy, and the world begins to make sense again. You are clearer about why the break-up had to take place, and you are ready to put energy into new connections with others and daily activities. At this point, you might have a deeper understanding of who you are and what you need in an intimate relationship. There may be times of sadness, and perhaps some regret, but you are ready to move forward and experience new adventures. You realize that your story does not end here, as there is still much life left to be lived.

Although the process is not easy, you might find that this stage brings many gifts with it that allow you to reinvest in life again with a deeper sense of purpose and joy. Since you will know what it is like to lose someone through a break-up, the fun, excitement, appreciation, richness, and fertility of developing new interpersonal connections will be all the sweeter for you. With your newfound wisdom from enduring a relationship break-up, you will be able to live out these new experiences to the very fullest.