

Relationship Breakup

Nearly everyone experiences the pain of a breakup of an important love relationship at some point in life. Many people are forced to cope for the first time with the breakup of a significant relationship during their college years. It is difficult to know just how painful a relationship breakup can be until it happens in one's own life. Intense feelings of sadness and despair are a common reaction to the end of a relationship. Psychological research shows that the emotional response to the breakup of a romantic relationship strongly resembles reactions to what would appear to be more traumatic losses, such as the death of a loved one or the diagnosis of a life-threatening illness. The following are common emotional reactions to the loss of a romantic relationship:

- **Denial** – It may be very difficult to believe and accept that the relationship is ending. It is painful to experience a loved and trusted partner seeming to care so little about the relationship and your feelings.
- **Grief and Despair** – It is normal to feel sad and lonely, and to cry a lot. You may feel an intense need at times to make contact with your ex-partner. Particular times during the day, such as waking up in the morning, may be especially difficult.
- **Fear** – It may be frightening and difficult to imagine life without the significant other. You may fear that you will never find love or feel happy again.
- **Anger** – Anger with a partner who has caused pain by initiating or contributing to the breakup is a common emotional response.
- **Self-blame and Guilt** – You may obsess over what you could have done to cause the breakup, and may attempt to “bargain” with an ex-partner to give the relationship another chance. If you initiated the breakup, you may feel guilty about causing pain to your partner.
- **Jealousy** – You may experience jealousy or panic about your partner potentially being with someone else.
- **Confusion** – Life may feel strange or incomplete without your significant other. You may question who you are, and the meaning of life without your partner.
- **Relief** – You may feel some sense of relief from negative feelings associated with the relationship that resulted from fighting, insecurity, or boredom.

Will I Ever Feel Better?

If you are coping with a relationship breakup, you may wonder if and when you will ever feel better. The cliché “time heals all wounds” does really apply to the loss of a relationship. Though the process may feel long and difficult, painful feelings of loss and longing resulting from a relationship breakup will diminish over time. However, anything that disrupts the letting go process, such as seeing one's partner or having hope raised for reconciliation, may temporarily rekindle feelings. Moving on from a relationship breakup sometimes means accepting that there may be no satisfying answer to why the relationship had to end, or recognizing that people often “grow out of” relationships. This may mean coming to terms with limits in being able to control what a romantic partner chooses to do. For some

people, there may be a “final straw” (e.g. a partner ignores them in a time of need, having an argument or intensely emotional meeting, etc.) which helps them to move on from the relationship.

It is true that there is no way around feeling emotional pain after a relationship breakup. Your feelings reflect the importance of your partner in your life, as well as your own ability to allow yourself to be intimate and close with an important other. There are steps you can take, however, to care for yourself and help ease your distress during this time:

- **Seek support from friends and family.** Social support is one of the most important factors in coping with a loss. Reach out to people who care, and who will listen to your feelings and provide encouragement. Spending time with others may be difficult at first, but will help you to realize that there are other people in your life who care about you and are there to support you.
- **Take steps toward closure in the relationship.** Ongoing contact with your partner may hinder your healing and diminish your sense of self-esteem. Ask for help from others when contact with your partner leaves you feeling increasingly upset. “Loss rituals” such as writing a farewell letter (which you may or may not choose to send), returning belongings, or boxing up photos, letters and other reminders of the relationship may help in the process of letting go.
- **Make a daily schedule.** Structuring your time and having a schedule for the day can be helpful in lessening distress and preoccupation with your ex-partner. Try to redirect your mental energy to accomplishing projects and tasks, such as academic work, which can boost feelings of control and competence.
- **Make changes in your life and express yourself creatively.** Develop new interests, activities and relationships in your life separate from your ex-partner. Redecorate or paint your living space. Focus on doing things that reflect your unique nature, and that are not reminders of your ex- partner. Plan new events with friends or family on holidays or anniversary dates of the relationship. Engage in activities that help you recover a sense of meaning and balance, such as religious/spiritual practice, art, poetry or music.

For More Information

Consider making an appointment with a counselor to talk about your feelings about the breakup. Caring, experienced psychologists are available to meet with Union students for confidential sessions at the Counseling Center. To make an appointment, stop by the front desk of the Wicker Wellness Center or call (518) 388-6161.