

Breaking Up: Dating Advice for the Breaker and Breakee



By Jim Hjort, LCSW

Humans are wired to thrive on close interpersonal connections, so when a relationship and love life comes to an end, often at least one of the parties will hold hard feelings. Perhaps blame, regret, vulnerability, disappointment, fear, or any number of others. This is when dating advice becomes the most important.

If there's an impulse that's stronger than the one to seek close

connection, it's the one to protect ourselves from injury.

Temporary empowerment.

As a result, when intensely negative breakup feelings arise, their cousins—anger and self-righteousness—often follow close behind. Those feelings can provide a temporary feeling of empowerment, as opposed to feeling helplessly stuck in an unpleasant situation. Unfortunately, the fireworks that anger and self-righteousness can induce tends to create even more lasting animosity, which provides fertile ground for negative thoughts and feelings to multiply.

Prevention of Openness.

That, in turn, can prevent both people from having the psychological and emotional openness necessary to recognize the next relationship opportunity that comes along—and nurture it. Not to mention, such a negative state of mind impacts your ability to generally enjoy life and function in healthy ways.

A breakup is a stage of your relationship.

In order for both parties to emerge from a breakup as healthy as possible, you need to remember something that is simple, but easy to forget in the presence of strong emotions: the breakup is a stage of your relationship, just like any other. That means that all the rules of healthy communication and respect for your partner still apply.

For starters, recognize that any partnership exists through a interaction between each party's need for something from the other, and the other party's willingness and ability to fill it. Fundamentally, a breakup happens when sufficient numbers of these pairings can't or won't be made.

Be open and honest.

Therefore, the healthy approach is the open and honest one: let the other person know what need of yours isn't being met, or what need of theirs you are unwilling or unable to meet. (The "it's not you, it's me" speech isn't really accurate: it's both of you whose needs and willingness and ability to fill them have to fit together, like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.)

When you're doing this, be sure to use "I" statements to own your perspective, instead of attributing thoughts, feelings, and motives to the other person. (For instance: "When you disappear for days without calling, I feel like I don't matter to you.")

Own your decision.

If you're the breaker, own your decision and explain it. If you're the breakee, try to devote your mental resources to listening and comprehension, rather than formulating a rebuttal while the other person is speaking. The breaker has made a decision; try to understand it. And then, restate what the other person has said in your own words, both to make sure you've understood them and to convey that you're trying to do so.

Arrive at a mutual understanding.

Approaching a breakup with the goal of arriving at a mutual understanding tends to defuse the natural, defensive anger response. It also provides both of you with clear information and a matter-of-fact perspective on what happened, eliminating the unknown, which tends to spawn negative rumination and feelings just as much as animosity.

This thoughtful, healthy approach certainly won't eliminate the pain of a breakup, but it can greatly reduce your suffering about it, which is different. With a solid understanding of what happened, you can also move forward with less "baggage." Best of all, you might even come to understand

your needs (and shortcomings) better, so that your next relationship has a better chance of success.

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