

9 Stages of Grieving a Breakup

SUZANNE LACHMANN PSY.D.

These stages are not linear in progression. They don't necessarily present "in order," nor is it always apparent when one stage ends and another begins. Stages will switch around often, occur simultaneously, and cycle back and forward. The stages offer a roadmap through unpredictable terrain and hope that a way forward through your pain does exist.

SHOCK

"Huh? What do you mean, it's over?"

This new information overloads your brain, you may feel disposable, rejected, replaceable, irrelevant. Shock is a primal response to a sophisticated loss. It's the result of being inundated on all levels – all five of your senses overload while questions you can't answer rain down on you, to the point at which you just short-circuit. Despite shock there are immediate decisions to be made and real world obligations to manage. You may be numb and unfocused so autopilot sets in to help you get through. That's your survival instinct kicking in.

DENIAL

"Nope. It's not possible. He/she/they doesn't mean it."

Life without your ex is too unfathomable, so you don't believe it. No matter how remote the possibility, you continue to carry on as if you're still in a viable relationship, because then it hasn't ended. That's you postponing your grief because you are not currently equipped to acknowledge that there is anything to grieve about. It's your primal way of trying to keep yourself regulated. You can't tolerate the loss and so you don't. When you are deliberately denying, that's no longer denial, that's avoidance. Right now there may not be anything you can do, but sit with your feelings, and take comfort in knowing that when you're ready, the path forward does exist.

DESPERATE FOR ANSWERS

"How and why did this happen? There has to be a better solution..."

The intensity of the quest for answers can become all consuming. The need to know why often leads to irrational and unreasonable thoughts and behaviors. Your urgency to understand your ex's reasons is because you want to believe that by understanding them you can disprove them. The need to know why your ex ended the relationship extends well beyond anyone's capacity to explain it to you, including your ex, because no reason is acceptable anyway. Instead, you'll look for ways to poke holes in the validity of their conviction that it's over. The tension you feel to get to the bottom of this and "finally" know the "real" reason feels unbearable. The reality is perhaps you are not yet ready to understand, aspects of shock and denial are still active.

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EXTERNAL BARGAINING

"If you'll just take me back I'll be better, I'll make it right."

Everything that's been wrong, you'll make right. If you can convince your ex that the relationship will be better this time, you can make your pain go away. At this stage in your grieving process, your capacity for reason and judgment are significantly impaired, making you prone to offering bargains you can't and don't want to keep. Any relief you get by cajoling your partner into consenting to another try is usually fleeting—you can't seal every crack or compensate for every problem the two of you had. Trying to fix a broken relationship all by yourself is a losing proposition. Somewhere within you, you know that. You're just not ready to face it yet.

INTERNAL BARGAINING

"If only I... Why didn't I... I should have..."

In this stage, you replay moments, scenarios, decisions, actions and inactions that occurred within the relationship. You obsess about what you should have done differently to prevent the breakup. You're bargaining with your past self, hoping to alter how time has already unfolded. It's a seductive loop to get stuck in, because what you imagine is so much less painful than what you have to face. Maybe it's true: maybe you could very well have changed the outcome by altering behaviors in your past. However there is simply no way to determine if your theories are true.

RELAPSE

"Phew. Relax. He/she/they are going to stay."

Because the pain is unbearable, you are relentless in your pursuit of reconciliation, and are actually able to convince your ex to try again. By reconciling, you relieve the agony of withdrawal, at least temporarily—although not without some discomfort and insecurity, due to the tenuous nature of the relationship now. Relapsing, that is, giving in to withdrawal, is another way to avoid the fear of the unknown, namely life without your ex. It's your way of staving off the pain of acknowledging that the relationship is no longer viable. You are doing everything in your power to buy time now so you don't have to face the pain. Warning: This cycle can occur many times before the breakup sticks.

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INITIAL ACCEPTANCE

"I can resist the urge to contact my ex... I can use conscious restraint."

Initial acceptance happens repeatedly during your process of grief. Between the waves of agonizing rediscovery of your loss, you will experience moments of clarity. During those moments, you may be able or even willing to accept the inevitability of breakup, and will resolve to keep away from your ex to the best of your ability. Over time, initial acceptance and the strategies you used to sustain it become more substantive and consistent. Know that it's okay when the moments of clarity and the realization that you'll be okay are submerged more often than experienced. Your shift in perspective will come with time.

ANGER

"I got what I deserved... I'm not good enough... This is unfair..."

Anger takes many forms in breakups. There are earlier, more primal forms, and later more developed ones. In the beginning, anger can take the shape of self-blame. You're angry at yourself for what you see as messing up the relationship. This kind of anger also takes the shape of self-disgust: "I'm not good enough". Blame is an unproductive and immobilizing form of anger. No matter who's at fault, blaming yourself, your ex, or anyone else you believe is implicated can't and won't change the outcome. When anger is used as a motivator for self awareness you have the power to move forward.

HOPE

"I will be OK even though the relationship has ended."

Hope or lack thereof about yourself, your relationship, and your future is a defining factor of your grieving process. Being without hope is a profoundly desperate feeling. It is one of the most devastating feelings a human can experience. Hope is a life force, a basic survival need. In reality, the only time you literally lose all the hope in your reserves is when you give in to death. Otherwise, what you are losing is not hope itself, but your access to hopeful feelings. As you begin to accept that reconciliation is not an option, you shift from the hope that the relationship can be saved, to the possibility that you just might be ok without it. For now, hope lies in small accomplishments, all of which lead toward greater hope for the present and future.

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