

**2013, Surviving Your First Heart Break:
Don't Let Your Breakup Derail Your Momentum in College
By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

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It has been on-again and off-again for a while. But now it's really over. The pain of your first broken heart is immense and immeasurable. There is no other pain like the loss of a love. Nothing else compares with it. It is heart wrenching. A romantic breakup can even feel like withdrawal in drug addiction. It can impair your ability to make decisions, to concentrate, to be motivated, and to stay engaged in your life goals.

When you enter into a romantic relationship, you embrace hope. You experience a flood of neuro-chemicals that make you giddy with joy, nervousness, and excitement. You expect those euphoric feelings to last forever. You and your love make plans for lots of wonderful things that you will do together in the future. Those plans take on all the expectations of "promises". When your relationship ends, some of the biggest losses experienced are the losses of fantasies of what could have been and the hurt of broken promises.

Another often unrecognized loss is the devastation of coherence of your own identity. When we entrust ourselves profoundly to a romantic relationship, we not only gain intimate knowledge of the other person's inner composition, we get to know ourselves within the context of that relationship. In the early days of the relationships, a kind of emotional enmeshment is common and a kind of merging of personalities seems to occur. When the other person leaves the loss can devastate your sense of self. Those with low self esteem are especially vulnerable to give up pieces of who they are in order to be loved or accepted by the other person. When the relationship ends, the loss experienced can be more profound with the belief that you gave "everything" to the relationship and were still abandoned. This belief reinforces other self-denigrating beliefs and further damages already low self esteem and self-efficacy.

Romantic relationships lend themselves easily to other faulty assumptions and expectations. Most people make the assumption that if they invest emotionally in a relationship that it will pay off in emotional and other rewards. There is an underlying expectation that the other person will care about your feelings, will be there emotionally for you, and will serve as a psychological fortress when others try to hurt you.

In a break-up, the person that you trusted to care about your feelings and to protect you, not only does not seem to care about your feelings, but is the one who is hurting you. S/he was your best friend. If someone else was hurting you, you would be turning to him/her for solace and support.

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How do you heal a broken heart? Healing comes about from talking about your thoughts and feelings, reclaiming your sense of self, rebuilding and re-engaging in your life without him/her. It takes time to process through the events, and to resolve uncomfortable feelings.

Many people are plagued with compulsions to try to maintain contact with their estranged loved one in the midst of a breakup. Sometimes the person who is leaving tries to maintain the "friendship" by staying in contact. They may feel guilty. They may fear reprisals. Regardless of the motivation, the attempt to still be friends is ill-advised. There may be a time in the future, when it is possible to regain the friendship. The midst of the breakup is not a good time for that.

The person who is being left, may think that they are also trying to maintain the friendship, but may instead, be trying to hang on to the romance. They may believe that if they maintain the contact, the other person will simply "come to his/her senses", or that if they change certain behaviors they will be able to "win" him/her back. When a romance ends, you miss the other person. You miss their presence. You miss the contribution that they make to your life.

The compulsion is strong to make contact, to call, to text, to drop by, or to post on Facebook. You not only want to share what is going on with you, you want to know the details of his/her life. When you break up, you are no longer "intimates". It is no longer appropriate to gain intimate knowledge of the other person's life, or for them to have access to intimate knowledge of your life. A breakup defines the territory between "in" and "out". It is no longer appropriate to continue to try to maintain contact. It just prolongs the pain.

Overcoming the compulsion to make contact takes some work. Cognitive therapy works to mentally challenge any thoughts that tell you it's ok, it's appropriate, or that it could actually "help" to contact him/her. Fighting the urge to contact your ex is like fighting the urge to smoke after you have given up cigarettes. Urges pass if you do not act on them.

Other self-destructive urges may also be present. You may experience urges to act out your feelings in some kind of spiteful behavior. Although you probably spent a great deal of time and energy trying to figure out what you did "wrong", chances are pretty good, that you have or will blame the other person for the pain you are experiencing. Those who have difficulty with expressing feelings in a healthy way are especially vulnerable to acting out the pain during a break up. The newspaper headlines are full of crazy things that people have done while acting out feelings related to being abandoned or betrayed. It is important that you forego any urge to act in vengeful, spiteful ways.

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When feeling hurt and betrayal, the urge for "justice" for being "wronged" may be strong, but acting on that need tends to create more problems than it provides relief. Acting out hurts you more than you hurt the other person. Acts of malice and vengeance are destructive actions toward yourself. It is equally important to refrain from medicating your feelings with alcohol or other drugs.

Counseling is available for anyone experiencing the pain of a breakup. Many people experience symptoms of depression and anxiety that are severe enough to merit insurance coverage for counseling services. Those feeling compelled to act out feelings, harm self or others, or to commit suicide should see a professional immediately.

A romantic break up is an opportunity. In recovering from your emotional devastation, you will learn a lot about yourself and the other people in your life. In trying to make sense of what happened, you will process your own theories about the "why's" of the breakup. You may feel compelled to ruminate on what was said, what happened, and any indications that a breakup was on the way.

Many people utilize this opportunity to identify destructive and repetitive patterns in relationships, such as a pattern of selecting love interests who are emotionally unavailable, abusive, or commitment phobic. Familiar feelings stirred by abandonment and betrayal may signal need to look for a repetitive pattern.

Old patterns can be replaced by new intimacy skills. It takes awareness, determination, and sometimes help. One of the red flags that you can identify early on in the relationship is a gut feeling of shame, or feeling bad about self. Another is the tendency to attempt to become the person you "think" your love interest wants you to be, and to abandon your own identity in the process. In order to learn from this painful experience, look for the red flags that were present in this relationship, so that you may be able to identify them in the future.

Anyone recovering from a romantic breakup needs the listening services of others, in order to talk through and process seemingly random pieces of information. Talking through thoughts and feelings will involve remembering and analyzing relationship events. Your friends and family, as active support and official "listeners" will probably take your side, villainize the other person, and eventually get very tired of hearing about it. Initially, they feel your pain. They give advice. They try to make you feel better. Ultimately, they can't fix your feelings. They get frustrated. They get compassion fatigue. It is important to have a group of people who will listen while you process your breakup.

In addition to processing thoughts, feelings, and experiences, there are other important things that you must do to recover. You must maintain your perspective. You are in college because you have life goals (other than finding a potential spouse). You must

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keep your eyes on the prize and keep doing what you have to do to achieve your ultimate academic goals.

Behavioral objectives for staying on the path toward your goals are the obvious: Keep suiting up and showing up at classes. Maintain your normal study structure and routines. If you have abandoned some of the structure and focus of school to concentrate on the relationship, now would be a good time to recoup your focus on school tasks and objectives. Think about it in terms of getting back to your own dreams. You had dreams that were uniquely yours before you met your loved one. Re-invest in yourself. Take stock of your skills, talents, and strengths. A break up hurts self-esteem. Remind yourself of the strengths and skills that you had before you met your boyfriend/girlfriend.

Other therapeutic activities include getting out and about and spending time with your friends. It may take some work to eliminate some of the self-absorbed rumination and pain, but it can be done by getting outside yourself and doing something that does not focus on the relationship or the breakup. Do something thoughtful for someone else (not the ex). Volunteering can give you something to do with the extra time that you have now. If you have additional goals or activities that have been abandoned because of the time and energy you were investing in the relationship, now may be a good time to pursue those.

Even though it feels like your life has ended, that life will never be the same again, and that time will forever be marked by "before breakup/after breakup", your life truly will go on. It is important and telling that the word "first" is in the title of this article. It is difficult to recognize that other relationships are around the corner for you. No one wants to continue to feel the way that you do now. It may feel like you will feel like this forever. Or, when you think about getting over it, you may be thinking, "Never again." To get over the loss of a love, you keep moving forward, doing what is in front of you to do that day. You fight any compulsions to reconnect and focus on your own life.

You will be able to love again. We are driven to try to trust someone. Healthy people reveal pieces of themselves in small doses over time, paying attention to see if trust is warranted. When you find yourself drawn to a new love, slow down and get to know them before you commit. Look for red flags that may indicate old familiar patterns. However, know and understand that you cannot find love again without experiencing hurt. Don't let the fear of hurt keep you from taking a risk on loving again. Let yourself know that you are deserving of a new relationship, and that you are capable of dealing with feelings in an adult manner. Love is a risk worth taking.

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