

How to Move Through the Loss of a Relationship

By
Jay Uhler

Nothing is more upsetting than to lose someone we love. It tears at the fabric of our lives —of our very existence. There is often confusion that it can happen, especially when we enter a relationship with so much hope, with so many fantasies about a wonderfully fulfilling future together, with dreams of a lifetime of sharing.

Then it happens, the relationship begins to unravel. Cracks occur in the dreams as unresolved hurts begin to accumulate and differences emerge that were not apparent under the glow of romance and hopes and dreams.

As the relationship became more difficult, the feelings of pain and anger and helplessness and fear became more intense. As the relationship moved toward its end, there was always the hope that things could improve.

When the friction is so great that the relationship is irreparable and separation is inevitable, it becomes clear that the relationship must end for the benefit of one or everyone involved. The hope is then gone and the reality strikes that the end is *now*.

The emotions of pain and anger and helplessness and fear take on a different focus. The feelings shift to grieving for the losses attached to the ending.

Those feelings are only modified by a sense of relief that all the energy that has gone into trying to “make it work” is no longer required. There is relief that the struggle for intimacy is ended.

Using the term end is not really accurate. The “end” is the resolution to the attempts to find a solution that could continue the relationship. It can seem as though it is the end, but often it does not end. The nature of the relationship changes. It is the end of the relationship as we knew it.

A significant difference exists when an important relationship ends by choice, compared to when someone dies. Death brings finality. Partings, separation, and divorce have several complexities. (For more on grieving when someone has died, go to jayuhler.com, click on the “Articles” tab on the left, then select [Articles on Grief](#).)

One is that after it “ends,” it is not over. The person still exists. The relationship often continues in a different form—especially if there are children.

The confusing struggle is that in order for grieving to be complete we must face the qualities we liked about the person, the loss of the activities that we enjoyed sharing, the interests that we had in common and the dreams of future events together.

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That is difficult whether you were the one ending the relationship or you were the one who was told it would end. If you ended the relationship, the fear can be that if you focus on the losses related to the person with whom you ended it, there can be the desire to go back into a situation that is not good for you. When that fear is great enough, looking at the positive aspects of the person or the relationship is avoided.

If you did **not** want the relationship to end, facing the positive part that you miss and lost can generate pain and helplessness that the person you lost does not want to be together. Therefore, to avoid the pain and helplessness, people avoid the positives of the relationship that you lost.

Both of these situations can interfere with the willingness to face the loss of what was satisfying or enjoyable in the relationship. When we don't face the positives, we do not conclude the grieving—the letting go is not complete. It is important, if we are to move on, to courageously confront the pain of losing the positive aspects of the relationship that ended.

Another complication occurs when there are children in the relationship. When children are involved, it can be as though you are not separated or divorced, because there is continued contact around the children and their activities, especially when they are young, and even when they become adults. There are events where the children want both of you to attend. There can be meetings with teachers or school officials, sporting events, school plays and music programs and on and on.

Children can also be a significant loss to couples who were not married and whose children are their mates, not their own. Sometimes the emotional attachment to the friendship is the need for a family setting which the children create. At times the bond to the children can be strong, even as the relationship is disintegrating. When this happens, the loss of the children can be as great, or greater, than the relationship with the mate.

Family events also continue after the child grows to be an adult. Events such as college graduations, weddings, award ceremonies, sports activities and social gatherings.

For the sake of the children and for the benefit of having happiness in your own lives, it is necessary to be as gracious as possible to the parent of your children. That may not be easy, because the previous complications in the relationship do not vanish. In the short run and for the long run, it is well worth the effort, even if the former partner does not reciprocate. When tensions intensify between the parents, everyone suffers.

Issues with children can affect many people: grandparents, extended family members, friends of both parents, the children's friends and primarily the children.

A third complication is with friends and family. When someone dies people rally around to provide comfort. When a friendship, courtship, partnership or marriage ends, it creates tension about who to befriend. Often the loss of the relationship is compounded by the loss of other relationships. This can be especially painful when there are strong ties to in-laws and family members because there can be the loss of those relationships and the enjoyable events that have been shared with them.

When friends are uncomfortable about the separation, they often pick one person or the other, or are uncomfortable being with either one of the separated people, so there is the loss of friends and activities.

When someone dies, it is traumatic; however, relationships that end while both people are still alive have unique, ongoing distress that can be difficult to cope with.

Hopefully, as you have been reading you have been connecting my thoughts with your experiences or those of other people that you know and love.

You are probably asking, “OK, now what do I do?”

The remainder of the article will focus on how to cope with the experience of loss.

The more we know what feelings to expect and how to manage them, the more smoothly we can move through our loss. The more we face and resolve our emotions on the inside, the more clarity, energy and strength we have to handle life's struggles in the outside world.

To fight against ourselves—our emotions—is exhausting and we are waging a battle on two fronts. There are many challenges to be faced in the outside world when a relationship ends. The better we manage our emotions on the inside, the better we can cope with circumstances outside ourselves.

I have been assisting people and organizations to move constructively through life's transitions for the past forty years as a minister, a therapist, a coach an administrator, and a consultant to organizations. Here is what I have learned.

Endings have three phases. The **first** is **denial and disbelief**. Physically, our body shuts down. We move more slowly. Our breathing is shallower. We take big breaths, with deep sighs. We feel tired and lose our appetite. We shut down emotionally and go numb. I believe that our body is shutting down to protect us from the full impact of our pain and to buffer us from the intensity of all the emotions that suddenly occur.

I refer to the **second phase** as the **"grief work"** phase. We either deal with our emotions related to the loss and move into the final phase or we stay glued to the past carrying it around with us wherever we go. That can be an enormous emotional burden and can lead to illness or physical pain.

The **third phase** occurs when we have done the emotional work required in phase two and become ready to live free from the emotional ties to our lost past. We are ready to **go on with life** without the important person that we have lost and we are ready to fully invest ourselves in the new opportunities and relationships that are presented to us. This is the **letting go** phase.

Let me emphasize that these three phases overlap. We gradually progress from one to the other. I have made them distinct for the purpose of clarity.

The remainder of this article will focus on the second phase, the “grief work” phase of dealing with the emotions related to the loss of the relationship.

The first emotion we will address is that of **sadness**. The first step to managing **sadness** is to recognize that the pain of sadness is a natural human response to loss. The next step is to talk about the losses with family members or friends—tell them what you miss—and as you do, sob out the pain of the sadness. If it would be comforting, have them hold you as you cry. If not, simply appreciate the presence of a supportive person.

Unfortunately our family and friends may not know how to deal with feelings or grieving situations because our society does not assist people to know how to grieve. Therefore, our family and friends have not learned the grieving process. Often we are told to “just move on.” Even some therapists take this approach. This does not work. It is difficult to move on until we face and release the emotions linked to the loss.

People are taught that crying is “breaking down.” The truth is, **sobbing is letting go**. Letting go brings with it healing relief as our sobs and tears wash away our pain.

It can be of value to share your feelings with professionals who are experienced at assisting a grieving person. Hopefully, clergy persons, therapists and school counselors are sensitive to people experiencing loss. There are wonderful support groups, such as New Beginnings of Wellesley, in Wellesley, Massachusetts that exist specifically to help people move through grief.

Frustration also occurs when there is a loss. I think of frustration as a **combination of helplessness and anger**. With many losses there is a sense of helplessness that the person you are losing won’t change or that there is not a damn thing that you can do about the relationship, as you knew it, ending. The anger grows out of the frustration.

When we feel **helpless**, it is important for us to consider our options. We may not like them, but when we sort out our options and select one, we feel in control and that reduces our feelings of helplessness.

Whenever we choose an option, even if it is not one that we like, we are getting unstuck, we are creating momentum and often better options appear.

We may say that we have no options. We may find that the only option we have is to decide to be miserable or to be happy.

Our **anger** may be directed many places. It can be directed toward anyone who happens to be around. We must accept our anger as a part of our human nature and then decide what we are going to do with it.

To direct anger toward undeserving family members or friends hurts them and hurts us if we lose their friendship or respect. To direct our anger at our former mate not only hurts them, but can hurt us and our children. Destructive behavior helps no one. To release our anger in ways that benefit ourselves and hurt no one is the best approach.

Another experience is **guilt**. **Guilt lies to us**. It tells us that we are bad. If we believe guilt’s message of judgment, we will experience the pain of self-rejection—the most painful of pains.

Guilt does not like ambiguity, so it goes looking for a peg upon which to hang itself. It is like a police scanner that goes through our memories. It selects a past event and says, “If only I would have done something differently.” “I shouldn’t have done that.” Or, “I should have done something.”

When we are in a situation of loss, we need to remind ourselves that guilt is one of the feelings that we will experience. Remind ourselves that we did the best that we could under the circumstances. Remind ourselves that we are a good and caring person.

To avoid the pain of guilt, you must talk to yourself saying, "Oh, there is the guilt. I'm glad that I know it is there. It's natural for me to feel guilty in this situation." Then remind yourself that **guilt lies**. It tells you that you are a bad person when you are not. After you acknowledge any guilt that is present and remind yourself that it lies to you about you, continue your thoughts by telling yourself all of your virtues. Remind yourself of your good qualities.

The following comment is worth noting. Based on my familiarity with people over the years, **those who experience the most guilt are the ones who try the hardest to do their best.**

However, I must add that there are some people who like to hurt others. **Some people are just plain mean.** If you are one of those, you deserve to feel guilty, but you probably don't. You probably justify your spitefulness and cruelty by rationalizing that the other person deserves it. What a pathetic way to live.

A significant feeling related to the loss of a relationship is the feeling is **fear**. There is fear of the unknown future. Even though there may be relief that the relationship is ending or even excitement about the changes, you will be afraid. Remember that fear is a natural emotion that accompanies transition out of a relationship to a different life style. There is fear about the unknown future. It is helpful to remember that **fear does not predict the future. It only tells you that you are afraid.**

People can also be frightened by the intensity of their emotions when loss occurs because of their previous experiences. This is especially true if you were taught that you should not have feelings, or were never taught what to do with them when you do have them.

You may have experience in your family of learning that when feelings were express someone got hurt. Feelings may have led to abuse or violence. Criticism, cutting sarcasm or physical abuse is frightening.

The opposite may have occurred. When a family member had feelings they withdrew, maybe as a way to cope. When a parent is closed off/shut off from you, the isolation can be painful. The "silent treatment" can be especially painful.

When either expressed or unexpressed emotions led to pain and you were never taught how the deal with your feelings, that can be frightening. Since feeling are so intense when you loose an important person in your life, there can be the fear that you will have a "break down" or go "crazy."

Remember, you have feelings of fear because you are human. If you are afraid of your feeling, talk with someone who seems to manage their emotions well. You may want to talk with a close friend, a clergyperson or a therapist. Pick someone who is comfortable with feelings. Not all friends, clergypersons or even therapists are good at assisting someone with intense emotions. If they are not helping you, take care of yourself and find another person.

Emotions may be combined to form **ambivalence**. You may feel sadness about the loss, and at the same time relieved, or even excited, to move on—sad and happy at the same time.

When a relationship ends, there can be loss of the person and the dreams of what the future could have been if you were together, yet relief that you are no longer struggling to survive in a difficult, unhappy, unhealthy relationship. Both can exist together.

Best wishes to you as you face the challenge of the loss of a relationship. My hope is that these thoughts assist you to close one portion of your life and move forward to create a new and better life for yourself.

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To learn more about emotions, see the book and unabridged CD, *How to Make Friends With Your Feelings* by Jay Uhler. To order call: 1-800-bookjay (1-800-266-5529), go to a bookstore, the internet or order through jayuhler.com

For more on grieving when someone has died, go to jayuhler.com, click on the “Articles” tab on the left, then select [Articles on Grief](#)