

love lessons

When a relationship ends, it can seem like the end of the world. Psychologist Sonia Zadro shows you that it is possible to learn to love again – starting with loving yourself.

When Linda Newham came home early from an interstate trip, she was looking forward to a quiet cuddle on the couch with her partner, Gerard. Instead, what she found was Gerard on the couch, having sex with a woman Linda had never seen before.

"I felt oddly detached," says Linda, "as though everything was happening in slow motion. An obscure phrase from uni days floated into my thoughts: cognitive dissonance. I remember thinking, Yes, that's when one piece of information doesn't match another. Why on earth did I think of that? Later, I realised that my brain was trying to process two mismatched pieces of information: that the man I knew so intimately could be making love to someone else.

"The strange detachment remained – I even remember telling a friend that breaking up was probably for the best. But a week later, when I was having breakfast, I suddenly couldn't swallow. I tried to shovel in cereal, but it came straight up again. And I cried and cried, great gut-wrenching sobs. I couldn't stop crying for weeks."

5 STEPS TO SELF-AWARENESS

If you're finding it difficult to deal with the end of a relationship, these steps can help you to heal, forgive and create a new capacity for love.

1 Tune into your body Ask yourself, "Where do I feel the physical sensation of this emotion in my body?" For example, you may feel tightness in your chest or jaw, or 'butterflies' in your stomach. The simple act of observing your physical sensations helps you to dispel them; by noticing a clenched stomach, for example, you are better able to concentrate on relaxing it.

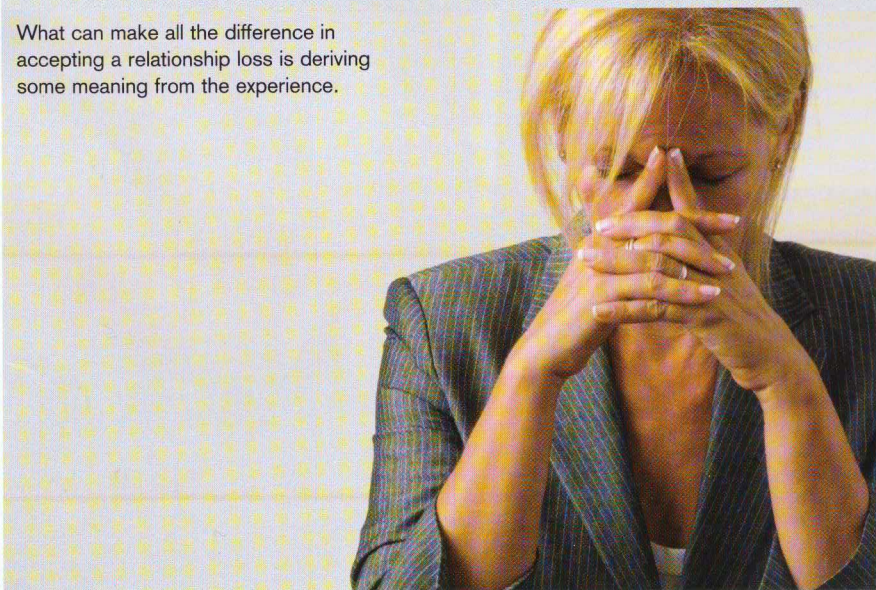
2 Write a letter Don't censor it, no matter how incoherent or poorly spelled it is. If you do, you're more likely to be careful about what you're writing and to repress the feelings you're trying to get out. A good way to begin is to write the first thing that comes to mind. It doesn't have to make sense. *You don't even deserve a letter, you miserable bastard, but I want to say ...* gets you off and running, with the pain out on paper, not in your mind. When you've finished, burn your letter, or tear it into pieces.

3 Say what you feel Imagine that your ex is sitting in a chair opposite you; then say everything you want to say to them, as clearly, loudly and thoroughly as you like. Swap chairs and respond as though you were your ex. Swap back and reply to what you think they would have said. Role-playing is a great way to express emotions and it can provide surprising insights into your ex's behaviour.

4 Be kind to yourself Loss creates a profound strain on your body and mind. Give yourself time out, eat nourishing foods, and do at least one thing to nurture yourself every day, such as booking in for a massage, watching a good movie and so on. Avoid negative self-talk: you are particularly vulnerable at this time to saying and thinking things that undermine your self-worth. Remind yourself that, irrespective of what has happened, you did the best you could with the resources and knowledge that you had.

5 Seek professional help Friends and family provide love and support, but a counsellor is objective. Find someone that you feel safe with, who can witness your feelings and validate them and then help you to make sense of your experience in the context of other life experiences, showing you patterns or unresolved issues that require attention. For example, you may attract partners who don't value you because you felt unvalued by a parent and you haven't learned how to value yourself. Developing awareness and understanding about yourself stops you from repeating negative or destructive relationships.

What can make all the difference in accepting a relationship loss is deriving some meaning from the experience.



Heartbreak and recovery

Stories like Linda's are very common. An Australian survey has found that affairs are the second most common reason given in divorce cases. (The others, in case you're wondering, are financial problems, work or study demands, raising children, an accident or serious illness.)

Linda's reaction was also typical. Disbelief, numbness and denial are common ways for your brain to help you face trauma. It's as though your brain decides: *This is too much emotion for you to process at once, so I'm going to make you numb so you can do it gradually.* Linda's denial – downplaying the significance of their relationship – also helped her to cope, at least in the short-term. Switching to this mode of thinking deferred the devastation that she wasn't ready to feel yet.

In reacting to any trauma, such as bereavement, a person will respond the same way. With extreme trauma, they may forget the trigger event, or be confronted by it again and again, via flashbacks or nightmares. If they are grieving, they go straight past denial and shock into accepting the reality of the loss, but then experience sorrow or rage as they go over events and perhaps question whether they could have done things differently or prevented the situation.

Forgiveness means letting go all hope of changing the past.

All these feelings are normal and healthy. What is not healthy is to suppress them. This is known as avoidance and it takes many forms, such as when a grieving person keeps so busy that they don't have time to feel anything. Avoidance drags out the healing process, or halts it altogether. Finding a way through loss means finding a way to express your feelings fully and safely.

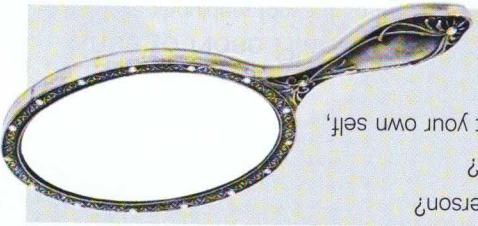
has happened (see box "Moving Forward" on this page). What happened to Linda? Well, she left Gerard and spent two years in a severe depression before she came to see me. She was still very angry at him and – as is often the case – what was underneath this was a lot of anger at herself, for not recognising what he was really like. During therapy, Linda discovered a lot about herself, including her need for love and for a partner that she considered more worthy than herself. These needs were so strong that she would overlook the fact that Gerard abused her emotionally. Every time he treated her badly, Linda tried to 'fix it' by giving him more love. The most important lesson Linda learned about the loss of her relationship was that she should have been giving herself more love and respect, not him. For her, therapy meant reclaiming her life.

than you did during the break-up. Don't force yourself to 'be strong', or think *I've dealt with this*; *I'm not going over it again*. Not engaging with your feelings only prolongs the healing process. What can make all the difference in accepting a relationship loss is to derive some meaning from the experience. For example, if you recognise that it showed you something about yourself that you need to work on, or if it propelled you to a new life direction – a decision to travel, perhaps. This is usually only possible down the track, after you have grieved, because at the start there is generally too much anger and sadness to make sense of what

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MOVING FORWARD



- Has this relationship developed you as a person?
- What have you learnt from this relationship?
- What has this experience shown you about your own self, issues and needs?
- What would you do differently next time?

“Heart be kind and sign the release as the trees their loss approve. Learn as leaves must learn to fall, out of danger, out of love.” JAMES FENTON

Acceptance and learning

Once you've processed your emotions, you will eventually come to a point of acceptance about what's happened. You still remember everything, but it will no longer be so painful. The process is not always predictable or linear. You may go back and forth through different stages, possibly returning to numbness and denial when you are under stress. However the more you allow yourself to feel, the less frequently the negative emotions will occur, and the less intense they will be. Remember: everyone is different. You may feel fine for a while, only to slump several months or even years later, and feel even worse.

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