

The mental health impact of relationship breakdown

REGISTERED COUNSELLOR AND PSYCHOTHERAPIST SHARON HINSULL

LOOKS AT HOW TO DEAL WITH THE END OF A RELATIONSHIP.



Facing the break-up of a serious and committed relationship is rarely going to be an easy or straightforward experience for anyone. Indeed, for many fathers, separating from a long-term partner can turn out to be an exceptionally painful and protracted process. A recent academic survey conducted by the University of British

Columbia served to highlight the serious degree to which men's mental health can be impacted by the ending of a relationship. In cases where separation from their children is involved, the emotional fallout for many dads is likely to be all the more devastating. When interviewed about their experience of ending an intimate partner relationship,

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most of the men taking part in the study revealed that they had suffered a noticeable worsening in their state of mental health, both leading up to and following the breakdown of a relationship.

One of the key findings to emerge from the research was a tendency on men's part to ignore or minimise some of the more difficult or contentious issues arising within a relationship, ultimately leading to further conflict and division. Dr. John Oliffe, lead author of the study and professor of nursing at UBC believes that many men are inclined to shut down when faced with relationship difficulties rather than confronting issues head-on or seeking appropriate support.

“Stereotyped masculinity plays a role in how men react to a broken relationship. For example, men's uncertainty for how to articulate and problem-solve in the relationship context resulted in many men isolating rather than reaching out for help. Most men in the study were battling with transitions in the partnership, like bereavement, parenting or infidelity, and their primary goal was to avoid conflict.”

The research also went on to reveal that men experiencing mental and emotional distress following a relationship break-up were inclined to use substances such as alcohol to help them cope with difficult feelings such as guilt, shame, anger and regret.



LEARNING TO LET GO

Counselling charity Relate works with couples and individuals who may be struggling with the prospect of ending a relationship, recognising that there can often be a mixture of very uncomfortable feelings to deal with in the aftermath of a break-up, not least anger.

“It can be easy to get stuck in the ‘blame game’ - endlessly questioning who did what, what could have been done differently and who ended up feeling worse. But this kind of thinking will only make you feel bitter, regretful and has a tendency to go in circles.

“Although it isn't always easy, it's much more useful to focus objectively on what the relationship was lacking and how it failed to meet your or your partner's needs. It isn't about deciding who was right and who was wrong, but being realistic about what happened and why.

“Think about the warning signs that you may have ignored. Think about the things that caused arguments - not just who caused them. And, crucially, try to understand your part in what happened. Although the answers to these might be upsetting, they will make it easier to let go of the past and avoid making the same mistakes in the future.”



“THE BREAKDOWN OF A SIGNIFICANT PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP IS ALMOST ALWAYS GOING TO BE ACCOMPANIED BY A PERIOD OF GRIEVING”

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ALLOW YOURSELF TO GRIEVE

As with any meaningful loss that we might experience in life, the breakdown of a significant personal relationship is almost always going to be accompanied by a period of grieving. In addition to anger, feelings ranging from denial to acceptance all form part of the natural grieving process, as does the tendency to bargain with ourselves - pondering the endless ‘what-ifs’ and ‘maybes’. At times the grieving process can also leave us feeling very low and despondent, to the point where some people might find themselves experiencing bouts of depression, or even despair.

It is important to remember that there is no set pattern or time-frame for the grieving process. Everyone grieves differently and in their own individual way. Not everyone will experience the full range of emotions associated with the grieving process, nor do the stages of grief necessarily follow any recognisable order. A big part of dealing with the feelings of loss surrounding a relationship breakdown, for however long they may last, is to acknowledge their likely impact and find ways of implementing a few helpful coping strategies along the way.

TALK ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS

For many dads, especially those who have been separated from their children, the effects of a relationship break-up can be very long-lasting. One of the most widely recommended ways of helping to relieve the emotional pain and turmoil of separation is to talk about your feelings. Whilst this might not always seem an easy thing to do, keeping emotions bottled up is likely to further intensify feelings of negativity, keeping you stuck in an unhappy and all too often self-destructive mindset.

Adjusting to life post-separation can often be a lengthy, challenging and financially draining process. Quite apart from having to deal with all the emotional fallout from a relationship breakdown, there will usually be a range of practical issues to have to contend with at the same time. Finding a suitable new place to live and making arrangements to see the children are just a couple of considerations that are likely to take priority for many dads who find themselves coming out of a long-term relationship. Where there is a new partner involved, the situation may be additionally complicated by the challenge of having to accommodate the needs of other children besides your own.

PRACTISE SELF-CARE

With so many new and challenging issues to have to think about in the face of a break-up, it can be easy to lose sight of some of the more basic needs of day to day life. Taking time out for yourself is always going to be important, not least giving yourself a chance to rest and relax once in a while. If you find yourself struggling to adjust to life in a new home, try to focus on making your living space as comfortable and welcoming as possible, thus creating a place of sanctuary to which you can readily retreat whenever needed.

The post-separation period can often present a golden opportunity for trying out new and exciting experiences, both for yourself and with your children. Now can be the perfect time for implementing positive new lifestyle habits, or checking out previously unexplored areas of personal interest.

EMBRACING FREEDOM

Ultimately, learning to come to terms with the end of a relationship can be a very liberating experience, enabling you to let go of the negativity of the past and focus on more positive ways of moving forward with your life.

As you eventually find yourself reaching the acceptance stage of the separation process, counselling charity Relate offers the following tips on building some firm foundations for the future:

- Look for ways to find a lasting sense of personal happiness. Consider trying out things that would enrich you as a person like a new hobby, or helping others. Learning to maintain good self-esteem is an important part of creating a positive future.
- Be courageous. Believe you can do what you want to do and don't put limits on your hopes and aspirations.



How can we
concentrate in
~~scet~~ Science class,
if all we can
think about
is our next meal?



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*Source: Magic Breakfast Partner School Survey, 2019. Magic Breakfast – Registered charity number 1102510 in England and SC048202 in Scotland.

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- Think positively. Be ready to catch yourself when negative thoughts pop into your head. Think about what you 'could try' rather than what you 'can't do', no matter how small.
- Try writing out a list of ten positive things about yourself and keep it with you. When a negative thought creeps in, get the list out and remind yourself of everything you have going for you.

For further information on surviving a relationship breakdown, the following organisations are able to offer online and face to face support, and provide access to a wide range of downloadable resources:

Relate As well as offering counselling to couples, families and individuals experiencing interpersonal conflict at home, Relate provides guidance and support for people coming out of a relationship, including free online tools to help people deal with the emotional and psychological impact of separation and divorce.

For help with navigating the practical side of a relationship breakdown, **Citizens Advice** is able to provide information and guidance on a wide range of issues, ranging from the legal and financial aspects of a separation, to advice on housing and child custody arrangements.

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Should you find yourself struggling to cope in the aftermath of a break-up, the following organisations are on hand to offer immediate support by telephone and online. Regional branches of MIND and other local counselling and support agencies are also ready to listen and help those who are in crisis following the breakdown of a relationship. ❖



CALM

0800 58 58 58

**Helpline and web chat available
5pm to midnight every day
thecalmzone.net**

Samaritans

**116 123 (24 hours)
samaritans.org**

MIND

**0300 123 3393 (Mon - Fri 9am - 6pm)
mind.org.uk**

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