

Conscious Break-ups – the art of staying open in tough situations

I just got dumped. Okay, that may be a bit mellow-dramatic, but this is one of those moments when it feels okay to be cranky about it and describe my experience that way. It was, after all, a relationship that has had deep significance in my life. I wanted the relationship. My partner didn't. And that hurt.

In the past, I would have gone off quietly to lick my wounds in private trying to prevent word from getting out. I would have locked down my heart and rallied my girlfriends and tried to believe them when they told me I was a "catch" and Mr. Right would be along shortly. I would have dulled my pain with lots of activity. Isn't that what everyone says after a break-up? Stay busy.

And eventually I would have gotten back on my feet and continued forward. But it often took a long time to feel good about myself again or simply to enjoy my own company. It was hard to shake the storyline that I'd failed somehow. Was there another way?

So here I am facing the painful end of a relationship but this time I know I've got a choice in how I respond. And since I've taken a very public stand for honesty and truth-telling, this situation gives me an opportunity to really "walk my talk."

So what would a conscious break-up look like? Could I keep my heart open to the pain that I knew was on its way? Could I choose to experience and express my feelings instead of avoiding them with a frenzy of work, socializing and endless movie rentals? Could I simply stay present and curious without over-riding my experience with a story tailored to cast me in just the right light so everyone would be hugely sympathetic? My now ex-partner had requested that we continue getting real with each other as much as we could through the break-up process. It's not every day you get that kind of opportunity. So I said yes.

Here's what I've learned so far;

It's not personal! By focusing on the facts, I realize that the stories we tell ourselves following break-ups often cause more suffering than the actual loss. Stories like "He didn't value me," or "I will never find true love," weigh us down and call our self-worth into question. I can see clearly that my ex was not ready to take the next step and that doesn't make me or him wrong. It's simply information. The popular storyline that I'm not the "right" person is silly. There is no ultimate reality about any couple. We choose who we make the "right" person simply by our willingness and ability to take responsibility for our own reactions when they push our buttons. Reminding ourselves of this can be a powerful antidote to personalizing a break-up.

Don't avoid the pain. Pain is a completely natural part of life. It's a sign that we're alive. Yet most people avoid pain like the plague, expending tremendous energy to steer clear of situations that might cause pain. It's why a lot of people won't risk loving in the first place. And sure, pain can feel scary. Sometimes the waves of pain can be huge and terrifying, like being tossed in a storm at sea. And we might need to stay in bed all day with the covers over our head. But that's okay. Because when we stop resisting and allow pain, we start to make some empowering discoveries. Pain is not "on" 100% of the time (thank God!) It ebbs and flows. We can still function. And we begin to trust that we are strong enough to handle the pain because it doesn't kill us and as the cliché goes "what doesn't kill us, surely makes us stronger." And I definitely feel stronger.

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Pay attention to your feelings! I've observed lately that my gremlin (inner critic) has been telling me I don't have time to feel my feelings (I only have 20 minutes for lunch before an appointment, I'm just heading out the door, etc.) That kind of cracks me up when you think about it. How long do emotions take? Apparently we're afraid they take awhile. I've had clients tell me that they don't want to start crying because they're afraid they'll never stop. Or that once the floodgates of their anger is opened up, they won't be able to close it. Hogwash! Emotions are not unending! I speak from experience! Besides, I've discovered that you can make a sandwich and cry at the same time!

Getting over someone has no specified time-line. I had a realization a few days ago when I was having lunch with some friends from Vancouver. I suddenly realized how alive and powerful I was feeling and that my recent break-up didn't seem sad or bad or hard. It occurred to me in that moment that there are all kinds of made-up rules about how long it should take us to get over relationships. But I was whole and able to open fully to life. And even the moments since that have been pain-filled can't take that away. This process isn't cumulative. You don't have to suffer 30 consecutive days before you can feel good. There are days of sunshine and days of rain. I wonder how many of us refuse to allow ourselves to enjoy the sun because the weather report said rain!

Use the experience to support others. Since making the decision to stay open and conscious during this break-up, my heart has expanded by several inches! Seriously! It's like the protective veneer has been shattered and my heart is free of any restraints. Shutting the heart down doesn't protect it. It actually starts to deep-freeze it. The profound connections I'm experiencing with clients, friends and family are a gift. I have so much more empathy, understanding and patience for other people. It's as though I can really "see" them with my heart and this deeper awareness blasts the superficial "shiny, happy people" persona out of the water leaving behind a more authentic community where people feel a relief to be accepted and honored for who they truly are.

Well the journey is far from over, but one thing is clear. I'm creating my experience of this "chapter" simply by the way I'm choosing to view it. It is tough to dodge the usual bullets when it comes to something as painful as a relationship break-up (especially if you're the dreaded dumpee!). Horror stories are all over the place - movies, TV, books, friends. The stories reinforce each other and create a collective fear preventing many people from opening their hearts in relationship. But none of our experiences are predetermined. By staying present, ditching the storylines and getting clear with our feelings, we are all free to have our own unique experience.

I've decided to call this my "*expanding heart*" experience. The "relationship break-up" title feels pretty dated!!