

how to break up with someone

There is truth to the saying that breaking up is hard to do! Just because you are considering ending a relationship doesn't mean that you don't have feelings for or care deeply about your partner. Ending relationships, although difficult, can be acts of compassion and kindness when they are well considered, thoughtful, and planned out.

1 take ownership of breaking up

If you have decided that you need out of a relationship (for whatever reason), it is important to shoulder the responsibility for initiating a break up, which means that you will have to initiate the break up conversation and end your relationship with your partner. Though many people secretly hope that their partners might end the relationship so that they don't have to feel bad or guilty, it isn't fair to pass along that responsibility to your partner through passive-aggressive or avoidant behavior. Learning how to end a relationship is actually a critical relationship skill.

2 be honest

If your feelings towards your partner have changed, if you are "just not feeling it" anymore, if you are interested in exploring other relationships, or if you are not ready or willing to put the time/energy into a relationship any more, then telling whatever your truth is about your decision to end your relationship can be done respectfully to your partner. Believe it or not, saying "I just don't love you anymore"—if that is the truth for you—is actually OK to say! While the truth can be hard to express, it is often appreciated by people (sometimes not in the immediate moment), and it can help them to understand and accept your decision. Remember, truth should be delivered with kindness and economy. Think about what the key elements of your truth are, how you would want this information presented if the situation were reversed, and go from there.

3 be clear

Sometimes out of a desire to be kind, people are not entirely clear about their intentions to end their relationships. Lack of clarity often comes from being vague or non-committal about what you are requesting or wanting. This behaviour can cause false hope and/or confusion for your partner. Unless these statements are actually true and not just buying time until your partner figures out you are breaking

If you are considering or planning on ending your relationship, here are some considerations for ending your relationship in a healthy and considerate way. Break ups alone are hard enough, but how you end your relationship can either help or prolong your partner's recovery process.

up, these are examples of unclear messages: "I need some time to think about us" (interpreted by partners as you are not sure about your relationship); "I/we need a break" (often interpreted by partners as a "time out" and not an actual break up). Examples of clarity include: "I want to break up," "I don't want to be in this relationship anymore," "I don't want to be your partner/boyfriend/girlfriend anymore," or "This relationship is not working for me anymore, and I want it to end." Although some of these statements may feel very direct and perhaps harsh, these statements are very clear and are unlikely to confuse your partner or promote hope if there is none for reconciliation.

4 if possible, talk face to face

Technology offers us many ways to connect with one another without meeting face to face. For many people, using various technologies to break up with someone can hold appeal, since you don't have to face your partner's reaction, you don't have to have a difficult conversation, or you can break up with them in the immediate moment and have it over with quickly. Unfortunately, to be on the receiving end of a break up text, email, telephone call, or Facebook relationship status change is often an experience that leaves people feeling disrespected, devalued, and unimportant. Although using these media might feel like you are making the break up process easier for yourself, this approach often makes the break up feel worse for your partner.

5 initiate the break up in a timely manner

Try not to wait too long for a "better time." Very often a "better time" never arrives, but worse timing frequently presents itself. There is often no "good time" to break up. Ending your relationship in a timely manner is often helpful for your partner, who may feel betrayed and lied to if a significant amount of time passes between when you knew you wanted to break up and you actually articulating your intention to end the relationship.

6 think about the details of the difficult conversation

Once you have made the decision to break up, there are the pragmatic details around where and when to initiate the conversation and of deciding what and how you wish to communicate to your partner. It helps to spend some time being clear and honest with yourself first about why you want to end your relationship and being thoughtful and intentional about how you communicate this information. It is always appropriate to be clear and honest about what you know to be true for you. This clarity and honesty can help you to avoid many of the clichés in break up conversations (e.g., “It’s not you – it’s me.”) that people can find confusing and disrespectful. Be prepared to be honest with your partner if they ask you questions about the possibility of you changing your mind, working it out, or reconciling: if your answer really is “no,” be prepared to tell them that.

Break up conversations are best kept focused, relatively brief, and clear, so having an idea about how and when to end the conversation can be helpful. Although it is reasonable to allow for time to respond to your partner’s reaction and to answer questions they may have, lengthy conversations that examine the minutiae of your relationship rarely prove helpful in the immediate moment of breaking up. If you are open to meeting with your partner to discuss their questions or concerns post-break up, then offer that possibility; but, give them the option of contacting you if they wish to pursue this with you. Practicalities that need to be addressed may be discussed at this time if they are minor (e.g., getting or giving personal items back, getting your key back to your place). If the practical repercussions of a break up are quite substantial (e.g., if you are living with your partner, you have shared assets) you may need multiple follow up conversations to negotiate the transition out of the relationship.

In addition to relaying the key message of wanting out of your relationship, break up conversations also can have other messages that might include: your care and concern for your partner; your reflections on what you feel is your role in the demise of the relationship; your appreciation of the relationship that you have had with your partner and what you learned from them; or positive aspects you see your partner possessing. Aim to communicate in a calm and respectful way and in a chosen environment (i.e., public or private) that supports expression and discussion of thoughts and feelings relating to the break up.

7 prepare yourself for appropriate reactions

Recognize that a break up may be really difficult for your partner. Be prepared to tolerate and witness appropriate reactions (i.e., distress, sadness, confusion, anger) from your partner, but remain firm and clear in your position.

Though it is often appropriate and helpful to express care and concern for your partner, remember that you are not the person to support them at this time. If you have safety concerns for them or for yourself, be sure to access appropriate campus/community resources and/or emergency supports.

8 seek support for yourself

Just because you are ending your relationship doesn’t mean this is easy for you, and it doesn’t mean you won’t feel the loss of it and grieve the end of the relationship. Seeking support for yourself from others such as friends/family/professionals can prevent the ever-common “break up then get back together” pattern. Remember, missing your partner and your relationship after a break up is normal, but often not a great reason to reconcile. You ended the relationship for a reason; remain connected to your rationale and feel supported by others while you grieve.

9 hold off on “being friends”

Sometimes couples who have broken up decide to try to be friends. If the relationship has been quite casual, with relatively little emotional investment, then shifting out of romantic roles can be relatively easy. If your relationship has been quite serious and emotionally significant to one or both people, friendship in the immediate aftermath of a break up can be a profoundly difficult transition to negotiate and a painful experience for partners who do not wish the romantic relationship to end.

It can be tempting in the moment to offer the possibility of continued connection in the form of friendship to “soften the blow” of a break up. Partners who are being left may decide to try to be friends, because any connection might feel better than no connection. However, being friends with someone that you have had significant feelings for is usually very challenging and can interfere with the normal grieving and moving on process that needs to happen after a relationship ends.

Having time apart where you don’t see or contact one another (if that is possible) is often helpful during the grieving process. Once enough time has passed, wherein both partners do not continue to hold romantic feelings or hopes for reconciliation, friendship could be considered, complete with new roles, expectations, and responsibilities to one another. Having a clean break from the start of a break up can actually promote the possibility of a friendship at a later date.

10 follow the golden rule

The “Golden Rule,” of course, is to treat others the way you wish to be treated. This is a good guideline to follow if you are having trouble determining how to proceed or if you have feelings toward your partner that make you feel “less than charitable” with how you proceed initiating a break up. Remember, ending relationships is a critical relationship skill, and being kind and compassionate sets you up for good dating karma.

11 special circumstances

On occasion, you may find yourself facing some special circumstances in your relationship that may make the suggestions in this handout inappropriate. If there has been physical/sexual/emotional abuse in your relationship, if your partner is threatening to harm themselves or you, if your partner is blackmailing you into remaining in your relationship, or if your partner is continuing to harass you after you have broken up with them: these are circumstances where it would be helpful to speak with a mental health professional and/or access other resources such as University of Alberta Protective Services or Edmonton Police Services. These professionals can then help you deal with the specifics of your situation.

* Created by U of A Counselling and Clinical Services. For additional resources, visit: uofa.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mentalhealth

