

Breaking Up Ethically

Mission Statement

To propose that it is advantageous for us as individuals and as communities to have a common goal to break up as “ethical exes”, or with as little pain and community repercussions as possible, while acknowledging that breaking up is inherently a painful or uncomfortable by managing our own behaviour in an ethical and compassionate manner.

Videos

- Sex And The City, season 6 episode 7 *The Post-It Always Sticks Twice*
- *Breakin' All The Rules* movie

Apology Script

Original source: *A Better Way To Say Sorry* (<http://www.cuppacocoa.com/a-better-way-to-say-sorry/>)

- “*I’m sorry for...*” Be specific. Show the person you’re apologizing to that you really understand what they are upset about.
- “*This is wrong because...*” This might take some more thinking, but this is one of the most important parts. Until you understand why it was wrong or how it hurt someone’s feelings, it’s unlikely you will change. This is also important to show the person you hurt that you really understand how they feel. Sometimes, people want to feel understood more than they want an apology. Sometimes just showing understanding– even without an apology– is enough to make them feel better!
- “*In the future, I will...*” Use positive language, and tell them what you WILL do, not what you won’t do.
- “*Will you forgive me?*” This is important to try to restore your friendship. Now, there is no rule that the other person has to forgive you. Sometimes, they won’t. That’s their decision. Hopefully, you will all try to be the kind of friends who will forgive easily, but that’s not something you automatically get just because you apologized. Don’t expect it, but you should at least ask for it.

Breakup Template

Breakup Goals

It is not enough to just “stop the pain”. We ought to have both short-term and long-term goals for our breakup other than merely breaking up. Consider what you hope this relationship will turn into after the breakup event and how you can achieve that post-breakup relationship while being your best self during the breakup process.

When

Action Plan

What are some dates on the calendar that will give you the time you and your soon-to-be-ex will need for this conversation? Do they need to have a warning that you want to schedule a difficult conversation on that day or will they react better if you just bring it up? Choose some dates that seem like they will give you the appropriate amount of time for this conversation.

When

Action Plan

Look at the dates you just chose. What is the very first date? How far away is that date? Does that first convenient time happen after some event that might add to the negative feelings about the breakup, like after a holiday? If so, pick a date before that event, even if it is less optimal. Put that on your calendar or write it down. Stick to that schedule. Schedule that date with your soon-to-be-ex if they need a warning to prepare for serious conversations.

Where

Action Plan

Think about all the good and not-so-good places to breakup, and choose one. Write down the location for where you plan to initiate the Breakup Event. If the location depends on other factors, write down your top 3 locations in preference order so that you will be ready with a clear plan when the opportunity presents itself.

How

Action Plan

What methods of breaking up with this particular person, based on what you know about them, will be the most compassionate way for them to receive the news? If there are more than one acceptable method, choose one.

Why

Action Plan

Come up with a short, non-blaming summary or Elevator Pitch or Cliff Notes version of why you want to break up. Remember, this is not a list of what's wrong with them, this is all about you now. "I'm not happy anymore," "I want different things out of a relationship or out of life," "We don't have much in common," "My priorities have changed." Use "I" statements and focus on how you are feeling in a summary that takes about 30 seconds or so to share.

What

Action Plan

Write down what kind of relationship you hope to build post-breakup. Write down what kind of relationship you hope to build in both the short-term and long-term. Write down what you think you will need to get there. Include how much time you think this will take (and be sure to follow the Cooling Off advice).

Using your intimate knowledge of them for good, brainstorm what kinds of things you think they might need from you in order to cooperate with your goals and write down some possible compromises you would be willing to make, some possible supportive actions you would be willing to do, and some possible hard limits you would be unwilling or unable to bend on. Keep these boundaries in mind for when you have your breakup conversation so that you are ready to negotiate in a compassionate, kind manner when they have their responses or reactions to your goals.

Who

Action Plan

For each of your ex's loved ones with whom you have a pre-existing relationship of some sort, make a goal or set of goals for what kind of post-breakup relationship you would like to have with their loved one, or if you would like to have a final goodbye conversation with them. Consider what steps you would need to take to achieve that goal.

Write down a Cliff Notes summary or Elevator Pitch short Story to answer the question of "what happened?" or "why?" This should be a short, few sentences, 1 minute or less, description involving I-statements and leaving out blame and accusations. Have this summary handy in case they ask you the question, but do not volunteer it.

Breakup Questionnaire

Breakup Goal (FWB, platonic friends, nesting to LD, co-parent well, space to be an individual, want something else that conflicts with maintaining this relationship, etc.): _____

When do you want to break up? _____

Where do you want to break up? _____

How will your partner best appreciate (or least hate) you breaking up with them (the method - in person, phone, email, etc.)?

The Story Of Why (Note: not a list of what's wrong; this is about YOU, not them) "I am not happy anymore." "I want different things out of a relationship / life." "We don't have much in common." "My priorities have changed."

Name 3 things about the relationship that you loved / memories that you will cherish (say this during the breakup):

Name 3 things about the other person that you love / admire / will cherish (say this during the breakup):

What do you need to achieve your Breakup Goal? _____

How much time / space do you need? _____

Suggestions: Cooling Off time should be no less than one month. It can last as long as you need it to. One option is half the amount of time of the total relationship. Another option is until after some form of accountability. Never is also acceptable, but cautioned against unless there was some egregious behaviour in the relationship.

Who can be the person to initiate contact again after the Cooling Off period? _____

What stuff / physical items are a priority for you to get back or keep? _____

Example

Here's what one might say to an INTJ with the Love Languages of Words of Affirmation and Acts of Service:

Honey we need to talk. I don't think this is working out for me. We've had some great times together, and I want to remember and respect that. I love how strong and independent you are, and I think we are looking for different things from a relationship. Is there anything I can do for you to make this easier? I can bring your stuff over for you, or you can pick them up yourself, which would be better? You're welcome to keep that jacket of mine that you've been wearing, but I'd really like my DVDs back soon, if you can. I would like to stay friends because I think you are a good person, and I love your sense of humor and your sarcasm, and we still have the same taste in movies. May I call you in a month or would you like to be the one to call me first? I'm sorry, I hate hurting you. This wasn't an easy decision for me because you really are very special. Would you like a hug?

Ex's Loved Ones Breakup Questionnaire

Breakup Goal regarding the Loved One (maintain friendship, start dating, cut off contact, etc.)? _____

Is communicating with the Loved One post-breakup appropriate given your history with them? _____

When do you want to talk to them about the breakup? _____

Where do you want to talk to them about the breakup (in person, email, etc.)? _____

How will they most appreciate you reaching out to them ((the method - in person, phone, email, etc.)? _____

The Story Of Why (Note: not a list of what your ex did wrong; this is about YOU, not them) *"We have broken up and are remaining friends."* *"We have broken up and I am moving in a different direction."* *"We have transitioned to long-distance so that I can pursue my career."*: _____

Name 3 things about the metamour relationship that you loved / memories that you will cherish (say this during the post-breakup conversation with the metamour):

Name 3 things about the other person that you love / admire / will cherish (say this during the post-breakup conversation with the metamour):

What do you need from your metamour to achieve your Breakup Goals regarding both your ex and your ex's Loved One (*"Please tell me if you invited them to a social gathering when you also invite me so that I can choose whether or not to attend."* *"Please do not mention their name to me until I process this breakup."* *"I would very much like for you to initiate contact with me for a while so that I feel as though you still want to be friends."* *"Please stop me from complaining about my ex to you so that I don't wallow in this breakup."*)?

How much time / space do you need from the metamour? _____

What stuff / physical items are a priority to get back or that you want to keep from your ex's Loved Ones and/or what kind of assistance do you want from your metamour during the Division of the Stuff with your ex? _____

Cooling Off Options

Here are some suggestions on how long to go no-contact with your ex between the Breakup Event and the Post-Breakup Relationship if you are unsure and would like some guidance. It is recommended that you take no less than one month, no matter how clean you think your breakup went or how good you think you are at breaking up. If you truly have laid the groundwork for a post-breakup friendship, then that friendship will be strong enough to last one month of no-contact:

- Option 1) $\frac{1}{2}$ the total length of the relationship (i.e. the relationship lasted 8 months so the no-contact period would be 4 months) or no less than one month, whichever is greater.
- Option 2) 1 year
- Option 3) Until a form of accountability has been achieved regardless of time (such as completing anger management course, or checking into rehab or apologizing) with no less than one month even if accountability has been achieved sooner.

(For the record, the person who suggests the longer time limit is the one who “wins” if there is a conflict about the amount of time. Everyone has the right to consent who they interact with. If someone does not wish to interact with someone else, no matter what the reason is, and no matter what reasons the other person has for desiring that interaction, the ethical default is to always fall along lines of consent.)

Division Of The Stuff Rule Of Thumb

If you need some guidelines on how to divide up property during a breakup, here is Joreth’s Rule Of Thumb for deciding what to keep and what to return:

- If I brought it into the relationship, I take it with me when I go.
- If you did, you take it.
- If it was a gift, the recipient keeps it no matter how much it cost.
- If it was a joint purchase, the reason for the purchase and the meaning it holds will determine what happens to it. Large purchases might result in sale of item and division of profit. Or one person can “buy out” the other. Or one person can concede the purchase.
- If I find that I don’t really care about the object, but I do care about my ex getting to keep it, that’s a sign that I’m not being my best self and I should let it go.

Further Reading

Understanding Yourself & Others:

Please Understand Me II by David Kiersey
I’m Not Crazy, I’m Just Not You by Roger Pearman
The Five Love Languages by Dr. Gary Chapman
Stumbling On Happiness by Dan Gilbert

Understanding How The Brain Works:

The Monkey Sphere by David Wong (http://www.cracked.com/article_14990_what-monkeysphere.html)
Blink by Malcolm Gladwell
How We Know What Isn’t So by Thomas Gilovich
How We Believe by Michael Sherman
Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me) by Carol Tavris & Eliot Aronson
Don’t Believe Everything You Think by Thomas E. Kida