

Carrying a Torch for Your Ex?



Relationships: After the Divorce, 5 Tips to Putting Out the Torch -- Permanently

Your ex-spouse is long gone – but from the way you go on about the relationship, no one would know it. You still sleep on only one side of the bed. You've yet to purge your closets of all those little things your ex left behind. You refuse to let your friends set you up. Face it: whether you're willing to admit it or not, you're in denial.

It's time to ask yourself: Why are you still carrying a torch for someone who no longer wants to share your life with you?

In his book "How to Break Your Addiction to a Person," [psychotherapist Howard Halpern](#) says such denial is very common, particularly when you're still experiencing the shock and awe of your divorce. "Many basically rational and practical people find that they are unable to leave a relationship even though they can see it is bad for them. Their best judgments and their self-respect tells them to end it, but often, to their dismay, they hang on, as if the relationship was a prison, and they were locked in. Friends and psychotherapists may have pointed out to them that in reality their "prison door" is wide open and that all they need to do is step outside. And yet as desperately unhappy as they are, they hold back."

The reason for this, says Halpern, is fear: of failure, of loneliness, of the unknown. "All of these people really believe it would be better for them to leave the relationship, but when it comes to doing so they are paralyzed. In order to remain in the relationship, knowing it is against their own best interest, they frequently try to trick themselves by distorting the situation. They rationalize, using 'good' reasons to conceal possibly unconscious reasons."

[Rhonda Findling](#) agrees. In her book, "Don't Call That Man! A Survival Guide to Letting Go," the psychotherapist explains that "Wanting to compulsively call your ex or cling to him when you know the relationship is over can serve to mask or anesthetize your feelings of loneliness, hurt, and pain... Desperately clinging can lead to a vicious cycle. The more he distances himself, the more you cling. He distances further, you cling more desperately."

Even with this insight and knowledge, says Findling, the urge to cling can be irresistible. "You know with your rational mind that your behavior isn't appropriate, but you are driven by a compulsion you feel you can't control. You feel actual discomfort when you don't carry out the compulsive act."

In order to fully extinguish any torch you may still be carrying, [social psychologist Bella DePaulo](#), author of the book "Singled Out," feels it is important to put the experience of the marriage in perspective. "Marriage does not transform you from a miserable single person, to part of a happy couple. It's not a fairy dust that will transform your life from sad to happy. Many divorced people look back on their feelings when they were approaching their wedding day, and now realize that the 'honeymoon effect' they were anticipating never really kicked in, or did so for too short a period of time. In fact, some studies show they were even less happy."

So, what is the first step to moving on? Findling suggests forgiveness. But before you can forgive your spouse, you must forgive yourself. "Give yourself permission to experience the tension and your feelings. Tolerate them until they pass — and they will pass. Feelings are just temporary. That's the trick -- to feel your feelings, and to not act them out. It will take a great deal of self-discipline and work. It's easier to feel something, give in to your feelings, and act out. Holding in your feelings, experiencing the feelings and not acting them out is known as containing your feelings."

With the release of these pent-up emotions comes the urge to reach out again, warns Findling. "You'll probably want relief from the tension because you'll actually be uncomfortable. This discomfort will drive you to want to call him, because what you want is immediate gratification from the release of tension. Remember, however, the anguish and pain you may have to go through if he rejects you, or if you don't get the response you yearn for."

Halpern gives another very important reason for letting go: if you don't, you'll never find the happiness you were meant to have. "Now your world is bigger and you have the capacity to create and generate your own happiness; and while a satisfying love relationship can be a part of that happiness,

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to hold on to the belief that only an attachment to this one person can make you happy is to hold on to an illusion that will more likely lead you to misery....Doubtless, some illusions add to life, but not the ones that delude you into staying stuck in an unhappy relationship."

FIVE STEPS FOR AVOIDING POST-DIVORCE STRESS SYNDROME:

Step 1. Don't fantasize the relationship.

You and your ex broke up for a reason, or more than likely, many of them. Sweeping those underlying issues — and emotions — under the carpet after the fact won't bring back the feelings you first felt for each other. This is one instance in which time does NOT make the heart grow fonder.

Step 2. Rid yourself of reminders.

Pack up anything he left, put it in the carport, and e-mail him to come pick it up, before you donate it all to Goodwill. Out of sight, out of mind really helps you to move on.

Step 3. Forget the pity party.

Have a closure ceremony instead. Grieving the death of a relationship is a natural emotion. In fact, the process must take place before you can move on in your life. Memorializing your decision to do so is a momentous occasion, and should be honored as such. So write down all the reasons the marriage didn't work — and why you need to move on. Seeing it in black and white puts things in perspective. Or burn some of the photos you have of you with your ex (or ones just of your ex). Best yet, break open a bottle of expensive wine and toast your new life, which will be filled with new experiences, and many new journeys ahead.

Step 4. Hang with friends.

Your friends are your best support system. If an intervention is needed, they will be ready, willing, and able to remind you why the break-up had to happen. They saw you — and your ex — at your worst, when you were together. They also remember you at your best. Let them remind you what that was like, and how you can be that wonderful person again — by yourself.

Step 5. Date around — and enjoy yourself.

Now, more than ever, you need to feel loved and desired. Your next relationship may be a fling — and that's okay. Jumpstarting your love life is important to moving the rest of your life forward. Eventually you will find true love again. Dating allows you to take your time and explore many options. Divorce isn't fun, but marriage to the right person can be fun and fulfilling.

Josie Brown is a feature writer whose articles on relationships and couples communication have appeared in Redbook and Complete Woman, as well as AOL's Women Channel, Yahoo.com's Personals Channel, and numerous news and media outlets. She is also the relationship editor at singlemindedwomen.com, and the editor of John Gray's Mars Venus Advice, Dr. Gray's internationally syndicated question-and-answer columns; and co-author, along with her husband, Martin, of "Marriage Confidential: 102 Honest Answers to the Questions Every Husband Wants to Ask, and Every Wife Needs to Know."