

A photograph of two people holding hands in a grassy field. The person on the left is wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt and white pants. The person on the right is wearing a light-colored sleeveless top. The background is a bright, slightly blurred outdoor setting with green grass and a clear sky.

How to Let Go of the Past

**So You Can
Get Started
on Your Future**

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Introduction

It's never fun to look back. You want to move on. And the last thing you want to think about is your bad marriage. But before you can really move forward, you have to clear out the old relationship "stuff." Think of it as making space for someone new and good. And the first step in that process is grieving what you lost.

The loss of a marriage is like a death. It's the death of the marriage. In some ways it's more complicated than losing someone to death, because, as one of my professors used to say, "the body's still up and walking around."¹ Your ex-husband isn't dead. In fact, he's very much alive; he's just not with you. Maybe you let him go after a lot of pain and rejection. Or maybe he left. Either way, his very existence is a constant reminder of being unwanted.

And no matter how bad it was, there's still incredible pain in letting it go. You had so many hopes and dreams – a family, a home, a future together. And giving up on those dreams is never easy.

¹ David Stoop, School of Psychology, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1994.

Let Yourself Grieve

You've probably done a lot of grieving already. And you're probably familiar with the stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.² But it's important to give yourself permission to feel all your feelings in your own way and at your own pace. (Note: If you're still in the midst of your grief, a good divorce support group can be life-saving.)

Denial (This can't really be happening)

This is the shock and disbelief of “I can't believe this is really happening.” You probably went through this when you realized your marriage was in trouble. And it will come up again during and after the divorce, because you never thought it would end like this. Grief can be so intense at times that it's disorienting. You're probably past the worst of it now, but you may still have your moments. Remember to be gentle with yourself and to surround yourself with people who love and support you.

Anger (I'm mostly mad at myself)

It's normal to be mad at your ex-husband, at God, at the world, at men in general. You might even be mad at people who have good relationships. That's okay. Being angry doesn't make you a bad person. It just makes you a human being with strong feelings. People may want you to get over your feelings or to forgive before you're ready. Forgiveness often comes after a lot of anger. You don't want to get stuck in your anger. But, you do need time and space to feel your feelings, because that's how you heal. Some

² Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 1969, 38-137.

women don't get angry at others. Instead they get mad at themselves, "How could I have been so dumb?" "Why didn't I see what was happening?" It's important to "own your part," which we'll get to in my next ebook, *Learning to Trust (Yourself) Again*. But, it's also important to remember you did the best you could at the time.

Bargaining (If only . . .)

This is when you try to make deals with yourself about how things could have gone differently, "If only I had done this..." "If only this hadn't happened..." It's your brain's way of trying to make sense of something that doesn't make any sense. It's an attempt to control the uncontrollable. There's nothing you can do to change what's happened. But your mind may keep replaying things trying to come up with a different outcome.

Depression (It feels so bad, I'm not sure I can stand it)

This is the overwhelming pain³ and sadness that comes with the loss. You may be through the worst of the pain, but certain times will bring it back. Anniversary dates, holidays, a friend's wedding. Remember to be gentle with yourself at these times. It doesn't mean you're not over him. It just means that some pain goes so deep, that it always leaves a little tender spot. And when that spot is hit in just the right way, it will pull the grief back up for you.

3 William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 4th edition, 2009, 43-46.

But, each time you let yourself feel the sadness, you're that much closer to being done with it. Grief is not infinite. There is a finite amount of pain to be felt. And the more you can allow yourself to feel it, the sooner it will pass.

And you don't have to feel your grief all at once. You can distract yourself. You can do things that make you feel better. A friend of mine said only her grandchildren gave her pleasure, when she lost her husband. Only my young niece and nephew could distract me from the pain during the worst of my separation and divorce.

Most of all, you don't have to go through it alone. Reach out for support. What you can't bear alone, you can just barely bear with others. Even if you don't want to talk about your feelings, it helps to be in the company of those who care.

And when you're grieving, don't expect to be at one hundred percent. You won't be. Think of it as if you had the flu. You may not have any physical symptoms. But, your heart has been broken. And that can be just as debilitating. You can also be forgetful and accident-prone at this time. Be extra careful with driving. You don't want anything to happen that will make your life more stressful than it already is.

Acceptance (It's really happening)

This is when you begin to adjust to the finality of the loss. Maybe it was when you decided to end the relationship. Or if he ended it, when you realized he wasn't coming back. This is a sad time, but at least you're finally able to move ahead with your life.

Hope (I'm still standing)

This is when you realize that you're still here and life is still worth living. You might even think about putting yourself out there again. You still want someone to love. In some ways you need it more now than ever. But you don't want a repeat of your marriage.

This is a critical time. It's important to enjoy your newfound relief and hope. It's equally important to explore what happened in your marriage. That's how you learn to trust yourself to not make the same mistake again. That's what we'll look at in my next ebook, *Learning to Trust (Yourself) Again*.

Meaning (Out of the wreckage, something good has emerged)

This is when you can find meaning in your loss. This doesn't happen in the midst of grief. *If it comes, it comes later when you look back.*⁴ But, if you can find some good that has come out of your pain, it will help redeem your suffering.

I was a therapist when I got married. And I had worked hard on my family-of-origin issues. But without realizing it, I still married someone just like my dysfunctional family. It was devastating at the time. But, today I'm grateful. That marriage and divorce was the perfect catalyst for me to really heal those family issues. And that healing brought new closeness and friendship with some of my family. Most of all, it paved the way for the good marriage I have today.

4 David Kessler, "What is the sixth or 'meaning' stage of grief?" www.videojug.com, September 11, 2007; September 15, 2010; <http://www.videojug.com/expertanswer/the-stages-of-grief-2/what-is-the-sixth-or-meaning-stage-of-grief>.

Conclusion

These stages aren't meant to be worked through in a lock step fashion. You will cycle up and down through them. You may spend more time on some than others. Everybody grieves differently. There's no right or wrong way to do it. Some people need to talk and talk. Others can barely talk at all. However you grieve, is okay. What's important is that you feel all your feelings at your own pace and you come out on the other side.

Then you'll realize your life isn't over. In many ways, it's just beginning. The healing journey you're on can help you find a different kind of relationship in the future. You may have discovered strengths you didn't know you had. And when you realize you did the best you could, you shift from a place of shame and failure to being proud of yourself for surviving your marriage and divorce. Then you know you have forgiven yourself. And you're ready to move on.

Activity

One of the things that's hardest about divorce is it's so lonely. And you're often alone when you get the news your divorce is final. You get an envelope in the mail with a piece of paper notifying you that as of a few days ago you were no longer married. You were no longer a wife. That's it. It's over. No people around to support you or acknowledge what has happened. It's the opposite of how you started your marriage. There's no public ceremony to indicate your marriage is over. There's no one there to witness the end, but you.

With grief it's important to memorialize your loss⁵ and share your story. That's how you heal.

This exercise gives you the opportunity to acknowledge what you've lost in your marriage and/or what you'd like to let go of. And you get to share your story.

Supplies:

Poster board(s)

Scissors

Glue stick

Old magazines

5 William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 3rd edition, 2002, 35.

- Cut out pictures from magazines to represent what you've lost or would like to let go of. It might be your ex-husband. It might be the family home. It could be the fact that you no longer get to have your kids full-time. Or maybe you didn't get to have kids. Include whatever you had to give up or would like to let go of.
- You can also cut out pictures representing what you'd like to bring into your life – a new relationship, a new home, friends, fun, hobbies. You can put those on the back of your board or on a new board if you like. This can be an important step, because you're not just letting go of the past, you're also making space for something new and good.
- Glue the pictures onto your poster board or boards.
- *Share your story or stories about what the pictures on your board(s) represent. And listen to others as they share their stories.

*The sharing part of this activity is important. It provides an opportunity for others to witness your loss. And you will feel less alone as you hear others' similar stories. It would be ideal to do this activity with a divorce support group. But, you could also do it with others who are experiencing similar grief. You could even do the poster board alone and then share it with someone. What's most important is that you share it within a safe setting. You need to know you will be listened to with care and compassion for all that you've been through.

This is how you memorialize your loss and share your story. It's a way to let go of the past so you can get started on your future.

About the Author

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