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Breaking Up: Going On and Growing

by SUZY TRUAX

“U m, Jessica...I’d like my ring back.” Sound familiar? How about, “Nathan, I think we should start seeing other people—but we can still be friends.” Or maybe the worst: “We have to split up. You see, I’ve met someone new...”

However it’s said, it means you’re going to be out of the picture with the partner who brings you this announcement. Someone has altered your life, perhaps without warning and probably without permission. You may feel inconsolable, and everywhere you turn there are reminders of the past.

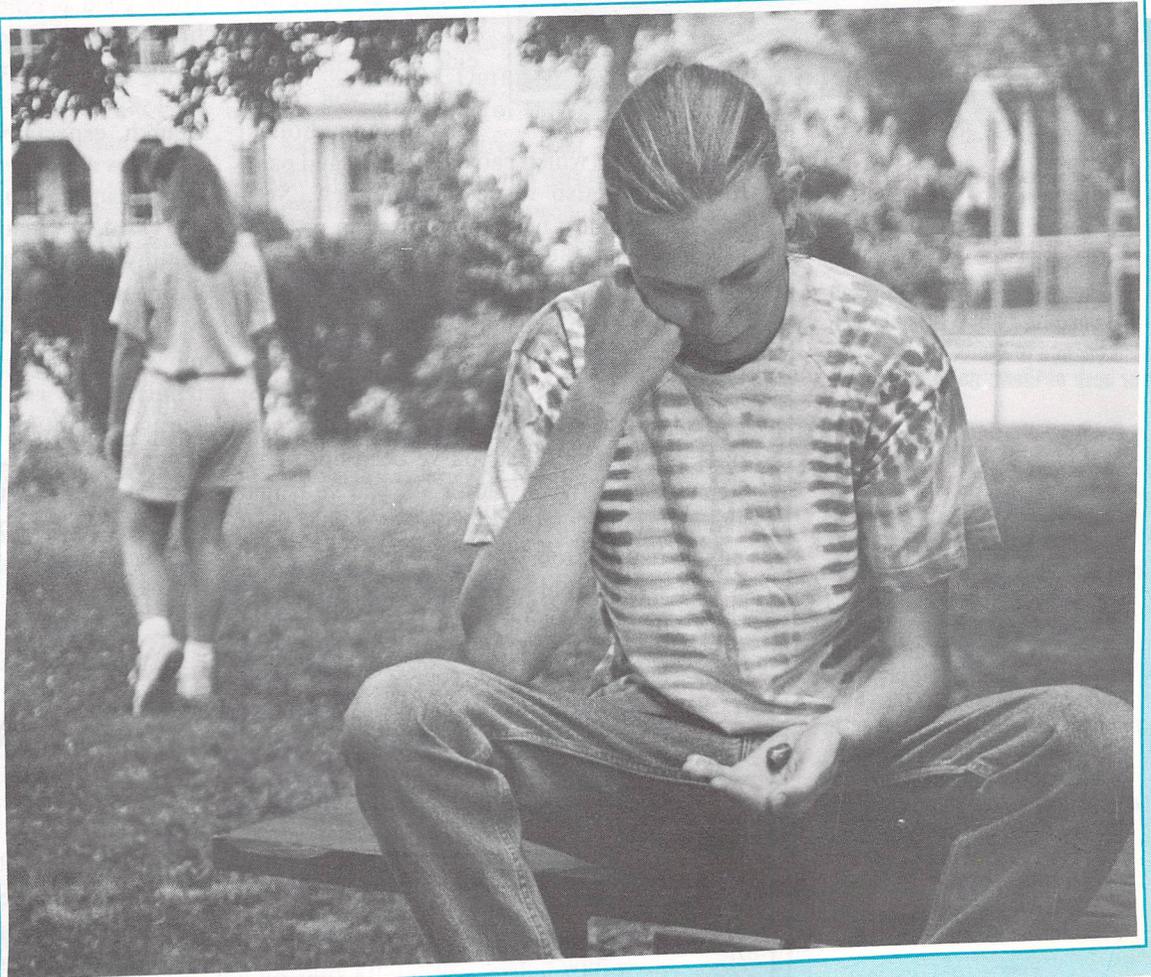
Is it possible to get through this tough time and feel good about it? Or even just get up and go on? Yes, but it’s not easy and you won’t recover overnight. People who have been there, survived and now can tell you what worked for them, offer these hints.

1. *Don’t try to keep it going.* This advice is easy to give, but hard to follow. It’s difficult to understand how your relationship could have been so good one day and nonexistent the next. If you could just convince him to come back, then he’d see how wrong he’s been, right? Wrong. His decision was probably a very difficult one.

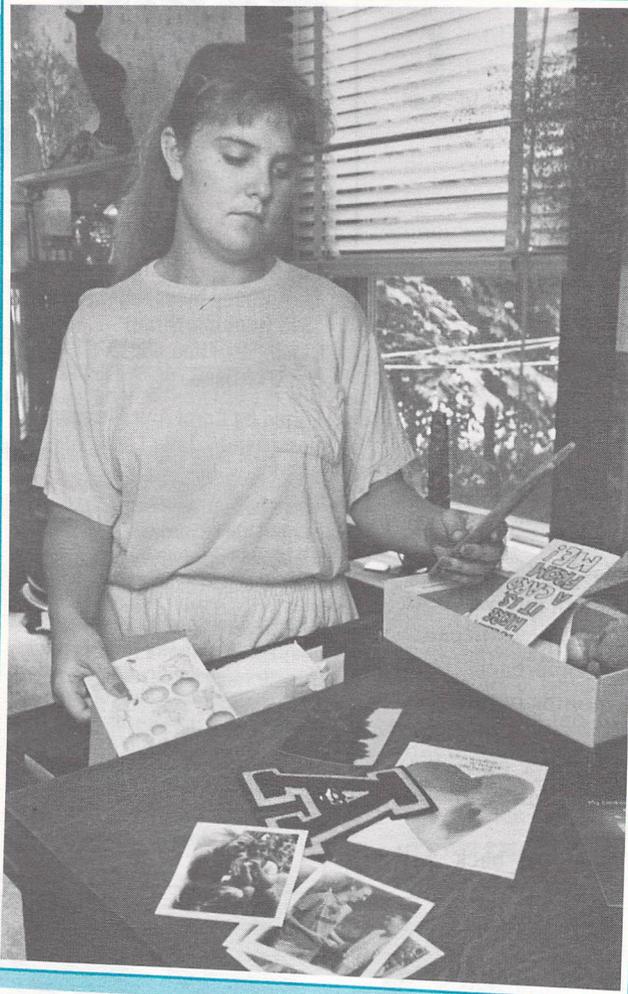
“Trying to make her change her mind is hard on both of you,” says Jason. “You end up begging or crying, she gets mad, and you both feel worse than before.” Jason knows because he begged his girlfriend to come back. They limped along for two more months before they broke up again, this time for good. “I spent two extra months on that girl. Neither of us was happy. I could’ve had more fun with my friends! It wasn’t worth it.”

Sometimes trying to get him back will

Youth Update advisers who previewed this issue, asking questions and suggesting changes are Aimee Arnold, Mary C. Clark, M. Margaret Huser, Doug Lain and Amy Quakenbush of the Queen of Apostles Community L.I.F.E. group in Dayton, Ohio, where Janet Stanislawski is youth minister. Jim Finnigan, Madonna Glaser and Michael Kelly of Immaculate Conception Parish in Kettering, Ohio, where Karen Gottschall has been youth minister, also assisted.



make you do things that you never thought you'd do. Megan was firm in her no-sex policy



JAY BACHEMIN

with Kyle. Then they started to drift apart. Finally he suggested that they date others. Megan thought that he really meant that she wasn't desirable, and she was tempted to entice him with sex to prove a point. Kyle had enough sense to see what was really happening, and Megan still feels humiliated and embarrassed. "I can't believe that I was willing to toss my convictions away and take such a life-changing risk for one guy!"

Both Jason's and Megan's stories illustrate one more very important reason not to keep things going: your personal integrity, your moral beliefs and your religious values. When you decide *not* to change the decision, you're not only being honest

with yourself (which can be difficult and painful), you're also respecting yourself. Self-respect shouldn't be compromised in order to keep any relationship.

2. *Name the hurt*—and all the other feelings that hit you like a ton of bricks when you break up. The devastation can be genuine, especially if your dating partner takes you by surprise. It's all right to acknowledge your pain and to admit that you've been hurt. Cry! Lean on your friends; after all, you've helped them through their hard times. Your family can be helpful, too.

You may feel rejected, which damages your confidence and self-esteem. Your mind translates this as "I just can't cut it." While you may bear some responsibility for this particular breakup, that doesn't imply that the hermit life is your only remaining option. "If only I'd worn this...if only I'd smiled more...called more often...didn't have acne..." If only *I'd* tried harder is what you're thinking. Most of us give our very best in important relationships, and you're no different. If you didn't give your friend what they wanted or needed, it's just as

well that you've concluded this phase of your relationship.

3. *Keep busy!* It's O.K. to feel sorry for yourself for a while. To sit paralyzed in your room, however, doing nothing but puzzling over what went wrong, isn't helpful after a certain phase that can refresh and, at least, restore your energies.

One of the first things you may want to do is decide what to do with the souvenirs you've collected as you went together. What you do depends on the type of person you are. If you're a pack rat, you may want to save the mementos to show your own children. That's fine, but you may still need to box and hide everything in the back of the closet for now. If you're a live-for-today person, dispose of everything in some way that will give you a moment of satisfaction and a feeling of closure. Whichever you choose, do it and don't look back.

Keeping yourself occupied serves several purposes. First, it keeps you from moping, from doing things like overeating or using drugs to numb the pain. Staying busy can be a way of managing pain, though you have to stay in touch with your feelings to make sure you're not denying that pain.

Second, activity gets you out with humanity. You need to be reminded that there are other good people in the world, people who like to be with you! So tag along with your friends, take your brother to the mall, visit your grandmother. Don't forget that your Church, especially its youth group, provides activities and volunteer opportunities. Serving others can be both gratifying and healing.

Third, you can get rid of your anger in a healthy, constructive way. Serious exercise has been proven to be an excellent way to deal with stress and depression. Make yourself move! Get out and walk. Shoot baskets, play tennis or do aerobics with the TV workout gurus. It may be the last thing you feel like doing, and if you are not used to regular exercise, it will be tough. But don't give up. Not only will your mind feel better, your body will feel better.

Sorrow: A Natural Process

As you get over a breakup, the phases can be compared to the stages of grief described by Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a psychiatrist who pioneered the study of loss and grief. Knowing about these stages of grief can help you understand that your feelings are normal and will probably pass.

The first stage is denial. When the love of

Q.

Does every ending involve all this sadness? I have friends who just agreed to break up. It's good for both of them, not just for one.

A.

No, sometimes endings happen just as you describe. Two people, especially if they're emotionally mature, can realize that they're growing in different directions. The relationship just isn't working anymore, and they both recognize that. These people are able to end the relationship without the upheaval that can accompany a one-sided breakup. You're right; not every breakup has to be traumatic.

your life announces “the end,” your first reaction is probably disbelief: “No, it can’t be! This is a horrible nightmare.” Brittany recently broke up with Justin. Justin says, “The first thing I do when I wake up in the morning is to consider whether I might have dreamt it all. But there’s my very own class ring—not hers.”

It’s natural to wish that your breakup had never happened. You may even feel numb at first because things just don’t seem “real.” These feelings help protect you as you adjust to the shock.

Denial and shock are often accompanied by a variety of uncomfortable physical symptoms and behaviors: irritability, restlessness, dizziness, pounding heart, tightness in the throat or chest, change in appetite and sleep requirements (both of which might increase or decrease), and lack of energy, strength or concentration.

You may experience one or more of these symptoms. They generally serve as signals that you are under stress. Symptoms will go away as the stress lets up. If they don’t, check things out with your family doctor.

Kubler-Ross describes another phase as “bargaining.” In the case of grief over a death, it’s a cosmic sort of negotiation. Some may promise to turn over a new leaf, for instance, if God will spare a dying person, returning the patient to health. Now think back to the example of Megan and Kyle. Megan seriously considered striking a deal involving her own body just to hang on to her regular dates with Kyle. That’s a pretty bad bargain, but it’s not completely foreign in the dating game.

As the initial shock wears off and deals don’t cut it, you’re likely to get mad. “How dare (insert name of formerly loved one)!” You may feel cheated and angry at the person who caused this pain. “How could (formerly loved one) do this to me?” This stage, anger, is important because its expression is generally outward. Acknowledge your anger; it’s a normal human emotion, and it will fade as the days and weeks pass. Don’t keep your anger in. Express it in safe and constructive ways, such as are mentioned in this *Youth Update*.

It’s not unheard-of to feel angry with God, too, when you experience a loss. You may be tempted to feel as if God allowed this to happen just to hurt you. God can handle your accusations, but the actual fact is that divine support remains constant through all the ups and downs of human relationships. When you’re sad, though, you might not notice God’s presence, or you may ignore or even resist it.

Recovery is not a smooth path. Setbacks are common with any injury, and emotional

injury is no different. In the fourth stage, depression, you realize that this breakup really did happen. This relationship, which has brought you a lot of joy, is actually over. At this point, you may feel the hurt again, crying or isolating yourself just as when you first found out. A significant difference from your earlier sadness, though, is that you’re a little more healed and a little stronger. You’re not hoping unrealistically or pretending anymore. You’re on your way to the last stage: acceptance.

Acceptance comes gradually, and slipping back to earlier phases is always possible. With acceptance, though, you’ll notice that you’re laughing again, that you enjoy being with friends and that you can go for long stretches without thinking of the breakup. You’ve learned once more that when challenges come, you can find the resources to cope. God gives comfort through friends and family. God enables us to experience gifts of wisdom and strength.

If It’s So Normal, Why Do I Feel So Bad?

You need not rush the healing process. But somewhere along the way you’re bound to wonder “Why?”

Teens—like adults—break up for a number of reasons. For you, however, the main reason is that you change. During adolescence, you are in a continual state of flux and growth. If you look at yourself from last year, you’re likely to recall a person with different interests and attitudes. As you approach adulthood, your views and goals modify. The same is true of your boyfriend or girlfriend. It’s simply not realistic to expect you both to change in the same way or in the same direction.

Sometimes the change is one of location. At the end of the summer, teenagers go back to school and friends made at the pool, at summer jobs, on vacation, are left behind—with many promises of letters, calls and visits. “Long-distance” love is challenging to maintain. So is any relationship where your time or experience together is very limited. Other factors like family pressures or heavy school responsibilities may make your relationship seem like one too many burdens to carry.

And sometimes, people just come to prefer the company of someone else. That’s a tough reason to face, but it doesn’t mean that you are doomed to live at the bottom of the popularity charts for the next 50 years. You have a lot going for you and may not have discovered the half of it yet. Dating relationships, after all, are not the only kind of friendship with value.

Q.

Could you offer some easy or, at least, simple ways to break up? I hear people talking about “dumping” someone. There must be a better way.

A.

Breaking up, like other endings, is seldom easy. Dumping someone just adds to the discomfort: guilt for you, pain for the other person. Ask yourself what you would want to hear if someone were breaking up with you. Chances are that a simple and honest approach would be your choice. By being direct, you both maintain your dignity. “This is hard for me to do, but I’m just not comfortable with our relationship any more.” No lies, no avoidance, no false hopes. Everyone deserves honesty. Take a deep breath, a prayerful sigh, and just do it.

Life Goes On

Q.

Can't all this busyness and involvement be just the denial you speak of and not be helpful at all?

A.

Good question! The activity can be part of the denial phase. But the denial of the grief process is useful; it serves as a cushion to soften the emotional blow and to ease into the rest of the grief process. In this case, denial is actually helpful and becomes harmful only if someone stays stuck in it.

The activity has another purpose, too. It keeps you in touch with others and reminds you of the positive things in life. By reaching out and keeping busy, you get the support and experiences that are necessary for healing.

Just because relationships sometimes end doesn't indicate that life is some terminal black cloud. You may even be able to acknowledge the gifts that were yours in the now-concluded dating relationship, whether it lasted weeks, months or years. Every human connection can be a gift—some just remain unopened or unappreciated.

So how do you get on with your life? The authors of *How to Survive the Loss of a Love* (Bantam Books) offer three suggestions:

1. *Invite new people into your life.* There are interesting people everywhere, and they usually know more interesting people. Look beyond your own comfortable circle of friends. Don't worry about whether each new person has "love potential"; just enjoy the experience of learning about others.

Allow yourself a new look at people whom you have allowed to be merely functional, fulfilling a limited role in your life. For instance, your lab partner may also share your interest in sports. Or the foreign exchange student has some surprising opinions about her experience in the country you take for granted. As you express your interest in others, you also become more interesting.

2. *Develop new interests.* There is probably something that you've always been meaning to "get around to." Now's the time! Pick

something that you'd like to try, or that you'd like to know more about. Would you enjoy tennis? Photography? Swimming? A club at school? Check out library books, make some phone calls or talk to someone who's already doing it. The main thing is to take some initiative, to venture into new territory.

3. *Renew old interests.* Did you collect baseball cards? This has become a sophisticated hobby. Are you a good cook? An avid

reader? A poet? A runner? Think of things that used to give you pleasure, consider learning more or improving your skills. This approach has its advantages over starting from scratch.

You may meet new people who have come to share your enthusiasm. Or you may enjoy your interest alone, which can also be very satisfying.

However you decide to get back in the mainstream, don't rush off in too many directions. The idea is to provide fun, support and some interest while you heal.

Reacting, Not Relating

Rebounding in relationships means to take up with someone new on the first bounce, before you've said your final good-byes to your previous love. Tyler has firsthand advice on "rebound" relationships: "After Kelly and I broke up, I was pretty depressed. Then Lynn started paying attention to me, and that made me feel like I wasn't so awful. The next thing I knew, we were a steady duo. I mean, Lynn is a nice person, but not my type at all! I figured out that I was just hiding from my bad feelings about Kelly. We ended by breaking up soon, and then I felt worse. You need time to pull yourself together."

Tyler's right. Allow yourself time to heal and trust that you will feel better. You'll then be able to pay attention to someone new. Accepting your loss, and the growth that comes with it, will make your experience valuable.

Ending a relationship may occur lots of times in our lives. This *Youth Update* may seem like a big deal over nothing, if you're in the healthy pattern of varied friendships as well as dating relationships. Nevertheless, change seldom happens without some built-in regrets. And change is part of every life.

The longer you've known someone, the more it probably will hurt to break up, but each time you learn more about yourself and your inner strengths. You'll also gain insight that allows you to support others when they go through breakups. And happily, you learn to appreciate the best in every good relationship. ■

Suzy Truax is a registered nurse who has worked with teens in both high school and treatment settings. She has led programs and groups on a variety of teen issues. An article on this topic by Ms. Truax first appeared in the June 1990 edition of The Magazine for Christian Youth!

NEXT

Watching Your Time
by Eloise K. Podraza

TO EXTEND THIS ISSUE

Consider some musical messages about breaking up. Timmy T's "One More Try," Mariah Carey's "Someday," Nelson's "After the Rain," Wilson Phillips's "You're in Love," Daryl Hall and John Oates's "Don't Hold Back Your Love," Ralph Tresvant's "Sensitivity" are a few popular songs dealing with aspects of the issue. How many more can you find? Which of this *Youth Update*'s hints, descriptions and suggestions are confirmed or contradicted in the music that's popular right now? Are there some lyrics that could serve as a theme song for survival and growth?

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