

The Stages of Letting Go

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This article builds on previous articles, [Letting Go](#), and [Letting Go and Commitment](#). Learning to let go is very important in many areas of our lives, otherwise we are holding onto the past rather than living in the present. Statistics for relationship breakdown show the levels of pain that people are experiencing in our societies. When we are in pain, we are holding on, and as we release our partner, what we are really dealing with is our own needs, feelings and expectations. That is the very best life skill we can have and learning it will guarantee a happier future.

(Please Note: This article refers to relationships where partners have separated. Although it will have similarities for people who have been bereaved, there are important differences. [CRUSE Bereavement Care](#) gives excellent support, including counselling and advice articles that you can read online. In addition to our previous article on [wounded relationships](#), there has been some helpful online discussion on keeping safe while concentrating on our healing, where there is [domestic violence](#).)

Although this is written in the contexts of a relationship where partners have separated, it is also important to recognise that what we are holding onto in any relationship – past heartbreaks and partners, trying to get our needs met through our partners, blame, expectations, dreams and fantasies, etc., are holding back the flow and the love. Understanding and letting go of false expectations, blame and stored emotions is something we also need to do when we are in relationship to be available for love and happiness.

When We Separate

Separation is always painful and it helps us to know that what we are feeling – experiencing – is normal. Understanding is a powerful healing tool, for we can more easily handle what we understand. Sometimes we think we have finished the letting go and grieving process and are surprised, even shocked when another layer, or a different way of experiencing the loss comes up. That's normal too, and it's important to not lose heart and just give up. Below we chart the stages of letting go, to bring understanding to your process. Please remember that it is unique for each person – the stages don't appear in the same order for everyone, and we may revisit them as another layer emerges, but we will face each one on our way back to wholeheartedness.

When a relationship ends, we are left with many painful and confusing emotions. Heartbreak, grief, anger, depression, guilt, hopelessness and valuelessness are the most common. For some people, at first there is relief. Peace returns and is welcomed as years or months of fighting and indecision or split mindedness end. But at some point we will face the pain.

For some people, there is heartbreak, huge feelings of loss, accompanied by an overwhelming longing to be with the person who has been lost – even if we chose to end the relationship. At other times, we are ready for the ending of the relationship, having let go in stages while our partner was still present, but there will still be poignancy and the later stages of letting go to reach a true perspective.

Our Present will Echo Our Past

It's important to understand that the depths of feeling we experience is not only about the present break up. In earlier years we may have experienced losses, particularly of parents, grandparents and siblings.

Too young to deal with the loss, we buried those older emotions. We may believe that all of the pain we are feeling is about our current partner, but what has been triggered is all of our stored pain.

Unconsciously, we have focussed all of our hopes and unmet needs on our partner. We may have been struggling for years to get those needs met by our partner, but now we are facing them alone. We need to take responsibility, not only for our feelings, but for our needs. It is a common misperception that our partner or lover is somehow there to take care of and meet all our needs, and that causes untold pain. Mistakenly we blamed our partners for failing us, but our needs are not our love.

Measuring someone's love by the level they meet our needs is a common misperception. Where we have been demanding that our needs are met, that someone prove their love by their level of giving us what we want, we have been taking. That is not our love and when we try to take from others we always push them away. Most of our complaints about our parents are that they didn't give us what we wanted, and gave what we didn't want. When we look closely, we can see that this is absurd, but we will still need to let go all of those old feelings we are carrying about it.

The Loss Stage

Facing this lifetime of unmet needs adds to our sense of failure and hopelessness. This may not be our first 'failed' relationship, including with family members that didn't work out as we would have wished. We may feel as if we have been failing for all of our lives. This is not the truth, we have simply been looking in the wrong places to get our needs met. Now it is time to deal with them for ourselves. As my mentor Chuck Spezzano teaches, if we can see that something is missing, then we are the one who has it to give.

Feeling all of our 'abandonments' is not a comfortable place to be, and the temptation to withdraw is very strong. But our best way through this stage, along with feeling our feelings, is to reach out through our pain and give the love that we have to give to friends and family members in our lives. It may be that our best way is simply to feel it and send it out to others. It's important to stay connected as you work through your process. Where there are children in a relationship, they are a gift to our healing, as they are needing our love and connection very much at this time.

If our partner has left, the desire to contact him/her can be very strong, either to win them back or to heap blame on their heads. Recognise that this is part of the habit of holding on, and keep letting go of these old habits, for your healing is your empowerment.

The Heartbreak Stage

Whatever the pain, accepting that the relationship is over is a very important step. We need to have the courage to face our feelings, and to apply ourselves to moving forward in our lives. As long as we are holding on to our partners, we are holding onto the pain, and ignoring the lessons of the relationship. Our partners may come back to us, but we can't let go to get our partners back. Then we are still holding on, and that leaves us stuck in the morass of our hopes, fears and needs. We can let go so that love, true love can come to us again. We can learn the lessons of our heartbreak and heal the old wounds, so that we are more able to be a true lover and partner in the future.

Accepting that these are our own feelings, and accepting those feelings, being willing to feel through them, will move us beyond the heartbreak stage. Whenever we are feeling a very strong emotion, it is always because it is connecting to stored feelings from the past. When we have the courage to face those feelings, to lean into and feel through them, they will dissipate and we will find the natural joy that lives at the heart of us. Enjoy those moments and don't lose heart when the next layer comes up for healing.

*(As we let go and our attractiveness returns, our partner may contact us again – please see article **If S/he Contacts You** for suggestions on responding while continuing the healing process.)*

The Blame and Guilt Stage

In [Letting Go to Move Forward](#) we described how over the years, we can store our anger like old newspapers in the garage, until something triggers all of those stored emotions. Then it is like throwing a match into the garage and it explodes, burning out not only the garage, but anyone else nearby. This is true of all stored emotions. Whenever an emotion is massive, it is the past as well as the present that we are experiencing. Recognising, accepting and forgiving the past events where we felt this way, can give us a big breakthrough in understanding. In changing our view of the past we change how we respond to future events. Sometimes we can even see the humour in

situations where we still act like a ten year old to things happening in the present. We all do it!!

Anger is a cover emotion. We need to own it and feel it, particularly as many cultures have a taboo against feeling angry. We need to release it safely, not dump it on the people around us or our old partners. Draw, write, beat a pillow with a wooden spoon, do whatever it takes to release it safely. Beneath the anger there is always pain. We need to be willing to face the pain and clear both.

Pull Back the Blame and Feel Your Feelings

Anger and guilt are accompanied by blame. If we are feeling bad, somebody else must be to blame. It is important to always pull the blame back ... you have probably already seen that it accomplishes nothing, only intensifies our bad feelings as we pass them around. At some level we are feeling guilty about what has happened. We are blaming ourselves, and not being able to face the guilt, we pass it out in blame. Guilt is the most useless feeling of all. It traps us in the past. You can envision angels taking it away in bucket loads, or even filling trailers full of it to be taken to the light for dispersal. Just let all of the guilt go. It is not the truth. Forgive yourself and others – we all make mistakes, and we all get things wrong. Today is a new day but our blame will keep us stuck in the past.

In learning to be response-able for our needs, letting go of the anger, guilt and blame, and facing our feelings of heartbreak, we can move past our sense of failure. We can feel optimism for our future, and this is a good time to start looking at what you really want to have in your life, how you really want it to be.

What do you really want? Find your vision and then set your goals. You healed so that your life would be different in the future. But that future depends on your choices. *(See previous articles on this site to help you [finding vision](#) for your life and [your next career](#).)*

The True Letting Go Stage

Up until now, you may have only seen the bad in your relationship, and so it can come as a surprise to start missing the good that was in the relationship too. To truly let go, reach the present of our lives, and prepare for the future, we will need to let go of the good and the bad.

This may feel poignant rather than painful. It is part of your healing to appreciate what was good in your relationship, but be careful that it does not trigger holding on or wanting to fight to get your partner back. You are still healing, and where s/he has chosen to leave, honour that. While honouring your feelings, continue to reach out to give love and stay connected with the people in your life. Continue moving forward, knowing that many good things will be coming to you in your life ahead.

The Dreams and Fantasies Stage

When we let go, we are not only letting go of our needs and emotions, we are letting go of our dreams and fantasies too. All of those hopes and wishes, the ideals that we held at the honeymoon stage of our relationship, will naturally come up. Again, don't move back into blame, or start fighting about 'the somebody done somebody wrong song'. You can write or draw your feelings to help release them, and then release your words symbolically, as they are the past. Always pull back the blame and put your attention on what it is that you are feeling. Our feelings are not the truth, they are always coloured by our past experiences and beliefs, but they are our feelings. Letting them go, clears our emotional space, allowing us to make new choices and have healthier perspectives. Letting our dreams and fantasies go, opens the space for the truer wishes we have for our life. If we hold onto the old dreams, we can't allow new ones into our lives.

The Grieving the Grief Stage

In any grieving process, we will reach a stage where we grieve for the time and life we feel we have lost, not only during the relationship, but during our time of grieving and healing. We may feel regret, for the things we didn't do or achieve in what can seem like a time of treading water in our lives. As always, honour those feelings, burn through them, pull back any blame, and recognise that the time was spent on healing and changing your future in that time. Where we don't heal the past, and change our course, we will only set ourselves up for the same mistakes again. Love yourself for having had the courage to face what was happening in your life. Celebrate how far you have come on your journey.

The True Perspective Stage

Every relationship has good and bad aspects, and coming to a place where we comfortably recognise this truth, is a very important final

stage in our letting go. We can see the truth of our relationship and the gifts that it gave us as well as the lessons it showed us. We can recognise that our partner was doing the best s/he could within the conditions of their life and learning.

Our relationship has become a part of our life's journey. We feel compassion, forgiveness for our partner ... easier now we recognise that others were not put on the planet to meet our needs. We have learned to become a loving caretaker of our own needs and emotions. Where our partners, and probably a parent have been violent, we will recognise that this was their anger covering their deep pain. Although we feel compassion, we will also love ourselves enough to want to be safe and to keep our children safe too. We will know that healing ourselves is the most important step forward we can take.

Coming to a True Perspective on our past, whether we are still in the relationship or not is very important. When we have children from a relationship, as my friend Tess so beautifully put it, 'our relationship has become immortalised in another human being'. Our children are the gift of the relationship and we are connected for ever through them. Reaching our true perspective is then a gift we give to our children.

Welcoming a Future of Possibilities

Many years after separating from my partner, our son, then in his late teens, light heartedly said, "I can really see why you and dad were attracted to one another, but it was never going to work." As we laughed, I knew he had his resolution. Our children have loving relationships with both their parents, and I have a close friendship with my ex husband. I know that isn't possible for every relationship, and it was only achieved because early in our letting go process, we set aside our fighting for the sake of our children. But it is possible.

I have also seen very close friends honour themselves and let go completely and truly at the end of a relationship. Later they found that in their time apart, their ex-partner had stepped up to, and not only was there love between them again, but they had both come to a place where they wanted the same things in their lives and in their relationship. ([**See Note: If S/he Contacts You**](#))

We can't know what our future outcome will be, but by letting go of the past and our feelings about it, focusing on creating our own best life for ourselves, we leave a space for the very best to happen.

I wish you well in your letting go and healing. Please share this article with any friends who you know are struggling.

Further Resources:

For a deeper understanding of the process of Letting Go, with many exercises to help you move through and transform your experience, [The Power of Letting Go: Chapter 10 of Life Manual](#). I wrote this home study personal development programme with Psychology of Vision Master Trainer, Jeff Allen. Although we normally recommend the full course for personal transformation, I know from experience how much this chapter has helped people let go at the ending of a relationship. Letting go of buried blame and pain is an important part of our whole life healing and transformation process, and in this chapter you will find a fuller explanation of the tools that help us to move forward. You can ask questions or celebrate your successes in the Life Manual Support Forum that accompanies this programme.

[Communication – The Bridge of Healing](#)

This is an excellent article on the principles of Communication for healing conflict by Chuck Spezzano. As well as inspiring and informing, it has a helpful exercise you can follow. [Click here](#) to begin to become an expert in communication, which lies at the heart of all our relationships and our healing.

February: [Master Trainer Jeff Allen](#) will be answering your questions on letting go, so please send them to me as soon as possible.

We do respect your privacy, so full names will not be used. Even if we are not able to use your direct question, we will be making sure that the most common as well as uncommon questions are covered.

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