



How to break up without breaking down

Somewhere, buried beneath the screwed-up tissues and Tori Amos CDs, there's a reason why breaking up is so f***ing hard to do. A study by *The American Journal of Cardiology* observed 70 patients with "broken heart syndrome" (otherwise known as Takotsubo cardiomyopathy) and found their symptoms mimicked those of a heart attack – shortness of breath, chest pain and a huge surge of stress hormones. They also found that the patients recovered, most after being given aspirin or heart drugs, if treated quickly. While popping an Aspro Clear may only dull the ache of a break-up slightly, researchers have started looking into the reasons for our post-relationship pain, despair and sudden desire to slump, weeping brokenly and wearing our ugliest tracksuit, in front of sad movies. We waded through the research and asked the experts how to navigate Splitsville like a grown-up.

After 24 hours

Physically Wham. Whether you're the dumper or the dumpee, you've found yourself in a single room in Heartbreak Hotel. It's pretty sparse and there are no familiar pictures on the walls. You might feel sad, relieved, panicky, numb, liberated or slightly sick. Or all of the above. The connection between emotional and physical pain is very real – when a person experiences loss, changes in the brain's blood flow occur and the anterior cingulate cortex (responsible for regulating physical pain and distress) becomes more active. Depression may kick in, especially if you didn't want out: in a study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, researchers found that of 114 subjects who'd been romantically rejected in the eight weeks leading up to the study, 40 per cent remained clinically depressed and 12 per cent remained moderately to severely depressed.

Emotionally "This can't be real, we'll get back together" is on repeat in your head while you're in the first stage of grief – denial. As you shakily emerge from a full-on I-thought-he-was-the-one/who-gets-custody-of-the-dog?/what-about-our-joint-mortgage? situation, experts say your body and brain are in a state almost similar to mental illness. "In the very first days you're

simply responding to trauma," says counsellor Karen Masman, author of *The Uses of Sadness* (\$24.95, Allen & Unwin). "Be practical and just get through each hour – this is not the time to reflect on the meaning of your break-up and what the lessons are." Ride the emotional tsunami and, yes, rent *Marley @ Me*. University of South Florida researchers found that 88.8 per cent of people feel better after crying out emotional tears (as opposed to onion-chopping ones) because they release the stress hormone prolactin from the body.

The good news If the relationship was toxic, you may have just boosted your health. A break-up may weaken your heart a little for the short term, but staying in a bad relationship is noxious. A 2007 study conducted at University College London found that people in unsupportive and stressful relationships had a 34 per cent higher chance of having future heart problems compared to those in happy couplings.

Musically You may find yourself suddenly relating to David Gray. Or really feeling Beyoncé's *Survivor*. If you don't feel like company, raid your iPod for all the music your ex couldn't stand (the *Love Actually* soundtrack, anyone?) and play on repeat until you fall asleep.

After 1 week

Physically You're sleeping as infrequently as a new mum and your toast-for-dinner diet is messing with your immune system and energy levels. Expect headaches, skin outbreaks and bad hair days from the combo of stress hormones and poor nutrient intake. "Recognise if you're medicating your sadness with food, alcohol or drugs and call your mum or a friend and ask if you can come over for a proper meal," says *WH* relationships expert, psychologist Dr Traci Coventry. Force yourself to work out – do a yoga or spin class, or go for a swim... Anything that delivers a much-needed supply of endorphins.

Emotionally You're in obsession stage: with all the ways you screwed up, with whether you're going to be alone for all eternity. An MRI study conducted by Dr Helen Fisher and colleagues from Rutgers University, US, found the recently dumped had elevated activity in several brain regions, including those that control obsessive thinking, anger suppression and output of dopamine – a neurotransmitter associated with risk-taking. Tell your friends and at least one person at work what you're going through so they can keep an eye on you. And don't sweat partaking in embarrassing stalker-like behaviour – even if you ended the relationship, at this point it's practically mandatory (of course, we're >>

talking Facebook-following and “coincidentally”-turning-up-at-the-same-party-style stalking rather than the type that could warrant an AVO).

The good news There is beauty in heartbreak. Don't throw a shoe at us – it's what all the experts we spoke to said. “Until your heart breaks a little, it will never grow bigger,” says Masman. “It's a measure of the love you had in the relationship.” Dr Alice Boyes, a clinical psychologist and relationships expert agrees: “Break-ups can have many positive psychological consequences. Sometimes people don't realise how much stress being in a relationship that wasn't working was causing, or how much stress indecision was causing, until it all ends. Break-ups can lead to tremendous personal growth.” You might not see it yet, but now you get carte blanche to shape your life exactly the way you want it.

Musically If you've moved on to AVM (Angry Vagina Music) like Alanis, Kelly Clarkson or Pink, you're doing really well. If you're playing R.E.M.'s *Everybody Hurts* or, worse, Elliott Smith (akin to emotional self harm), not so much. But hey, it's totally OK to wallow right now.

YOUR BREAK-UP SURVIVAL KIT

Don't shoot the friend who suggests you watch *Bridget Jones* but do work your way through the *WH* recovery list

A diary Research shows that writing about trauma reduces stress and boosts your immune system. Burning his eyebrows off is fine, as long as you do it on paper and not for real. **Fairy lights** Finally! You can put them in your kitchen and no one can stop you. Non-scientifically proven to cheer you up. **Mr Right When You Need Him** Stick this man-doll next to your PC and squeeze him for on-demand compliments such as “You look thin! Did you lose weight?” and “As always, you're right”. He doesn't snore either. \$24.95; cookbooks.com.au **Danzo Direct** Nothing like an hour watching The FlavorWave Oven® Turbo in action to keep your mind off him. Just. Don't. Buy. It. **Jermaine Clement and Bret McKenzie** (aka *Flight of the Conchords*.) Trust us, you need the super-cute and hilarious singing/dancing duo in your life. Buy the DVD and the CD.

After 1 month

Physically You're not matching his portion sizes anymore, but a study of about 14,000 men and women in the *International Journal of Obesity* found people gained five per cent or more of their body weight if they experienced “vital exhaustion”, a psychological state in which people feel tired, irritable and demoralised – pretty common feelings mid- or post-break-up.

Go with the flow of how you really feel rather than always suppressing the pain. Let your anger or tears out to your best friend, mum or a punching bag. “There are stages of grief necessary to go through before you feel acceptance and can move on,” says Dr Coventry. It's actually easier to feel and heal pain and disappointment now than trying to clear them out years later.

Emotionally If you're channelling Alanis, that's a good thing – a 2006 study published in the journal *Emotion* showed people move on faster when they're angry at their exes. Exiling all reminders of the man from your life will help your healing interlude, so delete his texts, put his gifts and letters in a difficult-to-access cupboard, and block him from your Facebook for now. It's impossible to feel happy when his mugshot is still beaming from the photo on your bedside table. “People fare better psychologically if they can find lessons and positive meaning in the experience of the relationship break-up,” says Dr Boyes.

The good news You're now your own hero. Even though you freak out the first time you have to deal with a huntsman or a flat car battery alone, doing something that scares the crap out of you is a recognised builder of confidence and self-esteem. “People are more self-reliant than they think,” says Dr Boyes.

Musically It's time for some new aural memories to mark this major turning point in your life. Download some new AVM such as La Roux, Lady Sovereign, The Gossip and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

After 6 months

Physically You're in acceptance stage and no longer feel like you're missing a limb. But watch for ongoing exhaustion, sleep disruption and tearfulness – symptoms of depression. A study of married couples by Statistics Canada found that people who had divorced – who had not previously reported experiencing symptoms of depression – were four times as likely to experience a “depressive episode” than those who remained in a relationship. So, how do you tell when sadness has tipped into the big D? “That's the million dollar question; diagnosis isn't easy but, generally speaking, sadness feels temporary, as if – even if it takes another six months – you know you'll get over it,” says Masman. “Depression feels never-ending. If you want to be able to eat and sleep, see your friends and do your job properly but you can't, and your grief is overwhelming you, then it's time to ask for help from your GP.”

Emotionally If you're coping well, you'll be fitter emotionally and starting to see the old you back again. You'll go for days, maybe even weeks when you don't think about your ex. You've probably changed your hair. A hallmark of this stage is an attempt to demonstrate that you're better off without him, and you might have jumped back in the dating pool. Fill your bookshelf with self-help classics and turn up to that cooking class you always wanted to try. “There is a pivotal moment when, rather than fighting, you've accepted the big picture,” says Masman. “Then you know you're out of the woods.” Now is the time to think about what you've learnt and what you want to do differently.

The good news There's no barometer for how long it should take to get over a break-up – it may take you three months or three years – but a 2007 study in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* says most of us overestimate how devastated we'll feel if our relationship were to end. Subjects who said they were very much in love and didn't anticipate or instigate the break-up made “especially inaccurate forecasts”. Though this works both ways, says study co-author Reg Adams. People can be similarly bad at predicting how distressed they'll be. “People sort of return to whatever their initial state of happiness was to begin with,” he says.

Musically Moving-on music is your port of call. Try personal-growth musos like Ben Lee, Martha Wainwright, Erykah Badu, Fiona Apple and Ani DiFranco. You might even be going the whole hog and heading out to see some live bands.



Back in the saddle

One day you will fancy someone again. You'll even go on a date. Promise. And when you do, remember this advice from Justin Parfitt, CEO of singles events service FastLife International (fastimpressions.com.au). “Think of some conversation starters before you meet up. Hopefully you won't need them, but it helps to have a safety net. If you're going for dinner, you could talk about the food you're eating, or ask which three people they'd most like to cook for. Asking random questions like ‘What's in the boot of your car?’ or ‘What's the country you'd least like to visit?’ are always winners.” But don't try to be funny or quirky if you're not feeling it – you'll only come across as unhinged. If you'd like a second date, ask him if there's anything on at the cinema he'd like to see. If he's interested in seeing more than just *Star Trek*, he'll ask you to join him for popcorn.

After 1 year

Physically You may have spent the past 365 days fighting off every sniffle that circulated your workplace – a study by Ohio State University, US, suggests the recently separated have poor immunity for up to a year post-split, especially if they dwelled on the relationship afterwards.

Make sure you sleep at least seven hours a night – studies show this will help you get healthier, slimmer and look fresher than Miranda Kerr after detox (OK, so we made that last bit up).

Emotionally You're tougher than Mrs Obama's biceps. “It's a cliché that time heals, but it will – if you let it,” says Dr Coventry. “If you spent the whole year living in the past and lost in misery, you haven't done yourself any favours. By now you should find yourself thinking more about how exciting your future could be.” Commemorate the 12-month goal post by buying a significant piece of jewellery or by snagging a totally unsuitable, totally hot man.

The good news You're now an improved version of you: more resilient and wiser. “A break-up can breed independence and a new attitude about what you don't want in future relationships,” says Dr Coventry. All of which makes you a more attractive prospect to the next person who is lucky enough to snag you.

Musically You want a playlist that makes you feel like dancing, swishing your hair and rocking your tightest jeans: Kanye West, Outkast, Empire of the Sun and Guns N' Roses (before Axl had a face like melted cheese). **WHI**

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Number of weeks it takes for symptoms of depression to begin fading for most women post-break-up.

SOURCE: THE AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHIATRY

60
Percentage of women who are still friends with the guy they split up with.

SOURCE: ONLINE SURVEY OF MORE THAN 5,000 WOMEN BY MENSHEALTH.COM

Here's cheers!

