

## Lovelorn in a Facebook Age

*Obsessing After the Loss of a Romantic Partner Is Akin to Craving Cocaine*

By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN



Many women cry or talk with friends to get over a breakup; men often try moving on to a new conquest.

I woke up one day last week to an anguished email from a friend whose girlfriend had just broken up with him. He had an urgent question: How could he take his mind off her so that he wouldn't call or text her?

I was momentarily stumped. What advice did I have for coping with one of life's worst experiences—losing a romantic partner? What would help him channel his energy into positive, productive activities?

It's no secret that when we lose a lover, we tend to lose our willpower. Suddenly, despite our best intentions, we fall prey to obsessive thoughts ("What did I do wrong?"), feelings ("I'll be alone forever") and actions (calling, emailing, texting).

I reflected on the advice I got after a major breakup almost two years ago. "Literature, my dear, literature..." began one email from a good friend. My mother reminded me to listen to music because "it soothes the soul." Others suggested exercise, volunteer work, travel. All excellent advice—and difficult to follow when you are in pain.

"It's not a heartbroken thing, it's a brain-broken thing," says Marianne Legato, a cardiologist and founder of the Partnership for Gender-Specific Medicine at Columbia University.

The level of neurotransmitters in the brain are affected in a romantic split, producing a range of symptoms from sadness and anxiety to changes in sleep, appetite and even motor coordination. In people who are deeply grieving, the part of the brain that processes addictions is activated.

Sometimes it doesn't matter whether you are the dumper or the dumpee. If the breakup was painful, the physiological symptoms will be the same.

Therapists say the emotional stages after a breakup parallel the well-known stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, rebuilding. In general, the more meaningful the relationship, the longer it will take to move through the stages after a breakup. Figure a couple months for a short relationship, six months to a year for one that lasted a few years, and two to three years to recover after a long-term marriage, says Tina B. Tessina, a marriage and family therapist in Long Beach, Calif.

In the age of smartphones and iPads, though, it's easy to try to hang on, simply by peeking at your ex's Facebook page or Twitter feed. Did your former flame call? Pretend you're just checking the time on your phone. Is he still ignoring you? Send a quick text. What we're looking for when we engage in obsessive behavior like this is the dopamine fix that comes when we hear back from the object of our obsession. "It's like we have a cocaine craving," says Dr. Legato.

Marc Hordon, a 30-year-old lifestyle-management company owner in Boston, believes that self-reflection is, ultimately, the way to break the obsessive pattern. When his girlfriend left him two years ago and moved to Chicago, he spent the better part of a week crying, texting and calling her and talking to anyone who would listen about the split. Then, in the middle of a blizzard, he drove to Chicago to try to win her back.

His ex wouldn't see him, and Mr. Hordon spent hours immobilized on the bed in a hotel room. Eventually, he says, a voice in his head told him to go home. On the drive back to Boston, he had a realization: His feelings of rejection and abandonment might have had as much to do with his mother's death when he was young as with the breakup. He went into therapy. "I started to connect the dots," he says.

Many women I interviewed on this topic said they coped by crying, talking to friends and writing about their feelings in a journal. Others have been known to go shopping.

**What do men say makes them feel better? Four men told me the best way to get over someone is sex. When I asked 60-year-old Paul Martinez, who works in sales in Dallas, how he used to get over a breakup when he was single, he didn't miss a beat. "With a new woman, of course!" he said.**

**There's a problem, though. "Diving into a new relationship will only postpone your healing," says Lauren Mackler, a life and relationship coach in Boston. Breakups can—and should—be a powerful catalyst for personal growth, she says. Pain is to be expected and it should be dealt with, not brushed aside.**

**How do you avoid wallowing in obsessive thoughts after a breakup? Here are tips:**

**Don't call, don't text. You will push your ex further away and hurt your self-esteem, warns Tina B. Tessina, the Long Beach, Calif., therapist. Leave your phone at home or in your car, if you must. Or make a pact with a good friend: Every time you feel like texting your ex, text your friend instead.**

**Remind yourself why the relationship didn't work. List everything about your ex that irritated you—you'll be amazed at how long the list is.**

**Recognize your part in the breakup. This will redirect your mind from loneliness and pain to feeling empowered to learn the lessons of the relationship.**

**Spend time with family and friends, even if you don't feel ready to socialize. When you do, your brain produces more oxytocin, the feel-good hormone.**

**Learn to snowboard. Study a new language. Write a novel. Relax. Take a little old-fashioned advice from my late grandmother: Another streetcar will be along in five more minutes.**