



Introduction

Don't take your love away from me
Don't you leave my heart in misery
If you go then I'll be blue
'Cause breaking up is hard to do.²
Howard Greenfield and Neil Sedaka

Breaking up is a 'normal' life event: soon more marriages may end in divorce than will last – and that doesn't include the break-up of long-term non-married partnerships.

Because it is so common, we hope that break-up can be got over easily. We see photos of celebrities, who one moment are tearful and bedraggled, going into a detox unit or getting into yet another fight – and the next, lounging on a beach or glittering at an Event with a shiny new lover. Surely that's how we're all supposed to manage it – painlessly, glossily?

At the same time, gossip pages – and being around anyone who is in the middle of breaking up – reveal that there is a darker, more dangerous side: that it is easy to get into crazed, vengeful battles which spiral and end in chaos. There are wives who throw paint over their husbands' Mercedes, cut up their suits, or, memorably, one wife who cut off her partner's penis. There are husbands who are in such despair and rage that they kidnap their children, or kill their children and then themselves. And behind these headlines there are all the unnewsworthy, everyday accounts of withholding, rage and misery. As in the 1960s song above,



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you may suspect that breaking up is hard to do: but it is not until you do so yourself that you discover how much – much – harder it is than you ever expected.

Many couples who decide to break – with whatever mixture of sadness, despair and outrage – expect to do so in a way that is reasonably *civilised*. We all *know* that children need to be protected; that their relationship with both parents should not be harmed; that too much time and money should not be wasted on legal battles.

But in the event, you suddenly find yourself caught up in treacherous emotional rip-tides that pull you off your feet; suck you dangerously far out to sea; throw you over and over in the waves before smashing you on the sand – or the rocks. Divorce – like its partner, the legal process – is a giant beast that feeds on the unwary, grinding you with gnashing jaws and spitting – or shitting – out a terribly battered *you*.

And though you may know, logically, that you need to resist the pull into this exhilarating maw of outrage, accusation and counter-accusation, it can happen so quickly and unexpectedly that it can be hard to resist, and hard to find your way back from.

Divorce is an everyday disaster – the biggest one many of us will face. Most of us don't face war, famine, civil breakdown, death of children, complete powerlessness – thankfully. We are so privileged.

But emotionally, divorce has the shattering impact of civil strife and breakdown. And the enemy is the one you once loved and with whom you once shared so much. Your sense of security has gone – of feeling (more or less) loved and (more or less) loving. The loss of any sense of companionship in a shared journey is highlighted in the extreme isolation of the gaping loss you suddenly face.

One of the loneliest things in facing divorce is the belief that everyone else manages it quickly and relatively painlessly. If the impact of break-up hurts like hell for a long time, you can feel a failure – on top of everything else – for not breaking up as well as you think you should.



In fact studies that followed adults and children in the years after divorce found that breaking up is far from easy for anyone.³ After the initial immense shock and disruption dies down, a minority were able to use their divorce as a *window of opportunity*; they were able to learn from their painful experience and found a new sense of self-worth, often – but not always – in a new relationship; they continued to parent well.

Many did well enough and many found a new relationship to replace the old one – but they did not change or learn from their experience. The same difficulties that had created problems in the previous relationship now put pressure on the new one – and some foundered as a result.

Others had particular difficulty: they had been able to do well enough within the framework of their marriage – but not without it. Continued bitter fighting could be a way of managing the hurt and humiliation of loss, but was an obstacle to settling and moving on. Close to one third of former couples were still caught up in hostilities even ten years after breaking up in one study – mostly over access to children and money. These parents' capacities to attend to the needs of their children were severely impaired and the children suffered as a result in the short term – and often in the long term too.

Men were at more risk of doing poorly after a break-up. In break-up men often lose more: for many men the loss of their children in their daily lives is an unexpectedly devastating blow. In addition men are likely to lose the structure of family life, their role and their home – and they are less likely to have a network of friends to whom they can turn to for support. Men are also more likely to deal with emotional pain by shutting it down – and this has its pitfalls.

We don't get taught, or shown, how to leave a marriage – nor how to be left. You may want to end up with *no baggage* – but what does this mean? If the baggage in question is not spending the rest of your life preoccupied with *what went wrong*; or with *how pathetic/terrible* / . . . *your ex is* – then yes, it would be good to be free of that.



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Do you airbrush out that past shared history as though it had never happened – a bad mistake that it's a relief to be out of? But if you rid yourself of memories, you will leave yourself emotionally empty. You can't have good memories, which might be a source of pleasure, since awareness of the loss of those good times will expose you to grief.

Protecting yourself from bad memories, which might cause guilt, means you can't know why the relationship foundered and what your part in it might be. It means you can't learn for the future.

Truth is painful, but evading reality is not the way to a full life. Just putting the past behind you, being positive and not dwelling on regrets are not enough: in fact in the long term they can make it worse. Pushing painful feelings out of sight does not get rid of them – however much we all might wish it would. And there is a cost: you shut down a part of your personality; your capacity to know yourself, to learn from experience and to respond to others. It leaves you with constricted, no-go areas of your personality: it affects the relationship you have with children, friends, family – and with possible future partners.

To be able to learn from your experience; to have memories of that period of time you shared with your former partner; and to feel emotionally free to engage with life and – in time – the possibility of a new partner, you need to mourn the loss and notice your part in it as well as your ex's.

But the more vulnerable you (we all) feel – stressed, hurt and panicked after a break-up – the more tempting it is to avoid looking at anything which could be upsetting or undermine your already-tattered self-worth. It can feel so much easier to keep to the apparent reassurance of a state of mind where pain and hurt *should not happen*; that if they do, *someone else is at fault* and deserves to be *punished*; and that any share in blame is *intolerable*, because it is so damning.

You can attempt to reverse your feelings: you are no longer sad at the loss of your partner but *only* glad, and he (or she) is *only* hated and unwanted. You can also hope to rid yourself of unwanted feelings by provoking them in



your ex: so, if you feel guilty, you provoke rage in them – and they become the *bad* one.

Rage helps you feel powerful. Blame helps you feel innocent of any fault of your own – but blame and rage can whip you, and your former partner, into a cycle of attack and counterattack which – without a deliberate and determined decision to stop – can keep on going, with all its resultant damage.

The emphasis in this book is on the emotional difficulties, which interfere with moving on, rather than the strictly practical ones.

The point is not to end a marriage in some ideal or especially virtuous way, but what is in your best interests and – if you have them – your kids. When breaking up – no matter who *started it* – you need to do it as best you can. It is not in your interests to be still caught up in bitterness and anger ten years after breaking up, nor in passive resentment and hopelessness. You need to be able to pause and catch your breath. Rather than just swirling in panic and desperation, you need to think a bit; notice why you get caught up in endless battles – and why your ex might be behaving as he or she is. It can help to hold on to support – but you will need to do more than just cling on: in time, there is emotional work that only you can do.

Facing up to feelings – such as those of loss and sadness; of having some share in responsibility for the break-up; of helpless fury when life does not always go the way you wish it would – is painful and shameful. But it can also be relieving and empowering. Rather than feeling helplessly swayed by panic and impulse, you may find you have more of a mind to think, and decide what is in your best interests. It leaves you less likely to get caught up in perpetual battle; or to become chronically depressed.

The more you can digest the emotional impact of break-up, the freer you will be internally to move on. If you have children it is especially important to do this – because it leaves you more emotionally open to help them. If you are less caught up in rage and resentment it is easier to



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cooperate with your former partner – as you need to if you are to help your children best.

Rather than just endlessly examining the faults of your ex, it helps in the end to learn from your experience, and from your mistakes. It is worth knowing more about what breaks a marriage – and what sustains it; more about yourself and the emotional resources, difficulties and expectations that *you* bring to a partnership. It is important to find a way to manage alone – though with the support of others – or you will be at risk of rushing into a new relationship out of panic, and not able to choose carefully. It helps to find a capacity within you to know, parent and protect yourself.

This book is a map of the emotional territory. Like all maps it is important to know where the different paths lead and the whereabouts of the sheer cliffs, the minefields and the bogs. The choice of which path to take is yours – but I hope that this map will help you at least pause before the almost irresistible pull into headlong action and reaction. If you find one path leads to a dead end, having a reasonably reliable map – and a willingness to look at it – increases your chances of finding your bearings and moving off in the direction you wish.

I wish I could cheer you with how relatively easy and straightforward it can be after breaking up and offer easy short-cuts – but the only ones I know of are all traps. The territory, as I see it, is painful and difficult – but it is possible to find a way through.

I write from experience as a psychoanalyst and before that a clinical psychologist, working over the years with many whose emotional problems interfered with their capacity to trust and be close; some had broken up as a result of their difficulties; others had never got close; some had experienced their parents' break-up. I have spoken at length with men and women whose partnerships have broken; some had made the decision to leave and others were left. I tell many of their stories here, in somewhat disguised form.

Most important of all, my own marriage broke up and I learned an immense amount from finding my own slow way through that miserable experience.



This book is for those who think of leaving – and want to consider the possible risks and benefits of breaking up. It is for those who are breaking up and want to manage it as best they can. It is for those digesting the emotional aftermath of break-up and feel still burdened by anger, guilt and grief.

The book is for those who want to learn from the past so that they can do better in future relationships. For those who are breaking up from a formal marriage or from living together, I describe the emotional difficulties of those breaking up from heterosexual relationships – but I think that gay couples will find it useful too. I hope this book speaks to men as well as to women – particularly since there is evidence that men are more at risk of shutting down feelings and then are less able to use the opportunity to learn from their experience.

The break-up of your marriage will change everything – whether you find a new partner, remain single, or even if you get together again. It involves unavoidable loss and pain. But there are many valuable things that can be learned along the way. I hope that you will find in the long run that you can retain a memory of the good times as well as the bad. The marriage may have failed – but failure can be recovered, and learned, from.

It is not a sprint, but a marathon. Take the long view. Protect yourself in the worst moments. Enjoy the view when you have moments to do so. Maybe, with luck and effort, you can end up saying as Mr Valiant-for-Truth does at the end of *Pilgrim's Progress*, when all the trials, including the Slough of Despond, have been faced:

though with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been to arrive where I am.⁴

I hope this book will help you in that.

Notes

- 1 Tweedie, Jill (1982) The vision of life seen in depression has the truth in it, the bare-boned skeletal truth. *Guardian*, 17 April.



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- 2 Greenfield, Howard and Sedaka, Neil (1962) *Breaking Up Is Hard To Do*. RCA 8046, © 1962, Screen Gems-EMI Music Inc., USA.
- 3 Wallerstein, J.S. and Blakeslee, S. (2004) *Second Chances: Men, women and children a decade after divorce*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
Hetherington, E.M. and Kelly, J. (2002) *For Better or for Worse: Divorce reconsidered*. London: Norton.
Amato, Paul and Keith, Bruce (1991a) Parental divorce and adult well-being: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53(1): 43–58.
Amato, Paul and Keith, Bruce (1991b) Parental divorce and the well-being of children: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin* 110(1): 26–46.
- 4 Bunyan, John (1678–1684) *The Pilgrim's Progress*. London.