

Ending a Relationship

Ending an intimate relationship can be one of the most important and difficult life tasks and yet I have come across very little written advice on the matter. The following piece, based on my observations of people's attempts to end marriages, friendships, professional contacts and familial relationships, is meant to provide some guidance for the process while addressing some of the main considerations and challenges.

Firstly, why can ending a relationship be so difficult? One explanation is that humans are inherently social animals and that our survival as a species has depended on our ability to bond with others. We rely on others for physical care and protection, affirmation of our sense of self, physical and emotional stimulation. Indeed some people would say that their life is defined by their relationships. Suffice to say that attachment-related emotions can be extremely powerful. People can therefore be strongly motivated to prolong relationships even if they themselves regard them as essentially unsatisfactory. People may prolong unsatisfactory relationships for various compelling reasons such as fear of the other person's reaction, fear of loneliness, fear of change in general, fear of loss of identity, lack of confidence in one's ability to form a new relationship, belief that it's important to maintain long relationships even if they are unsatisfactory (the sunk cost fallacy), or concern about upsetting family, friends or their community. All of the factors can make the process of ending it very difficult, especially when the other person is powerfully driven to maintain the relationship. It is therefore essential to be clear in your own mind about your ultimate reason for ending it. So what is a good reason to end a relationship?

Any reason at all. This may sound simplistic or callous, and certainly may be culturally determined, however it is arguably one of our human rights to decide for ourselves with whom we associate and certainly, with whom we share an intimate relationship. The most important thing is to be clear why *you* are ending the relationship. Often that reason is simple. Common ones include,

"I don't feel safe in the relationship"

"I don't think the relationship is healthy for me"

"I don't feel happy in the relationship"

"I don't think I'm thriving/growing in the relationship"

This use of language may be effective for a few reasons. Firstly these are 'I' statements, that is, you are speaking from your own perspective and not directly assuming anything about the other person's perspective nor directly blaming them for your position.



Secondly, they are simple reasons, and there is a danger in going into more detail. Elaborating too much on your reason or reasons, while it may seem fair and compassionate, also encourages debate and is a distraction from the central issue, that is, your sense of safety, happiness, or thriving/growth. Determining how much to elaborate can be difficult. You have to make a decision about how much you are willing to, or think it is wise to elaborate. Take your cue from the other person's reaction. Does your elaboration seem to comfort and settle them? If so, use your discretion to wind the conversation to a close. Or, does your elaboration confuse or upset them. If so, gently but assertively return to your core reason. And does your explanation seem to enable the ending of the relationship or prolong it? Here is an example, drawn from conversations I've witnessed, of a good attempt at containing a difficult conversation where one person is trying to end a relationship and the other is resisting:

You: I'm really sorry about this but I don't want to meet up with you again.

Other: What do you mean? Why not?

You: I mean I don't want us to be together anymore because it's just not making me happy.

Other: What do you mean happy?

You: I just don't seem to enjoy myself with you anymore and afterwards I don't feel good about our time together.

Other: Well maybe it's because we aren't doing anything fun anymore, or maybe we should have had more couples counselling. Or maybe it's because you care too much about what other people think, or maybe we just need a bit more space. Perhaps it's really because you hate your job, or maybe because of your commitment issues.

You: Look I'm not really sure about all that, maybe there's some truth in some of what you're saying, but the fact is that I am not happy in our relationship and so I need to end it. I'm really sorry.

Other: Well I think that's extremely unfair and selfish of you! After all the time we've had together and all the plans we made together, I can't believe you're doing this to me!

You: I'm so sorry I have never wanted to hurt you and I do want you to be happy, but I can't be happy in our relationship so I don't think I can make you happy (a subtle digression).

Other: I can decide for myself what makes me happy!



You: Yes, you are absolutely right and I have to decide what makes me happy and (returning to the essential message) I don't think I can be happy in our relationship and that is why I'm ending it. I'm really sorry and I wish you all the best. I'm going to go now.

You can use your imagination to consider how the conversation could continue on after this. The point is that the person ending the relationship delivered the essential message more than once, did not directly accuse the other person of wrongdoing, did not allow him or herself to be drawn into a debate and lost in the details, and then brought the conversation to a close. The attempt was respectful, clear and assertive, the three essential ingredients.

Another consideration is in which format to deliver the message. Face to face, phone or written letter/email/text; each have their pros and cons. The format of delivery should be determined by your values and common sense. The ultimate consideration should be personal safety. While most people consider it to be the most respectful and 'human' format, a face-to-face conversation should only be chosen when there is a low risk of physical violence. Face to face conversations can also be the most difficult to bring to a close as they involve physically removing yourself at the end of the conversation which can be very dramatic and emotionally laden for both parties. Phone calls are less personal but may be easier to draw to a close and are safer due to the lack of physical proximity. You can also follow some written notes to help guide you throughout the call. Text or email is even more remote, and while often regarded as an impersonal and even offensive mode of delivery, it has several advantages. Firstly, it allows you to time to word your message carefully. Secondly, it allows the recipient a chance to re-read the message over time, hopefully increasing the chance that they will take on board its meaning and significance. Thirdly, there is no opportunity for you and the recipient to get caught up in a possibly unhelpful dialogue or argument.

Lastly, I think it's really important to accept that there is no blueprint for how to end a relationship that can apply to all people, relationships and situations. No use of language (including 'I' statements), techniques (including mine), or tone (E.g. gentleness can come across as condescending) is foolproof. Human interaction, with all of its personality, relational, and contextual factors is far too complex for any procedure to perfectly account for. I think it is therefore important to be mentally prepared for all possibilities. Your attempt to end the relationship may be very effective, minimising suffering and allowing for personal growth for both parties. However, it may also be disastrous and lead to an escalation of conflict and mutual suffering. Given the latter, ensure that you are adequately mentally prepared and if possible discuss your plan with a trusted friend or counsellor. You are about to do something that is potentially very difficult and upsetting but also possibly essential for your long-term wellbeing and personal growth.