

How to Manage 'Having a Break' in Your Relationship

Couples may decide (sometimes reluctantly) to have some sort of space, break or time apart from their partner. Usually this happens because things have become fragile in the relationship. Perhaps the level of conflict has gotten out of hand, perhaps something very upsetting has occurred, one or both people are seriously considering ending the relationship or the intimacy or spark has waned. The emotional stakes are usually very high leading up to having a break, therefore it is very important to plan and manage them carefully and sensitively. I have seen some couples manage breaks well and others poorly. Here I discuss what seem to me to be the important considerations when trying to manage one well.

Explain your intentions for the break clearly and sensitively

Even suggesting the idea of a break can be extremely delicate, particularly if the one calling for it is already being perceived as generally avoidant or less committed to the relationship. Indeed, the word 'break' itself may hold worrying connotations. Perhaps 'space' or 'time apart' may be less emotive terms. Often, the more sensitive or insecure partner might wrongly interpret the request for a break as an attempt to end the relationship. Of course, this may indeed be the break-caller's intention. Nevertheless it is very important for the break-caller to be as clear as possible within themselves about their reason for calling for one and then try to convey this intention to their partner as clearly as possible. Here are some common reasons people express for wishing to have a break:

'I need some time and space apart from you to help me decide if I can be happy in the relationship.'

'It seems like our conflict is getting out of hand and I think we need to stop communicating for a while to let things settle down.'

'I feel like I've lost touch with myself (or my identity) and need some time to myself to see if I can get that sense back.'

Of course, taking a break from the relationship is your right but, especially if you want to ultimately stay with your partner, you should try and make it as easy as possible for him or her to understand your motivation. It might be important to add something like:

'I'm hoping this will give our relationship the best chance of surviving.'

Establish clear conditions

Particularly for an insecure, sensitive or upset partner, the suggestion of having a break often conjures up worrying thoughts about what damage could be done to the relationship during the break. The idea of both parties having solitary time to contemplate the relationship might be agreeable or even comforting to both parties, but what if during the break the other person talks to someone who makes them feel more negatively about you, or even tries to persuade your partner to end the relationship? Or, worse still, what if someone tries to woo your partner? And what if your partner were actually to share intimacy with someone else?

There can be no universal rules for exactly which conditions or boundaries should be in place during a break, however setting some is very important in order to manage anxiety and give the break the best chance of working, whether that means saving the relationship or helping to end it smoothly. These are some of the considerations that seem important:

- **How long we should have no contact whatsoever?**

While perhaps not always essential, it is often necessary in order to allow things to settle and for both people to get clarity of mind. The period of no contact could be an afternoon, a day, a week, a fortnight or a month. Some of us may even know couples who have come back together after many years of no contact. My suggestion is to try and determine the *minimum* period of time you think you need in order to gain clarity.

- **Where will each of us be?**

Perhaps one of you can stay at the house with the kids and the other can stay at a friend's place. Or perhaps both of you need to stay in the house but will agree to not interact or discuss the relationship at all for a set time.

- **How will we interact with others?**

Again, there are no universal rules here as it depends on the conditions of your relationship. It may be important to commit to not interacting with someone you've had an affair with or an ex-partner. You may both agree to not have any intimate contact with anyone. Or you may agree that anything goes during the break. Again, you must determine your own conditions.

- **When and how will we reconnect?**

I recommend establishing a very specific time and agreeing on who will contact whom and in what format. Eg. You could agree that at 2pm on Sunday you will talk about how each of you is feeling about the relationship for half an hour. If you are really concerned about this step, perhaps you could agree to resume communication in counselling.

The most common mistake I see couples make when trying to manage a break is a vagueness around the conditions. This typically leads to confusion, uncertainty, insecurities, anxiety and misunderstandings. I recommend you err on the side of more than less structure. Above all, be sensitive, fair on yourself and your partner and stick to the agreed upon conditions.