

STAGE - RE-BUILDING EIGHT

FRIENDSHIPS : Where Has Everyone Gone?

The support you receive from friends is very important and can shorten the time it takes to adjust to life transitions. Friends are more valuable than your former partner at this point in the rebuilding process. You can develop friends of both sexes without becoming romantically or sexually involved with them however ending a relationship is threatening to many who are in a relationship so some may slip away from you at this point in time.

Maria and I had lots of friends and family around all the time. Most weekends we'd have dinner parties or go over to her sister's place, or meet locally with two or three other couples. Since we split up, none of those people ever call me or drop by. How come married people don't seem to want us around when we are single?
Paul

When we go through the process of separation some people insist on being on their own. They tend to withdraw and feel uncomfortable being around people. Then you will notice others who are continually clinging to other people as though they cannot be alone for a single minute. Always walking arm in arm they plan ahead so that they have do not have part of the journey to walk by themselves.

There are four common reasons why we separate from those friends we had when we were in a relationship:

Number one is that when we are ending a relationship you suddenly become more eligible as a future partner and may be viewed as a possible partner for one of the people in another relationship. So whereas you were formerly invited to all the parties as a couple because you were safe, now you are single you can be seen as a threat. Suddenly people are looking at you as eligible and invitations to certain friend's parties diminish accordingly.

The second reason we tend to lose friends is for some people those who have ended their relationship create a very polarising situation for others. Friends tend to support one or other partners thus we tend to lose the friends who have sided with our former partner.

The third reason is probably the most important: the fear that 'If it can happen to you, it can happen to me' so the ending of your relationship is very threatening to many relationships around you and the basis why many such 'friends' appear to slip away. Although you may be feeling rejected quite honestly it is their problem and a reflection on them rather than on you. So, instead of feeling rejected understand that the ending of your relationship has caused them to feel very insecure.

The fourth aspect of friendship which is important to understand while you are going through ending your relationship and rebuilding is that people in committed loving relationships are considered to be part of mainstream, accepted couple orientated society and separated people become part of the single subculture, a part of society which is less acceptable to many. So to be pushed out of the acceptable mainstream culture into the 'questionable' singles subculture is a difficult adjustment.

As you begin the rebuilding work on friendships you will find that there is a three stage process involved.

The first stage when you are hurt, lonely and depressed is that you avoid friends unless it is very safe to be with them.

The second stage begins when you can at last take the risk of reaching out to people even though the fear or rejection is still hanging around.

The third stage is becoming comfortable with people finding out that you are single and beginning to enjoy people without the fear of being rejected.

Experience shows that it is important not to become involved in another long term, committed relationship until you have emotionally worked through the ending of the previous relationship. Becoming involved too soon results in carrying the unresolved emotional issues for the past to the current relationship. A healthy process might be described as 'learning to be a single person because many people never learned to be independent of individuals before they entered a committed relationship'. So if you haven't learned to be a single person it is quite easy to hide in another relationship. Why, because your emotional needs are great when you end a relationship and so the comfort of another relationship is appealing. Nevertheless there is the truth in the paradox that when you are ready to face life alone then you are ready to enter a relationship.

Sometimes it is hard to tell whether your current relationship situation is limiting personal growth. The best criterion might be to ask 'Am I learning to be a single person?' If you feel you are

losing your identity because of your friendship then you probably need to back off from it.

It is possible to develop a close, nonsexual, non-romantic friendship with another person male or female. This may be the way it happens for you: you tentatively make friends, but you are very cautious because of your fears of closeness and intimacy. The friendship becomes important, and you suddenly realise that you want very badly to maintain this friendship because it feels so good.

You have a feeling down inside somewhere that if the quality of this friendship changes to a romantic, sexual one, it will be less meaningful, and it will become not so special anymore. Then you realise that you want to invest emotionally so that it will continue to grow. Such a friendship brings a free and exhilarating feeling. It also destroys the myth about never becoming a friend with someone be they of the opposite or same sex.

While you are working to develop new friendships you may also be hearing a barrage of negative comments about committed relationships in the singles subculture. There are people who rant and rave and shout from the hilltops that they will never get trapped into being a partner again. They compile long lists of all the painful and negative aspects of committed relationships. And if there is someone who decides to enter a new relationship, they even send cards of sympathy to the couple!!! You need to realise people are threatened by relationships as some people are threatened by ending them. Perhaps a bad relationship led to feelings that they could never have a happy future relationship, so they project their unhappy biases about committed relationships on to others.

I admit that there are a lot of unhappy people in relationships as there are a lot of unhappy single people but I think that this is due to the individual personalities. Some people will be unhappy wherever they are and the nature of the relationship situation has little to do with it.

Building a support system of close friends will shorten the time it takes you to adjust the ending of your relationship. We all need friends who can throw us a life line when we feel like we are downing. A friend who we can talk with is a real 'life saver' during a crisis. If you have not developed such a support system, then you need to start doing so.

Checklist to assess your progress with friendships in order to prepare for our session. Remember that friendships do not just happen - like anything worthwhile, it takes continuous effort.

1. I am relating with friends in many new ways since the ending of my relationship.
2. I have at least one close friend.
3. I am satisfied with my present social relationships.
4. I have close friend who know and understand me.
5. People seem to enjoy being with me.
6. I have both single and married friends.
7. I have discussed ideas explored in our sessions with an important friend.
8. I communicate frequently about important concerns with a close friend.

