

## Dos and Don'ts After a Break Up

I've always thought of myself as a strong, independent person. It's how I was raised. It's who I had to be. But even the strongest among us have a weakness, and I guess mine was my recent break-up.

High school sweethearts, we shared some of our biggest life moments together until last year when our 12-year relationship came to an end. I've experienced grief, but the intensity of a broken heart will have you thinking it's lethal.

Just when I'd think I was moving on, the pain came back again. Recently I almost cried in a supermarket staring at a packet of cereal!

How could a break-up have so much control over my life?

It wasn't until I spoke with a clinical psychologist that it all started to make sense. "When you go through a break-up your brain is on high alert and reminds you of your relationship and ex-partner all the time," she says. "Every time it does, you get a new dose of chemicals that cause that heartbreak feeling. It's the same reaction to when drug addicts are withdrawing from cocaine or opioids."

It's no wonder break-ups can have us doing some strange things — like crying in public. To help regain control after a break-up, I spoke to experts about the dos and don'ts. Of course every person and break-up is different, so you might like to take our dos and don'ts as purely things to think about.

### The Dos

**Do complete a digital detox**

Three words to get through the first phase of any break-up: deactivate, mute or unfollow. It sounds harsh but going digitally MIA for a month was the best decision I made.

You don't want to be caught in a situation where in a fit of rage or jealousy you end up posting something you can't take back. Social media has a way of making us feel guilty, especially when we're not in the best headspace.

When I was back online I muted posts and stories of my ex-partner and his social circle to give me back some peace and sanity.

### **Using music to get over your ex**

Understanding why music has such an impact on our emotions means you can unlock the best way to use it for healing after a break-up.

### **Do have a routine**

As much as you want to retreat from the world, keeping up with healthy activities is important. Things like exercise can help with the release of dopamine and endorphins that are all about enhancing wellbeing. Eating well also helps.

They sound simple but they're really easy to implement and before you know it, you're getting into helpful habits. I spent 12 years with a partner, so creating a routine that didn't remind me of him was hard.

We shouldn't miss out on things we love because of a break-up, so make small tweaks to your routine.

Think about whether you can do [things] in different ways; instead of going to the gym maybe you can exercise outdoors.

### **Do love yourself**

My break-up left me feeling unattractive, self-conscious and insecure. When I spoke to couple's therapist and sexologist Isiah McKimmie, she explained how important it is to heal from within.

"Self-worth needs to come from ourselves. We can't look to the outside, to having one partner or any number of partners to make us feel good about ourselves," she says. I saw a counsellor to help me reconnect and rebuild my confidence. They used this analogy about "filling your glass up" which is doing things that make you feel good.

Simple tasks like picking up the phone to talk to someone who lifts me up, going for a walk on the beach or putting on a face mask all helped.

Journaling is also a great tool. Getting thoughts out of your head, not just thinking about it, but writing it out has a different effect and actually helps you emotionally process the break-up better.

### **Do build a support network**

Surrounding yourself with loved ones is a good move after a break-up, but make sure it's the right people.

"You need to be around people that help give you perspective, that give you balance, that help work through your emotions in a comfortable and safe way," Dr Karantzas says.

"These people are not only going to be there for you but understand your potential need for space and respectfully check in as you go through this."

And sometimes we need someone from outside our circle to vent to, and that's why Ms McKimmie suggests speaking with a professional.

"Talking about the relationship and break-up with a therapist can help you recognise the patterns in that relationship and help you let go of remaining emotions."

### **The don'ts**

#### **Don't rush into a rebound**

Loneliness can get the better of us. I know it's tested me. After speaking with friends and an urge to move on, I downloaded a dating app hoping to find someone new.

Let's just say it was short-lived. Rushing into a fling wasn't for me — but it's different for everyone. "A hook-up can actually awaken the break-up feeling and miss the intimacy of your ex," Dr Cribb says.

#### **Don't avoid the negative emotions or feelings**

While my friends posted their "picture-perfect relationship" or newborn babies, I was at home with my cat crying to a rom-com. And there's no shame in that — it may have been the exact therapy I needed.

"Depending on how the relationship ended, some emotions you might experience could be anger, betrayal and feelings of despair," Dr Karantzas says.

"It's normal to experience them for a while. When you experience them for a lengthy period of time and they interfere with your daily living, that's when it's time to say you need help to work through this."

If you or anyone you know needs help reach out to Lifeskills Australia on 1800 870 080 or email [info@lifeskillsaustralia.com.au](mailto:info@lifeskillsaustralia.com.au).

To help process these emotions, Dr Cribb recommends compartmentalising. "Put aside a time every day to think about it, journal about it or talk to a friend about it."

### **Don't make big decisions**

Sometimes we create distractions to escape reality which our future self might regret. Giving it time is wise, says Dr Cribb. "Wait until the first wave of pain subsides before you make life-changing choices."

Straight after my break-up, I was ready to join Julia Roberts on an "eat, pray, love" trip that would've given me a whole new reason to cry when I returned home broke. Luckily, I took Dr Cribb's advice and watched the movie instead.

Most of all I'm living by Beyoncé. As she says: "When life gives you lemons, you make lemonade."