

I don't know why it is called heartbreak. It feels like every other part of my body is broken, too. *Unknown*

Chapter 1

Is It Really Over?

I came home at about the usual time. When I walked in, I knew something was wrong...things were missing. My gut started to ache. Then I saw a letter left on the table. Oh, no, not a "Dear John" letter. It can't be. She's gone! I don't want to believe it. I can't believe it!! I read the letter again in disbelief. There was a knot in the pit of my stomach. It just can't be. She's left, and I never saw it coming.

When a marriage ends, most of the time, it is the woman who makes that decision. Constance Ahrons (1994), a leading authority on divorce, reports that between two thirds and three quarters of divorces are initiated by women. So the majority of this chapter addresses how guys respond when the woman leaves the marriage. However, sometimes it is the husband who decides the marriage is over. So we also include answers for many of the questions that men ask when they have decided to go.

Before a woman leaves a relationship, especially a marriage, she usually makes a lot of complaints about why she is unhappy. If the complaints fall on deaf ears, the woman will usually try to make the complaint again later, perhaps with a different twist. If she concludes that it does no good to complain to her man, she may eventually give up the complaining, but that doesn't mean she's satisfied (Gottman & Silver, 1999). It means she has given up trying. For most women, it takes years before they are truly convinced that nothing is going to change.

How was I to know she was ready to leave?

Many guys are surprised when their woman leaves. This is in spite of the fact that their women usually tell us that they have been threatening to leave for years. Maybe guys get a false sense of security from this. It's like the story about the little boy who cried "Wolf" too often. After awhile the villagers didn't believe him anymore. Maybe you didn't believe your wife's threats anymore either. Or maybe you knew she was mad or unhappy, you just didn't know she was *that* unhappy. Remember that, in general, women are less likely than you to be direct in expressing their feelings, especially when they know it will cause conflict with you. If the two of you tried discussing problems before to no avail, she's probably not going to tell you that she's fed up enough to leave.

Anecdote: *A man came seeking consultation from one of us. He had come home from work one day to find his house empty, his kids gone, and a note on the fireplace mantle stating, "I've filed for divorce." Stunned, he walked outside only to be confronted by a sheriff's deputy who asked his name. The deputy then officially served him with papers indicating that his wife was suing him for divorce. "I never saw it coming," he said. "Didn't you know she was angry?", was our predictable response. "Well, I knew she was mad, but I didn't know she was THAT mad," he replied. He then went on to describe detailed complaints that she had made for years—all of which he had essentially ignored. The only surprise, really, was that she had waited so long to leave him. He had been lulled into a false sense of security because she had not left him before. Sometimes, we should have seen the handwriting on the wall.*

Why wasn't she honest with me about leaving?

If your wife left you, and you had no clue it was coming, it may have been because she was afraid of your reactions. If there has been a history of violence between you, she wisely chose not to tell you of her plans. Or maybe you never touched her, but, at some point, you threatened to harm her or make her life difficult if she tried to leave. (e.g., "You'll never see the kids again." Or "I won't let you have a penny." Or "I'll never let you leave."). Even if "all you did" was put your fist through the wall a couple of times when you were angry, you may have scared her sufficiently that she was unwilling to be honest with you when she made her decision to go. If any of these scenarios fit, your wife may have been smart not to tell you. You might say that you never "really" would have done any of those things, but how was she supposed to know that? The best you can do now is to not do anything else that she would see as threatening.

If she was so unhappy, why did she wait so long to leave?

Women are generally reluctant to leave relationships, even bad ones. They tend to stick it out in an effort to make it work. Women stay in unsatisfactory relationships for a number of reasons:

- *Love.* I still love him. He's like two different people.
- *Children.* Children are better off with a father. I couldn't raise them as well by myself.
- *Economic Reasons.* My standard of living (and that of the kids) will go down if I leave him.
- *Religious Beliefs.* Marriage is a solemn commitment. Divorce is against my religious beliefs.

- *Pressure from Family and Friends.* They tell me it is my duty to stay with him. They tell me to stick it out, and it will get better.
- *Family History.* People in our family never divorce.
- *Culture.* Divorce goes against our cultural values.
- *Work Reasons.* I would have to go back to work. I don't have job skills.
- *Isolation.* I have no place to go.
- *Fear of Failure.* I don't want to feel that I failed at marriage.

Is the woman always right?

Please note that we are not saying that the woman is always right. Rather, we are saying that when she becomes convinced that it does no good to complain to her man, the relationship enters a dangerous phase. At this point, an event that may seem relatively minor can be the precipitant of her moving out. One wife we know left her husband immediately after she overheard him say something negative about her to their child. They had many major arguments and conflicts over the years, but she remained in the marriage, but suddenly after this one, overheard conversation, she packed her bags. Was it really his remarks? No, she had given up on getting him to address her complaints, so the next thing that happened was the straw that broke the camel's back.

I've been thinking about leaving her. How honest should I be?

Unless your wife is likely to be either violent, suicidal, take the kids and hide their whereabouts, or burn the house down, be totally candid with her. Of course, we are not saying that you should use threats of divorce to indicate how angry you are with her. Only tell her that you are planning to divorce if that is what you are going to do. By being honest with her about your intent to divorce, you begin the transition in a more healthy way. As Robin Green (2005) put it, "The best way to lend dignity and respect to the end of your marriage is to be as honest with your spouse as he or she will allow you to be."

I left her, but what if I'm having second thoughts?

It is not uncommon for men (and women) to decide to leave a marriage and then later to have second thoughts. After all, she may seem like an impossible person right now, but a few years ago you thought you wanted to spend the rest of your life with her. Is she really all that different from the person

you first chose to marry? While it is true that you learned more about her after you married, it is also true that you have built some history with her as well.

If you are having some second thoughts, give yourself more time before you take further actions. If you have hired an attorney, ask the attorney to put matters “on pause” while you contemplate what you want to do. On the other hand, we don’t recommend that you dismiss your previous concerns about the marriage. Don’t completely cancel legal proceedings until you have greater clarity about what you want. You may want some alone time to think. You may also want to meet with your wife to discuss what she is willing to do (e.g. make certain concessions, go to marital counseling, join Alcoholics Anonymous).

One good thing is that when you have seriously contemplated divorce (e.g. by moving out or hiring an attorney) she knows that you are serious about ending the marriage. You may have threatened to divorce or leave before to little effect. Such threats lose their impact unless it becomes clear that you are willing to go through with the action. Now, however, it is more evident that you are willing to end the marriage. This may give her greater reason to reconsider her position.

In many situations you will be well off now to seek a competent marital counselor. A marriage counselor can help mediate your disputes and disagreements. Having an experienced third party to listen to both sides can be invaluable at this juncture.

I had an affair, and I’m hot for her. Should I leave the marriage and not look back?

The first thing that you should know is that the odds are heavily against going from an affair to a long-term, lasting relationship. One reason for this outcome is that both parties know the other has already had one affair, so they lack trust in the other’s fidelity. We have seen men who gave up their careers, their children, their homes, everything to pursue a woman. Most of those men eventually come back to see us or our colleagues for more counseling because they have jumped from the frying pan into the fire. Affairs are not good solutions for a failing marriage. They only make matters worse. If you are in the midst of an affair, we recommend that you, at least temporarily, put the affair on hold, and resolve what you are doing about the marriage. If the marriage cannot be salvaged, then it is best for you and all concerned to end the marriage rather than to carry on a double life.

Should I offer to go to marriage counseling?

Maybe she said that you should go to a therapist or that the two of you should see a marriage counselor. Most guys tend to blow off that idea, perhaps further convincing her that nothing is going to change.

Anecdote: *One guy we know was asked by his wife to go to marital counseling. His response? "If you don't like the marriage, why don't you go to counseling? You've got the problem." He reported to us that the next time he saw her in person was three months after their divorce was final. If she suggests marital counseling, just say yes.*

If you are interested in reconciliation, we recommend that you take the initiative and suggest marital counseling. Her response is likely to be that you should have agreed to it before. Tell her she is right. Confess you made a mistake and urge her to reconsider. Sometimes, if she does not really want to leave you, she will accede to your wishes. If so, don't assume that the battle is over. She may only be going to counseling now as a way of reducing her guilt about leaving you. On the other hand, she may be holding onto a shred of hope about the relationship. If so, she will need to see that you are sincere in your willingness to change things in the marriage. This is NOT the time to point out where she is at fault. It is a time to recognize and acknowledge YOUR contribution to the marital problems. If marital counseling continues, there will be time later to address your complaints about the relationship.

You may be skeptical that you can get any kind of benefit from marital counseling. However, Neil Chethik (2006) in his survey of married men found that two-thirds of them who had gone to a marriage counselor believed that it had been helpful. At this point, if you are interested in keeping the marriage, you have little to lose even if it is unsuccessful.

What should I be feeling?

If your woman leaves you, you are likely to feel a variety of emotions. Initially, you may feel devastated or overwhelmed. "How could she do this?" You may feel shocked or surprised. "I never thought she would really do it!" You may feel angry, sensing that she has betrayed you. You may feel desperate to get her back, or you may say to yourself, you're glad she's gone (but not really mean it).

Men sometimes wonder if they are feeling what they are supposed to be feeling. There are no rules here. What you are feeling is what YOU are supposed to be feeling. Somebody else might feel differently, but that's them. Whatever your emotions, they are likely to be intense.

The majority of the men we work with initially seem to be in a state of shock. Even if their wives have been threatening to leave for years, they cannot believe it is really happening. After all, if she has gotten mad but never left

before, or if she always comes back after a few days, why should you expect that this would be any different?

How can I stop the pain?

Whoa, wait a moment, Bub. Who says you should stop the pain? Of course, no one wants to experience pain, but the only people that don't experience pain are the dead ones. Pain is a natural response to losing the woman in your life. If you aren't feeling any pain, then you probably didn't care too much about her.

Maybe you are feeling more anger and outrage than pain. This is one of the favorite ways we men have of not experiencing pain. Divorce doesn't hurt so much if we are pissed off at her. This is a major reason why so many divorces end with huge animosity. This is also the source of all the nasty jokes about the "ex". That kind of anger, though, will often come back to haunt you. It makes it harder to let go of the marriage if you are dwelling on how she wronged you. It can interfere with your next relationship, and it can harm the kids since it makes it more difficult to function as parents after the divorce.

A lot of men try to deaden their feelings about divorce by hitting the bottle, smoking that "whacky tabaccy", or working even harder. We don't recommend any of these. Sooner or later you have to feel the pain of the loss. You can postpone the pain, but you will eventually have to deal with it. If you postpone the feeling of pain, it will generally hurt even more later. This will be especially true if you make a few bad decisions (e.g., getting remarried too soon; getting a DUI) while seeking to avoid your pain.

The best strategy is to "belly up" to the pain. Yeah, the situation sucks, but you will get through it. Rather than working on bad habits to avoid the pain, try doing those things that are good for you that you have been putting off:

- Lose that extra weight
- Join the gym
- Develop that hobby.

Other men focus on improving their ability to relax by:

- Learning about relaxation techniques
- Taking a martial arts class

- Trying hypnosis

And, oh by the way, just about the time that you think you are over the pain, it will probably sneak back in and whack you again. Something unexpected may remind you of her or of some special time that you had together, bringing you back to the pain. Over time, though, the pain will generally lessen, especially if you are making the right decisions about your life.

Can friends help?

Friends can help, but they can also harm. Your friends don't want to see you hurting. Their advice, which is anything but neutral, is usually about how to protect you. They are likely to take your side, to see how you were wronged by her. "I can't believe that you put up with her so long." Or "I always knew this would happen." That may feel good in some ways, but such advice is unlikely to lead to reconciliation.

We're not saying don't associate with your friends. Just be aware that their well-intentioned advice is biased and can even be an impediment if you hope to get back together with her. You might tell them that you appreciate their concern, but what you need most right now is support, not suggestions.

What about help from the family?

Even more than your friends, your family is apt to take your side. You may find yourself asking for their sympathy. Your family may become really angry at her for how she has treated you. The problem is that if the two of you ever get back together, it will really be awkward between the family and her. They may continue to resent or distrust her even after you and her have let "bygones be bygones". This can set the stage for more problems between you and her.

We're not saying keep things secret from your family, but rather to be careful about what you say. A good strategy is to let the family know what is happening and to also ask them not to take sides. Indicate that she has grievances about the marriage just like you do. Explain that you are unsure if things can be worked out. If it is true, tell them that you hope to reconcile, and you don't want to do anything that might jeopardize that possibility.

Can anything help?

This is not the time to become more isolated. If you are religious, this is a good time to become more involved with your church or synagogue. More

generally, reach out to your friends and associates without seeking them to be on “your side”. Tell them that this is a rough time for you and you would like to play golf this weekend, or go to the movies, or have a barbecue. You don’t need them to fix this thing for you. They can’t, and you both know it. It can help a lot, though, just to be around people who still *want* to be around *you*.

Should I want her back?

Some relationships should just end. Be honest about your relationship with her. Was it really unhealthy and unhappy, and you just couldn’t admit it? Were you secretly hoping it would end, but now you are having regrets? Do you believe that a bad relationship is better than no relationship at all? Are you more worried about being alone than about being unhappy? Have you been putting up with stuff that you would tell others never to tolerate?

Anecdote: *One man we know was always reacting to problems in his marriage with outrageous anger directed at his wife. His anger was disproportionate to whatever the problems were. When asked about the source of his anger, he ruefully admitted that since he didn’t value the marriage so much, he played “marital roulette”, seeing if his anger would cause HER to end the relationship. If YOU want out of the relationship, take the necessary actions to leave rather than making her miserable in hopes of avoiding making the decision yourself.*

Sometimes, a guy will do anything to get her back, but the price can be too high. Ask yourself if the relationship is really worth saving, or is this the time to let it go? No one but you can really answer that question, but it is vital that you really consider it.

What about her annoying habits?

Every person has annoying habits---including you! A person who has no annoying habits is one that you do not know well. In every relationship you have to put up with the annoying habits of the other person, and, of course, they have to put up with yours.

We don’t think that relationships are made or broken on the basis of annoying habits. They come with the territory. It is best to recognize that they are inevitable features of every relationship. If you get back together with her, she will still have annoying behaviors.

Can we get over big problems?

Annoying habits are like hangnails. They are painful, common, but seldom life-threatening. Big problems are like fractures. They limit our freedom and mobility and can even threaten our lives if left untreated. By big problems we mean things like affairs, alcoholism, irresponsible spending, and the like. In and of themselves, big problems do not usually lead to divorce. Divorce is more likely the outcome when the big problems recur or when the couple is unable to talk about the big problem.

If there is a big problem in your relationship (e.g., an affair by either party), it will have to be addressed for reconciliation to have any meaning. That means that the two of you will have to talk about it ...a lot! Usually, marital counseling is necessary in these situations. Invariably, the person who committed the transgression (e.g., the person who had an affair) wants to talk about it less, while the other partner wants to talk about it more. It's like a roller coaster ride with many ups and downs, and you will want to get off before the ride is over. All you can really do is sit down and hang on. The ride will eventually end.

If we got back together, can this happen again?

You know there are no guarantees. Of course, it can happen again. One of the inevitable risks of being in a relationship is that you may be hurt. You can try to fix what was wrong in the relationship, but that doesn't mean it will ever be bulletproof. The best you can do is to try to establish more meaningful conversation and better relationship habits to prevent a recurrence.

If we got back together, can we trust each other again?

This is one of the most common questions people have about reconciliation. Everyone agrees that it takes time to rebuild trust, but it takes more than the mere passage of time.

Trust can only grow when there is no repetition of the problem. If you and/or her promise you will be different, you have to be *consistently* different. If you soon revert to your old ways, no trust can develop.

Anecdote: *One couple we know got back together after a separation with the husband promising he would be in better control of his anger. His wife, although reluctant to try again, did not really want a divorce. Eventually she allowed him to come back to the home with his commitment to be less hot tempered. They were anxious about how it would work out. Initially, though, he was careful to manage his temper, and things went pretty well. After a matter of a few weeks, though, he became irritated about some minor matter. Although his expression of anger this time was not extreme, it reminded her of all of his previous incidents*

of outrageous anger, and she began to rethink her willingness to reconcile. Trust requires consistency.

Trust requires changes of behavior, not just changes of words. All of us believe what we see more than what we hear. Whatever changes are needed or demanded will have to be seen.

If she has lacked trust in you, and you want to reconcile, make obvious and visible efforts to address her concerns. For example, if she complained that you never wanted to spend time with her, commit to having a weekly date with her, and, most importantly, let nothing keep you from keeping that date. If she was unhappy about your treatment of the children, enroll in a parenting class. Take actions that unmistakably signify your desire to be different.

If, on the other hand, it is you that lacks trust in her, demand that she engage in the behaviors that will signify a change of heart to you. Don't settle for promises. One strategy that can be helpful is to ask for her to make behavioral changes and then to contact you after she has maintained those changes for a period of time, say, six months.

Another thing that prevents rebuilding trust is if you or she keeps threatening to leave again. Such threats make the other person unwilling to make the commitments necessary to revitalize a relationship. There should be a moratorium on such threats while the two of you explore reconciliation. For many couples this is hard to do for two reasons:

- They have a bad habit of making such threats.
- Such threats are an effective way of getting your partner's attention.

Nonetheless, you both must stop making threats to leave if you want to give reconciliation a fighting chance. Of course, stopping threats does not mean the other person can't leave, but it removes the threat as a weapon to get your way. A better way to handle this issue is to agree to have periodic meetings to discuss the state of the relationship. These should be scheduled and put on the calendar. Initially, the meetings probably should be held weekly. Later, if you are successful, monthly meetings might suffice. Even happily married couples should adopt a habit of discussing their satisfaction with the relationship on at least a yearly basis.

Furthermore, in order to rebuild trust, both of you must act in a trustworthy manner in *all* things. If a person is willing to be dishonest in a small thing, there is no reason to expect they would be honest over a big matter. Little "white lies", minor indiscretions, failing to fully disclose, are behaviors that doom reconciliation.

What about dating?

You are a precocious one! Even if you feel certain that the marriage is over, now is not the time to think about new relationships. Some men immediately seek the company of another woman as a way of salving their wounds. They feel hurt by the loss of their woman and look for reassurance in the arms of another. Maybe friends will offer to “set you up” since you are “free” or “single”. They may be well meaning, but it is way too early to consider this. We strongly advise you to avoid this short-term tonic. It is likely to make dealing with the divorce far more complicated. It could even be used against you in court. If you have children, you will further confuse and perhaps alienate them. The time to think about new relationships is when you are completely disentangled from your old one. See Section III on Dating Again for further guidance.