



# Can broken relationships be mended?

BY NANCY K. SCHLOSSBERG, *Correspondent*

**M**any songs reflect the heartache that comes with a broken love, the end of a career, a ruptured friendship. We memorialize endings, we romanticize new beginnings, but often we handle them poorly.

A few examples:

- Bill has been living with a woman for several years. She ended their relationship and insisted they live apart. He cannot end it. He just waits and hopes that she will have him back.
- Natalie was a widow-in-waiting for several years, knowing that her husband would die, but not knowing when. Even though she was prepared, she is having difficulty trying to carve out a new life.
- Ted resigned from his job as CEO of an organization he founded. His identity was interchangeable with the organization's. He has begun to feel regret and ambivalence. He is unsure about what he did but, more importantly, he is uncertain about where he will go.
- Molly and her son have not talked in years. She says that he was the one who broke away. At one point he told his mother that he was angry because he felt a total lack of acceptance from her when she discovered that he was gay.
- Ralph, a high ranking Army officer, told me he hated his parents for what they did to him as a little boy. He described one incident — a time when they locked him out of the house. He didn't go to his father's funeral — that's how angry he still is. He has never let go of his anger.
- Martha, a 60-year-old woman, talked about the horrific fight she had with her husband. She threatened suicide and felt they could never repair their relationship.
- Meredith and Ebony were best friends. Meredith found a romantic partner. There was a period of adjustment where the two women saw less of each other. Ebony felt left out and hurt. On the one hand, she was happy for her friend; on the other, she felt slighted.

Any broken relationship — between two people, or a person and an institution — begins with the ending, followed by continuous re-evaluation and, finally, with the decision to repair the relationship or just walk away and stay away. Figuring out what to do — that is the question. As you decide on your course of action, here are some pointers to consider:

- 1. Take time to grieve.** Broken relationships are transitions, and the more invested you are in the relationship, the more difficult the transition. These relationships evoke complicated reactions. You are dealing with the event — the breakup, but you are also dealing with your future expectations — the nonevents. For example, a mother and daughter have stopped talking. That is a major event. But besides the breakup, they are also coming to grips with what it will mean to live separate lives — the celebrations and life events that will not be shared.
- 2. Develop a leave-taking ritual.** We have all dealt with ending something that was important to us. Confusion and ambivalence precede the actual decision to stay or not to stay. Sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot points out the importance of handling exits



# TRANSITIONS

well and our lack of leave-taking rituals in her book "Exit: The Endings That Set Us Free." The Peace Corps is a perfect example. Much time is spent orienting new recruits but much less time is dedicated to helping volunteers adjust as they return to their own societies. In other words, attention must be paid to the leave-taking process.

**3. Learn about Collaborative Divorce.** A new process gaining traction, Collaborative Divorce was developed to help people work out a harmonious way to end a relationship while keeping lines of communication open and agreed upon. (For more, go to <http://www.thinkadvisor.com/2014/08/25/collaborative-divorce-a-win-win-dissolution>) Rather than hiring two lawyers, the parties engage a team — a lawyer, an accountant and a financial planner. Together with their team they look at the entire picture with the goal of resolving the conflict peacefully.



Nancy K. Schlossberg Photo by Rod Millington

**4. Consider forgiveness.** Why, asked Cora, should I forgive? After all, what he did was unforgiveable. Answer: Forgiveness is not about the perpetrator of harm. It is about you. It is about freeing yourself from hatred, from angry feelings, from being hurt. Robert D. Enright, a psychologist and author of "Forgiveness Is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope," among other books on the subject, points out that forgiveness does not deny that we have been hurt. We have a right to feel hurt, angry or resentful. Forgiveness is not condoning or excusing, forgetting or justifying.

The following case is an instance of forgiving and actually forgetting. A young woman, "Wanda," described her adolescence. She hated to bring friends home in case her mother was drunk. Her mother embarrassed her and made her feel ashamed. She remembered one night when her mother chased her around the kitchen



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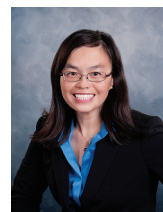
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with a knife. Years later, the young woman expressed how grateful she was. If her mother had been less volatile, she might have stayed in her hometown. This way, she moved away and developed her own identity. She also forgave her mother when her mother was very ill and for medical reasons had to stop drinking. She began to understand the cause of her alcoholism and to forgive her. Wanda is free and remembers her mother with love and appreciates all the things her mother did for her — ice skating together in the park, joint art lessons, shopping for fun clothes. Over time, Wanda was able to see the total picture and put the negatives in perspective.

**5. Explore reconciliation.** It is certainly possible to forgive but not reconcile. But realize that one of the options in repairing a broken relationship is to “bury the hatchet,” get back together and negotiate a new phase in the relationship. Reconciliation is often difficult to achieve because most relationships have patterns, habits and comfort zones. Clearly reconciliation will force new patterns. It is a new relationship with an old connection.

The bottom line: You have a choice. To live filled with anger or to move on, let go of the anger, forgive, maybe even reconcile.

Sarasota resident and former professor of counseling at the University of Maryland, College Park, Nancy K. Schlossberg is board chair of Institute for the Ages. She writes self-help books, blogs, lectures and runs workshops on coping with change. You can contact her through [www.transition-sthroughlife.com](http://www.transition-sthroughlife.com) or at [nancyks4@gmail.com](mailto:nancyks4@gmail.com).



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