

SOS Détresse

When the partner leaves

Everyone who gets married or who decides to co-habit probably does so in the hope that it will be “for life”. Separation or divorce is something that happens only to other people. However, our partner may decide to break up and all of a sudden we are affected too.

First reaction: state of shock

At first we are as though paralysed, we cannot understand what is happening. We do not want to accept that this is the end of our relationship. This is a perfectly normal reaction. We deny or ignore this final separation, we swing between despair and hope in a happy outcome and we think that the separation will be temporary and that we will be able to persuade our partner to return.

Separation is particularly hard when it is totally unexpected. We didn't see, or didn't want to see, the warning signs in our partner. But even if we had a presentiment, at the beginning we are completely overwhelmed. The vague threat hanging over us has become reality and we refuse to accept it.

Emotional chaos

If the separation is final, the partner's absence leaves a great void and gradually we come to understand that it is over. It is only when we realise that the separation has indeed happened that pain and anger erupt. We go through a period of sadness characterised by sudden mood swings and disorientation.

We are desperate and overwhelmed. Our emotions are chaotic. We cannot imagine ever being happy again. Positive memories return and exacerbate the pain. We are submerged by a wide variety of emotions: sadness, rage, fear, irritability, or even physical pain such as a kind of paralysis so intense that even the simplest tasks appear impossible. We are faced with an inner emptiness, a sense of having been totally abandoned and rejected. We are tormented by feelings of loneliness and anxiety. We have lost the support of our partner and are afraid we will be unable to face life alone. We have lost all our self-confidence. We fear the nights and weekends. Our loneliness becomes almost unbearable. Above all, if the relationship was a very long one, we are no longer used to living as a single person. Changes relating to finances, to housing and to the children's upbringing and the administrative side of divorce appear to us to be insurmountable obstacles. All these demands on us take our breath

away.

The sense of failure returns again and again. We torment ourselves with doubts, self-accusation and feelings of guilt. Why did he/she leave? What did I do wrong? Was I not good enough for him/her? I should have made more of an effort in the relationship. To that is added anxiety about no longer being attractive enough to find a new partner one day.

But we also feel rage and hatred. In our mind we insult our partner, address lengthy reproaches to them, or develop ideas of revenge. However, this rage often turns into pain. We are constantly torn between all these feelings or the need to see our ex-partner again. We perhaps try to win them back because we want to keep open the possibility of going back to normal, we want to give our relationship a chance. When these attempts fail, we may well lose our self-esteem.

Allowing space for sadness ...

It is extremely important to understand that all these reactions - pain, rage, fear, self-hatred - are completely normal and are natural reactions to the loss of a loved one. They are part of the process of grieving which enables us to come to terms with the separation. It is important to be able to grieve properly, even if we don't really want to accept or show it and we wish to continue functioning "normally". Often a separation cuts us off completely from our present way of life. It is not just that we have lost the person who has left, we also need to get over the loss of a life plan, the vision of a shared future and a shared life experience. So it is not surprising if we lose our balance for a while.

People who are grieving are in a kind of state of emergency, whose duration varies from one person and from one situation to another. So we should not put ourselves under pressure. Even if it is not easy, we should allow ourselves to take as much time as we need to work through this process. It is important to give space to these contradictory feelings, to accept and not repress them. We will succeed best in this if during this phase we take optimum care of ourselves.

It is important not to become isolated during this phase. Stay in touch with good friends and choose carefully the people you talk to. People to whom you can show your pain and impotence are very precious but so are those with whom you can laugh and relax, depending on what you need. Maybe you know someone who has experienced a similar situation. It is important to have someone to support you while you grieve, without making any demands. There is often considerable pressure to return to normality. "Forget him/her, he's/she's not worth it", "look at it positively", "you'll find someone else". This advice is well-intentioned but helps no-one. In the end, we just need someone to listen.

... in order to let go

If we are patient and kind with ourselves and if we try not to rail against our fate, after some time we are able to take the first steps towards a new future. We find the courage to reorganise our life.

If we have grieved deeply, it is possible to achieve inner reconciliation and then we can allow ourselves to assign to the past its true value. Reconciliation of this kind can be extremely therapeutic. We can store up the experiences we have had with another person, especially the positive memories, like treasure.