

Relationships:

A Collection
of Articles



Kali Munro

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Kali Munro

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Table of Contents

Bringing Out the Best in Your Relationship	1
Regain the Romance and Sparkle in Your Relationship	8
Getting Past the Arguments - an article on resolving conflict in relationships	13
Women's Sexual Expression	18
Sex, Lies, Affairs, and Relationships	26
Break-ups: How To Survive Them	30
Tips For Enhancing Your Sexual Enjoyment	38



Bringing Out the Best in Your Relationship

These guidelines are based on the assumption that you are not being emotionally, physically, or sexually abused. If you are being abused, you are not responsible for the abuse, or for understanding your partner's reasons for abusing you.

Note: Ideally, these guidelines work best when both partners follow them; however, a change in one partner's way of responding often encourages a change in the other partner.

Relationships bring out the best and the worst in us. Here are some ways to bring out the best in yours:

1. Focus on yourself.

Do things to increase your self-awareness, like how you behave in relationships. It can help to stay aware of patterns, reactions, feelings, beliefs, and triggers (from your childhood and previous relationships) that arise in your relationship. It is often true that how you feel may have little to do with your partner, and is more about you and your past experiences.

2. Take responsibility for your own feelings, thoughts, needs, and behaviour.

- Use "I" statements ("I feel..." vs. "You make me feel...")
- Check out assumptions, interpretations, and fears.
- State your feelings and thoughts clearly and without blame.
- Make requests. Ask for what you need. She/he may not know what you need.
- Know that you may not get exactly what you need.
- Find ways to meet your own needs.

3. Take care of yourself.

Treat yourself as you would a good friend.

4. Be present with yourself.

This is important not only for your own well-being, but also for your relationship. Being present with yourself can be achieved in different ways, such as meditation, yoga, relaxation, rest, exercise, body awareness, dance, being in nature, and prayer. Anything that helps you to be in the moment will help you to do that with your partner, as well. Many people find that being in the moment while they are with their partner is a lot harder than when they are alone or with other people. Some couples work on this together. You can:

- Lie down with your partner in a spoon position (one person's front side hugs the other person's back side) and then breathe in unison for five to ten minutes. Generally it is better if the larger partner follows the breath of the smaller partner. If your mind wanders, bring your focus back to breathing together. Variations of this are standing up and breathing in unison while hugging, and sitting down facing each other, holding eye contact while breathing in unison. This can also be helpful to do when you feel upset or angry with each other.

- Sit facing each other. At first, look down or close your eyes. Become aware of your breath. Follow the natural rhythm of your breath, and let your mind be clear of thoughts and worries. When you have done this for a while, open your eyes and look at your partner. S/he may not have opened her/his eyes yet. If not, look at your partner from this meditative place and see what you notice, while you continue to follow your breath. When your partner opens her/his eyes, hold eye contact, while continuing to follow your breath. If you lose your connection with your breath, take a moment by looking down or closing your eyes to reconnect, and then hold eye contact again. Just notice what you are aware of as you do this.

5. Nurture all of your relationships.

Try not to isolate yourself in your primary relationship.

6. Explore your own creativity, needs, independence, leisure activities, hobbies, career

Anything that makes you feel better about yourself, or makes you feel whole and feeds your soul is important and will have a positive effect on your relationship.

7. Take another look.

When your partner does something that bothers you,

- Ask yourself, what does this mean to me? Why am I bothered by this? Is there anything from my past that is effecting how I am feeling or seeing this right now? Have I in any way contributed to this issue, perhaps without being aware of it? Is there anything about this issue that might reflect something I don't want to look at within me?

- If you are feeling critical or judgmental about your partner's behaviour, step back for a moment and see if you can come up with alternative explanations for that behaviour—ones that are less critical.

- If you need to say something, this is a helpful formula to use: When you...(describe behaviour in neutral terms), I feel...(describe feelings without blaming), and I would like to ask that you...(make your request about a concrete behavioural change).

8. Give understanding.

Just as you deserve understanding and

support, your partner does, too, and it does help to feel understood. Try to see the situation from her/his perspective, especially when you are in conflict.

9. Acknowledge your partner's feelings.

You don't have to agree with someone to acknowledge and understand how they feel.

10. Give your partner lots of appreciation.

Let your partner know how much you love her/him and why.

11. Accept your partner the way she/he is.

This doesn't mean that you don't ask her/him for behavioural changes, or that you accept, for example, being yelled at. It just means that you accept your partner as a person, and believe in her/his good intentions. Contrary to popular belief, really accepting someone brings out the best in them.

12. Don't make sweeping generalizations.

No matter how tempting, try not to make sweeping generalizations like "You never...", "You are always...", "You are such a...." Besides the fact that they are not true (no one does the same thing all the time, in every situation), they are hurtful statements that leave people feeling bad about themselves, and can feed into a lack of motivation for change. "If I never do anything right, why bother?"

13. Have complaint sessions.

Sometimes couples build up resentments that need airing. It can help to have a "complaint session." One person starts by saying all the things that are bothering her/him, while their partner listens and encourages them to continue by saying, "what else?" Sometimes by delving deeper, the one who is complaining realizes that there's more to the complaints than what s/he originally thought. The one complaining may start out angry but often will soften, and become more aware of what is really bothering her/him, and what s/he needs. The listener's job is to listen, without comment, and to try not to take it personally. What you are hearing is an indication of how frustrated or angry your partner is right now. Keep in mind that it's not all about you, even if most of the anger is being directed at you. You can switch roles when the first person is done, or at a later time.

14. Take time out.

When a conflict is not going anywhere, it can help to take some time away from your partner. Couples usually make up rules about time out, such as don't leave the house, and having a set amount of time for the time out, like 30 minutes, before checking back in with each other about whether or not they can continue the discussion. In cars, time out can just mean that no one talks for a set amount of time. Either partner can call time out, and it should mean immediate silence for an agreed-upon time. It is always better to have the amount of time set prior to an argument, or you will argue about that! Some

couples don't set a specific amount of time, but remain silent for a while, and when they have calmed down enough to feel compassion, they check in with each other about their mutual readiness to continue the conversation or to let it go for now.

15. Listen carefully.

If your partner is trying to tell you something and you don't understand, listen carefully, ask clarifying questions, check out what you think they are saying, and keep trying to understand. Many arguments arise from our not really listening to each other, or assuming that we know what the other person is saying without checking it out first. It is always best to check that you understood the other person correctly.

Of course, you won't be able to follow these guidelines one hundred percent of the time, and that's okay; no one can. But if you want your relationship to be based on respect, compassion, and clear communication, it's a good idea to try to follow these guidelines or others that work for you, as much as possible.

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Regain the Romance and Sparkle in Your Relationship

If only relationships could be as exciting and romantic as when we first met. You know, all that intensity, enthusiasm, excitement and, of course, sex. I'm sure you've felt it: hating being apart, even for a short time; being unable to concentrate on anything else for very long; and waiting to be together again. When you are together, you hang onto every word, marvel at every part of your lover's body, and feel so wonderful, you smile all the time.

Does this all have to end? Are relationships doomed to predictable and boring routines of shopping, preparing meals, doing the dishes, laundry, watching T.V., talking about work, taking care of the kids, fighting, and sleeping? Definitely not. In fact, long term lovers can become even more enchanted with each other, since their passion grows from a deeper knowledge and fondness for each other. But time alone does not help a relationship to flourish-it requires a willingness to take risks, and special, persistent attention.

Many couples love each other deeply, and genuinely enjoy each others' company, yet feel that the relationship is stale. They long for some of the old intensity, romance, and spontaneity. Others don't see the need for that intensity, or even believe that it's possible to feel that again. They assume that intensity exists only at the beginning of a relationship, and that

"mature love" is more settled and less exciting. While how we feel toward each other certainly changes and evolves over the years, the truth is that our relationships reflect what we put into them.

Children can be so carefree and loving because they have lived for just a few years—a much shorter time in which to accumulate negative experiences and build up feelings of resentment, anger, and mistrust. Relationships are similar to this. In the beginning, we don't know each other very well, and aren't carrying around resentments from past interactions with each other. As the years go by, these resentments accumulate. We no longer look at our partner with the same fresh, unjudging eyes.

It can help to look at our partner with a fresh look, let go of past baggage, and remember all the reasons we love her/him so much. This means stretching past any resentments, and opening up to feeling and giving love more fully.

So, how can you regain some of that old spark? Start out by thinking about your partner and all the reasons that you love her/him. Ask yourself:

- what s/he means to you;
- what it is about her/him that you love;
- when was the last time that you told her/him how much you love her/him in a real feeling way;
- and whether you have written her/him a love letter, or left a love note under her/his pillow or in her/his briefcase recently.

Give yourself permission to creatively express your love. You can make a card, a little book of love, coupons s/he redeems with you for a massage, dinner, or whatever you know s/he'd enjoy. You could write a love poem, sing to her/him, or read an erotic passage out of a book. Don't be shy; your partner will be touched by the love you put into it.

Consider doing something silly with your lover that you used to do when you first dated, no matter how silly it seems-in fact, the sillier the better. Take time to enjoy your partner. Let the dishes and laundry pile up if necessary.

Need some more ideas? Here's a few:

- Surprise your sweetie with tickets to an event you think s/he'd really enjoy. Hide them where s/he'll find them.
- Take her/him out on a date where s/he gets to choose whatever s/he wants to do, even if it's something you wouldn't ordinarily want to do (remember to be gracious).
- Take turns planning weekly dates, where you take turns deciding what to do. A date could be a picnic in a park, a drive in the country, a trip to an art gallery, or a movie.
- Turn your home into a fine restaurant for one evening. Surprise your lover with a menu, music, candles, a delicious meal, and table service (that's you). If you're frequently too busy to find time

together, make spending time together a priority. Show your partner that s/he is your priority.

- Take a day off from all responsibilities, including the telephone, and just do what you both really want to do. Be completely spontaneous, and if you can't agree, take turns doing what you both want.

- Devote yourself to your partner's wishes for a fixed amount of time. S/he gets to decide whatever s/he wants you to do (assuming you agree to it). S/he may want to be held, have you read poetry, receive a massage, be understood about something, have you clean the kitchen, or be taken out for coffee. Taking turns with this can be a lot of fun.

- Be playful with each other. Feed each other with your fingers, stay in bed all day, take a walk in the rain, sing old tunes you both know, or have a pillow fight. It doesn't matter what you do, just that you have fun again.

- Find a time to look deeply and lovingly into your lover's eyes; words are not necessary. Look at her/his face and see her/his beauty and uniqueness. Tell her/him what you see and feel. Take the risk to feel the depth of your emotions and to share that with your lover. At night before you fall asleep, tell her/him something that you love about her/him. Remember, you're the one who knows what your lover really enjoys. Surprise her/him with something special-don't wait for a birthday or anniversary.

The idea is, no matter what you do, make it special.

These are just a few suggestions to help you regain some of the sparkle in your relationship. Don't be afraid to let your imagination go wild, or to appear silly. Your partner will enjoy the love and thought you've put into it, and over time you may find your relationship feeling vibrant once more.

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Getting Past the Arguments: An Article on Resolving Conflict in Relationships

One of the hardest things to handle in a relationship is conflict. While a good and fair fight can clear the air and help you to feel closer to your lover, many fights are just hurtful and destructive. Fights that never go anywhere, that are repeated year after year, or that leave you feeling awful about yourself are not going to help your relationship. Those are the kinds of fights we need to take another look at, and find out what is going on underneath. This is true for any conflict that doesn't feel right, not just those you have with your lover.

With most fights, there are layers of what we mean, feel, intend, hope for, and believe, and what we actually say. We may only say a little of how we feel, or we may even say the opposite of how we're feeling on a much deeper level than the surface. Problems arise when we don't come from the deeper levels.

Some people think that the top layer of what they feel and think is all that there is, yet they feel something's missing in their relationship. Others know how they feel but instead of stating their feelings as their own, they blame how they feel on their lover, leading to hurt feelings and arguing that goes nowhere. This is often the time that people call it quits

on a relationship.

Many break-ups occur because we do not know how to get to our inner depth, or getting to it, how to share it. What we want to say isn't what comes out of our mouths. We argue about something meaningless in order to get space from our lover, rather than feel the anxiety or fear we may have about setting boundaries or looking at what we need. We argue to feel more alive, instead of looking at what is missing in our life. We argue about what our lover spent money on, rather than face our own issues about money. We argue as a way to control our lover, rather than face our fear of being controlled. Regardless of the content of the argument, until we are prepared to express and respect our lover's deeper feelings, beliefs, and meanings (and s/he respects ours), very little change can take place.

We can work around our lover's "sensitive points," expect them to do the same for us, and make compromises, but how far does that really take us? While problem-solving can help, particularly in the immediate future, often it isn't enough for the long run. As long as the deeper issues remain unaddressed, our relationship will be flattened, soured, or lost to meaningless fights.

So how do you get underneath the arguments? By being vulnerable and risking being as open and as honest about yourself as you can with your lover. Take anything you argue about and ask yourself what is upsetting you. Usually people will respond with answers that are about their lovers -

s/he spends too much money, s/he is defensive, s/he doesn't listen to me. Now try asking yourself the following questions:

- what about that bothers you?
- how do you feel about it?
- how do you react to it, and what does it mean to you?
- what if anything are you afraid of?
- what do you believe it means about you or your relationship?
- does it remind you of anyone?

Try not to get bogged down in intellectual answers. Even if you know the answers, see if you can connect to your feelings about it and notice whether any other thoughts, feelings, associations, or memories come to you spontaneously. Sometimes the best stuff just suddenly occurs to us.

Next, find an opportunity when you and your lover aren't rushed or distracted, and share how you are feeling about the issue. When mentioning something about her/his behavior that affects you, phrase it within your own experience ("When I think that you are not listening to me I feel...I then worry that...it reminds me of...which feels...to me). Even when you want to mention something that your lover does, focus on you and your deeper responses. You may want to ask for something specific ("Could we set aside times to listen to each other?") which your lover can consider, but initially it is usually best to have you and your lover listen to and understand each others' deeper responses.

You might be tempted to leap to a solution, but this is only the beginning. If you settle on a solution too quickly, you could miss something that still needs to be unearthed.

The listener's job is to listen attentively and to verbalize understanding for the other's feelings, regardless of whether or not the listener agrees with her/his lover's perception of the events. For example, maybe you think that you're the one who's always listening to your lover, and it is s/he who doesn't listen to you. It's okay that you do not agree with her/his version of reality, but for now, offer only your understanding of how s/he feels and what it means to her/him. It is important that you suspend your difference of opinion and only offer understanding.

When you're finished with that, switch roles. Feel free, as the one who just listened, to say something like "When I hear you say that, I feel...because I believe that I do listen.... This reminds me of...and I feel...and I don't know what else to do. I feel that you don't listen to me. When this happens I feel..." It's important to not argue about who does or doesn't listen, or what you each do, but rather, the original speaker should now listen and offer understanding for how it must feel. Keep going back and forth and see what happens. You may not notice anything for a while, but you might. If you don't, try not to worry or rush the process; something usually shifts over time, especially if you keep going deeper. You never know what you might discover - it may be a completely different issue than you originally thought. Only by staying with your deeper feelings and

reactions will you discover what is underneath the arguments.

By each of you truly understanding the others' perspective without judgement, you'll be able to move through this barrier in your relationship. Stick with the formula, even if it feels unnatural, and you may find that the two of you are laughing about what started the whole disagreement.

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Women's Sexual Expression

Have you ever wondered whether other women, lesbian or straight have problems with sex? Do you worry that you're the only one who makes passionate love at the beginning of a relationship and then withdraws? Or perhaps you enjoy making love to your partner, but feel uncomfortable receiving sexual pleasure? If any of these sound familiar, you are not alone.

Barriers to Feeling Comfortable with Your Sexuality

While we may believe that sex should flow naturally and easily, the reality is often different. It's no wonder, given all that we're up against--sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia; society's repressed attitudes about sex generally and especially about women's sexuality; messages we receive from families, religion, schools, and the media about women, lesbians, and sex; and the fact that so many girls and women are sexually assaulted. It's remarkable that we feel comfortable with sex at all!

Patience and Awareness

If you're having a hard time with any aspect of sex, the best thing you can do for yourself is to be patient and understanding. Freeing yourself of pressure, blame, or criticism is crucial to moving

through any obstacle you face.

A good starting place is to simply pay attention to everything that you feel as soon as you are aware of feeling uncomfortable. If you are numbing, or shutting down, you'll want to figure out how you felt immediately prior to that.

- How does your body react?
- What body sensations do you notice?
- Do you hold your breath?
- Does your heart quicken?
- What are your thoughts?
- Do you see or sense images, sounds, smells, or tastes?
- What do you notice before and during the point you start to feel uncomfortable or begin to numb yourself?

Being aware of your own experience and responses is an important first step. This awareness helps you be in your body and be present with yourself. These are important elements for being able to relax and enjoy sex. This does not mean that you suddenly feel comfortable with sex, in fact initially you may feel even more uncomfortable because you are more aware of how upset or scared you feel. Some may respond to this process by feeling calmer. If you feel more upset or about the same, continue to be with your feelings, let yourself breathe if you can, and remember this will help you to feel better about sex.

It is important that you and your partner accept how you feel and approach your feelings with

tenderness and love. Awareness, acceptance, and compassion are probably the most important things you can do for yourself and/or your partner.

Are There Any Connections to the Past?

You may want to ask yourself:

- Have you felt this way before?
- Do you feel this way in other situations?

See if you can remember the first time you felt this way and whether there might be a connection. Does it make sense to you why this was triggered at this time? If not, try to remember the next time you felt this way and whether you can make a connection to your present feelings. Strong emotional reactions are usually connected to past experiences that have not been fully resolved.

You may have been sexually assaulted and coped by numbing out. Or you may have been raised in a chaotic household and feel a strong need to be in control. Directing your attention to what originally brought on these feelings or reactions, and finding ways to work through those issues can help a lot.

How is Your Relationship?

If you are withdrawing from sex, how are you feeling about your relationship?

- Are there areas in your relationship, apart from sex, that need to change?
- Are you spending too much time together, which can dampen passion?
- Are you not spending enough time together, which can lessen your intimacy?
- Are you carrying around "baggage" from a previous relationship, which may be blocking your ability to relate intimately with your partner?
- Are your childhood experiences coming between you?

You may want to ask yourself what happens when you withdraw from your partner. Does it reduce some anxiety or fear, or get you some much needed space. Maybe there is another way that you could accomplish the same thing. When you are aware of what is going on, you can let your partner know how you feel, and ask her/him for what you need.

What You Can Do: Slowing Down

If you are going numb or shutting down, there are a number of strategies you can try. One strategy is to approach sex at a slower pace, spending more time at sexual activities in which you don't numb out. Maintain a lot of contact with your lover by talking to each other and keeping eye contact. The idea is to stay present and in your body, and to stop when you begin to numb out.

Asking For What You Need

You may need a stronger or softer touch, or to be in a certain position. Stop whenever you need to, and talk about how you are feeling. You might want to hold each other for awhile, then begin again unless you don't want to. Only you can know how you are feeling and whether you want to continue or not, your partner can only guess. It is far better for you if you take charge of your own needs and that your partner respects that. At times, it may feel frustrating, for both of you, so remember that by being patient and taking it slow, your sex life can improve.

Partners who view each others' difficulties with sex as something to work on together have the best results. In this situation a partner will ask how the other is feeling, what is wanted, and whether they need to stop. This sends a clear message that you care and that it is okay to stop at any time.

Talking About Sex

Talking about sex, both inside and outside the bedroom, is important in any relationship. If you're shy about saying what you like while you're making love, tell your sweetie at another time. Have fun, it doesn't need to be serious. You may feel more comfortable sharing sexual fantasies because it is less direct. Do what works for you, but find a way to communicate your likes and dislikes with sex.

Starting and Stopping Sex

For the person who feels uncomfortable on the receiving end of sexual pleasure, try starting with just a little and stop. Talk about it, if that feels okay. Then try a little more, remembering to breathe. Take a break again. Keep trying this, receiving a little each time and then maybe increasing the amount of time each time. By going slowly, stopping and starting again, you can increase your comfort level with the focus on you. Both of you need to be patient because this can feel frustrating too but it is well worth it in the long run. You may find you even enjoy it.

Letting Go

To have an orgasm, we need to be able to ride the waves of arousal and let go--not always such an easy thing to do. If you find this difficult, begin outside the context of sex by thinking or talking about the following questions:

- What does letting go mean to you?
- What would happen if you were to let go?
- How do you feel about letting go?
- Do you know what those reactions, associations, and feelings are connected to?
- Are there other ways of your life in which you find it hard to let go?
- Do you like to be in control?
- Is there anything you are afraid will happen if you are not in control?

You might want to begin by finding

opportunities to let go, to be in less control outside of sex. How do you feel about that? Start small. Find little ways you can be in less control throughout your day. See if you can relax more, take it easy. Remember this can help improve your sex life so let that motivate you.

During sex notice your reactions. If you start to tense up or pull back, stop right there. Notice that for a moment, breathe, and if you want continue. Trying to push on while you tense up will not work, backing off will. You'll immediately relax some. Remember, you are tensing up for a reason, honour that and let your partner know you need to stop. Obviously it is crucial that your partner handles this sensitively and respectfully.

Additionally, you may need to let your partner know how to pleasure you just the way you like it. Give yourself permission to do that.

And most importantly, no one has an orgasm by trying to have one. Let go of that goal, and focus on the pleasurable feelings in your body. Some women need to hear gentle loving words or be held when they approach orgasm because for them it brings up all sorts of safety issues. Others like to hear something more raunchy.

Summing Up

Experiencing sexual pleasure involves being present; staying with your feelings, your breath and other body sensations; expressing yourself (talking, making sounds, moving your body); and letting go. Finding ways to feel more comfortable doing these things, in and outside the bedroom, will help your sex life. Try not to worry if you don't notice any difference right away, be patient with yourself and your partner--your sex life can and will improve.

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Sex, Lies, Affairs, and Relationships

Have you ever had a strong desire to have sex with someone other than your partner, and didn't know what to do with it? Maybe you've had an affair, but are scared to tell your partner, or you think s/he is better off not knowing. Maybe s/he already knows, and it's blown up in an ugly mess. You don't want to lose your relationship, and you don't want to feel stuck in this place, either.

There's nothing wrong with feeling attracted, even strongly attracted, to another person. Some couples have fun sharing their stories of attraction and desire. Others just want to be open to all that they are feeling without acting on it, to see what they can learn about themselves. Sometimes, it's just fun to indulge in fantasies without worrying about what they mean.

But what about the situation when there is an agreement to be monogamous, and someone has an affair? How does this affect both partners? Does it mean the end of the relationship?

It's possible for a relationship to last after an affair, but whether it really heals or not is another question. It's very tempting to try to put an affair behind you, but the reality is that it will continue to surface in different ways in your relationship if it's not

adequately addressed. When couples take the time to talk it through, usually many times, and offer true understanding to each other, they have a better chance of moving on in a real way.

Sometimes an affair is the beginning of the end to a relationship that was already coming apart. Other times, an affair can lead to a breakup, when one partner falls in love with someone else.

If you are considering having an affair, or have had one already, it's important to sort through how you are feeling and what those feelings mean. Some people say it doesn't mean anything, but I think it always means something, even if it means that you and your partner don't agree on the monogamy issue. If you don't know, it might help to ask yourself some questions about the larger context:

- When, where, with whom, and under what circumstances do you want, to have an affair, or did you have an affair?
- What were you thinking and feeling at those times?
- What were you hoping to feel (besides turned on)?
- Would you say that there is anything missing or bothering you about your relationship or yourself? Does the affair offset that somehow?
- What makes the affair or the person attractive to you?
- Is there something you need to learn about yourself or your relationship that will be missing, or was missing, by acting on your feelings?

When an affair is out in the open, both partners need to talk about what it means and how they feel. Some people who've had affairs describe the experience as having no impact on how they feel about their partner. Some experience it as a wake-up call, an indication of how they're feeling in the relationship, pointing to what is missing for them and what they want to see changed. Others see it as a huge mistake, happening at a time when they or their relationship was vulnerable. They wish they had never done it.

Sometimes affairs are a form of abuse, in which case they need to be seen in that light -- someone being abusive needs to take full responsibility and get help.

People whose partner had an affair usually feel confused, hurt, betrayed, and angry. For the relationship to last, their feelings need to be heard and understood by their partner, many times. S/he may have all sorts of questions in order to make sense of what happened. Her/his trust will need to be rebuilt slowly.

While affairs hurt relationships, so do lies and a lack of honesty. Often the biggest hurdle is being honest and facing not only your own feelings, but your partner's. No one wants to feel responsible for someone else's pain, but being able to be there for your partner in her/his pain is vitally important. A relationship can survive an affair; it can even grow stronger. But it takes both partners being gentle and patient (with space for anger), facing their fears and

vulnerabilities, and voicing what is true for both of them.

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Break-ups: How To Survive Them

The loss of a relationship can be incredibly hard - you can feel so much pain. There's not only the grief from losing someone important in your life, but the pain of seeing your hopes and dreams of a future life together disappear as well. Sometimes this is the hardest part - having to totally readjust your view of how you saw your life unfolding in the next 5 to 10 years. Suddenly, you can't see into the future and it's scary.

Feeling Like You're Starting Over

You may feel like you're starting over - that you've lost everything that was important to you and you're not sure what to do anymore. It may be hard for you to imagine your life without your partner - your lives have been so intertwined.

Let yourself know that you will get through this.

Having Difficulty Trusting Again

You may find yourself questioning who you can trust, including your own judgement since you may not have expected the break-up. You may

wonder if you were wrong to have trusted your partner. You may begin to question how real your relationship was because if it was real how could it be over?

Your ability to trust may feel shaky. You probably trusted your partner, and expected your relationship to last. You may feel alone and abandoned, even if you're the one who decided to leave.

While it takes time, you can re-build trust in yourself and others again. Even though this relationship is over that doesn't mean that you were wrong to trust her/him, and even if you were that doesn't mean that you'll make that mistake again. You can learn from this.

Having an Identity Crisis

You may experience an identity crisis, not knowing who you are any more without your partner. Not necessarily because you didn't have your own identity while in the relationship, but that your relationship had become part of that identity.

This too will change and you will feel more secure in yourself again.

Feeling Triggered

Break-ups can hurt immensely and shake us to our very core. They can throw us right back to the feelings we had in our first relationships - the ones we had with our parents.

If as a child, your relationship with your parents were loving and supportive, you may find yourself wanting to be with them, even wanting to be a child again when it felt safer and easier.

If your relationship with your parents was difficult, lacking, or abusive you may feel some of the feelings that you felt with them (even if you weren't aware of them as a child.) You may feel as though you are drowning in grief and feelings of abandonment. If you feel as though you are being punished or that the break-up means that you are unloveable, or unworthy of love, you are probably triggered - those are messages, beliefs or feelings that usually originate in childhood.

At times of loss, it is very common for feelings, beliefs and memories from past hurts, traumas, and losses to come up. Not only are you dealing with the present loss, but your past losses as well. No wonder, it hurts so much! And, there are ways to cope with triggers.

How To Survive The Triggers

It is really important that you try to separate out which of your feelings, beliefs and responses belong to the present situation and which ones belong to the past. This is hard to do when you're feeling overwhelmed but it can also help you to feel less overwhelmed. Separating past and present feelings will help you to attach less of your pain to the break-up and can help you to feel more hopeful about getting over this break-up, because maybe you are not as upset about the break-up as you thought. You're still just as upset but it can be helpful to know that it's not all about the break up, that some is also coming from the past.

When you know that you are triggered (past feelings and issues are coming to the surface) you can find ways to comfort or reassure yourself, or to deal with those issues in other ways. The first step though is to separate the past from the present.

Ways of separating the past from the present include:

- Ask yourself where your feelings are coming from, and notice what you become aware of, including later on in the day.

- Notice whether your feelings are familiar to you - whether you've felt this way before - and if so remind yourself that some of your feelings are probably coming from the past.

- Spend time being aware of the past origins of your feelings if you know, and if that's not too overwhelming for you.

- Let yourself know that even if you don't know where all of your feelings are coming from, it's likely that some of how you are feeling is from the past.

Stages of Grief

You will get through this, even if it doesn't feel like that right now. Grief moves in stages -it has a beginning, middle, and an end phase. It might help to know where you are in the process.

In the beginning, you may feel in shock, denial or feel numb. It may be hard for you to believe what has happened. It may be hard to make sense of it all. You may find yourself expecting to come home to your partner or for her/him to call at a regular time only to discover that's not the case any longer. It may take awhile for you to fully comprehend that the relationship is over.

During this phase many people operate as if the relationship is still on even as they grieve the loss. For example, even though you may be really upset, you may not have fully accepted that the relationship is over. Deep down you may be waiting for her/him to come back. (People do this even after a death, it's

normal.) This period of disbelief or shock is the body's natural protection against pain.

At this stage, many people have trouble remembering things, focusing, and feeling a sense of purpose or direction in their lives - you may feel as though you are drifting through the day. This is a natural initial reaction to loss.

The Second Stage of Grief

The second stage involves feeling fear, anger and depression. This stage often lasts the longest and can be filled with feelings of insecurity, panic, worry, crying, anger, and feelings of depression. Some people don't allow themselves to feel, while others have trouble letting go of how they are feeling. Both are essential - feeling and eventually letting go.

Some people worry that if they let themselves feel that they'll be overcome with emotion and never come out of it - they'll drown in their feelings and not be able to function. Others feel their feelings but can't seem to let go of them even after a lot of time has passed. Either way, it's important to give yourself permission to feel and at some point to let go so that you can move on.

In the beginning, you may think that you will always feel this way, but you won't. Your feelings will pass. You'll discover that the time between down periods increases. Too often with break-ups we don't

feel that we have the right to feel upset much longer than a few weeks when the truth is it usually takes longer. I have found that grief tends to run a cycle of at least one year unless of course the relationship wasn't very important, was short-term, or you were grieving before you actually left her/him. But, if you spent a number of years together, and the person was important to you, even if you're the one doing the breaking up you can still be grieving for approximately one year. Of course with very long term relationships, it can take even longer to feel back on your feet but it is still possible to recover.

The Third Stage of Grief

This is the stage where you begin to accept that the relationship is over, and that you're going to be okay. You realize that you haven't thought about your ex-partner in awhile, and that without realizing it you are moving on. You've gained back some of your zest for life, and are beginning to see a future ahead of you.

Sometimes the process involves a little movement forward and a little back. This is okay and perfectly normal, after all you need to get used to your forward steps and occasionally may need the comfort of what you were feeling before. Try not to be hard on yourself, change is not a linear path. It's full of up's and down's. It's okay to feel good and then feel hurt and angry again, especially if you see her/him in the community or dating someone else.

In the acceptance stage, you've done a lot of thinking about relationship and the break-up and you realize things that you hadn't before. You understand yourself better, and you aren't as angry or hurt. You find yourself laughing more, and feeling hopeful. You begin to notice that you're feeling better and that you are ready to trust again.

Try not to lose faith if you fall back into a funk - each time that you feel better will have an accumulative effect. Grief comes in waves - up and down.

Sometimes letting go just happens after you've let yourself grieve and rage and whatever else you need to do. Other times, people have to deliberately and consciously focus on letting go. It can be too tempting to hold on, and too scary to let go. Saying to yourself that you are letting go of your ex-partner can be helpful. Interrupting yourself when you get stuck thinking or talking about her/him and redirecting your focus onto something else is all part of letting go.

Filling your life with activities that you enjoy - creative, playful, sociable, soulful activities - are all ways to nurture yourself back to health.

Breaking-up can feel unbearably hard and so permanent. Let yourself know that you won't always feel this way and in the meantime let yourself grieve your losses fully. You will feel stronger and lighter for having done so.

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Tips For Enhancing Your Sexual Enjoyment

While we may believe that sex should flow naturally and easily, the reality is often different. There are many things that can interfere with our enjoyment of sex -- society's repressed attitudes about sex; messages we receive from families, religion, schools, and the media; and sexual abuse and assault.

To experience sexual pleasure, you need to stay present with your body and feelings. You need to be able to express yourself and to let go. Finding ways to feel more comfortable with these things will help your sex life.

Making the adjustment from working all day to abruptly having sex with your partner can feel impossible. If you can incorporate loving touch -- hugs, non-sexual caresses, a gentle kiss or other forms of sensual touch -- into your time with your partner, the transition into sex can be a much more pleasurable thing -- one of gradual build up, rather than feeling pressured.

There are many things you can do to make sex more enjoyable and fun. As always, only use what feels comfortable for you:

• **Become more present in your body, and feel your body's sensations.** You can do this by doing body awareness exercises, breathing awareness exercises, meditation, relaxing, walking, dancing, massage, etc. The more present you are overall, the more present you will be during sex.

• **Let your body move the way it wants to.** There is no right or wrong way to move. In allowing yourself to move freely, you will find yourself feeling more pleasure. Your body knows what it wants and enjoys.

• **Pay attention to your breathing while making love.** Learn to stay with or focus on the natural rhythm of your breath. Try letting your breath all the way out of your body. On your out-breath, let out a sound. Practice deep belly breathing.

• **Make love to yourself without rushing or being mechanical.** Discover what is pleasurable to your whole body. Then ask for that when you make love.

• **Focus on the feelings of pleasure in your body while you make love.**

• **Let go of any expectations you have about sex.** Just let yourself (and your partner) be. You don't have to act or be any way. Just be the way that feels most right to you.

• **Accept yourself where you are at — there are no "shoulds".** Pushing yourself to be

where you're not won't get you there any quicker -- and may even make things harder for you.

- **Touch each other in non-sexual ways:**

- Explore each others' bodies. With your partner, spend time touching each other all over except for explicitly sexual areas, only touch each other where you feel comfortable touching or being touched.
- Give and receive slow and luxurious massages with your partner.
- Hug each other, full body to body. Close your eyes and really feel your partner against you. Feel their breath, the movement of their stomach. Smell their hair, their skin.

- **Take the focus off your genitals or an orgasm when you make love;** your whole body is an erogenous zone.

- **Concentrate on the emotional connection you have with your partner when you make love.** Hold eye contact, talk lovingly with each other, talk sex-talk, stroke each others' face and hair — do all the things that help you to feel safe and

grounded with your lover.

- **Take sex slowly, don't rush it.** Just enjoy yourself.

- **Stop making love whenever you need to.** Stop when you feel scared, uncomfortable, spaced out, or numb. Talk about it. Start again if you want to and stop if it happens again. Stopping and starting not only help you to feel safe or in control, it can help you to increase your comfort with different levels of sexual arousal and pleasure.

- **Talk about sex outside the bedroom.** Talk about what you enjoy, want, and fantasize about. Learn to make clear and direct sexual requests.

- **Incorporate anything that helps you to feel good about yourself and your body, or that increases your sensual/sexual feelings, into sex.** Play music, wear comfortable clothes, dim the lighting, light candles, put on perfume, use massage oils, etc.

- **Show your partner what makes you feel good.**

- **Guide your partner's hand to areas of your body and show your partner the way you like to be touched.**

- **Pleasure your own body while your partner holds you or**

touches you elsewhere.

- **Be emotionally and physically affectionate with each other in and outside the bedroom.**

- **Be playful with your partner.**

- **Read erotica together.**

- **Try sex toys on your own and with your partner.**

- **Laugh together.** Sex doesn't have to be serious.

- **Maintain an open and curious approach to sex.** Be willing to try new things -- as far as you're comfortable.

- **Maintain open and honest communication in your relationship.** You'd be surprised at how much this can enhance your pleasure together.

- **Take turns pleasuring each other the way you like to be pleased.**

- **Try not to overreact to unsatisfying sexual experiences.** Try laughing it off.

- **Try to let go of thoughts that interfere**

with your sexual enjoyment. Focus on the present moment.

- **Ask for what you want.** Practice taking up space, asking for what you want, saying how you feel, asserting yourself, saying what feels uncomfortable to you, making sounds, dancing, and moving your body.

- **Be gentle and compassionate with yourself and your lover.** If you're having a hard time with any aspect of sex, the best thing you can do for yourself is to be patient and understanding with where you are. The enjoyment will come.

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