



Letting Go: When and How to End Relationships

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Introduction

Deciding to end a relationship, whether it's personal or professional, is a big decision many clients need to make. When is it the best thing to do? How do you know? Rather than relying purely on "gut feelings," clients need a practical way to honestly examine their own efforts and the likelihood the situation can change. In addition, they need a healthy way of coping with the aftermath of calling it quits. While every situation is unique, this text is designed to provide areas to consider that can help clients make the decision that's best for them.

Educational Objectives

After taking this course, participants will learn how to:

1. Examine the costs and benefits of ending a relationship.
2. Resolve feelings of anger and/or guilt.
3. Apply lessons of the relationship to personal growth.

Let's Get Started!

Increased Energy with Decreased Results

It takes a lot of work and effort to get along with someone you're at odds with all the time, but simply not liking a person is not a good enough reason to call it quits. If you're fighting over personality differences or a lack of communication, you really have to earn your way out. That means exhausting every avenue to clear up misunderstandings, communicating directly and assertively, examining your own contributions to the situation, seeking outside help, and adjusting your expectations. To walk away and feel good about it, you must know you did everything within your power.

If you've made every possible effort and nothing has changed, you may be wondering, when is it enough? If you've reached a point where the energy you're investing into resolving the conflict outweighs what you can reasonably expect in return, it's time to end it. Deciding when the scale tips in favor of quitting resolution efforts will be different for each person. However, there are situations that you should never ignore:

- Threats of physical harm or behavior that you consider to jeopardize your personal safety.
- Invasion of privacy, including computer hacking, identity theft, or tampering with personal items.
- Stealing.
- Bullying, verbal abuse, or intimidating behavior that continues after you've assertively asked it to stop.
- Efforts to blackmail, blacklist, or harm your reputation.

No matter what has caused you to throw in the towel, attempt to end it with class and dignity. You may have mutual friends and acquaintances, so just because you end efforts to resolve this particular conflict doesn't mean you won't be seeing each other again in other circles. Ending it poorly could cause you lasting repercussions. This is not the time to bring up the past, take your last shot, pass judgment, or assign blame. Nothing is going to change at this point, so why bother? You don't have to lie and pretend you like him if you don't, but at the same time, you don't need to create an enemy for life either.

Conflicts can be emotionally draining and stressful. Be careful about making impulsive decisions to behave in a spiteful way just because you think you've nothing to lose. It's a bad idea to start telling the world all the reasons you think the other person is awful. This will only cloud your decision to move on because he'll probably counter attack. Then the conflict hasn't truly ended! You'll be even more exhausted and still fighting. If you're going to end efforts, make a clean break.

Weigh Costs and Benefits

Every decision has consequences that are potentially positive and negative. Taking a realistic look at what those might be will help you decide if now is the time to end the relationship. Look at the facts. Based on time, resources, and available options, is it realistic to assume that you might still find a solution to the conflict? What other areas of your life are suffering because of the situation? Can those areas sustain further efforts to resolve it?

Damage Assessment

There are five areas to explore when weighing the pros and cons of ending a relationship: emotional, physical, financial, relational, and time. Remember, you don't control the other person. The pros and cons you consider must be in the realm of what you control, not assuming or hoping how he will react. Here's a closer look at each area:

- *Emotional.* Conflict can be stressful, and if not managed well can develop into symptoms of depression or anxiety. Chronic stress affects concentration, decision-making, sleep, and eating habits. Determine the emotional costs of continuing your efforts. How would ending the relationship affect your stress level? Would it lead to other stressors? If so, make a plan to handle them.
- *Physical.* Monitor signs of declining health such as mood swings, weight loss or gain, stomach upset, headaches, reliance on drugs or alcohol, and disrupted sleep. Will the long-term effects of poor health outweigh the gains of resolution?
- *Financial.* Tally up what you will gain or lose in career, legal, housing, moving, healthcare, or any other costs associated with your decision. Are you losing money based on the energy or support you're devoting to this relationship? If you're financially dependent, what's your plan for stability?

- *Relational.* How is this conflict affecting your other personal and professional relationships? Have you lost support from important people in your life? Is saving this relationship a necessary link to other connections?
- *Time.* If you weren't spending time dealing with this conflict, what else would you be doing? What are the costs of not giving your attention to these things?

As you can see, there's a lot to consider. Bottom line, ask yourself what's the *worst* thing that could happen in each scenario? Could you live with it? Or, what would you need to do right now so that you could live with it? Choose the lesser of two evils and start preparing yourself to deal with the consequences. As long as you know you could cope, your anxiety will lessen. That doesn't necessarily mean it will be easy or comfortable, but you can survive your decision either way.

Resolve Feelings

Deciding to let go of a conflict doesn't mean you've let go of the feelings it caused. The emotional aftermath can linger to the point that it still affects your life. It's important to spend time identifying and resolving your own feelings to gain some closure and be able to move forward. What feelings do you want to let go of? Write down any feelings currently having a negative impact in your life like: pain, hurt, anger, resentment, sadness, fear, bitterness, guilt, shame, or embarrassment. You can't deal with anything unless you name it. It might take you some time to accurately identify what you're experiencing. The longer the battle, the more likely it is that you will have emotional aftershocks when memories get triggered.

Once you've identified the feelings you want to let go of, you need a plan for addressing them. Time itself does not heal all wounds! It's what you do with the time that matters. Sometimes journaling or talking with a trusted friend can help you process. It can also be helpful to seek professional counseling. A few sessions with a mental health professional that is unrelated to the conflict can provide a neutral perspective. He can help you focus on healing versus allowing you to wallow or complain.

Next, identify the feelings you want to be experiencing or increasing. What do you need to start doing right now in order to feel that way? If the conflict caused you to put aside your personal well-being, then returning to self-care is good start. Exercise, eat better, and practice stress management. Eliminate harmful habits you may have acquired like eating junk food, smoking, drinking, or abuse of prescription medications. You also might need to eliminate toxic people from your life. If conflict turned you into an angry, negative person there's a chance you attracted similar people into your circle because they allowed you to complain. Instead, renew old friendships or seek to connect with more positive people.

Use the time you would have spent worrying about the conflict on investing in learning new skills or hobbies. Professionally, you might want to take a class or start networking more. Above all, once you've resolved your feelings, stop talking about the past. Repeating old stories

or hanging on to anger only hurts you in the end. Apply what you've learned about yourself to create healthier relationships and experiences in the future.

Choosing to Forgive

If you're feeling hurt or angry over the way you were treated, it may seem impossible to think about forgiveness. People often refuse to because it's their way of punishing the other person. But, does he burn with your anger, feel the knot in your stomach, or become distracted with your thoughts of old conversations playing over and over again in your mind? Holding grudges only causes self-inflicted pain.

Forgiveness isn't something the other person earns; it's a choice you make. By choosing to forgive, you're not saying that everything that happened was okay or that you will ever forget. You are merely putting the past behind you in a way that allows you to move forward without emotional baggage. It takes a lot of energy to stay mad. To do so, you must constantly reactivate memories and keep them alive as if they're still happening today. What might you be missing out on in the present by living in the past? As long as you choose to stay mad, you choose to let the other person have power over you.

How to Start Forgiving

Your decision to forgive and move on should not be contingent upon receiving an apology. The other person doesn't have to know of your forgiveness or even be present in your life. When you feel ready, here are the steps to make it easier:

- Recognize that forgiveness is a choice you make for yourself, not the other person. It does not excuse the past or require that you forget.
- Make a list of the things the other person did that you want to let go of or forgive.
- Acknowledge your part. Were you honest? Did you speak up when you needed to? Did you ever antagonize? Own up to your responsibility, and if necessary, forgive yourself too.
- Consider what you gained from the relationship. Even though it was rough, did you learn anything about yourself? How are you stronger?
- Write a letter to the person *that you will not mail*. In your letter, say everything you feel, including acknowledgement of your part in the relationship. Tell him that you forgive him and how this benefits you.
- Create a ceremony in which you will get rid of the letter by burying, burning, or ripping it up. Imagine releasing the person's hold on you as you symbolically destroy what you've put on the paper.

Bitterness is a heavy burden to carry. Forgiving the other person, and yourself, if necessary, gives you your life back. Reward yourself by focusing on your own well-being.

When to Apologize

When you're angry with someone, it's easy to point the finger of blame in the other direction. But once you step back from the situation, you may discover that you're the one who needs to apologize. You're certainly not responsible for 100 percent of the conflict, but neither is the other person. You may not even be responsible for half, but you played a role. Just like forgiveness, being accountable for your actions benefits you in the end. It makes you feel like less of a victim, relieves feelings of guilt (if you had any), and gives you the peace of mind that you did all you could.

A warning though: Do not apologize with the expectation of having it reciprocated. Just because you say you're sorry does not mean he feels the same way. That's okay because this is about you, not him. If you're caught up in the game of waiting until he apologizes before you will, then you have unresolved bitterness. The island of pride and principle is a lonely one! If you recognize how you negatively contributed to the situation and want to be accountable, apologizing can help.

How to Sincerely Apologize

A sincere apology has three components with the first being to own your behavior. Second, acknowledge how your actions impacted others. Finally, state what you will do differently in the future. Here's why each step is critical:

- *Own your behavior.* Recognize what you did or said without defending, minimizing, or justifying your actions. There should be no, "but" in your sentence as in, "I'm sorry I called you names, but..." If you can't fully own your behavior, you're not ready to apologize.
- *Acknowledge the impact of your actions.* This step requires empathy. The only way to truly know how the other person was affected is to ask. If you assume how he felt, your apology could be way off the mark. There's a tendency to rush past this step, but without it, your words are meaningless. Saying sorry isn't enough. After asking you can say, "I understand now that my name calling caused you to feel ashamed and embarrassed."
- *Commit to future change.* You can't change the past, but you can behave differently in the future. If you acknowledge what you did was wrong, then don't repeat it. Say, "In the future, I plan to take a break when I'm angry instead of resorting to mean words."

Acknowledging your part in the breakdown can be very empowering. It allows you to recognize what to do differently in the future so you're less likely to encounter a similar situation. Even if your apology is rejected, you still walk away knowing you did all you could.

Learn the Lesson

Every conflict, resolved or not, is full of life lessons if you're willing to learn them. To call it quits and not reflect on what you learned about yourself in the process would be a waste. A big part of resolving your feelings has to do with what you choose to focus on and take away from this

experience. Gaining perspective can take time. In six months, you may feel very differently about what happened than you do right now. That shows that even though the facts remain the same, their meaning is constantly evolving depending on your perspective.

Gaining Perspective

At the moment, you may not understand why you had a challenging experience or what you could possibly gain from it. You can't predict your future and how this experience might influence it. Some insights are immediate, but others will be a slow reveal. You can start to gain clarity by asking yourself insightful questions. It's helpful to write your responses in a journal and reflect on them over time. Here are questions to ask yourself:

- What did this experience teach me about myself?
- What did I learn about other people?
- How does this compare to other experiences in my life and is there a pattern?
- How am I different today because of what I learned?
- If I could do it over again, what would I have done differently?
- What did I contribute to this conflict?
- What previous life lessons did I ignore that would have prevented this?
- How do I want to use what I've learned to improve my life?
- How can I use what I've learned to improve the lives of others?
- What part of the story do I need to stop repeating?
- What part of the story do I need to talk about more?
- What's my plan for change so this doesn't happen again?

If you dig deep and honestly answer these questions for yourself, you'll come out the other end of this conflict a better person. Keep the focus personal rather than get wrapped in whether the other person has learned lessons. If that's where your head is, you're still holding a grudge. That alone is a valuable lesson to learn about yourself and how you cope. Be prepared for your answers to change over time as you apply lessons and re-evaluate insights. This is a sign of growth and maturity. If you're the same person today as you were before this conflict, you've missed a major opportunity to gain wisdom. But don't worry! If you refuse to learn the lesson this time around, life will present you with another opportunity until you get it right. Learn it now, or learn it later.

Renegotiate Relationships

Ending the struggle to get along with a difficult person is easier if you never have to see him again. But, that's not the reality for many conflicts. They occur with people you will still have to see daily or interact with frequently. So, how do you peacefully co-exist when you still have unresolved conflict? You have to shift your heart and mind to accept your "new normal." Spending time wishing things would go back to the way they were or that the other person would change will only cause you continued disappointment. Adapting to your current reality means doing so without anger but acceptance in order to protect yourself from further damage.

Respectfully Disengage

It's possible to interact with someone without emotionally engaging. But, if you're still secretly waiting for him to "get it," you'll remain hooked. Respectfully disengaging means that you're still polite, communicating when necessary. It's not giving the silent treatment, icy stares, or plotting sabotage because all of those behaviors are symptoms of your unrealistic expectations. What you're agreeing to give up is your personal agenda for him to change. Here's what it looks like:

- You give up all efforts to change the other person.
- You give up all efforts to get the other person to understand your pain.
- Stop complaining about who he is and what he does.
- Define yourself separate from the relationship.

Shifting your expectations isn't something you have to announce. It's a quiet, private decision you make for yourself. Don't confuse respectful disengagement with giving someone free reign to treat you however he wants. There will be consequences for his behavior. But, if every morning you wake up and think that maybe this will be the day he'll change to please you, you're going to get hurt. This is different from ignoring the situation, pretending not to see what's going on. Rather, you're choosing to see everything clearly, yet not be disappointed by it.

By disengaging, you set yourself free by setting him free. He's no longer responsible for fulfilling your needs, nor is he the answer to your problems. You're giving up the roles of monitor, caretaker, problem-fixer, and scorekeeper. There will be no more displays of disappointment because you will no longer require him to be someone that he is not. Yes, this is hard! But, if you still need to work or live with this person, learning to respectfully disengage is necessary for your self-preservation.

Going Forward

Moving forward, it's essential to understand that relationships are important, but they don't define you. Everyone is human and therefore imperfect. Relying on others for recognition, validation, and reward comes at the expense of losing yourself to their opinions. To remedy this, ground yourself in knowledge and application of your internal strengths. These are qualities and skills unique to you that are stable, reliable and predictable. When everything is falling apart, chaotic, or changing, your strengths remain consistent. The only way to lose them is to give them away which can happen when you live to please others.

You'll discover your strengths in interests, hobbies, natural abilities, and competencies. They've been with you all your life, and because they've come easily to you, they tend to get minimized as being, "no big deal." When you're using your strengths, you feel confident and alive! It's energizing to do what you're meant to be doing. These qualities are internal and define you. External measurements are unstable, unreliable, and unpredictable. Basing your self-worth on

relationships, job title, bank account, social status, material items, or appearance is standing on shaky ground. These are all areas in which you have no control and could change in a flash.

This won't be the only conflict you'll ever experience. It will be far easier to cope with the ups and downs of future challenges if you know and value your core strengths. If you're unsure, recall a peak experience in your life when you felt extremely proud. Go ahead and brag! Even if it was a brief moment or long ago, detail exactly what was happening. Most likely you had worked hard, put in some effort, figured something out, or were recognized for something you did and you used your strengths to achieve it. What could you work at for hours that may leave you physically tired but mentally energized? Look for patterns throughout your life when you've succeeded by using these skills.

No matter what conflicts you may experience, never lose sight of your unique strengths. Relationships will come and go, but your strengths remain steady proof of your value. Use them to express your potential, serve others, and help you navigate adversity, especially conflict. If you're doing this, you'll definitely be moving forward and taking the best of you along for the ride!

In Conclusion

Deciding when it's the right time to call it quits in a relationship can be difficult and stressful. It will always be easier to throw in the towel early on, but it's very important to work your way through the process of doing all you can. Every relationship has the potential for rough spots. The goal is to learn how to work through them, not give up. But, if you've truly done all you can and the other person refuses to cooperate, it's possible to end a relationship in a respectful manner.

TEST

Letting Go: When and How to End Relationships

Complete the test below and follow the instructions provided on page 1 to receive your certificate. Remember to include the Payment Method form when you mail the test in. Please complete the information below to serve as the sign in form. Please PRINT clearly.

Name: _____

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Circle the correct answer:

1. It's best to end a relationship if:
 - a) There are differences of opinion.
 - b) Personal safety is at risk.
 - c) Communication is difficult.

2. Areas to consider when deciding whether or not to end a relationship include:
 - a) Emotional, physical, financial, relational, and time.
 - b) Amount of effort compared to results.
 - c) Both A and B.

3. Choosing to forgive means:
 - a) Acknowledging the past and choosing to release emotional ties.
 - b) Letting the other person off the hook.
 - c) Forgetting the past.

4. Sincere apologies require these three steps:
 - a) Blaming, minimizing, and defending.
 - b) Saying you're sorry at least three times.
 - c) Owning behavior, acknowledging impact, and plan for future changes.

5. Acknowledging personal strengths aids emotional healing.
 - a) T
 - b) F

I read and completed the test questions for 1 hour of credit.

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