

EXPLORING BEYOND DIVORCE

Coaching Guide • Topic 02 of 12

Disintegration of a Marriage and Relationship Endings

Understanding how relationships unravel — and what it means for your healing.

About This Topic

Most marriages and serious relationships don't end in a single moment. They unravel gradually — through patterns of disconnection, unresolved conflict, and emotional withdrawal that can span months or even years.

Understanding the stages of disintegration can bring relief. It helps you make sense of what happened, release self-blame, and begin to grieve what was actually lost — not just the marriage, but the relationship you hoped it could be.

The 3 Stages of Disintegration

Marriage disintegration typically moves through three stages. These stages are not linear — relationships often cycle back and forth between them, and they are frequently caused by a failure to successfully handle conflict.

Stage 1: Disillusionment

- Some disillusionment is normal in all relationships
- You feel unhappy because of false illusions about your partner — and yourself
- Attempts to "fix" the relationship begin to feel futile
- The gap between who you thought they were and who they are becomes painful

Stage 2: Erosion

- Couples move away from each other, then come back together — repeatedly
- The Four Communication Enemies enter the relationship:
 - Criticism — attacking your partner's character
 - Contempt — treating your partner with disrespect or disgust
 - Defensiveness — deflecting responsibility, making excuses
 - Stonewalling — withdrawing, shutting down, refusing to engage
- It begins to feel like a matter of "when" and "if" — not "if" and "when"

Stage 3: Detachment

- Ambivalence and uncertainty about the relationship
- Anger and pain — often beneath the surface
- Apathy and disinterest — emotional disconnection sets in
- Anticipation of possibly leaving — the end begins to feel inevitable

Emotions During Disintegration

As a relationship disintegrates, powerful emotions often arise — sometimes before you have even made a decision to leave. These are normal responses to an abnormal amount of loss.

Common Emotions

- Anticipatory grief — grieving the relationship before it has fully ended
- Sadness — mourning what was and what could have been
- Denial — difficulty accepting that it is really happening
- Confusion — uncertainty about what is real, what is right, what comes next
- Relief — which can coexist with grief, and is also completely normal

About Anticipatory Grief

You may have begun grieving your marriage long before it officially ended — while still in the relationship. This is called anticipatory grief, and it is a real and valid form of mourning. If you find yourself wondering why you don't feel more grief now that it's over, this may be part of the reason.

The Four Communication Enemies

Researcher John Gottman identified four communication patterns that are highly predictive of relationship breakdown. Understanding these — in hindsight — can help you process what went wrong without carrying all the blame yourself.

Criticism

Attacking your partner's personality or character rather than addressing a specific behavior. "You always..." or "You never..." are common signals.

Contempt

Treating your partner as inferior — through sarcasm, mockery, eye-rolling, or dismissiveness. Gottman identifies contempt as the single strongest predictor of divorce.

Defensiveness

Responding to concerns with counter-complaints or excuses, rather than taking responsibility. It signals that you don't feel heard — and neither does your partner.

Stonewalling

Withdrawing completely from interaction — shutting down, going silent, leaving the room. Often a sign of emotional flooding, but it leaves conflict unresolved.

Reflection Questions

Take your time with these. They are not about assigning blame — they are about honest self-understanding. Be gentle with yourself.

1. What false illusions did you have about your partner — and what did you discover over time that was different from what you believed?

2. What false illusions might you have projected about yourself — the person you presented yourself to be early in the relationship?

3. Which of the four communication enemies (Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, Stonewalling) showed up most in your relationship? How did they affect you?

4. Can you identify a moment when you first felt the relationship shifting — when something changed, even subtly?

5. What emotions are you carrying right now about how the relationship ended? What feels unresolved?

A Closing Thought

Understanding how your relationship disintegrated is not about reopening old wounds. It is about making sense of your story — so you can set it down and move forward with greater clarity.

"The most beautiful people I've known are those who have known trials, have known struggles, have known loss, and have found their way out of the depths."

— Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

Additional Support Available

1-on-1 Clarity Sessions • Weekly Zoom Support Groups • exploringbeyonddivorce.org