

EXPLORING BEYOND DIVORCE

Coaching Guide • Journey 02 of 12

Disintegration of a Marriage and Relationship Endings

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

About This Journey

Many marriages and serious relationships unravel gradually — through patterns of disconnection, unresolved conflict, and emotional withdrawal. For others, the ending feels sudden. This Journey explores ways to understand what happened and what it means for your healing.

Recognizing patterns of disintegration may help you make sense of your experience and ease self-blame. You may be grieving both the relationship that ended and the future you hoped to share.

The 3 Stages of Disintegration

Disillusionment, erosion, and detachment offer one way to understand how a relationship can unravel. They are not a fixed sequence or a description of every relationship. You may recognize more than one at a time, and conflict is only one of many factors that can contribute to an ending.

Stage 1: Disillusionment

- Expectations and everyday experience may begin to differ
- You may notice differences between your expectations and what you experience with your partner
- Attempts to "fix" the relationship begin to feel futile
- Those differences may bring disappointment or uncertainty

Stage 2: Erosion

- You may move apart and reconnect repeatedly
- Harmful communication patterns may become more frequent:
 - 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
- You may begin to wonder when the relationship will end, rather than whether it will

Stage 3: Detachment

- Ambivalence and uncertainty about the relationship
 - Anger and pain — often beneath the surface
 - Apathy and disinterest — emotional disconnection sets in
 - Thoughts of leaving may become more frequent, even while uncertainty remains
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Emotions During Disintegration

As a relationship unravels, powerful emotions may arise — sometimes before a decision to leave. Your feelings may change from day to day, and you may experience several at once.

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

John Gottman describes four harmful communication patterns as the “Four Horsemen”: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Recognizing these patterns can help you reflect on your experience without assuming that you alone were responsible for the relationship ending.

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 mockery, ridicule, or expressions of disgust. This can undermine respect and connection.

Defensiveness

Responding to a concern by defending yourself or shifting blame rather than considering your part. This can make it harder for either person to feel heard.

Stonewalling

Withdrawing from a conversation and no longer responding, sometimes when feeling overwhelmed. This differs from agreeing to take a break and return to the discussion.

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 hopes or expectations did you bring to the relationship? How did your experience differ over time?

2. Looking back, were there needs or parts of yourself that you found difficult to express? What do you understand about them now?

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 unraveled may help you make sense of your story. You do not have to find every answer before taking a small step toward healing.

"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