

Guy Winch is a clinical psychologist, speaker, and author. He has written several books within his field and has a private practice in Manhattan. His writing has been featured on CNN.com and other media outlets. The *TED* talk is from 2017.

Guy Winch

## How to fix a broken heart

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At some point in our lives, almost every one of us will have our heart broken.

5 My patient Kathy planned her wedding when she was in middle school. She would meet her future husband by age 27, get engaged a year later and get married a year after that. But when Kathy turned 27, she didn't find a husband. She found a lump in her breast. She went through many months of harsh chemotherapy and painful surgeries, and then just as she was ready to jump back into the dating world, she found a lump in her other breast and had to do it all over again. Kathy recovered, though, and she was eager to resume her search for a husband as soon as her eyebrows grew back in. When you're going on first dates in New York City, you need to be able to express a wide range of emotions.

10 Soon afterwards, she met Rich and fell in love. The relationship was everything she hoped it would be. Six months later, after a lovely weekend in New England, Rich made reservations at their favorite romantic restaurant. Kathy knew he was going to propose, and she could barely contain her excitement.

But Rich did not propose to Kathy that night. He broke up with her. As deeply as he cared for Kathy – and he did – he simply wasn't in love.

15 Kathy was shattered. Her heart was truly broken, and she now faced yet another recovery. But five months after the breakup, Kathy still couldn't stop thinking about Rich. Her heart was still very much broken. The question is: Why? Why was this incredibly strong and determined woman unable to marshal the same emotional resources that got her through four years of cancer treatments? Why do so many of us flounder when we're trying to recover from heartbreak? Why do the same coping mechanisms that get us through all kinds of life challenges fail us so miserably when our heart gets broken?

20 In over 20 years of private practice, I have seen people of every age and background face every manner of heartbreak, and what I've learned is this: when your heart is broken, the same instincts you ordinarily rely on will time and again lead you down the wrong path. You simply cannot trust what your mind is telling you.

25 For example, we know from studies of heartbroken people that having a clear understanding of why the relationship ended is really important for our ability to move on. Yet time and again, when we are offered a simple and honest explanation like the one Rich offered Kathy, we reject it. Heartbreak creates such dramatic emotional pain, our mind tells us the cause must be equally dramatic. And that gut instinct is so powerful, it can make even the most reasonable and measured of us come up with mysteries and conspiracy theories where none exist. Kathy became convinced something must have happened during her romantic getaway with Rich that soured him on the relationship, and she became obsessed with figuring out what that was. And so she spent countless hours going through every minute of that weekend in her mind, searching her memory for clues that were not there. Kathy's mind tricked her into initiating this wild goose chase. But what compelled her to commit to it for so many months?

35 Heartbreak is far more insidious than we realize. There is a reason we keep going down one rabbit hole<sup>1</sup>  
after another, even when we know it's going to make us feel worse. Brain studies have shown that the  
withdrawal of romantic love activates the same mechanisms in our brain that get activated when addicts  
are withdrawing from substances like cocaine or opioids. Kathy was going through withdrawal. And since  
she could not have the heroin of actually being with Rich, her unconscious mind chose the methadone of  
40 her memories with him. Her instincts told her she was trying to solve a mystery, but what she was actually  
doing was getting her fix. This is what makes heartbreak so difficult to heal. Addicts know they're addicted.  
They know when they're shooting up<sup>2</sup>. But heartbroken people do not. But you do now. And if your heart is  
broken, you cannot ignore that. You have to recognize that, as compelling as the urge is, with every trip  
down memory lane, every text you send, every second you spend stalking your ex on social media, you are  
just feeding your addiction, deepening your emotional pain and complicating your recovery.

45 Getting over heartbreak is not a journey. It's a fight, and your reason is your strongest weapon. There is no  
breakup explanation that's going to feel satisfying. No rationale can take away the pain you feel. So don't  
search for one, don't wait for one, just accept the one you were offered or make up one yourself and then  
put the question to rest, because you need that closure to resist the addiction. And you need something  
else as well: you have to be willing to let go, to accept that it's over. Otherwise, your mind will feed on your  
50 hope and set you back. Hope can be incredibly destructive when your heart is broken.

Heartbreak is a master manipulator. The ease with which it gets our mind to do the absolute opposite of  
what we need in order to recover is remarkable. One of the most common tendencies we have when our  
heart is broken is to idealize the person who broke it. We spend hours remembering their smile, how great  
they made us feel, that time we hiked up the mountain and made love under the stars. All that does is  
55 make our loss feel more painful. We know that. Yet we still allow our mind to cycle through one greatest hit  
after another, like we were being held hostage by our own passive-aggressive *Spotify* playlist.

Heartbreak will make those thoughts pop into your mind. And so to avoid idealizing, you have to balance  
them out by remembering their frown, not just their smile, how bad they made you feel, the fact that after  
the lovemaking, you got lost coming down the mountain, argued like crazy and didn't speak for two days.  
60 What I tell my patients is to compile an exhaustive list of all the ways the person was wrong for you, all the  
bad qualities, all the pet peeves, and then keep it on your phone.

And once you have your list, you have to use it. When I hear even a hint of idealizing or the faintest whiff of  
nostalgia in a session, I go, "Phone, please."

Your mind will try to tell you they were perfect. But they were not, and neither was the relationship. And if  
65 you want to get over them, you have to remind yourself of that, frequently.

None of us is immune to heartbreak. My patient Miguel was a 56-year-old senior executive in a software  
company. Five years after his wife died, he finally felt ready to start dating again. He soon met Sharon, and  
a whirlwind romance ensued. They introduced each other to their adult children after one month, and they  
moved in together after two. When middle-aged people date, they don't mess around. It's like "Love,  
70 Actually"<sup>3</sup> meets "The Fast and the Furious."<sup>4</sup>

Miguel was happier than he had been in years. But the night before their first anniversary, Sharon left him.  
She had decided to move to the West Coast to be closer to her children, and she didn't want a long-

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<sup>1</sup> *rabbit hole*: (here) a difficult state or situation

<sup>2</sup> *shooting up*: injecting oneself with a narcotic drug

<sup>3</sup> *Love, Actually*: a romantic comedy movie (2003)

<sup>4</sup> *The Fast and the Furious*: an action movie (2001)

75 distance relationship. Miguel was totally blindsided and utterly devastated. He barely functioned at work for many, many months, and he almost lost his job as a result. Another consequence of heartbreak is that feeling alone and in pain can significantly impair our intellectual functioning, especially when performing complex tasks involving logic and reasoning. It temporarily lowers our IQ.

But it wasn't just the intensity of Miguel's grief that confused his employers; it was the duration. Miguel was confused by this as well and really quite embarrassed by it. "What's wrong with me?" he asked me in our session. "What adult spends almost a year getting over a one-year relationship?" Actually, many do.

80 Heartbreak shares all the hallmarks of traditional loss and grief: insomnia, intrusive thoughts, immune system dysfunction. Forty percent of people experience clinically measurable depression. Heartbreak is a complex psychological injury. It impacts us in a multitude of ways. For example, Sharon was both very social and very active. She had dinners at the house every week. She and Miguel went on camping trips with other couples. Although Miguel was not religious, he accompanied Sharon to church every Sunday, where  
85 he was welcomed into the congregation. Miguel didn't just lose his girlfriend; he lost his entire social life, the supportive community of Sharon's church. He lost his identity as a couple. Now, Miguel recognized the breakup had left this huge void in his life, but what he failed to recognize is that it left far more than just one. And that is crucial, not just because it explains why heartbreak could be so devastating, but because it tells us how to heal. To fix your broken heart, you have to identify these voids in your life and fill them, and  
90 I mean all of them. The voids in your identity: you have to reestablish who you are and what your life is about. The voids in your social life, the missing activities, even the empty spaces on the wall where pictures used to hang. But none of that will do any good unless you prevent the mistakes that can set you back, the unnecessary searches for explanations, idealizing your ex instead of focusing on how they were wrong for you, indulging thoughts and behaviors that still give them a starring role in this next chapter of your life  
95 when they shouldn't be an extra.

Getting over heartbreak is hard, but if you refuse to be misled by your mind and you take steps to heal, you can significantly minimize your suffering. And it won't just be you who benefit from that. You'll be more present with your friends, more engaged with your family, not to mention the billions of dollars of compromised productivity in the workplace that could be avoided.

100 So if you know someone who is heartbroken, have compassion, because social support has been found to be important for their recovery. And have patience, because it's going to take them longer to move on than you think it should. And if you're hurting, know this: it's difficult, it is a battle within your own mind, and you have to be diligent to win. But you do have weapons. You can fight. And you will heal.

Thank you.

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