

TURNING “GOOD-BYE” INTO “HELLO”

When people who have been frustrated for years announce that they are ending a relationship, it can prompt their partner to act in desperate ways. Partners may promise to change, beg for another chance, and try to convince spouses to stay. Although it may look as though people who are ardently pursuing have changed, they may actually be continuing a pattern of trying to control by discounting their spouse's desire to separate. It would be far more out of character, and therefore more meaningful, if they were to:¹

- Show understanding of their partner's reasons for wanting to leave.
- Encourage their partner to take all the time needed to make a decision.
- Seek help to make needed changes in themselves, regardless of their partner's plans.

Relationship crises can become opportunities to change destructive interaction patterns by taking some of the following steps:

1. Give your partner enough distance to experience some feelings of loss and think about the real consequences of leaving. Attempts to convince him or her to stay will put the focus on the struggle with you rather than on what it means to be without you.
2. Surprise your partner by agreeing that a decision to separate may be a good thing. It may take some time or even remarriage after a divorce for each person to make needed changes. The less pressure your partner feels, the better your chances.
3. Spend time together on dates if your partner is willing: Use dates for enjoyable activities, not to discuss your relationship or to talk him or her into taking you back.
4. Learn to enjoy yourself without your partner: Do things with people who can give you support or find fulfilling activities. In healthy relationships, people do not count on their partner to make them happy. Instead, they find happiness on their own and share it with their partner as a gift.
5. Do not use your children as an excuse to be with your partner or to spy. Remember, this is time that should be devoted to building your relationship with them.
6. Make casual conversation: Tell your partner what is new in your life, and find out what is going well with him or her.
7. Do not ask your partner what he or she is feeling: Your partner may be genuinely confused and not be able to give an answer. If he or she is starting to enjoy being with you, you will know without asking.
8. Do not repeatedly tell your partner how much you love him or her: This may only add pressure to have emotions he or she does not feel yet. Likewise, do not be overly romantic or giving. Allow your partner room to take the initiative.
9. Do not talk to your partner if you are depressed or argumentative: This will greatly lessen any chances you have of reuniting.
10. Do not bargain: “I’ll change if you do too.” If you decide to make changes, do it for yourself! Later, you can address what you want from your partner as a separate issue.
11. Take a good look at yourself before discussing your relationship: In what way did your partner find you difficult? If you don’t know, it may be because you disputed past comments. If your partner’s objections don’t make sense, talk to people who can help you understand. Be careful not to blame jobs, family, or friends for your problems.

¹ See *Divorce Busting* by Michele Weiner-Davis (Simon & Schuster, 1992) for additional ideas.

12. Admit any mistakes you made or problems you have: Let your partner know your plan for getting help and express gratitude for being pushed to take a long overdue look at yourself.

13. Do not promise to be different: First, see if you really can be different or if you like the changes your partner wants you to make. Being separated is a perfect opportunity to practice being less critical, angry, controlling, and demanding. Eventually, your partner will see changes even if you aren't living together.
14. Starting over means starting over: Take time to build your relationship slowly, without pushing.
15. You may have irreconcilable differences and be better off apart: If, after careful consideration, you do not agree with the changes your partner wants you to make and he or she is still dissatisfied, it is time to end the relationship.
16. If the end is final, go on with your life: Relationships are not about whom you love, but about loving someone well. You can learn from past mistakes.

WHEN YOU ARE THINKING OF LEAVING

Deciding whether or not to end a relationship is just as hard as being left. Although you may be very dissatisfied or wonder if you have any love left, you may be reluctant to really make a break. Tormenting yourself over whether or not to continue the relationship may interfere with looking at the changes you need to make in yourself. Don't count on a new partner to take away any underlying insecurity you might have. Before making the final decision to stay or leave, consider the following:

1. Do not expect yourself to feel love for your partner when you are feeling resentful. These two emotions are almost incompatible.
2. Imagine yourself living with your partner on even days and living apart on odd days: Do not let anyone pressure you into a decision.
3. Discover how you allow yourself to be a victim by talking to friends or a therapist. You will not stop feeling resentful until you stop giving up your power.
4. Identify one change you are going to make in yourself: Make this change consistently until you sense that you are no longer acting like a victim.
5. Make a final decision after making changes in yourself: This will give you a much better sense of what you need to do.
6. If there are problems with physical or substance abuse, a separation may be needed to save the marriage. Often, people stay in such relationships until they have no love left. It is better to recognize problems early and insist on living separately until the other person has sought help. Promises to get help should be ignored until the person takes action and makes significant changes.