

Completing Good-Byes—or Just Escaping Pain?

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Life brings us plenty of good-byes. There's no getting around it. We move. Friends move away. Jobs end. Relationships fall apart. Children grow up and leave home. Loved ones die. We let go of addictions and character defects. Summer ends. Even our favorite jeans eventually wear out.

Most of us avoid good-byes because they hurt, and it is often true. Ending any meaningful relationship hurts emotionally.

So, we look for ways to escape the pain of good-byes.

We believe that if we don't let anyone close, good-byes won't hurt as much. If we amass a huge busy social network, one loss in the crowd will barely be missed. If we get mad, we can pretend to be the one in control. Some of us leave before the other person has a chance to. Some of us cling until the very last possible moment, hoping our loved one will not leave after all. And some of us just avoid the finality by saying "So long!" or "See ya!" instead of the more definitive "Good-bye."

While it may seem natural to avoid pain whenever possible, these protective patterns sometimes accumulate a mountain of unreleased sadness inside that can contribute to depression, addictions, and the unnecessary avoidance of new relationships that could bring us much joy and happiness. Such a mountain of emotion inside keeps us from going on with our life—and it hurts anyway.

Perhaps it is time to learn to complete our good-byes, rather than take those tempting shortcuts that create bigger problems down the road.

Let's consider a bigger picture.

A different viewpoint

"Good-bye" marks the end of something meaningful. Something is over. We say "hello" when we greet someone and begin a conversation or relationship. Then, we say "good-bye" when we part ways again. Hello and good-bye mark the perimeters around an event, relationship, or chapter of our life. The longer version might be "Hello. I'm glad to see you. I choose to spend this time with you." And then when our interaction is over, "Good-bye. I've enjoyed our time together."

Good-bye is a gradual but definite internal shift in perspective from believing that something is ours to recognizing and accepting that it truly is not. It is a process of unattaching, a transition from hanging onto something to letting it have its own life. Letting go means to allow something to melt away, to dissipate from being with ME or about ME to being in that endless other category I call NOT ME.

Good-byes are a normal, natural part of living a flowing, ever-evolving life. They help to keep us up-to-date and present in the here and now. While they often include uncomfortable and even painful feelings, good-byes are not innately bad or harmful. After all, every good-bye is not abandonment.

And when completed, good-byes release us to freely go on with our life.

An invitation

So, I invite each of us to actively participate in the process of completing good-byes. I invite us to go toward each good-bye, rather than away from it, emphasizing our choices along the way. I invite us to discover the peace that completing good-byes brings.

How do we get there? How do we complete a good-bye? We start at the beginning, exactly where we are whenever a good-bye begins to come our way.

The three stages of every good-bye

There are three stages to completing every good-bye:

- Fighting the change: “I won’t let go and you can’t make me!”
- Riding the emotional roller-coaster: “I’m a mess!”
- Opening to the new: “I will be okay.”

Let’s explore these three stages one at a time.

“I won’t let go and you can’t make me!”

This first stage of saying good-bye reveals the toddler in each of us who has tantrums when we don’t get our way and don’t want our life to change. Often afraid of the unknown, we cling to the old, whether it is working or not. We prefer to believe we are in control, so we refuse to change and deny that adapting is even necessary. We try everything we can think of to escape the pain. This is the ferocious “self will run riot” that 12-step programs know so well.

But let’s be gentle with our self. As Elizabeth Kubler-Ross taught us many years ago, good-bye is a process, and this is only the first stage. This is an “I don’t wanna” moment, not a permanent state.

We try everything we can think of to save our marriage, for example. Then later, if a divorce occurs, we can look back and say we tried everything we could think of to avoid it—and it still happened.

In this way, fighting change helps us to realize we are not in control. It helps us “hit bottom” when we need to. It helps us forgive ourselves for not being able to be in control.

It takes a lot to loosen our grip on the old, so we fight until we are ready to surrender, whenever that is. We moan, groan, and complain until accepting reality begins to appear to be the easier softer way.

Our choice in this first stage is whether or not to quit judging what we are letting go of as bad or wrong. It just is. We don't have to like or approve of the change in front of us, but when we quit judging it as bad, we readily drop into our feelings and move on to the second stage.

"I'm a mess!"

The second stage of completing good-byes is the mess—the muck and the mire of the emotional roller-coaster. Life feels chaotic, and it is—for a while. Fearing for our sanity at times and hating the loss of control, we often feel overwhelmed, sad, angry, confused, and/or afraid. We may feel abandoned. We certainly feel powerless. We don't know where we are going or how we will get there. Our life appears to be falling apart. We may feel like a failure, believing we should be able to handle things better.

When we feel our feelings, we sometimes remember other past painful good-byes that we have not yet completed. We might remember a pet dying when we were little, a child leaving home, or the untimely death of a friend. This natural memory parade of flashbacks provides an opportunity to complete earlier unfinished good-byes—sometimes even more opportunities than we believe we want.

But again, let's be gentle with our self. This mess is the normal second stage of any significant transition, and we cannot possibly be in control of a mess. We might as well surrender and let our life be a mess for a while, both inside and outside. It means that we are feeling. It means that we care. Like a butterfly in its cocoon, everything old needs to completely dissolve before we can see the beauty of the new.

Our choice during this second stage is whether or not to let go of our need to control long enough to feel our feelings and process them through.

Feelings simply need to be noticed, experienced, and then released to the outside. We name them, claim them, and let them go. There is no need to blame anyone else for our feelings, not even the person leaving. They are ours.

As we wind our way through this second stage, it is helpful to take just the one next step in front of us. We process through just the one next feeling or pack just the one next box. We make the one next phone call or ask for the one next thing we need. We say the one next thing we need to say or do the one next thing we need to do. It will all get done. Perhaps not perfectly or fast, but it will all get done—if we stay with it.

Sooner or later, as we move through our feelings, we begin to feel a deep and significant shift inside. We begin to notice our increasing willingness to surrender to what is.

“I will be okay.”

The third stage of completing any good-bye is opening to the new. We discover a new peace that takes us beyond the pain and fear of the second stage. We feel like daffodils coming alive after a long cold winter. The heavy sandbags hanging on our shoulders drop away. We begin to flow again. We smile more and may even begin to laugh at our stubbornness. Life looks brighter. We may even begin to feel some excitement about the new that is coming our way. Most importantly, we begin to feel a deep trust that we will be okay after all. We may even hear a long relaxing sigh of relief.

As we notice this shift inside, we sense a boundary line developing between us and what we are letting go that distinguishes what is ME from what is NOT ME. When we understand that our loving feelings are a part of ME that stays with us after we go separate ways, we can let go with love. We don't have to hate the person who is leaving. We don't have to demonize a character defect to let it go. We don't have to forget our children just because they grow up and leave home. We don't have to define our marriage as a mistake just because we divorce. We can now genuinely say both “Thank you” and “Good-bye.”

But letting go doesn't automatically happen all by itself. It requires a deep-level choice whether or not to go on with our life. This is a choice and it is our choice, but it is not a choice that can be rushed or forced. It is not merely an intellectual decision. It involves trusting what lies ahead even when we don't yet know what that will be. Again, we need to be gentle with our self. Acceptance comes when it comes. Moving on is a very good thing, and it comes when we are ready.

It is as if we step over a line to mark the passage. First we face the line, saying and doing whatever we need to say and do. Then we step over the line and turn back to face the line again, as if it is now in the past, and we say “Good-bye.” Then, we turn around again, choosing to walk on, even when we don't know what that next chapter may bring.

Curiosity is often what gently but powerfully lifts us forward into the next chapter of our life. When my mother was dying, I asked her one day if she was scared. She thoughtfully paused a moment and then said, “No, I'm not scared, but I am curious. I wonder what it will be like.” Ever so succinctly, she described this genuine willingness to go on, not knowing what lies ahead.

We can tell we have completed grieving a particular personal good-bye when we think about a past separation and remember that it was painful at the time—perhaps even for a long time afterward, but we no longer feel that pain in the present. We have moved through our feelings. We have processed through the transition and are going on with the next chapter of our life, thus once again living in the present.

A current good-bye in process

As I write this, one of my best friends is moving out of town soon to attend graduate school in another state. Her absence will mean the end of our women's bluegrass band, at least as I have known it. It is a painful good-bye I am living right now.

When my friend told me that she needed to move, my heart sank. I didn't want it to be true, even when I could immediately tell that this choice fit perfectly for her. I felt a battle raging inside. Do I support my friend following her dream—or do I beg her to stay to make my life easier?

When I eventually quit judging her for choosing to fully live her own life rather than stay in “my” band to meet my needs, I rapidly sank into my feelings. I cried. We cried together. I felt a great deal of sadness, for our connection has been a good chapter of my life, and I have felt alive playing in this band. It has indeed been a lot of fun, and I can't yet know if I will find another band I enjoy. I can't yet even know for certain if our friendship will continue long-distance.

I have been remembering—and feeling—other friends who have left my life for one reason or another, my daughter leaving home which left me living alone years ago, another friend in another band who died a few years ago, and my mother dying. I feel these old losses hovering near. I journal about them, too.

I am nearing the end of the second stage of this painful good-bye. My fear seems to have melted. My sadness still comes in waves. I am feeling it, but I am no longer clinging either to my friend or our band. I am doing what I need to do with both and saying all that I need to say. I still don't want her to leave, but the impending change in my life has indeed become real.

She leaves in a couple of weeks now. I know I will go on with my life. I trust that about myself, but I can tell I haven't yet stepped over that line. I am not yet curious about what is next for me, and this tells me that I have not yet fully completed this good-bye. Yes, I have more letting go to do.

Practicing good-bye skills

It is easier, of course, to complete smaller good-byes than big ones, and small good-byes are a good place to practice developing our good-bye skills.

We can start with something as simple as “I choose to throw away this piece of junk mail.” We can say, “I choose to leave work now. Good-bye.” We can sort through one drawer or box at a time, purposefully letting go what no longer fits for us to keep. We can learn to fully and safely process through our feelings, no matter what they are. We can notice little changes in our reality, like the seasons passing or when a child has grown more than we realized. We can practice these steps when we change jobs or a pet dies, rather than wait for the bigger death of a parent.

I encourage all of us to complete each good-bye as it comes our way. This means moving toward the experience, rather than away from it. This means remembering and feeling other good-byes that get triggered along the way. This means recognizing how much a current relationship means to us. This means getting past denial that a good-bye is happening when it is not our choice. This means letting go of our urge to control to accept our current evolving reality. This means being gentle with our self.

And who is that who is letting go? Who is it who is moving on? That is the ME in each of us who will always be okay. That is our deeper sense of self, our essence, that part of us no one

else has the power to destroy. It is who knows there is life after completing a good-bye—our own life.

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