

The Big Kiss-off: Whether it's a lover, a friend or a hairdresser, here's how to make dumping and being dumped less painful

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It's not you, it's me. You'll always be my best friend. No, honey, there isn't anyone else, I swear.

These are just a few of the tired cliches that dating experts Annabel Griffiths, Alison Lawrence and Mary Francis Moore have heard during the 57 times they have been dumped collectively as a group.

Sometimes outrageous, often laugh-out-loud unbelievable, the experiences of these three women -- as well as those of many others they've heard about -- are chronicled in their recent book, *Bittergirl* (Penguin Canada, 2005).

Originally a play the actress/writer trio performed in 1999, *Bittergirl* toured the world, including New York and London, and evolved into a book after a literary agent saw their performance and suggested it had potential for something bigger.

It's a subject many of us can relate to -- and, if you thought it could only happen to you, you're wrong. The Toronto-based trio has been dumped at funerals, weddings, while still in bed with a significant other and sitting in a therapist's office.

They've heard stories of other women being dumped while still in labour -- "I've fallen in love with the woman across the street, that's where I'll be staying while you're in the hospital" -- or of discovering their husband's infidelity through reading a magazine story about it while on vacation.

While there's never a perfect time or place to say, "I don't love you anymore," there is a certain art to dumping someone that can make it less painful for all parties, say the authors.

How would they like to be dumped? "That's a great question, we've never been asked that before," says Moore, who suggests a good start would be to tell your partner the truth early on.

"Tell us that you don't love us anymore, that you don't want to be with us."

Better they hear it from you than from a gossipy neighbour or Internet bulletin board.

"Come over to my place and do it," she says. "Don't do it someplace from where I still have to get home, with the tears pouring down my face while I wait for the subway."

So meeting them on neutral ground -- let's say, their lunch break half an hour before they have to get back to work -- isn't the best option.

On the other hand, trying to soften the blow is like slowing down a train that's still going to run over them -- the only difference being that it will last longer.

Leave the "let's be friends" cliches at home, and forget about using the "I need a break" excuse as a wimpy precursor to what is likely an inevitable breakup.

"When he says he wants a break, it more likely means he wants permission to have sex with other women, and if they're not as good as you, then he'll take you back," Moore cautions. "If he comes back to you, and you still want him back, be careful. Make sure he works to regain your trust and to prove he really wants to be with you."

For those of you on the receiving end of the kiss-off, remember: "Yesterday's heartache is today's one-liner," says Griffiths. "Humour is the first step towards getting over it."

Regardless, getting dumped can still shatter your confidence and self-esteem for a while -- and it doesn't matter if it's by a significant other or by a platonic friend.

Lawrence found that getting dumped by a longtime female friend left her reeling; it was worse than her divorce since, after all, she is still friends with her ex-husband.

These days, the fantasy of having a life-long friendship has replaced the dreams of having a life-long marriage, says Dr. Jan Yager, the Connecticut-based author of *When Friendship Hurts* (Simon & Shuster, 2002).

"People were coming up to me after I would give a talk, and tell me in hushed voices about friendship breakups they were traumatized about," says Yager. "It's far less socially acceptable to get sympathy or understanding when you break up with a friend, because the reaction is usually, 'Oh, it's just a friend.'" "

The reality is the friendship may have been the longest non-family relationship they have had, even more than with any romantic partner.

The most torturous way to end a friendship? With silence. The dumpee doesn't know what's going on, so it keeps haunting them as they try to figure it out. Or the alternative: acting like a bitch, so the other person is forced to break up with you first.

It's also referred to as the "passive-aggressive" method, says chartered psychologist Janet McMahan, who describes it as the most harmful kind of breakup.

"This is for people who don't want to take responsibility, don't want to feel uncomfortable in the other person's hurt," says McMahan. "The person who is being broken up with gets a denial if they ask what is going on, and they are likely to feel like they're just being paranoid and over-sensitive."

Another increasingly popular way of disentangling is with the kiss-off e-mail (replacing the old-fashioned letter) that lists all the negative things the former friend did to the other.

There's also the "become really busy" method that enables you to pull away without confrontation, making the shift from close friend to casual friend.

"There's still interaction between you," says Yager. "But less intimate information is shared, and you answer 'How are you?' with a perfunctory, generalized, 'Everything's fine.' "

But the best way to deal with the situation is akin to the manner in which a parent deals with a misbehaving child, says Yager. "You're not criticizing them -- just their behaviour and the way in which you interact with each other.

"It's best not to say or do anything that's hurtful and can't be undone. That way, you keep the door open to revisit the friendship at a later date. Send a holiday card to test the waters and see if you can reconnect at a better time."

When dealing with a service provider that you wish to break it off with, the same rules of honesty, respect and communication apply.

Maybe your massage therapist's stomach rumbles loudly when giving you the rubdown, or your stylist gives lousy haircuts.

While some women avoid certain street corners, or even entire neighbourhoods, out of fear of running into their former hairdresser, a saner solution exists.

Don't just stop calling. Give them a chance to know what they did wrong and to remedy it if still possible; be honest about what the person isn't providing you with anymore.

"Women look for people they feel comfortable with to be their service providers," says Katherine Gibson, author of *Unclutter Your Life: Transforming Your Physical, Mental and Emotional Space* (Beyond Words Publishing, Inc., 2004). "We look for someone who is good at what they do and also who we like; we then develop a relationship with them quickly."

What we need to be mindful of is developing boundaries.

"Recognize that you're paying for a professional service and the person you are dealing with is part of a business. This isn't a friendship. When we're paying for something, it's about us," says Gibson.

Guilt is a huge factor for women who continue to remain loyal and shortchange themselves in the process. But being able to exercise an attitude of healthy self-interest isn't to be confused with selfishness, says Gibson. "You have a right to move on, to say, 'My needs are changing and I'm not going to feel guilty about it anymore.'"

But if you don't want to explain why, there's no need. Instead, send them a card thanking them for their service the last few years, and leave it at that.