

When Love Breaks Your Heart by Jill Suttie

Heartbreak is inevitable. Romances end, loved ones die, friends let us down. These experiences might be universal, but their impact can still be devastating.

“This is what science journalist Florence Williams discovered after her husband of 25 years unexpectedly asked for a divorce. William found herself in a daze, shocked and miserable, and even ill.

“Physically, I felt like my body had been plugged into a faulty electrical socket,” she writes. “In addition to weight loss, I’d stopped sleeping. I was getting sick: My pancreas wasn’t working right. It was hard to think straight.”

To help understand what was happening to her, she turned away from self-help book advice—like “learn to love yourself first” or “beware of rebound relationships”—and looked to science instead. The result is her book, *Heartbreak*—part memoir, part exploration into the science and practice of healing from heartbreak—which offers hope and guidance to anyone who’s experienced heartbreak themselves.

By studying research, Williams found that heartbreak can be more harmful to our health than people typically think. Ironically, heartbreak does affect the heart, with one study finding that men and women (aged 30–65 years old) are at a significantly increased risk of having a heart attack within the first year after a romantic breakup—25% and 45%, respectively.

Williams also learned from neuroscientist Helen Fisher that parts of the brain linked to addiction and pain light up during heartbreak, and that this pattern is tied to obsessive, erratic behavior—like thinking about the rejecting partner 85% of the time, showing up at an ex’s workplace unexpectedly, and leaving long voicemails full of rage, despair, and passionate love.

People who are dumped go through a protest phase, Fisher told Williams, where dopamine and norepinephrine flood their brains, making them act as if they are in a threatened state. That makes sense, as rejection taps into that part of us that recognizes we need others around us for safety and survival. But, as a heartbreak victim becomes more resigned, dopamine and serotonin levels drop, which can lead to depressive symptoms.

With all of this discouraging news, Williams was determined to figure out how to move through heartbreak more quickly and come out the other side of it. “Why was heartbreak so hard to get over? If I learned the answers, maybe I could speed it up and feel better,”

she writes.

Here are some tips that helped her get through her own heartbreak.

Don't take rejection personally

"When we feel unloved by key people in our lives, we easily assume we are unlovable," writes Williams. While it's important to understand our role in a breakup, we should not feel responsible for our rejection, nor take it as a blanket evaluation of our unworthiness.

It's possible to gain some perspective and remind ourselves of who we are at heart, which helps lessen the sting of rejection. One way is through expressive writing, which has been shown to help people manage painful experiences better and find some peace or meaning from them. Creating a narrative, where you are at the center of the story (and not just a casualty), can help diminish the link between heartbreak and later psychological problems—perhaps because it decreases rumination and gives us a sense of agency.

Reduce stress

As Williams discovered, heartbreak puts you in a hyper-alert state, which wreaks havoc with your brain and body, especially if it becomes chronic. To counteract that, you need to find ways to reduce stress, whether that means trying meditation (which Williams found less than helpful) or taking regular walks in the woods (more up her alley).

â€œOne reason it's good to reduce stress is that it can open you up to other avenues of thinking that might help you through heartache.

"When we calm down, the real healing can happen: the emotional growth, cognitive insights, planning for the future, and the ability to connect with other people in reciprocal, meaningful ways," she writes.

Soothe pain

As the pain of heartbreak affects the same parts of the brain as physical pain, things that reduce physical pain can help. For example, loving touch can be a good thing for reducing pain and has also been shown to reduce the pain of rejection. On the other hand, as Williams found, jumping into bed with someone else post-heartbreak can be a good or bad thing, depending on how it makes you feel about yourself.

One interesting idea Williams tried was applying heat to her body, by taking hot baths, using a hot water bottle in her cold bed at night, and drinking warm beverages. Heat has been found to soothe the pain of loneliness, and it is also associated with "warmer" social interactions.

"One doesn't typically read this in breakup manuals, but now the science is in: Seek heat," she writes.

Turn toward supportive social contact

Loneliness is a hallmark of heartbreak. After all, a major source of companionship has ended, and you can no longer count on that person's presence to provide social connection and care.

On the flip side, research shows that positive social connection reduces stress and improves health—something Williams needed at this very difficult time in her life.

At one point in her book, she describes going on a long river-rafting trip along the Green River, which turns out to be good when she is in the company of others, but not so good when she does a solo trip. Being alone for long stretches on a dangerous river, while challenging and confidence-boosting, also made her hypervigilant and gave her too much time to ruminate.

“I came here to embrace being alone—or at least to face it—but the fact is I liked having other people around,” she says. “Relying at times on a kind someone—or a close group of kind others—has always been our cellular superfuel.”

Practice awe

When we experience awe, we not only feel happier, we also have a sense of ourselves as part of something bigger than us. It can help us be more creative and even improve our immune system. The perspective and creative problem-solving that comes with experiences of awe, argues Williams, can be good for heartache.

One way to find awe is by tuning into beauty. For Williams, a nature enthusiast, that meant spending time in natural settings. Staring at sunsets, looking closely at the intricacies of flowers, or doing a full-on wilderness retreat helped shift her mind away from personal suffering to a more positive, outward focus.

“It’s possible that awe can help us swerve toward becoming more helpful, purposeful, and resilient, or toward any other goal,” she writes.

Find purpose

Helping others, doing meaningful work, creating community—all of these can bring a sense of purpose, which is good for our mental well-being, writes Williams. She talks with researcher Steven Cole, who studies how emotions affect our gene expression. According to him, volunteering is one of the best interventions to prevent the negative effects of loneliness on our genes.

“If we can muster some optimism about the state of the world, and even better, if we feel we are actively contributing to its improvement, our genes will thank us,” writes Williams.

Beyond these, Williams offers many prescriptions for shifting out of heartbreak and trying to forge a new path—including working toward becoming more open to new experiences, even the use of psychedelic drugs. While no one method is foolproof, put together, many of them helped her move through heartbreak better—even if it was never a straight line.

“I’d hoped through this long process, to find the terminus of pain,” she says. “Resolution doesn’t come that easily. Most of the things I’d tried had helped, some hadn’t. The best I could hope for now was distance, perspective, and the passage of time.”