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A Gift for a Lifetime

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BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God. — Psalm 146:5 NKJV

Arriving at college, Karen quickly became my friend. Before long, I learned she had broken off an engagement with someone she met while attending another college. When he later came to school on our campus, I became acquainted with him. I just couldn't imagine her marrying this guy! I recall a conversation when I asked her why she had loved him and agreed to be his wife. Her response almost took my breath away! She said, "Love him? I didn't even like him!"

How does one get to the point of deciding to marry someone they don't even like? Maybe it's because ... breaking up is hard to do. Fortunately, Karen took the necessary step, but others do not. There are reasons it can be so difficult. We have been taught not to hurt people's feelings. We don't want to be alone. We hate the idea of being "single." We are in love with the idea of being in love (more than being in love with the individual). At least, we know what to expect in the current relationship. We are afraid of what people will think. We love their family. We believe we can change our partner, and things will improve. We don't want to mess up the plans already in place, especially when a wedding is in the near future. While engagement is a serious commitment, it is not the same commitment as marriage. It is far better to end a relationship before saying, "I do."

Having an unsettled, nagging sense that something is wrong in the relationship, lacking a general sense of peace and contentment, or not feeling valued for what you think and feel are danger signs in a relationship. Whether one sees the following in their partner or in oneself, further red flags include: possessiveness that takes the form of jealousy or imposed isolation, including a lack of freedom and unrestrained opportunities for friendships with others; other controlling and abusive behaviors; making excuses for attitudes and behaviors — not just to friends and family, but to yourself; insults and hypersensitivity; frequent criticism and defensiveness; dishonesty; major irritation and discomfort regarding personality issues; a lack of shared values and goals; and unsettling differences in spiritual beliefs and practices.



Keep in mind that any intimate relationship will experience conflict. All couples, healthy and otherwise, experience negative feelings, with hurt, anger and even disgust. John Gottman¹ and his colleagues found that what counts is how much negativity there is in relation to positivity. In stable relationships, the ratio of positive to negative during conflict is 5:1,

which means there are five times as many positive interactions than negative ones in stable couples even when they are in conflict. Couples in happy relationships tend to be much more forgiving and understanding of each other, even during conflict. You may ask yourself, "What is the ratio in our relationship?" Ongoing, unresolved conflicts are damaging and dangerous. It is imperative to develop the skills to handle conflict without damaging the relationship.

Mike Tucker shares sound biblical principles and provides solid guidance about dating relationships. He encourages individuals not to put off breaking up until some magical time when it will be easy. Be direct, and state fully that you want to end the relationship and why. Do this in person unless there is fear of possible violence or the person has extreme emotional or mental control over you. He shares, "Don't underestimate the psychological and emotional impact of ending a dating relationship, even if the relationship should be ended and even if you are the one initiating the break-up."²

Susan E. Murray is a professor emerita of behavioral sciences at Andrews University, certified family life educator, and licensed marriage and family therapist.

1. Gottman, John. "Positivity/negativity ratio." Retrieved November 28, 2014, from http://psychology.wikia.com/wiki/Positivity/negativity_ratio.
2. Tucker, Mike. *Laws of Dating: The Irrefutable, Irrevocable, Unalterable...* Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press (2007).