

## CAN YOU STAY FRIENDLY WITH YOUR EX?

Looking at the royal family for an overview, it would appear that there are two hugely differing outcomes of a separation. We can all see Sarah Ferguson and Prince Andrew's rumoured enduring and affectionate connection and we have also seen the apparent face of far less harmonious royal divorces played out in a sadly public manner.

A passionate love affair will not easily reform quickly into a fond friendship. All that strong feeling can't dissipate overnight. We need time to pass in order to create a new relationship without the heat and intensity that used to bind us. This is when it may be worth taking a while to decide exactly why we actually want to stay friends with an ex lover.

If they ended the relationship then perhaps it mitigates feelings of rejection. See? We aren't unlovable after all, they don't want to completely let go of us, and maybe a small bit of the cake is better than total deprivation.

If we ended it, well keeping in touch shows that we aren't that cruel after all. And someone who loves us is still in our life; most of us do like to be adored.

The reality is that uncoupling is usually a painful process. Many people swerve a brutal ending by not ending at all. This avoids the pain of grief, but it's worth considering if this matiness is a way of soothing the pain rather than the healthier option of enduring it; which allows for reflection and acceptance and a capacity to experience change and to understand that this will always also bring loss.

The ending of a love affair is not unlike bereavement and can involve the same incredibly sad and hurtful stages. But for some, there's the added pain of knowing the other is now significant to somebody new. In the age of social media, a clean ending is almost impossible. It can be agonising to see happy snaps of a beloved ex cosying up to their new love and moving on without you. It may be necessary to disconnect from media sites that bring pain, and even to avoid old haunts for a while. These are the tricky bits, but let's also look at the positive reasons that can help twosomes maintain good contact.

Some couples can live comfortably like housemates without sex or passion. If they truly are friends, there may come a time that sex does become important and a new love can bring feelings that don't totally diminish the bond between them. Real friends should be capable of unselfish pleasure and be able to see and enjoy renewed happiness for each other.

Time can settle old scores and bring a fresh perspective to a relationship. Impassioned feelings can fade, and once an ending has been mourned and accepted, then people can begin to see the good in what they once had, and want to preserve that affection. If a person has been truly important in our lives, it's worth remembering the good times and not allowing those happy experiences to melt away or be completely eclipsed by the pain of the end.

Do both partners agree to a new way? If so, clarifying fresh boundaries will be important. This will be another, new kind of couple. Talk about how often you both feel it's appropriate to talk or connect. Maybe daytime meetings are best in the initial period, and away from anywhere that holds memories. How might you cope with seeing each other in new relationships? Is this truly an equal agreement and are you really sure that neither of you might possibly be hanging on in the hope of repair?

Of course the biggest and most powerful reason to stay friends with an ex is if you have children together. You are co-parents for life, so it's imperative to look at your relationship in the most positive way that you can muster. As relationship counsellors who have witnessed many of these couple breakdowns, we are familiar with a scenario in which, initially, the ending will be harder for one half of the couple. It takes sensitive thought and great care to see that the main focus has to be on safeguarding children from any unnecessary fall-out.

Whatever unresolved or negative feelings may surface, especially at outset of what may be a traumatic time, the connection between parents has to be seen to be restrained and polite in order to maintain security and stability for the new arrangements that their children will have to experience.

In time many couples can forge friendships as they are compelled to stay connected through the family links. If we keep anger and grievances within us, this will only block our capacity for the best outcome with new partners.

It takes time and kindness to come out of our previous relationship and to allow both people the freedom to enjoy a future that won't be blocked by negative feelings.

So, here's to conscious decoupling and shaping some new horizons of a different kind of love.

Christina Fraser