

Chapter 10

The Emotional Stages of Separation

David and Sarah

Sarah

“The one thing I’ve noticed about being apart is the incredible range of emotions I experience. While I’m away from David, I often feel lonely and depressed, especially on the weekends. As it comes closer to seeing him again, I get excited and even a little nervous. After we’re together for a few hours, I settle back into the way we were before we had to separate. Then I notice that about a day or so before I have to leave again, I begin to refocus on all the work I have to do back home, and I begin to distance myself emotionally from David.”

David

“I’ve always felt that Sarah has had an easier time with the separation than I have. Partly I think it helped her to be the one who moved away. She has such a new and different life, and her studies keep her busy. I’m the one who’s always around all of the places we used to go for dinner, and the park we used to go for picnics. I think I’m reminded of her more because of that.

“She mentioned that she begins to pull away before she leaves. I’ve noticed that, and it’s a bit of a problem because I tend to want to hold onto her even more tightly as I know she’ll be leaving soon. When she does leave, I’ll admit that I spend a few hours fighting back some anger. I know we both decided that this was the best thing for us, but I still get frustrated. If it becomes too obvious, and she notices that I’m acting upset at her, then the guilt sets in. I’ve heard people use the term ‘emotional rollercoaster,’ and I think that it fits my situation pretty well.”

David and Sarah shared with me their own experiences of the separation. While they differ from one another on a few issues, such as their reactions toward

an impending separation, they share many of the emotions that most people experience while in LDRs. Fortunately, every one of us will travel through our separation with a slightly different emotional reaction. But researchers have discovered that separation evokes some very common patterns of emotions, patterns that I hear over and over when talking with couples in LDRs.

Some of the most detailed research on separation has examined the reactions of puppies temporarily isolated from their mothers.⁵⁸ Although it's difficult to apply conclusions from research done on animals to the emotions described in humans, I've found that the reactions of the pups are strikingly similar to the reactions of many of those in LDRs.

When the researchers removed the mother dog from the kennel, the pups began to protest. They cried and ran around the kennel sometimes for hours and even days. Eventually the pups stopped protesting, but they began to behave as if they were depressed. They slept poorly, they lost their appetites, they stopped playing with toys in the kennel, they lost weight, and they withdrew from other dogs.

Once mom returned, the dogs reacted in a variety of ways. Some dogs immediately leapt up and scrambled back to be close to their mother. They spent the next several hours to days within a few feet of their mother, never venturing out of her sight. Other dogs seemed almost angry. They initially looked excited and then seemed to ignore their mother, staying at some distance for a time. Still other pups showed a compromise between these styles, with an initial excitement and a few hours close by mom's side, and then they resumed their usual frolicking around the kennel.

For most of the pups, when mom began to distance herself as if to leave again, they began to appear anxious, pacing around and beginning to protest. Some pups, subjected to repeated separations, began to distance themselves from mom. They eventually appeared disinterested, and they stopped protesting when mom left. Unfortunately, they also failed to benefit from the guidance that mom had to offer as they matured.

This pattern of protesting the separation, then behaving depressed, then developing some emotional distance, seemed to represent the usual reaction of the pups to separation. Because these reactions occur very early in the lives of the pups, there is good reason to believe that the sequence of emotions may even be programmed to help them survive.⁵⁸ You can imagine how important the mother dog is to the survival of these pups had they been born in the wild. Should the mom begin to wander off, the pups' protests may help keep her and her offspring together where they are safe. However, if the mother leaves despite the cries of the pups, the energy required to keep up such a protest puts the pups in danger because they already have limited food-gathering skills. Thus, a safeguard is built in to end a futile protest.

This safeguard resembles depression. Researchers speculate that the sequence of separation, protest, depression, and detachment may reflect an almost automatic protective reflex in many mammals. How much of this reflex remains in us humans we don't know, but I think it unlikely that we have managed to escape it entirely. More likely, the emotional reactions remain, but we have learned

to change the behavior they evoke. Instead of crying for days after a loved one leaves, we may cry a few minutes, or not at all. But the emotional triggers that cause the pups to cry for days, and us to feel saddened by our partner's departure, remain deeply ingrained.

Switching now to studies of couples in LDRs, researchers have found that in general, the same sequence of reactions occurs: *protest*, *depression*, and *detachment*. The intensity and the expression of each of these vary greatly, of course, but the vast majority of couples describe emotions that roughly fit into this pattern.

Protest

The *protest* phase begins when you first start to focus on the impending separation. The intensity of the emotions that follow can range from mild sorrow to absolute panic. Obviously, those who find themselves closer to the panic side might find LDRs less than ideal. Most of us have learned to accept the need for the separation and actual protests are few and far between. (I'm personally guilty of trying to convince my partner to extend her stay "just another day.")

Some people feel angry with their partner at this stage. One couple, Craig and Molly, were finding that they began to fight with each other as the time to leave approached. Neither could pinpoint why they were irritated at one another, until Molly one day realized that she was just plain angry at Craig for leaving. She knew that the LDR was their best alternative, but she couldn't help being angry. Molly was protesting Craig's departure. It just happened that her way of protesting was more along the lines of yelling at Craig rather than begging him to stay. Neither approach is particularly constructive, but both stem from our natural need to maintain a close connection to someone we care about.

Molly and Craig's case highlights another important point. Because the emotions stem directly from the separation itself, they can cause a great deal of confusion when we try to identify their source. Typically when we're angry, sad, or depressed, we begin to search back, trying to find out why we're feeling this way. Anger in particular seems to call for an explanation. Unfortunately, the best explanation in many situations may be simply that what we're feeling is a normal and natural response to being separated.

Survival Tip # 28

Research has shown us that whenever we are separated from someone we care about, we experience a very normal range of emotions. Anger, guilt, depression, anxiety, and many others stem directly from the separation. Realize that sometimes when you're feeling these emotions they may be caused simply by the separation rather than by something more complex.

Depression

The second stage of separation has traditionally been called depression, a term that I hesitate to use because it means many different things. Clinical psychologists usually use the term to refer to something called *major depression*. This describes a situation in which someone is significantly depressed, to the point that they have difficulty going to work and doing the day-to-day things that we all need to do to survive in today's society. They may be so depressed that they have thoughts of hurting or killing themselves. This degree of depression calls for professional help, either in the form of medication, psychotherapy, or both.

Some of the earliest studies of separation focused on the wives of soldiers fighting in World War II.^{35, 45} These studies found a significant level of major depression, but their situation is much different than that of most modern day LDRs. Our study of LDRs found that separation did not appear to increase the risk of major depression.² So while I'll use the term "depression" to describe this stage of separation, realize that I'm referring to a relatively mild amount of depression, not major depression. If you think that you may have major depression, I urge you not to see it as simply part of the normal reaction to an LDR. Separation does not, by itself, cause that degree of depression. Because major depression has effective treatments, seek professional help if you're in this situation.

If you find that you do feel a little blue or down while you're separated, you're not alone. I reviewed 25 studies of separated relationships, and in every one the participants described feeling slightly depressed while apart.³ In our own study we used a pencil and paper test that is used by therapists to screen for depression,⁵⁹ and we compared people in LDRs to people in geographically close relationships. I've already mentioned that we did not find any difference in the rates of major depression. But we did find that those in LDRs reported more symptoms of mild depression: feeling blue, difficulty sleeping, feeling uninterested in things, difficulty making decisions, and difficulty concentrating. These symptoms weren't severe enough to disrupt their day-to-day functioning (in fact, recall that those in LDRs had *less* difficulty with work than those in geographically closer relationships), but they were significant enough for most people to mention them as a disadvantage of LDRs. What causes these symptoms? Again, just a normal reaction to being separated.

One of the fascinating, but unfortunate, aspects of this mild depression is that it does indeed behave much like a reflex. We found that no matter how long couples had been separated, they still reported the same amount of mild depression. Couples separated for one month, and couples separated for three years, had roughly the same difficulty with feeling down.² Several other researchers have found the same thing.^{27, 35, 36} A large study conducted by the U.S. Army of almost a thousand separated couples also found that more experience with separations did not seem to make these symptoms any easier.⁴⁴ Oddly enough, the puppy study I already mentioned showed the exact same thing.⁵⁸ Older puppies with more separation experience had as much difficulty with being separated as younger puppies.

Like any other reflex, it takes a very long time to change or eliminate the response, if it can be done at all. That is not to say that *dealing* with the emotions doesn't get easier; it does. It means that you need to take control of how you plan on coping with loneliness and depression rather than simply waiting for these feelings to go away with time. (Chapter 11 will discuss some of the best ways of taking control and staying emotionally healthy while separated.)

Survival Tip # 29

Feeling blue while you're apart is a common complaint in LDRs and, unfortunately, it often doesn't get any better with time. Create a plan to help deal with your loneliness and depression early on in your separation.

Detachment

The last stage of separation, *detachment*, sounds unpleasant but represents a worthwhile coping mechanism.⁶⁰

Returning to the puppy studies, remember that protest helps prevent separation when possible. Depression helps prevent the wasting of energy on futile protests, while detachment helps prevent the lack of productivity associated with depression. Some degree of emotional detachment allows the puppies, and us, to continue with our lives while we have to be apart from the ones we care about.

As in the other two stages, the degree to which each of us detaches from our partner varies tremendously. At one extreme are those who barely detach at all. They spend most of their time stuck in the depression stage and sit around obsessing about their partner and the separation. The pain associated with constantly focusing on the distance often leads these LDRs to abandon the distance, either by moving closer or by simply ending the relationship. On the other extreme are those who detach so quickly and completely that they have trouble maintaining any intimacy while apart. When reunited, these people remain emotionally distant in order to avoid the pain of ultimately having to separate once again. While this strategy may help you to avoid pain, it obviously deprives you of the wonderful gifts that intimacy provides. Thus, a healthy level of detachment is one sufficient to propel you past any separation-related depression without being so intense that you lose the ability to connect intimately when you're together.

Another aspect of detachment that Molly and David faced involved what some have called *anticipatory distancing*.^{28, 61} Many couples I spoke with described a situation in which one or both of them would begin to pull away from the other as the time to separate grew near. If this sounds familiar to you, recognize it as a normal way of trying to protect yourself from the pain of separation. Often the more someone cares about their partner, the more they feel the need to begin to pull away, even before the actual "goodbye."

The real difficulty comes when both partners respond to the actual departure in different ways. David preferred to hold on tighter until the very last minute, while Sarah chose to distance herself in advance. Negotiating this issue takes some compromise on the part of both partners.

Anxiety

Many people I spoke with described feeling nervous or anxious during their separation. For some people, the anxiety begins just prior to separation and probably results from the same reflex that leads to the protest stage. Anxiety represents your body's way of saying, "*Do something!*" Whether that something is running from a hungry bear or trying to prevent your loved one from leaving, the type of reaction is similar. It is usually the magnitude of the anxiety that differs.

Other people mostly reported being anxious when their partners were already away. Some were primarily concerned about sexual infidelity or that the relationship itself was disintegrating. This response isn't all that different from the anxiety involved in protesting the separation. Both are concerned with preventing the loss of a loved one. It's helpful to realize that the most important function of anxiety is to warn you that something may be wrong and to prompt you to take action.

Deciding what exactly is "wrong" can be frustrating. Remember that the mere act of separation generates emotions reflexively, and the only thing creating the anxiety may be the separation itself. In other situations the issue may be one of distrust or fear that the relationship will end. In any case, deciding what to do to help diminish the anxiety isn't particularly easy. Some people pay outrageous airline fares to fly back to their partner, simply because their anxiety grows to the point where the only action they can take is to temporarily reunite. Certainly there are situations that necessarily prompt an urgent flight to see your loved one, but because anxiety can be an intrinsic part of separation, this approach can prove quite expensive.

Survival Tip # 30

Anxiety often is a reflex emotion resulting from any separation from a loved one. When you find yourself anxious it may be due simply to this reflex or it may be due to specific thoughts about your relationship. If you can identify any thoughts that are making you fearful, challenge their validity. For example, if you're afraid of the relationship ending remember that LDRs don't breakup any more frequently than geographically close relationships. If you can't find any specific thoughts that are making you anxious, consider some general relaxation techniques such as meditation, breathing exercises, massage, yoga, or exercise.

Guilt

Unfortunately, guilt does play a role in LDRs, and it comes up in many different ways.

First, our society has decided that intimate relationships *should* be geographically close. Because of this, when we choose to try an LDR there can be a definite feeling of guilt associated with the separation. Guilt stems from the concern that we are violating social norms.⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹ Second, if your LDR resulted from one of you having to move away for career reasons, that person may feel guilty and feel as though they had been overly selfish. Guilt can also creep up when you begin to judge yourself over the emotions that are naturally a part of separation.

The most common situations I've seen involve either anger (the protest stage) or crying (the depression stage). As David discussed in the opening quote for this chapter, he commonly finds himself angry with Sarah for no particular reason. His reason is simply that he doesn't want to be apart. Unfortunately, he then judges himself and thinks, "I shouldn't be angry at Sarah," and he begins to feel guilty about feeling angry. Michelle (who, you'll recall, is dating George, deployed with the Navy) sums up the other common situation.

George and Michelle

"When George leaves, it's a big affair. All of the girlfriends and wives come out to the dock, and there's lots of hugging and crying. I always try not to cry. I don't want to ruin our last few minutes together and I don't want George's last image of me to be one of me sobbing my eyes out. But I always cry, and I hate myself for not being able to hold it back."

Michelle's reaction to the separation is completely healthy, natural, and normal. Yet she has decided that crying somehow ruins their experience of being together, and so she floods herself with guilt. In reality, Michelle had never discussed this with George, and when it finally did come up he said that her crying showed him how much she cared. Had she ever been able to hold back the tears when he left, he would have been hurt by what he would have seen as her lack of caring.

Survival Tip # 31

Many people in LDRs experience guilt over the normal and natural emotions that come with separation. Allow yourself to feel anger when you don't want to part and to cry when you're sad. These are normal and healthy feelings.

