

Managing the transition from romantic partner to friend

Romantic relationships can end for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they end in a dramatic manner with a lot of ill-feeling on both sides. Often, however, relationships end because one, or both of you, no longer has strong romantic feelings but would like to remain friends. If remaining friendly with your ex is something that you'd like to do, then some of the tips below may help you avoid some common issues and create and maintain a happy, healthy friendship.

Be honest about how you feel

From the outset it's best to have a frank discussion on what you would like from your relationship in the future so that you are both on the same page. For instance, if you feel there is no chance of resuming an intimate relationship then communicate that very clearly to your ex (who may also want to communicate a similar sentiment). If either of you still has feelings for the other then state what those feelings are. Being anything less than honest can lead to protracted emotional pain and confusion in the future. Perhaps it was a lack of communication or honesty that has contributed to one or both of you wanting to end the relationship. In any case, aim for respectful honesty now.

Be clear on what you expect

Although you might think that you are both on the same page in terms of what 'being friends' means, it may help to spell it out. There's a big difference between being someone's closest confidante to being 'friendly' toward them if or when you bump in to them. Yet both these types of relationships could easily be described as 'being friends'. Ask yourself some questions to help you determine what you want. How much contact would you like to have with your ex? Would you like to see them or speak to them every day or just when you run into each other? Do you still expect them to do favours for you? Will you still be happy to speak to them for a couple of hours every time that they call? There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, but it is important that you both expect or agree to the same things from your friendship.

Give it time

Even though it may seem easy at the outset, adjusting to a change in the status of any relationship can take some time. It may be unreasonable to expect that you can immediately go from being romantically involved to being friends. Your emotions may still be running high or communications may have been heated. Sometimes it can help to have a period in which you don't have any contact in order to allow enough space for you both to get used to the idea that the nature of your relationship has changed.

Avoid Mixed Messages

Friends don't tend to be sexually intimate on a regular, or even semi-regular basis. If you are being sexual with one another then you need to assess how this makes you feel, how they feel and whether what you have is more than just a friendship. Be as honest as you can about the situation with yourself and with them as this can facilitate greater clarity and reduce the chances of future hurt and distress.

Can you be friends with your ex?

Set limits

Don't be afraid to say no to a request and to assert the new boundaries of your friendship. If you have been the one to end the relationship then be aware that you may feel guilty for the hurt and disappointment that you have caused. If you ended the relationship you may be tempted to comfort your ex or make it up to them because of any guilt that you feel. This can give your ex mixed messages. Likewise, if your ex broke up with you then it is important that you set your own limits. Don't become overly reliant on your ex partner for company and support as doing so can make it harder to move on and establish a new romantic relationship – for you and your ex.

Manage your jealousy

Although you may very much wish to be friends, it is normal to experience feelings of jealousy when your old partner becomes involved with someone else, regardless of which one of you initially chose to end the relationship. At this time, it may be difficult to be around the new couple and it may take some time to feel comfortable in their presence. It's always good to be fully conscious of the consequences of your actions. If you choose to communicate your jealousy, either directly or indirectly, then ask yourself what it is you are actually communicating. Do you want your ex to feel guilty? Do you want your ex back? Or do you want them to remain single? Are you in fact trying to say that remaining friends is too difficult? If the answer is yes to any of these questions then it is a good idea to really think about the consequences of your jealousy and to be truthful with both yourself and your ex.

Manage their jealousy

Introducing a new partner to your ex can be especially fraught. While you need to be sensitive to your ex's feelings, you also need to be loyal and respectful to your new partner. It may help to give your ex some prior warning the first time you and your new partner are attending a mutual social activity. During the first few times that you are all together, it may also help to minimize the public displays of affection that you show to your new partner as this may be difficult for your ex to experience. Having said this, the responsibility to behave in a civil and appropriate manner rests with your ex. If they find that they can't do this, then it may be worth assessing whether the friendship that you have can be sustained in the long term. Don't be afraid to speak openly about any inappropriate behaviour that you encounter and to be clear on what you expect from them in the future.

Is it too hard?

If you find that it's too difficult to be friends with your ex then you need to acknowledge this, both to them and to yourself. Sometimes a relationship can be excellent and no less meaningful or important to you because it cannot be continued in one form or another. If you are finding it hard, consider getting some more distance from the situation and this may help your feelings to become more in line with the new status of your relationship.

If you'd like to speak to a UNE counsellor about any of the issues covered in this tip sheet, please call 02 6773 2897 and arrange a face-to-face or telephone session.