

A CLIENT GUIDE FROM JPL COUNSELLING

Understanding Break-ups

Why you can't stop thinking about them, why the checking happens — and three things that actually help.

5 min read

3 practical tools

Includes a worksheet

A break-up is one of the few losses nobody treats as a loss. There's no time off, no card through the door, no ritual — and yet people are often floored by the size of it. This guide explains what's actually happening when a relationship ends and your mind won't let it go, and what tends to help.

In this guide you'll:

- Understand why a break-up hurts more than people expect it to
- Recognise why the checking and re-reading happen — and what keeps them going
- Try three practical tools you can use tonight
- Know when it's time to reach for extra support

Why it hurts this much

"I miss them" usually turns out to be several different losses stacked on top of each other. Naming them separately matters, because they don't all need the same response.

The person

The obvious one — and often not the largest.

The routine

Who you text when something happens. What Sunday looks like. An ordinary week, now with holes in it.

The future

You weren't only with them, you were heading somewhere with them. That version of your life ended too.

The version of you

You were a particular person in that relationship, and that person has nowhere to go now.

The wider circle

Their family. Shared friends. The dog. The flat. The people you lose access to along with them.

Grief without a death is still grief. Part of what makes a break-up so heavy is that nobody treats it as a loss — so you're expected to carry it quietly while getting on with everything else. That doesn't make it smaller. It just makes it lonelier.

How it shows up

Like anxiety and depression, the aftermath of a break-up tends to affect five parts of your experience at once:

Situation

A song, their street, a Sunday evening, a photograph surfacing, or nothing identifiable at all.

Emotions

Grief, anger, shame, longing, relief — often several at once, and often contradicting each other.

Behaviours

Checking their profile. Re-reading old messages. Drafting things you don't send. Looking for meaning in who they followed at 11pm.

Thoughts

"They've moved on." "I wasted years." "I'll always feel like this." Fast, automatic, and very convincing at 11pm.

Physical sensations

Broken sleep, appetite changes, a heaviness in the chest, restlessness that won't settle.

The checking loop

Almost everyone does some version of it, and it isn't a character flaw. It goes round like this:

- 1 You feel the pull. Usually when you're tired, on your own, or it's late.
- 2 You check. For a few seconds it feels better — at least you're doing something.
- 3 You find something, or you find nothing. Either way, it doesn't answer the question you're really asking.
- 4 You feel worse than before. Flatter, or angrier, or further behind than they are.
- 5 Feeling worse makes the pull stronger. So it comes round again, sooner.

The relief is real — it's just very short, and you pay for it afterwards. Two things make this loop especially hard to break.

1. Your brain hates an unfinished story. When something ends without a proper answer — you don't know why, or what they're really thinking — your mind keeps going back to the gap, the way your tongue keeps going back to a missing tooth. Checking feels like it might finally settle it. It never does, because what you actually want is certainty, and certainty isn't on anybody's profile.

2. It works like a fruit machine. If checking gave you nothing at all, every single time, you'd have stopped weeks ago. If it gave you something every time, you'd soon get bored. It's the *maybe* that hooks you — the one post in twenty that might be about you. Fruit machines are built on exactly this, by people who know precisely how well it works. That's what you're up against. It is not a lack of willpower.

Grief comes in waves, not stages. You'll have a decent Tuesday and a terrible Thursday. The waves don't mean you're going backwards — over time they space out and lose height, but they keep arriving for a while, especially around anniversaries, songs and places.

What tends to help

These are things you can start using tonight. In sessions, we'd build on them to work through what's driving it for you specifically.

1. Ride the urge instead of fighting it

Urges behave like waves — they build, they peak, and if you do nothing they come down on their own. Most people never discover this, because they act at the peak and conclude that acting is what ended it.

Next time: **name it, delay it, move.** "This is an urge. I don't have to act on it for ten minutes." Then do something physical — a walk, a shower, washing up. You're not trying to never check again; you're building evidence that the urge is survivable without acting.

2. Catch the thought, not just the feeling

Write the thought down when it arrives, then ask two questions: *what's the actual evidence for this?* and *what would I say to a friend who said it to me?* You're not trying to think positively — you're catching a thought before it becomes a fact.

3. Make a plan for the low days on a good day

A low day is not the time to work out what helps. Decide in advance: two people you'd message, one place you'd go, one thing you'd eat, one thing you would not do. Write it down and put it where you'll find it.

TRY IT NOW · MY PLAN FOR A LOW DAY

Written on a good day, for a bad one. Fill this in, then photograph it and keep it on your phone.

Two people I would message

.....

One place I would go

.....

One thing I would eat

.....

One thing I would **not** do

.....

If it's the middle of the night, I will

.....

How counselling can help

Working through a break-up in sessions means going beyond first aid — looking honestly at what the relationship actually was, what it taught you, what part the patterns played, and what you want next. Not to rush you past it, but so you come out of it as yourself rather than as someone still waiting.

If this sounds like where you are, I'd be glad to help.

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If you were hurt, controlled or frightened in this relationship, written exercises aren't the right kind of help — not because you're beyond help, but because you deserve more than a worksheet. Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline for women: **0808 2000 247**. Respect Men's Advice Line: **0808 8010 327**. Galop, for LGBT+ people: **0800 999 5428**.

If you're struggling to cope, or having thoughts of harming yourself, contact Samaritans on **116 123** (free, 24/7), text **SHOUT** to **85258**, or call **999** in an emergency.

If the person you're grieving died, this isn't the right guide — much of it works on the possibility they might return. Cruse Bereavement Support: **0808 808 1677**.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO GO FURTHER

When You Can't Let Go

A 42-PAGE GUIDED WORKBOOK

This guide is the short version. The workbook takes the same work properly — through what happened, what the relationship actually was, the patterns underneath it, how to grieve it, and what you want next. Written in the order I'd use it with a client.

Fillable PDF and print version • £5.99 • jplcounselling.co.uk/self-help

WORKSHEET · A PAGE TO WRITE IN

Where am I now?

An honest snapshot of today. There's no score to add up — this is just for you.

Tick the column that fits. Come back to this page in a month and compare; most people are surprised by what's shifted.

Over the past week, how often have I...

	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Most of the time
Thought about them when I didn't want to be thinking about them	☐	☐	☐	☐
Checked their social media, or felt a strong pull to	☐	☐	☐	☐
Re-read old messages or looked at photos of us	☐	☐	☐	☐
Started composing a message to them (sent or not)	☐	☐	☐	☐
Looked for hidden meaning in something they said or did	☐	☐	☐	☐
Felt low, flat or empty	☐	☐	☐	☐
Struggled to enjoy things I usually enjoy	☐	☐	☐	☐
Imagined ways we might get back together	☐	☐	☐	☐
Compared myself to other people in their life	☐	☐	☐	☐
Felt like I couldn't cope with this	☐	☐	☐	☐

Two written questions:

Right now, the hardest part of this break-up is... (the evenings? the silence? not knowing why?)

My urge plan. When the urge to check hits, I will first delay for ___ minutes. While I wait, I will... (move out of the room, out of the app, off the sofa)

*This guide offers general information and guided self-reflection.
It is not therapy, and it is not a substitute for it.*