



## Making Friends With Heartbreak

*The best way to survive a broken heart, says SUSAN PIVER, is to be gentle with yourself.*

A FEW MONTHS AFTER my longtime boyfriend and I had broken up, I was charged with conducting a business meeting at a restaurant over lunch. I was pretty sure I was on the road to recovery from the breakup and had been genuinely looking forward to this opportunity to discuss an exciting new project with the other attendees, colleagues I respected and admired. I made a reservation at a favorite restaurant, which we had been to many times before and was always delicious. Yes, I thought, I'm going to be okay. I have a good job. I work with wonderful folks. Our meeting is going to be fun. I am moving on, damn it.

So I drove to the meeting with a lovely feeling of things returning to normal. The seven of us, as I had requested, were seated at the only round table in the restaurant large enough to accommodate a group of that size. We were settling ourselves around the table, waving hello, pulling out papers, and turning off pagers, when everything completely fell apart for me. *The waiter had brought us a basket of jalapeno cheddar-cheese cornbread.*

Oh no. *He* loved jalapeno cheddar cheese cornbread. A mere glimpse of those crumbly, orange-y squares flecked with green blotted out all feelings of normality and, once again, my world turned upside-down. Tears stung the back of my eyeballs and I gruffly pushed back my chair to try to make it to the ladies

room, but not quite in time—the tears had already begun to fall. There's no hope, I thought. Just when I thought I was getting my life back, a piece of bread caused it disintegrate once again.

I sat down in one of the stalls and tried to cry without making any noise, which, as anyone who has attempted this knows, only leads to a bulbous nose and a Mt. Rushmore-sized headache. Somehow I soldiered on and made it through the meeting, and when I got home at the end of the day I was too tired to cry anymore, so I just lay on the couch. For about six hours. When I finally dragged myself to bed, I thought, I'll never get over this. Why? Why do the waves of grief just keep coming? What is happening here and will it ever end?

At this point, I realized that there was very little, maybe nothing I could do to predict, modulate, and manage these unpredictable waves of grief. Trying to fight them would be like trying not to have nightmares by staying awake all night just in case one might arise. It was just too exhausting. I had to accept that these episodes were simply a part of my life for the time being and I was going to have to learn to deal with them instead. But how?

Soon after this, I was attending a talk by a Tibetan Buddhist monk at a local meditation center. He was young, not yet thirty, but already highly respected as a scholar and spiritual adept.

After talking about overcoming obstacles such as depression and anxiety, he was asked about how we can manage our emotions in a world of ever-increasing danger and uncertainty, how to cope with feelings of paralyzing dread about our safety and the future of the planet. The monk said, “When you are filled with fear, anxiety, or other difficult emotions, the first thing you should always do is make friends with them.” Rather than fighting off unpleasant feelings, it is always best to soften, open, and invite them. Fighting wastes valuable time. Allowing them acknowledges the reality of that particular moment and makes

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it easier to address your circumstances intelligently. For example, if you're walking down a dark street trying to pretend you're not afraid, you might miss the valuable signals fear offers you when you tune in and open to it.

And so it is with a broken heart, or any other problem, really. You may have been taught to attack a problem when you encounter it, either by trying to fix it right away or else eradicating it. I'm not suggesting that this is never a good idea, but there is another option which is not often thought of, which is to extend the hand of friendship to your situation. This is an extraordinary thing to do. Making friends with your broken heart, instead of trying to mend it or banish it, begins by simply making room for it to exist. You could even invite it to sit down with you, since you've probably been hating it or trying to ignore it. When grief and disappointment threaten to overwhelm you, instead of bemoaning them, turning away, or shrinking in fear of them, you could feel them. Instead of trying to shout them down, either by talking yourself out of what you're feeling (It's all his fault, anyway), making up a story about what it all means (I always attract the wrong guys), or collapsing on the couch with a bottle of gin (to deaden the pain), invite in your feelings and get to know them.

For example, when you feel grief, where does it manifest in your body? Does it weigh down your chest, close your throat, or make your shoulders ache? How about disappointment or anger or any of the other feelings that have become your companions? If your emotion had a color, what would it be? If your emotion could speak to you (instead of the other way around), what would it say? When you suddenly feel a pang of emotion,

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*For Susan Piver's video-blog on Wisdom of a Broken Heart, go to [www.shambhalasun.com](http://www.shambhalasun.com).*

whether positive or negative, can you go back and pinpoint the exact moment it arose? These are useful questions. Just like getting to know a new friend, the first step is simply to find out about her.

This process is really, really hard, so you need to appreciate yourself and what you are going through. So many problems result from the inability to simply be kind to yourself. Please develop some sympathy for yourself, which is different from self-pity or self-indulgence. Imagine if you knew that your best friend or your child or your mom was going through what you are experiencing—wouldn't your heart ache for her? Wouldn't you feel that if only there were something you could do to help, you would do it? Wouldn't you think about her night and day with kindness, hoping for her to find peace?

Ask yourself honestly: have you felt these things about yourself?

If you have, that is wonderful; you are a great friend. If you haven't, you could try to offer kindness to yourself. You know that the ultimate kindness, the best thing you can do for a friend is simply to be there with her and for her when she's falling apart. Offering advice is not helpful unless you've been asked directly to give it. You know that trying to talk her out of what she's feeling or convince her that it's not a big deal is unkind. Telling her to buck up already is certainly not helpful. What helps more than anything? Simple, unquestioning, ultra-patient companionship. Be by her side. Take her to a movie to get her mind off the situation. Check in with her throughout the day just so she'll know someone is thinking of her. Listen to her patiently, no matter how many times you've heard the story; feel sad with her when she cries and relieved when her spirits begin to rise.

What helps more than anything is to be gentle toward yourself. Gentleness doesn't mean being all "poor baby" or coddling yourself in any way. Real gentleness has way more precision and intelligence than that. Gentleness means simply that you acknowledge and embrace your own experience from moment to moment, without judgment. Without trying to fix it. Without feeling ashamed of it or, if you do feel

ashamed of it, you do not feel ashamed of your shame! In this way, gentleness is actually an advanced form of bravery. You aren't afraid to take on your own suffering, even though you don't know how or when it will end; still, you agree to feel it. Somehow, this acceptance begins to calm things down. On its own timetable, gentleness begins to pacify even the most raging emotions. Gentleness is the spiritual warrior's most powerful weapon.

The best way to cultivate gentleness toward yourself, thought by thought and moment by moment, is through the sitting practice of meditation. In fact, meditation, which is sitting with your self, your thoughts, emotions, and yearnings and simply allowing them to be as they are, *is* the practice of gentleness itself. There is no better teacher than this.

Most likely, there will be only a few times in your life when you'll reach the limit of what you can bear. It may be from falling ill, the death of a parent, or even the loss of a most precious possession, such as your home, and of course it can also be because of a broken heart. To face these extraordinary times, you need to take extraordinary measures. Most of the tactics touted as "extraordinary measures," however, are really ways of escaping the reality of what we must face, our emotions. Certainly drinking, drugging, random sex, and sleeping all the time are ways to avoid emotional pain, but even healthier means, such as positive thought, physical exercise, therapy, or simply forcing yourself to move on, are also methods of stepping *away* from what ails you, rather than toward it. And stepping toward it and going into it do not just mean lying around crying all the time. It means meeting your emotions and relating to them, not as enemies to be conquered, but as wounded friends from the front, needing your loving attention. As Zen teacher and poet John Tarrant says, "Attention is the most basic form of love. Through it we bless and are blessed." ♦

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