

6 Steps to Completing Relationships

Source: Interchange Counseling

Relationships have a natural life cycle: a beginning, a middle, and an end. Along the way, they pass through a series of stages. Some relationships make it to the next stage; some don't. If they last long enough, someone eventually leaves the world altogether. All relationships end.

We live in a culture that pours endless energy into beginning relationships well, but very little into ending them well. It is possible, at the end of a relationship, to inventory the past and resolve everything in need of resolution. This is helpful for at least three reasons. It clears away accumulated clutter from your past, helping you to feel more free. It gives the relationship that's ended the best possible chance of moving forward with ease and positivity. It allows you to get maximum learning from the relationship that's ended. Instead of making the same mistakes over and over in your future relationships, you are free to make new and different mistakes!



Here's a process for completing your relationships with deliberateness and care. I've been using it to help people complete their relationships for the last 15 years. "Completion" in this phrase means completing the past of the relationship. You can do this when a relationship is ending or has ended, to tie up loose ends and resolve stuff that will otherwise hang around making life less enjoyable. You can also do this when your relationship is in full swing! Completing the past in an ongoing relationship clears the way to have a less predictable future. The process works for all kinds of significant relationships, not just romantic partnerships. Completing the past does not imply that you have no future. Rather, it means that the future you do have will not be determined by the past.

There are six steps to the process:

1. Communicating Resentments
2. Apologizing
3. Forgiving
4. Expressing Gratitude
5. Appreciating What You Loved and Will Miss
6. Saying Goodbye

Here's an explanation about how to do the process, an explanation of each of the six steps, and a few notes on how to best pull it off.

How the Process Works

This process is designed to do with a partner, but the partner does not have to be the person you are completing a relationship with. If you can secure the participation of the person you are completing with, this is a valuable process to do together. If you can't, this is still valuable to do on your own. A friend or counselor can stand in for the person you are completing with. They don't need to do any role playing. All they do is listen to you on behalf of the person who can't be there. They also offer some simple responses, such as saying, "thank you" (details below). The text below is written as if two people are speaking to each other. If you are instead doing this with a support person, you are speaking to the person as they exist in your internal world, to the part of them that you have internalized. When someone has died, you can use this process to complete your relationship with them. Either speak to the part of them that lives on within you or to their spirit out in the great beyond.

This is an opportunity to communicate to each other about anything from the past of your relationship that feels unresolved. There are six steps to the process. The last one is optional. Each one can take some time to move through, in particular when it's been a long-term relationship. Taking the time now to be comprehensive can save a lot of suffering later. If you only have limited time available, however, you can time each step so that you have a chance to get through to the end. The few minutes you spend on each step will still get you part way there and have powerful symbolic value. For each step, one partner speaks while the other listens, until the speaker is done. Then the other partner speaks. Alternately, if it seems like a stretch to listen to your partner list off items for a long period, you can go back and forth, taking turns, within each step.

When you are in the middle of a relationship, it is appropriate to try to change your partner to make them more the kind of person you want to be in relationship with. When a relationship ends, you are accepting that no further change will occur. Instead you are completing the relationship. So this process is not about trying to get anyone to grow or shape up or improve their behavior. It's about cleaning up the past to open up a new future, but it is not about designing that future.

1. Communicating Resentments

State anything and everything you might otherwise hold as a resentment about your history together. This includes whatever is upsetting to you about the way the relationship ended or is currently ending. You can include specific historical incidents that you hold onto as well as overall trends in your partner's behavior throughout stretches of the relationship. The idea here is that expressing what you're angry about, letting your partner know what was not okay with you, can often complete it for you. You no longer need to carry the resentment around inside yourself. Your partner has heard it clearly spoken.

"I'm still mad at you for the time we ran into your cousin and you didn't introduce me, as if you were embarrassed about me."

"I resent you for not putting more effort into falling back in love with me. I think you just got resigned, and our relationship deserved better than that."

"I wish you hadn't been so sick these last few years. It's really limited you and me and what we can do together. I realize there's nothing you could have done about it, but I still resent you for it."

"I resent you for not listening to me."

Note that these don't have to be particularly enlightened or self-aware statements. Your resentments may or may not be justified. It doesn't matter. They may reveal your pettiness and tendency to blame others rather than taking responsibility. That doesn't matter either. What matters is that you are speaking them with the intention to clear them up. After your partner expresses each resentment, it can be useful to just say "thank you," thanking them for saying it out loud rather than just holding onto it and silently believing it about you indefinitely into the future. Do not respond in any other way, in particular in your own defense. The idea is just to hear what your partner has to say to you. Really try to take it in, even if it makes you feel bad.



2. Apologizing

After you have both stated your resentments and heard your partner's, it often naturally happens that you want to apologize. Take some time to tell your partner everything you want to apologize for, which may or may not include the things they expressed resentment about. Apologizing is appropriate if you realize, in retrospect, that you wish things had gone differently, or that you had behaved differently (for example, if you know you screwed something up). Apologizing is challenging. Often we don't apologize because we feel so bad about our role in past events. In order to apologize to your partner, you almost have to implicitly forgive yourself, which is not always easy. Keep in mind that you are apologizing for your own sake, about the things YOU need to apologize for. This is the complement to expressing resentments, an opportunity to clear up what was not okay with you about your own behavior.

"I'm sorry that instead of telling you the truth about how I felt, I tried to 'protect your feelings,' but in doing so, left you guessing and confused."

"I'm sorry about the times when we got into arguments and I kept yelling long after I realized that the argument was going nowhere. I don't know how I could have stopped myself, but I wish I had, and I'm sorry that I hurt you."

"I'm sorry I failed to show up on time. I know how important that is to you."



Note that the most effective apologies include an acknowledgment of the negative impact you had on the other person. They do not include justifications for your behavior. Again, don't respond except by thanking them for the apology, even if they do it clumsily. Especially don't try to dismiss what they are saying. The apology is important to them even if it doesn't seem like a big deal to you.

3. Forgiving

Having expressed your resentment and heard your partner's apologies, it is natural to want to forgive them. Forgiveness does not imply that you condone your partner's past bad behavior. Forgiveness comes from having compassion toward them and being able to imagine how, when everything is taken into account, their behavior was somehow constrained to be what it was. In the future, you may expect them to never repeat the behavior, but you are willing to forgive past transgressions, to give up the right to resent them into the future. Forgiving is something you're doing for yourself. You may or may not be forgiving your partner for the things they apologized for. Rather, you are doing this for YOU, to give yourself the opportunity to get complete with everything that happened. Make the list as long as you want, and include "insignificant" details and relationship-sized problems.

"I forgive you for not cooking for me more often, even though you often said you would."

"I forgive you for being so insensitive during the last few months. While I wish you had been more thoughtful about me, I realize that you had your own stresses to manage."

"I wish you hadn't done the things you did, but I understand that you didn't have the inner resources to act any differently, and so I choose to forgive you."



Forgiveness is a deeply spiritual practice. It can be difficult to do before expressing your anger and resentment. Once you've done both, in the proper sequence, you are left much lighter. Thank your partner for each thing they are being gracious enough to forgive you for. These may or may not be things that you think you need to be forgiven for, but they are things your partner has been holding onto, and the expression of forgiveness indicates their intention to stop doing that. That's worth a sincere thank you!

4. Expressing Gratitude

Now that you have made your way through many of the negatives of your past (transgressions, omissions, unfortunate incidents), you will hopefully have cleared some space to recognize the incredible contributions your partner has made to your life. This is a chance to recognize all the ways you are different because of your life with your partner up until now. You may take many of these things for granted, yet it is likely that much of who you are now is a result of what your partner has given to you.

"Thank you for believing in me when I was so insecure about whether I was a good enough parent."

"Thank you for all these years of cuddling night after night. Affection with you has fed me consistently and made me feel deserving of love."

"Thank you for teaching me how to do math in my head!"

"Thank you for forcing me to learn to stand up for myself by acting like such a jerk whenever we got into conflicts. I really have become stronger as a result!"



This step, and the next one, are about recognizing the positives. Expressing these is essential to completing the past, as we are at least as likely to hold back our appreciations as our negative feelings. Instead of thanking your partner for thanking you, offer some equivalent of "you're welcome" or "it was my pleasure."

5. Appreciating What You Loved and Will Miss

Having shared your gratitude for all the ways your partner has changed you, take some time to honor and acknowledge what you loved about them and about who you were together. It is especially important at the end of a relationship not to pretend to yourself that you don't care about what you are losing. In the short term, it can feel easier to justify separating if you devalue your partner or your past. In the long term, this will leave you incomplete. To counteract the pull to devalue your past, share everything you will miss. Be real. This is often where grieving comes into the process, though sometimes having gone through all the preliminary steps makes this last one just a pleasure. It is important to remember that ending does not equal failure. You have had a long, successful relationship that, for whatever reason, is now ending.

"I'll miss telling you about my day when I get home in the evening, and hearing about all the details of yours."

"I loved going on adventures together. We were good together. I'll miss that."

"I'll miss being a part of your family, even if I never fully figured out how to make them my own."

"I've loved getting to look into your beautiful eyes. I'm sad I won't get to see them anymore."



Thank your partner for acknowledging what has been good. You may discover tears accompanying this step. Crying is a natural and helpful part of letting go.

6. Saying Goodbye

Saying goodbye is an optional stage. If you are both clear that you are ending a relationship, you might want to each take a moment to say "Goodbye." The goodbye may be symbolic (that is, not implying you will never see each other again). It is a chance to acknowledge, out loud, in no uncertain terms, that something is ending. The relationship is over, and while it may still be difficult to understand what that means, it is important to face it together, in part in order to allow yourselves to grieve. If you are engaged in this process to complete the past of an ongoing relationship, saying goodbye can mean saying goodbye to the past. You are ending a chapter, choosing to step across a threshold together into a different future.

After this process is over, you may choose to declare the past complete. You will still remember each other, still move forward in the world having been changed by the story you have lived together until this point. The future you have opened up, however, will now be unpredictable. The past is determined. The future is free choice.



Advanced Work

An advanced version of this process involves you taking on both roles. When the other person isn't there, you can occupy their role and communicate all the resentments you imagine they would communicate to you, apologize for everything you imagine, or wish, they would apologize for, etc. Your support person in this case stands in for you so you can speak to yourself from the point of view of your partner. It is a great kindness to yourself to give yourself the apology on someone else's behalf, that you wish they would give you. It requires great generosity on your part to thank yourself for all the things you wish someone else would thank you for. You can even do this in your (ex-)partner's presence. After they go through each step, you can add anything you wish they had said. You can complete the past for both of you.

Whether you do the basic or the advanced version of this process, completing the past, no matter how long it takes, is a highly efficient use of your time. Taking even a few hours now means freeing up space in your psyche that might otherwise be occupied with countless hours of ruminating about your unresolved past later on. So take the time. Your future self deserves it!