

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HEARTBREAK

HOW YOUTH WORKERS CAN
HELP YOUNG PEOPLE COPE
WITH THE END OF
RELATIONSHIPS

I STILL REMEMBER MY FIRST EXPERIENCE OF HEARTBREAK.

Aged 15, after a long tearful phone call with a boy that I'd been seeing for the last eight months (which at the time felt like forever) I hung up and it felt as if my world was ending. It was a different sort of sadness to one I'd never felt before, with the intensity of feeling as if I was actually breaking inside, I couldn't breathe properly, my head was spinning as I struggled to make sense of what had just happened and in that moment all I felt was shock.

In the following days it felt as if the colour drained out of my life and the darkness impacted my friendships, relationships with my family, my school life, haunted my dreams and made me withdraw from my social life. At the time it felt as if no one understood or even cared. I was carrying such a heavy weight of sadness that wouldn't lift- why did they all seem to dismiss this as something silly that I would just get over in a few days.

So now as youth worker - that first break up feels like a lifetime ago, but for the last few years (and with a few more heartbreaks under my belt) it's made me question why we don't talk more about this with young people. It seems such an inevitable pain that most will experience within adolescence, that at the time can feel all consuming, and yet we offer very little or no support or preparation for it. Maybe it's partially down to a flippancy we develop as adults watching the transient coming and going of relationships within our young people and struggle to take these seriously. But maybe it's time to re-think this, and ask how we can provide young people the space and support they need to process how they feel in the wake of a break up.

On top of this, how do we help support those young people who find themselves at the end of a relationship they believe they were led into by God - after praying and feeling it was the right thing to pursue. How do we even begin to offer advice and support when they may be feeling angry or let down by God on top of all the other emotions they are navigating?

To start, let's chat a bit about psychology.

I love psychology. Not just because I study it and work within the field I do - although that's clearly part of it. I initially fell in love with it because it helped me unwrap details about myself that have always puzzled me. Where God healed the hurts of my past, psychology helped me better understand them. It shone a light on behaviours that at the time made no sense but made me realise what was going on and why I felt that way.

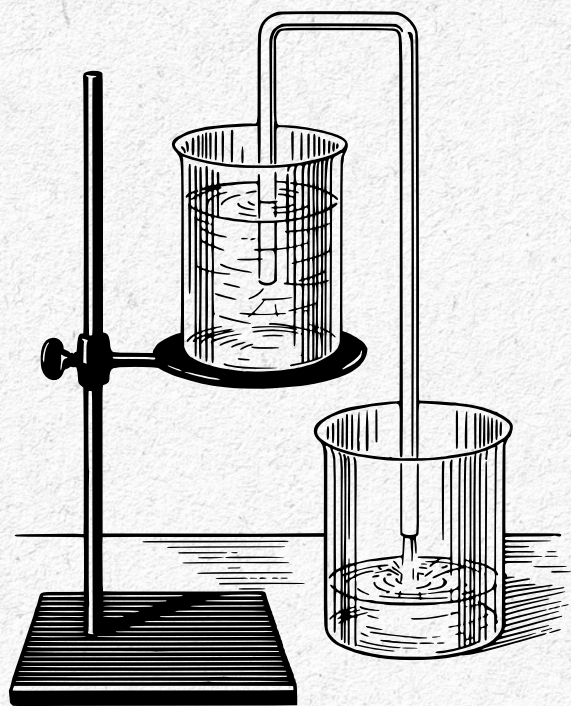
Psychology also helps me better understand the young people I work with as I walk alongside them in a supportive and prayerful role, enabling them to better understand and process the challenges they face. One of the best parts of being a member of the Alumina team at Youthscape is delving into emotions and how our brain works, unmasking what is going on behind the scenes- it's like a curtain gets lifted and suddenly things start making a little more sense.

I feel that the stages of heart break can be a little like that as well, so my mission this Valentine's Day is to encourage you all to look a little closer at the psychology of break ups in order to better support young people- it may not be the most 'romantic' valentine-themed articles but I believe it's an important one.

SO, LET'S GET CHEMICAL

Although we'll be talking more about how to support a young person spiritually in the wake of a break-up later in the article, we're going to start by understanding why break ups make us feel the way they do physically and mentally.

A helpful place to start is looking at the chemical responses that are going on inside our bodies and minds when we fall in love (also learning more about this is a great reminder of how our bodies have been wonderfully designed and that never ceases to amaze me!). So, let me introduce the happy hormones- **serotonin, dopamine and oxytocin** as they have a major role to play in this.



So, when we find someone attractive a chemical called **dopamine** and a related chemical called **norepinephrine** are released into our systems- these are feel-good hormones linked heavily to the reward system in our brains that makes us feel pleasure. A rush of these hormones can make us feel euphoric- this stage of a relationship can feel exhilarating. **Norepinephrine** can also give our bodies a surge of energy and we feel our hearts racing, our palms go sweaty, and our cheeks feel flushed, it also can mean that we struggle to think about anything else than the person we're attracted to.

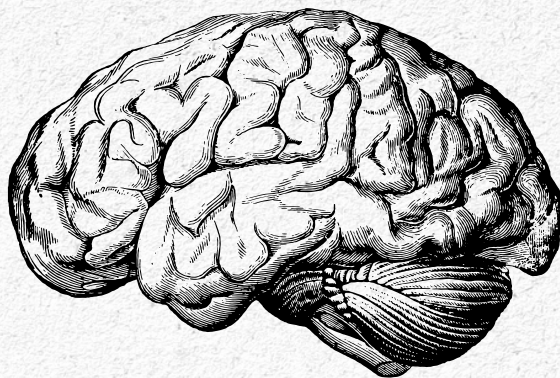
Dopamine is a neurotransmitter directly linked to the brain's reward system which creates pathways in our brain that leaves us searching for another fix of the experience that made us feel so good. As a result, we can start craving time with the person we're attracted to, it consumes our thoughts and makes us obsess about the object of our love. However, it's been discovered that **dopamine** is also the chemical linked to addiction issues and in studies it has been found that the part of our brains that lights up when we are attracted to another person are the same as we experience when we regularly take addictive drugs.

So I could be said that a brain in the early stages of love and attraction is a little similar to that of one in the grip of substance addiction craving more and more of something that is making it feel good (romantic eh?!).

At the same time, it's commonly believed that our **serotonin** levels decrease during the early stages of a relationship that can drive feelings of infatuation and pre-occupying thoughts meaning our newfound love can fill our mind making it hard to focus on other things.

Next come the attachment hormones- **oxytocin and vasopressin**. **Oxytocin** also known as the cuddle hormone helps us to bond with others making us feel warm and safe and is heightened by skin-to-skin contact. In essence it creates our close feelings of connection to others. A release of Oxytocin leaves us feeling calm, safe and content (which is why we often can feel safe in someone's arms). At the same time Vasopressin can make us feel protective over a partner, generating deeper feelings of attachment.

Interestingly it's also believed that the extreme combination of hormones above can actually work together to deactivate the neural pathways to our prefrontal cortex (the part of our brain responsible for weighing things up and making judgements) meaning we often can't see the flaws in our partners during the early stages of relationships!



SO, WHY DOES IT HURT SO MUCH WHEN LOVE GOES WRONG?

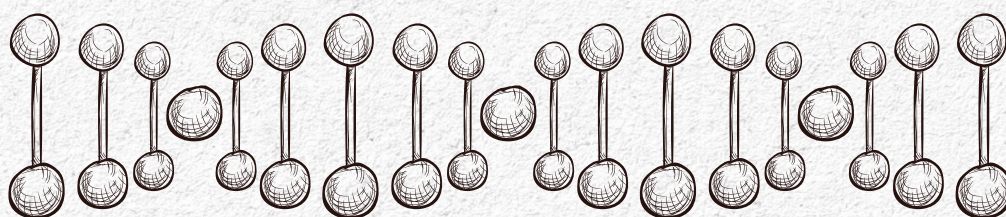
Well, perhaps a good place to start is to go back to what we were saying about the links between attraction and addiction and the similar ways our brains can behave to these.

One of the main reasons we physically feel the way we do is that we are in essence going through withdrawal.

Chemically when a relationship ends suddenly, we initially experience a crash of our dopamine levels, the feelings of euphoria abruptly stop as the object of their attention is gone and our brains are left craving the company of someone we cannot have.

Withdrawal brings with it many physical symptoms as our brains try to signal to our bodies to go and search out what was making it feel so good. Anxiety being one of the main withdrawal symptoms as our brain tries to make sense of things and rebalance itself. In the wake of many breakups, you'll hear people seeking to reconnect with their ex-partner just to relieve the pain they are in and we will often experience dreams of those we have broken up with as our minds try desperately to use the old pathways that brought it pleasure- the brain creating situations where it can get that fix.

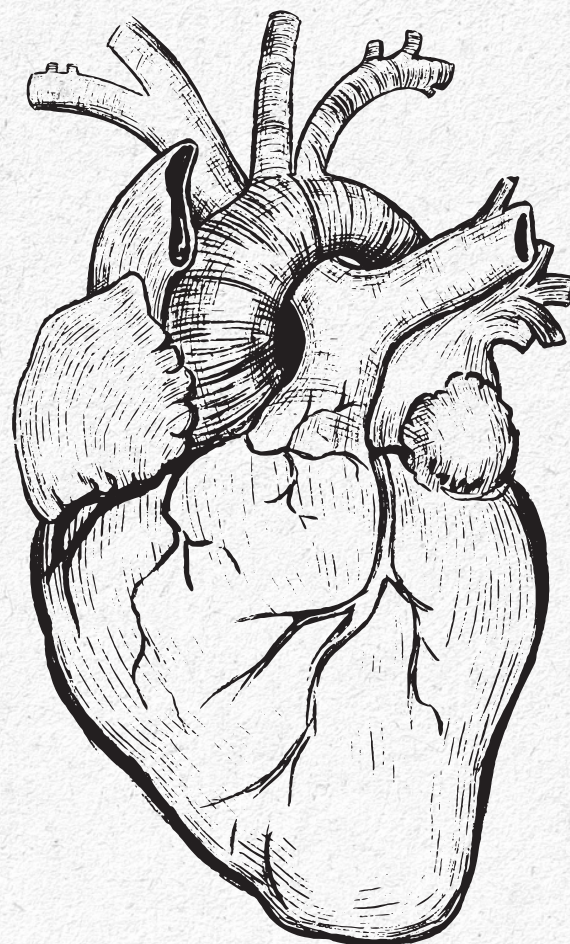
Our sense of self can be left feeling in tatters as our identity was so closely tied up and co-dependent on our partner and our self-esteem and confidence can decrease as we are no longer getting the validation and reassurance, we once had. Our social friendship groups can divide, leaving us feeling isolated and alone as those we thought were close to us try to choose between which 'side' of the break-up to take



FEELING LET DOWN BY GOD

So, on top of all the above, as a Christian teenager, one of the most painful parts of a break-up can be how they feel let down by God by the relationship ending. We can wonder how we misread the signs that this relationship was something God wanted for us after praying so hard that it was the right thing to enter into.

Also, when they've been so dependent on someone else for validation and assurance how do we help them to re-focus on leaning on God for their identity and self-worth? As we move onto ways we can offer practical support, we'll be looking at key ways you can use the stages of loss that a young person may experience, to help them reflect not only on how they feel but also how to reconnect with God in that place.



UNDERSTANDING LOSS AND FINDING WAYS TO SUPPORT A YOUNG PERSON

We can experience feelings of grief over many circumstances- the loss of things that meant so much to us such as pets, relationships, places, and other attachments can hurt us in a similar way the loss of a loved one to death can (for specialist bereavement support services, please see signposting at end of article). But how can understanding the processes we go through around loss, help us better support the young people we work with?

Although generalised, and not always relevant to everyone, there are thought to be various stages that an individual can move through after the loss of a relationship. By understanding a little about these stages, it can help us to think through how we can offer support and space to process and reflect on what has happened.

Denial:

A refusal to accept that things are over and holding onto an unrealistic hope that the relationship will mend.

How to help:

Providing a safe space for a young person to talk can be key in helping them accept the situation. You could help them reflect on the things they have told you and to accept the situation they now find themselves in. Conversations around control can also be helpful at this stage- helping a young person reflect on the areas in their lives they feel they have no control over (ie: other people's feelings) but making them see that there are many that they still do have control over (how they look after themselves at this time). Remind them that God's love is unconditional and even if they feel worthless right now they will never lose their value in God's eyes- remind them how much they are loved and offer to pray for them even if they are struggling to pray themselves about the situation.

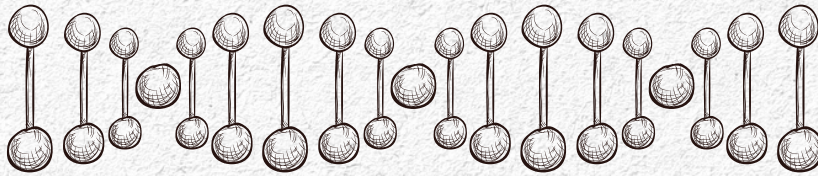
Bargaining:

Trying to do all you can to fix the relationship even if there's no hope of reconciliation. Going to extreme bargaining lengths to win a partner back.

How to help:

It can be helpful to encourage the young person to try and reflect a bit on what the relationship was 'actually' like and practice some critical thinking. It's very easy to see things through rose tinted glasses but is what you're suggesting really going to fix things or is it not a realistic option. While reflecting on the relationship, encourage the young person to think honestly about how their relationship with God was impacted by being with this person- did it help them grow or did it take them away from time with God? In what ways did the relationship effect their faith journey? Was it a healthy place for them to be part of spiritually?





Anger

Being filled with anger towards the person who has hurt you. How dare they treat you like that and make you feel this way.

How to help:

Help the young person find ways to express this anger rather than suppress it. Let them know that it's okay to feel anger but that they can channel it into healthy outlets that will make them feel better in the long run and realise how they feel. Paint, journal, exercise, listen to loud music- whatever it takes to help you channel this emotion into something that won't harm you or others.

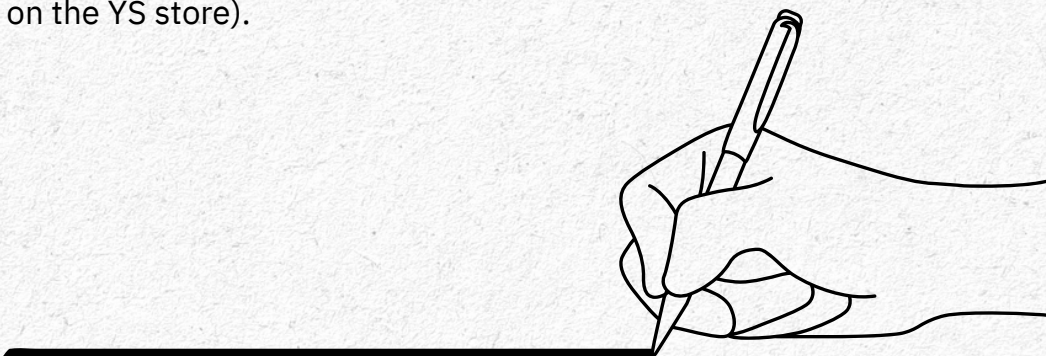
Encourage the young person that they can speak honestly to God and talk to Him about how they are feeling, even if they are feeling angry at Him right now- He can take it (!) and its important honest prayerful conversation keeps going- essentially don't hide away from God.

Depression

Missing the person and the relationship and potentially experiencing a range of other emotions like shame, guilt, and physical symptoms like loss of sleep or appetite. Depression is thought of as a quiet stage of grief as many people will withdraw as they realise the relationship is over.

How to help:

Let them know that it's important for them to allow themselves to feel the sadness rather than just bury it. Do what they need to do to express that be it cry, write or just withdraw from large groups of people for the time being. However also encourage them that this is a good time for them to start trying to reconnect with themselves and the activities and things that make them, them. Perhaps hobbies or interests that they dropped during the relationships. Maybe this is time to reconnect with faith or other Christian friends if they have drifted away. There's also some great faith-based journals out there than can be used as a reflective tool to reflect and look after your wellbeing (check out the Headstrong journal on the YS store).



Acceptance

Finally, you arrive at acceptance, and this is the stage where you realise that the relationship is over and will not be getting back together. You still feel sad potentially but accept the fact that you need to move on with your life.

How to help:

Although this is a great stage for a young person to reach, it's worthwhile to encourage them at this point not to launch straight into another relationship but maybe take some time out to spend time with friends or just in their own company. Taking some proper time to heal from everything can help you reflect on the things that are important to you. Ultimately remind them that whatever is next for them in terms of future relationships, that they can trust God and that he has a loving plan for their future and will continue to bring new adventures and new people into their life- Proverbs 3:5

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding”

So, there we have it, a quick overview of the psychology behind break-ups along with a few suggestions around how to offer support. I hope that this helps you to better understand young people as they walk this path and gives you a few key ideas around how you can help.

For Bereavement support please visit:

<https://www.ataloss.org>

