

# How to Break Up

By: Stacey Tuttle

*Once in a while you hear a message that is so powerful, poignant and significant, you never forget it.*

Growing up in church, a Christian school, Christian summer camps... by the time I reached High School, I'd heard so many talks on "dating", I was sick of dating before I'd even had my first date. I knew all the major points – no sex before marriage...choose a Godly guy...set wise boundaries... groups are good...when you date, no "crossing countries" – you know, no "Russian" hands, "Roman" fingers or "French" kissing....the list of good advice was both endless and repetitive. So, when my youth pastor, Jerrell Williams, told me he was going to do a series on dating, I was a little less than enthused. I mean, wasn't there more to the Christian life than dating? It was like having that annoying "Fried Ham" song we used to sing at camp stuck in my head: "Same song, different verse. Youth group accent, whole lot worse!" – only it was about "Christian" dating and not fried ham. Personally, I think I liked fried ham better. The "accents" were funnier – you got to make up crazy ways or accents in which to sing the song, such as opera, teacher, British, or football accent... and laugh a lot! Maybe my youth pastor could sing the talk in opera voice to at least make it a *little* more interesting and memorable? But he didn't. He did something much better – he took a new angle, one I'd never heard before (or since for that matter). Not only that, but he did it with an illustration that was so powerful that, nearly 20 years later, I find it just as relevant and unforgettable. He taught us how to break up.

Breaking up. It's something almost everyone will have to go through at some point in time, usually on multiple occasions. If it's something that is nearly an inescapable right of passage, then why is it that no one talks about how to do it? Maybe you get some advice in the middle of the crisis from friends and family – but often only after much of the damage is already done. Wouldn't it be better to give people some tools to handle it before the situation occurs? We're usually given some ground rules for dating before we start, but where are the ground rules for breaking up before we end?

*Disclaimer: While many of these principles have beneficial applications to various types and stages of relationships – this is intended very specifically for dating relationships. If you are married, the rules change. If your marriage is struggling, please seek Christian counsel and work toward reconciliation.*

"Breaking up," he began, "is like having surgery..." Imagine your appendix – at one time it was a good, healthy part of your life, but for whatever reason, an appendix doesn't always remain that way. When an appendix goes bad, it becomes toxic, lethal even. It has to be removed... and there is usually little time for delay – the longer you wait, the more toxic and dangerous it is to your body's health. **So, Lesson #1 – When a relationship becomes unhealthy, deal with it quickly, don't delay.**

Once the decision is made to remove the appendix, the method of removal is critical. A surgeon chooses a finely sharpened scalpel so he can make a swift incision with minimal cuts. What kind of

surgeon would he be if he chose a butter knife instead of a scalpel? Would it be any kindness to use the one which cuts less? Would it really spare any pain? Of course the sharper knife will hurt, but ultimately not as much as a dull knife would! Not only does the scalpel hurt less overall, but the scarring will be less as well. The scarring from attempting an operation with a butter knife would be horrific! While we would consider this the most basic common sense in a physical surgery, we somehow miss the connection to relationships and surgery of the heart. We don't want to be "sharp" with anyone; we don't want to hurt them. We fail to realize that even in breaking up we can prove ourselves a friend by being willing to wound as a surgeon wounds, to promote overall health. **Lesson #2 – Trying to keep from hurting anyone usually does worse damage and ultimately hurts more. Sometimes you have to hurt to heal.** Prov. 27:6, "Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses."

Additionally, you don't want a surgeon to operate on the wrong thing! If it's the appendix that's the problem, then *that's* where you need the surgeon to operate. The good doctor won't save you any embarrassment by operating on your toe, or even on himself instead. The same is true for breakups. Just as there is a reason for the surgery, there is also reason for the breakup – however, it's quite common for the person breaking up to subtly lie about that reason, thinking it will save the person being broken up with some amount of pain. Some popular forms of this are "God doesn't want us together anymore" (How did God tell you that? Did you get the writing on the wall? Certainly God can and does speak to his people, but be very careful about putting words in God's mouth. If a difference in religion is the problem, then call it that. If you put the blame on God then they are likely to resent God!), "It's not you, it's me" (the truth is, if certain things about that person were different, you would be interested!), "I'm just not ready for a relationship right now" (the truth is you're not ready for a relationship with THAT person...but if the person of your dreams came along you might think differently of the timing). As my youth group leader said, "Lying to prevent pain is still lying (and it really doesn't prevent pain)." We are often too concerned with hurting someone's feelings and not concerned enough with their overall well-being. **Lesson #3 –Be truthful and accurate about why you are breaking up.**

Honesty and accuracy in a surgeon are critical, but full disclosure may not always be required. A surgeon may not always explain every in depth reason for a required operation if a patient isn't in a place to understand all the information at that time. The key thing is to have the other person's well-being and growth as the motivation behind all communication. Reasons for breakups fall into one of three categories: things the other person *can't* change, things the other person *shouldn't* change, and things the other person *can* and *should* change. If you are breaking up because of something that can't or shouldn't be changed, then be clear about that. Help them see that while it may mean you aren't a great fit for each other, it doesn't mean either of you needs to change who you are for the good of your future relationships. Prayerfully consider: will communicating your rationale for breaking up help set the other person free – free to be who God made them to be, and free to find another relationship; or will it enslave them to think that there is something wrong with who they were made to be? The danger of not communicating your rationale is that uncertainty, doubt and suspicion can plague a person far worse than the simple truth. However, communicating your reason(s) can lead a person to think there is an opening for reconciliation if they just change or fix the "problem" – whether or not it is something they ought to change. If it is something that can and ought to be changed, you may be able to lovingly

reveal it to them if they are mature and wise enough to receive it. Whatever your reasons or level of disclosure, it is important that you communicate without leaving the door open for future reconciliation. (This is crucial if either of you are to be free. You haven't set them truly free to move on if they are thinking they can change something and be reunited with you. You aren't free from the person you broke up with if they keep trying to impress upon you that they have changed and are ready to reenter the relationship.) Believe it or not, even your break up can be a time of tremendous encouragement, love and even healing if done properly. **Rule #4: Prayerfully consider how much communication is best for the other person.** Phil 2:3-4 "Do nothing out of selfishness or vain conceit, but in humility, consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

A patient may not want to hear a doctor say they need surgery (especially if they haven't yet felt the pain that something was wrong), however, imagine the added horror if the doctor took the liberty to operate on countless other body parts while he was in there...body parts that were perfectly healthy nonetheless. It is unthinkable. But isn't this just what happens when you break up? You tell the person, this isn't working because of x, y and z reasons. The person gets hurt and says something back which offends you. You then decide to unleash all sorts of accusations and criticisms – stinging words which aren't at all the real issue. You have just opened this person up, started a necessary operation on the core issue and then started mutilating other perfectly healthy parts of this person. **Lesson #5 – Know what your key reasons are for breaking up and stick to them – don't get sidetracked.** Eph 4:29 "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

In surgery, you want the surgeon to be quick about it. You certainly wouldn't want him to cut a little every day, steadily plugging along until, a month or two later, he finally reaches the appendix, would you? No thank you! But this is one of the most common horrors in breakups. Rather than simply breaking up – whoever wants out begins to slowly pull away in a million different ways – they become distant, they get busier and busier, they attack the other person verbally, they hint at being dissatisfied in the relationship.... The person left behind is wondering all the while, "What is going on? Is it me? Am I imagining this? Are they just going through a phase or a hard time?" The doubts are horrible, painful and destructive (this is the voice of experience speaking). This is one of the most selfish things a person can put another through. The breaker-upper is basically being cowardly. They are more concerned with their own level of comfort than what is best for the other person. They hope that if they fade out of the relationship, eventually the break-up-ee will finally get fed up and become the breaker-upper, giving the original breaker-upper a convenient way out of having to do the breaking up. One of the biggest problems with this is that the person begins to think that this daily cutting, this daily pushing away and little by little disappearing in the relationship is the norm and is somehow healthy. If a doctor did this to a patient, cut just a little every day, the scarring would be horrific. The same is true in relationships. **Lesson #6 – When you aren't "in" the relationship anymore, get out – and be quick about it. Don't drag out your break up.**

Once the surgeon operates and cuts out that appendix, it would be unheard of for the doctor to only take it half way out. Can you imagine? A person walking around with their nasty, rotten appendix, the

one that was no longer a healthy, viable part of their life, now hanging half-way in, half-way out of their body, neatly sewn in place like that? If it wasn't healthy enough to be *fully* in the body, then it isn't healthy enough to be *half-way* in the body. But we do it all the time in relationships. People date, realize a relationship isn't best for whatever reason, and then rather than simply breaking up, they find some way to keep each other in their lives on a more limited scale – most commonly they agree to “just be friends.” This sounds like a great and benevolent thing, but the truth is: It's manipulative for the person who hopes the friendship will lead back to a relationship. It's selfish for the person who wants the freedom to look around but doesn't want to relinquish the benefit of this person's presence in their life until they have secured a better alternative. It's confusing for the person who still has deeper feelings. And it's naïve for someone to think that both people can simply go back to being friends immediately after having shared such a deeper intimacy. When you break up – do each other a favor and agree to not be friends, for a while. That is the friendly thing to do because it puts the other person's healing (and yours) as the priority. **Lesson #7 – When you break up – do it! Don't try some in-between arrangement to ease out of it.** “Immediate closure, or at least swift closure, is so important to bring about the next season of life without letting the currently dying season pollute the new one” (Jon Cook, Creative Arts Minister, Metro Church, Denver, CO).

Another unheard of medical practice, but only too common in the dating world, is for a doctor to take out the diseased appendix for an hour, a day or a week, and then put it back in. If it was bad for your body then, it will still be bad for your body now. Now, in the relationship world, I understand that there are those stories where timing is everything. I have known beautiful stories of people who dated but the timing wasn't right, they weren't right, and then years later, they reconnected and it was a “match made in heaven.” However, those stories are rare, and aren't quite what we are talking about. The big issue I am discussing is not when a couple has significant time to grow and change before they date again. I'm talking about when they break up and a day later, a week later, maybe a month later they are back together – not because there has been some great change, but usually because they couldn't stand to be alone or apart. Usually this is a sign of weakness. It is more like an alcoholic who gets sober for a short period of time and then can't stand the pressure and returns to his bottle. Then, they realize their “bottle” is bad for them, break up again...can't stand to be without it and return again. Back and forth, back and forth. This is a pattern of addiction not a pattern of love and change and growth. So, I repeat, what was bad for them then (the person, the relationship, the appendix, the bottle... it's all the same) will still be bad for them again. **Lesson #8 – Make your breakups permanent – no yo-yo-ing.** Prov. 26: 11, “Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.”

To this point, we have discussed the skills and knowledge a surgeon needs. But technical skills and superior knowledge are still not enough to make a truly great surgeon – one you want to trust with your life. To be a truly great surgeon, a good bedside manner is critical. Though they need to be tough enough to cut you open, brave enough to face what is unpleasant, broken or diseased in you, wise enough to know what the problem is and how to fix it and decisive enough to make the call to do it...all of this is not enough to make a good surgeon. One more thing is needed – it effects the way in which they do their job – it's love. Not romantic love – but Holy Spirit love. Love that is more specifically peaceful, patient, kind, gentle, faithful and self-controlled (Gal. 5:22-23). (Faithful may seem an odd

attribute in this context, but a doctor should be faithful to his patients well-being and health.) I have been to two doctors in my lifetime who I thought had particularly bad bedside manners – they lacked the qualities of love as far as I could see. I confess that their bedside manner colored my perception of their competency to prescribe what was best for me. I had very little confidence in their diagnosis and prescriptions and was altogether unwilling to do as recommended until I heard it from another source I trusted. If you had a doctor who was unkind, rude, impatient, rough and/or lacked self-control, and didn't seem committed or faithful to your well-being as a patient, do you think you would be very inclined to want to hear, trust and absorb what he had to say? What if you are the “doctor,” operating on a person's life, emotionally, relationally, personally? You may break up with all technical correctness, above reproach in your methods, but if you do it without love, then to the other person you are nothing more than a “noisy gong or a clanging cymbol” (1 Cor. 13:1). If you are going to try to help this person heal, even if it's healing from your relationship, then you are going to need to have good “bedside manners”. **Lesson #9 – At all stages in a relationship, and especially while breaking up, demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit.** Gal. 5:22-23, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.” Eph 4:1-3, “Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Part of a good bed-side manner for a surgeon is his integrity to maintain doctor/patient confidentiality. The Hippocratic oath a doctor takes says that, “Whatever, in connection with my professional service, or not in connection with it, I see or hear, in the life of men, which ought not to be spoken of abroad, I will not divulge, as reckoning that all such should be kept secret.” Hippocrates considered the knowledge a doctor obtained through his relationship to a patient “sacred”. Oh that we might treat with each other with the same sense of privacy and confidentiality! We make break ups too public. In a relationship we are privileged to a lot of sacred and confidential information about another person. It should remain so. **Lesson #10 – Use discretion in what you reveal to others about your break-ups. Keep private things which are private.** Prov. 11:12-13, “Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent. Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets, but he who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a thing covered.” Prov. 25:9-10, “Argue your case with your neighbor himself, and do not reveal another's secret, lest he who hears you bring shame upon you, and your ill repute have no end.”

*A few additional tips for the breaker-upper:*

If you are the one breaking up, then you have to be the strong one. You have to do what's best for the other person, and the truth is, it isn't best for anyone to be in a one-sided relationship. If you aren't wanting to be in the relationship anymore, then you have one final act of kindness to perform for this person who you at one time had a great affection for: you need to show them the surgeon's kindness. It may not be the most comfortable or easy route for yourself. You may have to sacrifice your own comfort or happiness for this person. I have known of more than one man who broke up with someone he loved, wanted to continue dating and thought he might one day marry, simply because he wasn't

able to commit to the next step when she needed him to. He sacrificed his own happiness with her to set her free – because it was best for her. Moral of the story: care more for the other person than you do for yourself, even in breaking up, *especially* in breaking up. John 15:13, “Greater love hath no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” It’s entirely possible to show the love of Christ even while you’re breaking up – and frankly, it’s something God asks of you.

While being in a dating relationship with someone may be optional, showing them the love of God is not. I Cor. 13: 4-7 describes the love that we should show to each other regardless of our relationship status: “Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” If we could show that love to one another in a break-up operation, think how much quicker the healing would be.

*A few tips for the break-up-ee:*

1. Be willing to hear (and even ask for) the *real* reason for the break-up. It can be very good constructive criticism and will help you grow if you let it. Prov. 27:6 “Faithful are the wounds of a friend.” Prov. 12:1 “Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid.” Conversely, Prov 18:2, “A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions.”
2. Don’t ask a question if you can’t handle the answer or if there isn’t a good answer. I had a very beautiful and trim friend who asked a guy if it was something the gym would fix or would surgery be required, when a guy told her he wasn’t attracted to her anymore. Now I ask you, was there a good answer to that question? He shouldn’t have answered. The question should have never been asked. Though she blamed him for years of woundedness and insecurity, the truth is she only had herself to blame – she asked an impossible and unproductive question. The reality is that attraction is more than just looks – the only productive question here was whether there was something about herself, not her looks, which was problematic...or whether they simply were not a good fit. Again – don’t ask an impossible/unproductive question and when you ask a good question, be prepared for the answer, whatever it may be.
3. Do your best to keep logic at the forefront when you are breaking up or being broken up with – you can fall apart later when you are alone or with friends. It is too easy to use emotions to manipulate the other person, or for the other person to cave on their resolve when they see you cry. You don’t want to be with someone who isn’t 100% in the relationship. If they want out, let them out gracefully – no manipulation, no guilt. This is especially pertinent when the person being broken up with (and consequently doing the falling apart) is female.
4. Recognize when the breaker-upper is “letting you off easy” because they don’t want to hurt you. You are just as responsible for not committing these break-up faux pas when you are the break-up-ee as you are when you are the breaker-upper. If they are dragging it out, then you help them get to the point. If they are avoiding the issue, you bring it up (been there!), if they want to try to be friends for a while or get back together shortly after breaking up, don’t let them (been there, been there!). If your doctor isn’t doing a good job – for example, maybe he isn’t

explaining things for you, then it's your job to help him do it better, tell him what information you lack! There are two of you in the relationship and two of you in the break-up. Help each other out.

5. Let the other person go...gracefully. You may not agree with, understand or like the situation, but the truth is, the Lord is the great physician and he is overseeing this operation. This person breaking up with you is simply a tool in his hand, a physician's assistant at best. You may not trust in the assistant, but you can trust in the one who is allowing and overseeing their every move. Despite the flaws and imperfections of the assistant, the Great Physician is perfect, in full control and loves you beyond comprehension. Because of this, you can respond with grace. Eph 4:31-32, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."
6. No retaliatory "punches" or revenge. Don't hurt them back – you are only hurting yourself. You are to show Christ's love to them as they break up with you just as they are to show His love to you during the painful process as well. James 1:19, "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger."
7. Put your significance in the Lord, not your boyfriend or girlfriend. If your significance comes from the fact that you are in a relationship with (and loved by) the King of Kings, then breaking up is unfortunate, but not an identity crisis. You lost *a* relationship *in* your life, but you haven't lost *the* relationship *of* your life. While you may miss the other person, your foundation is not rocked. Ultimately, you'll be able to say, "I don't base my fulfillment and wholeness in life in [any] person, only in God. I am not in favor of this break-up but I trust that God holds the future and that He will reassure me of the fact that He is all that I need to find true fulfillment, regardless of whether or not we're together" (Jon Cook).
8. Trust in the Lord to avoid infection. As with any surgery, there is danger of infection post-op, however, as with any surgery, the Great Physician has given you a prescription to ward off infection. It also has the positive side effects of speeding up the healing process and reducing the pain involved. Proverbs 3:5-6, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight." You may not understand why the relationship is over, just as you may not really understand why your body requires surgery. But, you don't trust in *your* understanding, you trust in the doctor's understanding. Trusting in the Great Physician and acknowledging him above all others (no matter how wonderful the physicians assistants may be, they are still subordinate to the Great Physician) is the only way to make your path straight – in other words, it's the best medicine you can take to fight against infection and reduce pain.
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It's not to say that if you follow this advice breaking up won't hurt. It will. However, the point is not to avoid all pain – you can't! In the appendix illustration – you're in pain whether or not you operate. The real point is to get through the pain in the best possible way – a way that promotes health, healing and minimal scarring. The same is true in breaking up. Heb. 12:11 "For the moment all discipline seems

painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.