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CHAPTER

1

# Why Your Brain Thinks Love Is Life-or-Death

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“Grief is the price we pay for love.”

—Queen Elizabeth II

**F**or many people, the pain of a breakup feels physical, so much so that researchers at the University of California have proven that the use of Ibuprofen can blunt distress experienced by women as a result of heartbreak. Interestingly, the same study found that for men, Ibuprofen had the opposite effect, making the pain of the breakup worse. My heartbreak left me with a feeling of intense pressure inside my head, to the point where I felt like I was about to explode. My mind would race in circles trying to pinpoint every explanation for how my relationship had

ended. It almost felt like if I could solve the problem logically, then I would be able to get her back.

This pain is what led me to become a breakup coach. I started by sharing what I was learning from my own research on TikTok. My videos were simple, and many still follow this same pattern. I would sit in my truck, usually parked in a parking lot on my way to work, and I would imagine speaking to myself and saying the words I needed to hear at the time. Since I was researching so much, and the breakup was the only thing on my mind, I had enough content to post about three times a day and I was consistent. After a couple of months, I had about ten thousand followers and put a calendar link in my bio for people to call me and ask for advice and assistance through their breakups. I wasn't sure what would happen, but immediately, people began to book calls. I began working with individuals to rebuild their lives. My main goal has always been to offer hope and a plan to those who are drowning, because I know exactly how that feels.

After a couple of years, my audience had grown to over seven hundred thousand people across all social media platforms. This is proof that the feelings of loss after a breakup or divorce are not a trivial thing. They are intense and life-altering. They are important enough to seek help for. Over the past couple of years, I have spoken to over two thousand people about their breakups. Most of these conversations have taken place in 60-minute, one-on-one video calls. People have called from countries and cultures all around the world ranging from Colombia, to India, to Ireland, to the United States. I've spoken to nearly equal amounts of men and women, in heterosexual, homosexual, polyamorous, and monogamous relationships. Across these calls, I have noticed several patterns that are usually hidden from view. As for why breakups cause so much pain, these two explanations seem most consistent with what I have observed.

## Evolutionary Biology

Brian Hare, a professor of evolutionary anthropology at Duke University, has conducted extensive research on the evolution of cognition in humans and animals and has proposed what he calls the “Self-Domestication Hypothesis.” This claim states that natural selection favored early humans who displayed greater aptitude for social interactions and cooperation.

Before we lived in towns and cities, humans were hunters and gatherers. We lived in tribes, and each tribe member had a role. Some would forage for food, some would take care of the camp, and others would hunt. Those who were able to forge strong connections with other members of the tribe survived and thrived, while those who could not were exiled to live on their own. These loners more often died of starvation or other predators while those who valued and practiced social connection were able to reproduce. Eventually, being a team player who truly cared for other members of the tribe was bred into us.

The ability to connect with others became a literal life-or-death skill. Not only that, belonging became a need, a drive as real as the drive to seek food, water, and shelter. Think about it: if you lived in a tribe and one day you woke up to find that everyone had deserted you, how would you feel? Imagine waking up one morning to find that all of the other tents are gone, the fire is put out, and you are completely alone. Your heart would begin to race, but not as fast as your mind as it scanned each and every second of the previous days to find out what you did wrong to drive your tribemates away. You are now at the mercy of the elements and the local predators. Your brain would then flood your body with adrenaline to give you the extra energy and strength needed to chase them down and hopefully avoid a gruesome and solitary death.

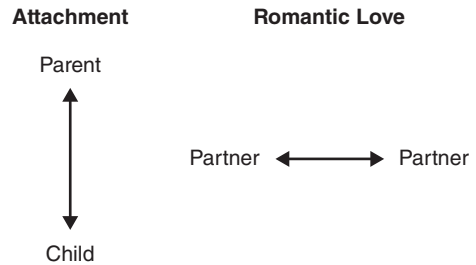
We may live completely different lives now, but biologically, we are not that far removed from these tribesmen. At our core, we still think and feel in similar ways. We may drive cars and work in corporate jobs, but the desire for connection is woven into our DNA and we are programmed to fear losing it above all else. This is not something we can just turn off and disconnect from entirely, which explains why so many of us feel completely lost in life when we experience the loss of a relationship. If this describes your pain, you are not weak, you are human.

## Childhood

In the early years of life, you needed to connect to someone else if you were going to survive. For most of us, our biological parents filled this role. In our earliest years, our entire chance of survival is dependent on our ability to connect to our caregivers as all of our basic needs such as food, water, and shelter come from them.

This truth has become much more real for me as I observe my own daughter. At the time I am writing this, she is just over one month old, and it is astounding how truly helpless she is. We come into this world entirely dependent on the love and sacrifice of others. This early form of attachment is healthy in childhood. It is the obligation of a parent to give their child everything they need to survive and thrive. A baby's survival depends solely on their caregiver's willingness to meet their needs, regardless of what the baby offers in return. There is no earning. No expectations. Just need, and a hope someone will meet it. We all relied on someone and it is because of their sacrifice that we are here today.

As we grow throughout life, this dynamic is meant to evolve and responsibility shifts to us. In adulthood, we are no longer entitled to have our every need met by others.



We are then responsible for our physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Ideally, our connections with others shift as well from pure attachment to something deeper and more mutual: love. Attachment in childhood is based on obligation. Love in adulthood is based on mutual freedom and choice. The problem is, some parts of this early programming don't disappear. When we are abandoned by someone close to us, the pain can feel unbearable—not just because we miss them, but because this abandonment can trigger that old fear: *If I'm not connected, I won't survive.*

In the pages to come, we will explore how insecure attachment in romantic relationships can amplify this pain and discuss a direct plan on how you can heal. But for now, just know that much of the pain of abandonment is deep and rooted in our earliest experiences.

With this context in mind, it makes sense why heartbreak is so painful. One of the most incredible things I've observed in my time as a breakup coach is how similar we all are. It doesn't matter if I speak to a man or a woman, a teenager or someone in their seventies; almost everyone experiences this same pain. As I dug deeper into these patterns, I discovered three fears that showed up in almost every person's story. Because they are so common, and so human, I've dubbed them the three primal fears.

## Our Three Primal Fears

For something to be defined as primal, it needs to be deeply rooted in our evolution. The fears we are about to explore are embedded in our biology and common across all of humanity. Please know that if you are feeling this way, your brain is working as it is wired to. You are not broken and there is a path forward.

The first is the fear of being forgotten.

This fear is most commonly found among those who are broken up with, but it is also present in those who leave. You may ask yourself, “Does my ex still think about me?” “Are they as torn apart by this as I am?” “Will they find someone else quickly and forget I ever existed?”

As we discussed earlier, your brain is feeding you these thoughts to drive you to go and get your relationship back. It is wired to do all it can to keep you close to your tribe. Reconciliation may or may not be possible for you right now. For some, it may not be the best choice, even if it feels like the only solution to your pain. We will explore those questions in depth later in the book. But keep in mind that your brain has evolved to fear losing people, and it will feed you any thought necessary to make sure that doesn't happen. The truth is you are not forgettable. Your ex does think about you, and your time together will not be forgotten. We simply do not forget those we have loved. Have you forgotten any of the past people you have dated? What about the ones you have loved? These people leave impressions on our souls. We may not think about them every second of every day. As time goes on, new things tend to occupy our thoughts, but we do not forget.

But I don't think this is what we are actually afraid of. We know our ex won't forget that we exist, but maybe we fear that we will no longer be important to them. We know that if someone were to ask them about us, they could dig up our

memory, but maybe we fear that they will never think of us on their own. The truth is that both sides of the breakup experience lonely nights and sad thoughts. Both sides of the breakup sometimes reach for their phone only to realize that they cannot call their ex. Both sides hear a song, see a movie, visit an old restaurant, and want to share those moments with the person they loved.

You may be thinking: if this is true, then why does my ex look so happy online? I once worked with a man we will call Ralph. His girlfriend of three years had left him four months before we met and seemed completely happy on social media. She was consistently out with friends, going to concerts, and always smiling. He could not shake the feeling that because she seemed so happy online, she had completely forgotten about him. About two months later, Ralph ran into his ex. It was awkward at first, but as they spoke, she revealed that the last six months had been some of the toughest of her life. Although she had appeared happy online, and was genuinely happy at times, she also had many sleepless nights where she questioned if she had made the right decision.

Social media is a false reflection of reality. Of course your ex is going to post themselves out with friends and having a great time! No one wants the world to think they are depressed or not comfortable with their own choices. This is one aspect of a breakup that is much lonelier for the dumper. They have to put on a happy face. Leaving was their choice and the world doesn't offer them as much sympathy as the one who was left. Although your ex may look happy on Instagram, rest assured that they do think about you and you will not be forgotten.

The second primal fear is the fear of an empty future.

You may have just lost the deepest connection you have ever experienced with another person in your life. You were at your best when you were with them. You understood each other, and

they made you feel important and valued in the world. You may have envisioned an entire life with this person. You saw yourself buying a house, raising children, and growing old with them. Maybe you two have already done many of those things. Now that they are gone, your future feels desolate. It is a blank slate and you're not sure how to deal with that. Starting over sounds exhausting. You've heard your friends complain about the dating world for years, and you feel that it's not where you belong. Depending on the length of your relationship, you may not even remember how to date. On the other hand, maybe you've spent years in the dating world already and you finally thought you had found your ticket out. This is the part of a breakup that many people don't talk about. You aren't just losing your person; you are also losing your future. When they left, they took with them an entire potential reality, an entire potential you.

As I mentioned in the introduction, before my divorce, I thought I had my life completely figured out. My wife and I would move away and begin medical school wherever I was accepted. We would have kids, buy a house with a big backyard, and build a thriving ophthalmology (eye doctor) practice together. When she left, my fear of the future drove me to attempt to replace her. I was so set on my plan that I was going to force it to happen, no matter what. But it didn't work. Up to this point, my life hasn't turned out anything like I imagined it would have. Instead of studying to be a physician, I am writing a book on how to thrive after a breakup, and instead of being married to my ex-wife, I am married to someone else. The crazy part is that if I had the choice to go back to the life I thought I would crumble up into a ball and die without, I wouldn't do it. I would not trade the life I have for the life I had planned in a million years. One thing that helped me overcome the fear of an empty future was believing in something bigger than myself. For me that is God.

The Bible contains a verse that encapsulates one of the most beautiful ideas ever put to paper:

*“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God.”*

*(Romans 8:28, KJV)*

Through my life experience, I have come to believe that even the darkest moments of our lives have the power to prepare us for something greater. When I felt like I couldn't get out of bed in the morning, I clung to this thought. Looking back now, it has been proven true. For you, it may be a reliance on God, it could be the universe, or simply the fact that things tend to turn out the way they are meant to. Whatever it is, believe in the hope that your life will turn out happy. You don't have to know the way to get there. You just have to do your best today.

If you've been through heartbreak before, try to remember how you felt then. Think back to what you would have done to fix things. Maybe you felt a similar way to how you feel now, but about someone else. Now think about when you met this person. Think about how they made all other heartbreaks feel worth it because they brought you to that moment. There is no reason that can't happen again. We see our lives through the lens of the past. When we are heartbroken, we naturally believe that our best days are behind us. We cling to the past because we believe it is our home. However, if you were wrong before, in that past heartbreak where you thought everything was lost, why can't you be wrong now? What if your greatest love story really does lie in the future and this is preparing you to receive it?

Intertwined in this fear of an empty future is the idea that you may never find someone like them again. My ex-wife and I could talk for an unlimited amount of time. We would often go on long road trips with the radio off and get lost in an engaging conversation for hours. As I dated people after her, I noticed that I could not

find this same level of connection. I found people I really cared about, but we didn't get each other in the same way that she and I did. For a while, I believed in an idea similar to a belief in soulmates. I thought, "Oh well, I'll never find someone who connects with me on that deep of a level again. I guess I'll have to find a way to be happy anyway." It wasn't until I met my wife Jocelyn that this idea was proven false for me. From day one, we could talk for hours. For our first date, we hiked to the top of a mountain where you could see the entirety of the city. Conversation seemed to flow effortlessly as if we had known each other for years. That hike awakened a hope in me that extraordinary connections are rare, but not impossible. Regardless of whether your ex is in your future or not, you will be happy again and you will connect again.

Matthew Hussey, a prominent dating coach, teaches a truth I have come to fully believe: at least half of everything that was good in your relationship was you. Half of all of the late night conversations, half of the spontaneous trips, and half of the amazing chemistry was you. If you enjoyed late night conversations, or last minute spontaneous adventures, or hours of deep laughter, that is because you are a great conversationalist, you are adventurous, and you have a deep sense of humor. These qualities stick with you, they cannot be taken, and you have the power to bring those aspects into your next relationship. The fact that this was the deepest connection you have ever found does not mean it was the deepest connection you will ever find. We can only go as deep with someone else as we have with ourselves. As you get to know yourself better through this breakup and many of the concepts we will discuss in this book, you will become a deeper individual. This will naturally allow you to have deeper partners and create deeper connections. Your future is bright. It begins when you take the small step of believing this could be possible.

The third is the fear of losing this specific person.

Maybe you do believe that you will eventually find love again. Maybe you even believe that you can find a deep and abiding connection again. But maybe losing this specific person is what hurts so bad. They are unique. We will do everything we can throughout the rest of this book to maximize the chances of saving your relationship if that is your goal. However, I have come to accept that losing things is a natural part of life.

As I mentioned in the introduction, when I was 18, I left home to serve a two-year religious mission in the Philippines. I am a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and it is common for young men and women in the faith to go on a mission after graduating from high school. I remember realizing that this departure marked the end of my childhood and the beginning of a new phase of life. At the time I served, the only communication we had with our families was a weekly email. When I had been there for about six months, my little brother sent me a picture of himself at school and it shocked me. He had changed so much. It made me sad because in my mind, my family had been frozen in time since the day I left. When I returned home, I was right, things were different. After I got married things were different again. When Jocelyn and I had our daughter things changed again. Change is the only consistent part of life. We can't hang onto what was because it keeps us from enjoying what is and what will be. With each change, we can only be grateful that it was a beautiful part of our life story.

The truth is that no one can be completely replaced. In many ways, this fear is valid. If you do end up completely moving on from your breakup and finding someone else like I did, you will lose many of the inside jokes, idiosyncrasies, and unique dynamics that defined your relationship with your ex. This loss is real and needs to be grieved to be fully moved past. There will be times when someone phrases a sentence in a certain way or orders the same meal as your ex would have, and you will feel a

sense of loss. It may hurt long after you feel like you have moved on. The good news is that humans are incredibly resilient. Your heart has the amazing ability to rediscover these beautiful aspects in new and meaningful ways.

Whether your goal is to move forward with gratitude or do what you can to save your relationship, the first step is the same and will be the subject of our next chapter.

## Key Takeaways

- **You are wired for connection. Our brains have evolved to view losing our loved ones as death. This fear can be traced through evolution and our early experiences with childhood attachment. To avoid this feeling, your body is flooded with chemicals that drive you to chase down your partner and fight for what you have lost, regardless of whether or not they are good for you.**
- **You will not be forgotten. Whether you end up back together or you both move on, you and your ex-partner are part of each other's stories. We do not forget those we have loved.**
- **A major portion of breakup pain comes from losing the future we imagined with our ex. Rely on something larger than yourself to pull you through the pain. We see our lives through the lens of the past. We have no idea how great our future can be.**
- **Losing a specific person is painful. We should not minimize this fear. If you do not reconcile and move forward with your life, you will lose certain things. Remember that you are resilient and that the future holds more than enough joy to make up for anything you have to leave in the past.**

### **Your Turn: Letter to a Friend**

Take a moment to step outside of your breakup story and imagine one of your best friends is going through it. What would they need to hear from you? How would you support them?

Write them a letter containing these things and then read it for yourself.

