



## **THE HEALING SEPARATION: AN ALTERNATIVE TO DIVORCE OR ENDING**

Adapted from *Rebuilding: When Your Relationship Ends* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed)  
by Bruce Fisher, PhD

A Healing Separation is a structured time apart which can help a couple heal a relationship that isn't working. It can also help revitalize and renew a relationship that is working. The Healing Separation is designed to transform the basis of a love relationship – moving it from neediness to health. A successful Healing Separation requires that both partners be committed to personal growth, and to creating healthy relationships with themselves and each other. Such a framework will allow them to carve out a new and more fulfilling relationship than they've known in the past.

When a relationship is in trouble, the couple has essentially three choices:

1. Continue as is
2. End the relationship
3. Carve out a new relationship

If a relationship is already crumbling, not many couples want to continue it as is. That leaves choices two and three. Chances are they hadn't thought much about the third choice – it probably seemed impossible. What's more, they don't know how to go about it. So their choice, almost by default, is to end the relationship.

There is another alternative: partners can work out a new relationship with themselves and with each other. The Healing Separation offers a process within which to do just that.

### *What is a Healing Separation?*

The Healing Separation, like a "trial-separation," involves living apart for a while, with the decision as to whether or not to end the relationship put off until some future time. Unlike unplanned and unstructured separations, however, the Healing Separation is a working separation, in which you and your partner **dedicate** yourselves to investing in your own personal growth. Can you create a better relationship with yourself that will allow different and healthier relationships with others? Sometimes your work during a Healing Separation may be on "the old relationship," and sometimes it may be on "the old you." The Healing Separation is a creative way to strengthen both partners and build a new relationship without dissolving the partnership.

A relationship between two people is analogous to a bridge. Each partner forms one end and provides half the support for the bridge. The connection between the two – the bridge – is the relationship itself. A Healing Separation gives the partners time to concentrate on themselves, on their own supportive end structures, rather than on the relationship, or the bridge. It can be a



scary process because neither person is tending the relationship bridge for a while – it could collapse. Nevertheless, it may be worth the risk. When the two ends eventually are rebuilt, the possibility exists for a new healthy relationship bridge to be built, supported by bridge ends, which are now stronger.

### *What Are the Purposes of a Healing Separation?*

The goals of a Healing Separation are more profound than simply whether you continue your love relationship. There is a high correlation between the amount of personal growth each person does and the success of the Healing Separation. If both parties are **committed and motivated** to work on their self-relationship, the chance of their new relationship lasting is good.

The following list of purposes for a Healing Separation may help you determine if your own separation will be successful:

- To take the pressure off a troubled relationship:* A love relationship is a changing pattern of interaction between two people who themselves are changing as they develop emotionally, socially, physically, and spiritually. This evolution of the relationship may result in strains and pressures upon the relationship and a crisis may develop. During this crisis, it is difficult for the partners to make rational and objective decisions concerning their future. A time apart pending final decision may be an advantageous alternative for the couple to consider.
- To enhance your personal growth:* This allows you to work through the stumbling blocks that sabotage love relationships. Changing stumbling blocks into rebuilding blocks can be the end result of a successful Healing Separation.
- To transform your relationship:* A Healing Separation can change your current relationship into something more beautiful and loving than you ever thought possible. You could find yourself in a relationship that not only allows you to be yourself, but also enhances your individual identity and offers more love and joy than you ever imagined. You could deepen your definition of what love is, and create a relationship that has no boundaries or limits.
- To end your love relationship on a positive note:* Beginnings and endings are important markers in our lives as they provide clarity and reduce the possibility for transporting "unfinished business" from one experience to another. To reach this goal might mean the ending has a minimum amount of stress, anxiety, court battles, and with everyone feeling good (or at least accepting) about the way it worked out. Remaining friends and being able to co-parent peacefully could be important by-products of this healthy ending.



## *Who Should Have a Healing Separation?*

Here are some key characteristics of partners who might want to consider a Healing Separation:

- You are experiencing sad and unhappy feelings:* Perhaps you are feeling suffocated or experiencing tremendous pressures, or perhaps you are feeling depressed, possibly even suicidal. You need to separate in order to survive and continue living.
- Your partner has refused to take any responsibility for the relationship difficulties:* Relationships are a partnership and both people must be invested in its growth. Refusing to become involved in counseling or other relationship growth activities may prevent you from growing together as a couple. The separation is one way to get your partner's attention and to highlight that your relationship needs some intense focus.
- You are feeling rebellious:* You feel the need for emotional space and decide to separate to relieve the internal pressure.
- You are in the process of healing your childhood abuse and neglect issues:* Many people express the desire to be alone during this time and many partners often feel frustrated and inadequate because they do not know how to help. Some couples find a Healing Separation helpful during this time, while others feel more comfortable finding a way to get through it together.
- You have begun an important personal transformation:* Perhaps psychological or spiritual in nature, you might want to invest some time and effort into this process and need some time and space apart to figure things out.
- You have not been able to gain enough emotional space:* Sometimes the love relationship does not provide the emotion space needed in order for the individuals in the couple to survive, grow, evolve, or transform.
- You are caught in conflict:* You may both want to continue your love relationship, but are unable to break out of old, conflicted patterns. Living together and staying together in the same old ways encourages continuing the old patterns of interaction. You want to "divorce the old relationship" so you can carve out a new one that is more healthy and less needy. A time apart may allow you to crate new ways of interacting by developing a new and different relationship with yourself and your partner.
- You need an understanding of how it feels to be single:* You may have gone directly from your parental home to a marriage or relationship home without experiencing the single life. You may have missed experiencing one of the developmental stages of growth – that of being an independent adult. Many people wrongly believe the single life to be one of freedom with no responsibility – an escape from the stress of living with a love partner. Having some time apart from the love partner may provide a more realistic view of the difficulties of living as a single person.
- You may need to express your independence from your family patterns for the first time:* You may have built a love relationship bridge much like your parents' bridge. Now you're attempting to get free from your parents' influence and you need to have distance from your love partner because your patterns with your partner are too similar to those you experienced with one or both parents.



- You and your partner are projecting your unhappiness onto each other:* Couples frequently "make" each other responsible for their individual unhappiness. You have not learned to take individual ownership of your own feelings. Time apart – with a plan for personal growth – could help you learn to accept adult responsibility for your lives.

### *Dumpers and Dumpees: The 80-20 Rule*

A separation is seldom started as a mutual decision. In the Fisher divorce classes, some 84% of couples ended their relationships when the dumper decided to leave. There is a similar statistic in terms of initiating a Healing Separation. This means that typically one partner finds the idea of a Healing Separation quite useful while the other partner typically is very reluctant. This type of split seems to occur about 80% of the time. Sounds like quite an obstacle to the success of the Healing Separation. How can a couple overcome the difference inherent in the attitude, goals, and motivation of the initiator and the reluctant one?

First of all, couples must begin to re-think the question of "Who's to blame?" When a relationship is not working as well as it should, *both parties are equally responsible for the malfunctions*. It is sometimes hard to believe this statement because each partner in the couple is so focused on all the ways the other person needs to change in order for the relationship to work. However, when the layers of pain are peeled off and the core issues are addressed, *the responsibility for the problem is equal*. Thus the problems are mutual even though one person was the initiator in the separation. When you begin to understand and accept the notion of mutual responsibility for the problems, you have begun to build a foundation for a successful Healing Separation – and a successful new relationship.

Traditionally, in a divorce the person being dumped experiences much more anger and painful feelings than the person doing the dumping. By extension, probably the more reluctant partner in a Healing Separation will experience more emotional pain. Whatever strong feelings are experienced by either party will need to be worked through before the separation truly becomes healing.

The parties in a Healing Separation have more alone time to work on themselves, on their careers, on projects, and hobbies. This can be a positive aspect and helpful to both parties. The reluctant one may learn to appreciate having extra time to work on personal growth and perhaps may even eventually appreciate the initiator's decision to have a Healing Separation. When the reluctant one finally understand that the initiator had so much internal pain and emotional pressure that separation was a matter of survival, it helps the reluctant one to understand and accept the initiator's decision.



### *Guidelines for a Healing Separation*

Following the guidelines below will improve the chances of success of your Healing Separation. They're not all absolute rules, but if you ignore more than one or two, your prospects for success will most likely be damaged.

- Probably the most important requirement for both of you during the Healing Separation is a *strong commitment to make the Healing Separation work*. Feelings of love and commitment are tremendously helpful to motivate you both.
- Make a list of what your ideal love relationship would be like. Think of what aspects would be important to you. Allow yourself to develop a fantasy role model of what your relationship might be like after the Healing Separation. Share and discuss your lists with each other.
- Commit yourselves to communicating with each other in an open and honest manner. Learn to use "I Statements" rather than "You Messages." Learn to be as honest as you can be with yourself and with your partner. Learn to say what is true for you. Complete honesty may include owning that portion of the relationship problems for which you have been responsible. Are you part of the problem, or part of the solution?
- Do not file for divorce or start any court proceedings during the Healing Separation. You must agree to not take any legal action without first conferring with the other person. The adversarial legal system is antithetical to the goals of a Healing Separation. Even the threat or the thought of the other person filing is enough to release the brakes of the train headed for dissolution, so you need to make it clear in the "separation agreement" that neither of you will consider undertaking any court action. The exception to this is when one or both of you needs to let the old relationship die by having a final decree stating you are divorced. You need to work toward obtaining the final decree together and avoid the adversarial court process. Anything you can do to help end the old relationship is helpful in the Healing Separation. This may be the step that really gets your partner's attention and lets the other person know you are serious in your need for emotional space.
- Quality time together might nourish this new relationship. It is helpful to think of the new relationship as a tender young plant just emerging from the seedbed. It needs frequent, tender, loving care in order to grow and not be squashed by the storm of the Healing Separation.
- Continuing a sexual relationship may help nurture the relationship, but it could also hurt. Be careful about what needs are being met by maintaining the sexual relationship.
- Sometimes you will need to talk out issues with another person other than your partner. You will need a good support system, or a therapeutic relationship, or both, to resolve these issues without them being added to the storms that will most likely occur during a Healing Separation.
- It is a great time to keep a personal journal. You will need a place to express and dissipate the strong feelings which are bound to emerge during this difficult time and a place to sort out the many thoughts and feelings you are experiencing.



- Read, take classes, attend lectures, and take seminars to increase your awareness of yourself and how you operate in the world. Awareness can really help put the brakes on your runaway relationship train. Reading and learning all you can will help make the process healing rather than destructive.
- Use the Healing Separation Agreement Form with modifications that suit your particular needs to help create a firm commitment to each other. A formal agreement such as this will give your Healing Separation the best chances of success.
- Seriously consider a (joint) ongoing therapy relationship with a licensed or credentialed Marriage and Family Therapist.

### *Other Considerations*

- Quality Time Together:* You may find it beneficial to set times to be together on a regular basis during the separation, as often as feels right and okay. It should be agreeable to both of you to spend "quality time" together. This quality time might include one or more of the following activities:
  - Important sharing and active listening using good communication skills
  - Verbal intimacy and/or sexual intimacy
  - Time to nurture each other
  - Trying out new patterns of interaction leading to carving out a new relationship
  - Doing fun activities together
  - Sharing your personal growth with the other person
- When your old dysfunctional patterns of interaction start happening, you need to be apart rather than continuing the old unproductive patterns of behavior together. Remember to stay honest with each other.
- Length of Separation:* Believe it or not, part of the goal for this process is to encourage and support you to be as fearful and insecure as possible!!! It would be easy for you to make a commitment for three months, and then use that deadline as a way of not dealing emotionally with the problems. "I can put up with anything for three months," might be your attitude. It is suggested, however, that although both of you might agree on a time limit for your Healing Separation, realize it can and should be renegotiated. This insecurity of not knowing how long you will be separated may help to keep you on your toes, and you may be able to use the insecurity of no time limit as motivation to keep growing. Insecurity about the future of your relationship can be frightening. You don't know how much to work on yourself or how much to work on the relationship.  
Sometimes it feels as if you are walking on ice. One false step and down you go, into the icy water of loneliness, rejection, guilt, anger, and the other feelings associated with breaking up and divorce.
  - *The Healing Separation will probably consume a year or so of your life.*
- Timing of When to Move Back Together:* Usually the couple is uncomfortable living apart, and the pain motivates them to move back together too quickly. One party is usually pushing to live together more quickly than the other. The reluctant partner usually wants to move back together before the initiator does. Time itself is factor: early in the



process, one or both are eager to move back together; the longer the separation lasts, the more hesitant both partners are to move back together. It is very destructive to move back together too quickly and have the patterns of the old relationship come back. This increases the possibility of separating again, and each separation increases the chances of the relationship ending.

Take your time about moving back together. Beware of the "honeymoon phase." You may start to feel emotionally close, and intimate; sexual satisfaction may improve (maybe because you have let go of sexual expectations); and you may want to live together again – but maybe for the wrong reasons. It is suggested that you WAIT until you both agree that you sincerely choose to be in relationship with each other, and want to share the rest of your lives with each other before you move back together.

Paradoxically, when you both believe you can live *alone* the rest of your lives and be happy, it may be a good indicator you are ready to move back and live *together* again.

- *Outside Love Relationships:* As a general rule, having an extra love relationship during a Healing Separation will diminish your chances of improving your current relationship as well as the relationship with yourself you are trying to pay attention to. Time and energy invested in the outside relationship diminish the time and energy available to invest in your own growth as a person.

Partners who initiate the separation seeking personal growth, healing, or transformation are so involved in their personal growth process that an extra relationship is often not of interest. They have a strong commitment to the Healing Separation, and are willing to risk everything in their relationship with their reluctant partners just so they can work toward becoming whole persons.

Reluctant partners have many opportunities for outside relationships, but they usually find out they are more "married" than they thought. Often they discover that a potential new partner has a multitude of new problems. Dating may leave them much more committed to the Healing Separation.

The person, male or female, who initiates a separation while in a "rebellion process" is much more likely to have an outside relationship which looks like an affair and may include sexual intimacy. He or she usually thinks of it as part of the process – the primary purpose is to have someone to talk intimately with – and does not think of it as an affair. This extra relationship may become a long-term union, but the chances of it becoming a healthy relationship are small.

In general, outside relationships usually have an adverse effect upon a Healing Separation because the people involved make the extra relationship more important than it is. A partner who is in a rebellion phase finds the extra relationship exciting and believes it has much more promise for the future than it typically does. This excitement rarely lasts beyond the early or "honeymoon" stage. The other partner then feels hurt, rejected, and angry about the extra relationship, and so may decide to end the Healing Separation and let go of the relationship altogether.

- *Lack of Support:* Another area of difficulty in a Healing Separation is your support system. Both partners need an emotional support system to help deal with the pressures of the difficult situation. The problem is that very few people have seen a Healing



Separation work and they view of many friend and relatives will be that the relationship is going to end. They don't believe there is such a concept as a Healing Separation. Thus when you need emotional support the most, your friends seem to be urging you to end the relationship, saying things like, "You're in denial. Can't you see that the relationship is over? Are you co-dependent? You don't seem to be able to disentangle. You better get your partner before she or he gets you. You need to get on with your life."

The idea of a Healing Separation is contrary to the values and beliefs of many people. A commitment "till death do us part" is a strong belief in our society, and a Healing Separation is somehow undesirable, not spiritually okay, a form of radical behavior. That's one of the reasons people are unable to support and accept the couple attempting this alternative to divorce or permanent separation.

You need your support friends, but it often makes you more insecure when your friends tell you the relationship is going to end. Continue to reach out and build your support system, but understand they may not always be there to help you make the Healing Separation succeed. Maybe having them read this will help them be more supportive of you.

### *Paradoxes of a Healing Separation*

There are many paradoxes or contradictions that go along with Healing Separations. Here are some of the most important and common ones for you to keep in mind during this process:

1. The person who initiates often does it out of need for emotional space. But the reluctant one often uses and benefits from the emotional space as much as or more than the initiator.
2. Initiators appear to be selfishly seeking ways of meeting their own needs, but often are providing an opportunity for their reluctant partners to meet their needs.
3. The initiator appears to be leaving the relationship, but may actually be more committed to the relationship than is the reluctant one.
4. As soon as initiators feel they have the emotional space they need, they reach out and ask for more closeness with the reluctant one.
5. The initiator wants the separation, but is not looking for another relationship. The reluctant one wants the relationship to continue, but is more likely to enter into another love relationship.
6. When the partners separate, they are often more "married" than they were when they were living together.
7. Most love partners project some of their hang-ups onto the other person. The Healing Separation makes these projections more obvious and identifiable. It's harder to blame another person for what happens when he or she doesn't live there any more.
8. One of the reasons initiators give for wanting a separation is so they can enhance their personal growth. But reluctant partners may experience as much or more personal growth during the separation.



9. The initiator may actually elect to have the marriage legally ended by a final court dissolution so the partners can begin again to build and create a new, different relationship.
10. The Healing Separation makes it look to others as if the relationship is not working, when in reality it may be the healthiest it has ever been.
11. In the process of seeking a clearer personal identity, the initiator may find a strong sense of "relationship identity" – personal identity as part of a relationship.
12. Initiators often give reluctant partners what they need rather than what they want.

*Is the Healing Separation Useful, Stalling the Inevitable, or Just Denial*

The Healing Separation is a time for action, not promises. If both parties are not actively engaged in working on themselves and rebuilding their ends of the relationship bridge, it is probably not a Healing Separation, but rather a step toward the ending of the relationship. Here are some questions to ask in order to help assess the effectiveness of the Healing Separation:

- Are both of you working at this Healing Separation or is only one of you investing in your own personal growth?
- Are both parties involved in counseling or some kind of personal growth or awareness process?
- Are both parties spending time alone or are they continually with people in situations that are not growth producing?
- Are both parties avoiding excessive alcohol and drug use?
- Are both parties investing in themselves or are they investing in another relationship outside of this one?
- Are the two people having any quality time together that includes good communication?
- Are both parties looking at how they can grow instead of expecting the other person to make all the changes?
- Do both parties believe the other partner is the problem and there is nothing one can do to change or grow until the other changes?

***During a Healing Separation  
It is important to carefully  
Plan Your Work  
And then  
Work Your Plan!***