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# SUMMARY

## CONSCIOUS

## UNCOUPLING

**KATHERINE WOODWARD  
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# **Summary of “Conscious Uncoupling” by Katherine Woodward Thomas**

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The guide to successful breakups.

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# Introduction

What do you usually say when you break up with someone? What do you often hear your friends say? Whether we mean to or not, it seems that we often speak in trite and tired clichés that fail to encapsulate the complexity of what we're going through. We say that things “just didn't work out.” We say that we struggled with “irreconcilable differences.” We say that we “went our separate ways.” The things we say to the people we break up with are often even worse. “It's not you, it's me”; “We should see other people”; “I've just fallen out of love with you.” As sad as they are, however, that doesn't mean that these statements aren't true. Sometimes people just simply aren't compatible; sometimes you really are better off without each other.

But have you ever noticed how carelessly we often toss these words around? Just as we say that we “fell in love,” we also imply that we “fell out of love,” as though love is an arbitrary and mystical force that we cannot control. As a result, both our breakups and our couplings have little intentionality. We fall in and out of love as the feelings move us, and-- as you've probably noticed-- our feelings are often inconsistent liars. But what if we were to be extremely intentional in the way we conduct ourselves and our relationships? What if we genuinely made decisions based on mutual compatibility and the right steps for our lives? What if we didn't get lost in the butterflies and the starry eyes, but instead, in the facts about another person? What if we used that information to determine whether or not they were right for us?

And that's precisely what Conscious Uncoupling aims to help us do. If you've heard the term “consciously uncoupling” before, it's probably in the context of celebrity splits. As a result, you might assume that the term is just another Hollywood fad, as meaningless and over-glamorized as any other facet of celebrity drama. But the author argues that nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, as Katherine Woodward Thomas asserts, “conscious uncoupling” is the long-awaited update to modern separations.

And it's a practice we desperately need! So, over the course of this summary, we'll explore the author's research about breakups and learn how we can move on in a healthy, harmonious way.

# Relationships Do Not Define Your Self-Worth

When did you first get the idea that you needed to be in a relationship in order to be a valid person? Maybe it was when you were in pre-school and family teased that you had a boyfriend or girlfriend if you ever played with a toddler of the opposite sex. Maybe it was when you watched cartoons as a kid and realized that even animated skunks had partners. The whole world, it seemed, was paired off in a romantic fashion, and you got the message loud and clear: if you want to be normal, you have to date somebody. If you feel that you received this message at any point during your childhood, the most important thing to understand is that you are absolutely not alone! These messages are forced on all of us from a very early age, but we rarely get to see the big picture. Cartoons, romance movies, and well-intentioned family members all encourage us to find a partner, but they neglect to add the most important part of dating advice: that it's about finding the right person, not just any person!

In fact, when we do receive that message, it's often as an after-thought. "Find somebody! Anybody! Or you're not normal!" the world seems to scream. "But oh, by the way, make sure they're right for you." And sadly, even this last piece of advice is often twisted so that we view "the right person" as being the one who gives us butterflies or makes our head spin. We learn to associate "right" with romantic feelings rather than genuine emotional compatibility. And no one ever tells us what to do when the person who gives you butterflies also has an overwhelming drug problem or refuses to help with the housework. So, because these messages leave us feeling flustered and confused, many people opt to stay in a dysfunctional relationship rather than risk the social stigma of leaving. Or, if they do leave, they immediately hop into a rebound relationship with someone who might be even worse!

That's because our society doesn't really know what to do with single people. Because our society has erroneously equated "single" with "unlovable" and "alone" with "weird," single people get the judgmental

message loud and clear. As a result, many would rather be trapped in relationships that are toxic or unhappy than face the social stigma of being alone. That's why the author believes that if we want to dismantle the true issues that keep us in unhappy relationships (or that lead to acrimonious breakups), we need to tackle the social stigma first.

And that starts with understanding that your self-worth never, ever depends on your identity as part of a couple. You are not waiting for "your other half," or waiting to "fall in love" as one might fall in a hole. You are already a valid and whole person on your own and you don't need anyone else to complete you. It's also important to remember that "till death do us part" isn't a realistic expectation for every partnership and it's not a failure if it doesn't work out. The same is true of that mythical ideal of "the one." Because sometimes, there isn't just one person for the rest of your life. Sometimes, you find "the one for right now," and then you outgrow each other and move on. And then, at another point in your life, you'll find a person who's right for you at that time too. So, don't allow yourself to blindly subscribe to toxic and unrealistic ideas of commitment. And don't let yourself be pressured into following someone else's standards when that isn't what you want. If you're happy being single, then be single! And if you're unsatisfied in your relationship, it's okay to leave.



# How to Break up Gracefully

If you're like most people, you've probably experienced quite a few breakups between adolescence and adulthood. And you've probably also noticed that adult breakups are rarely more mature than their teenaged counterparts. Just as we did when we were kids, we go from wearing our partner's hoodie and saving their number with lots of heart emojis, to burning their hoodie in the backyard. We bitterly remove all the heart emojis and throw out the notebooks where we blissfully doodled our initials together. And just as we did when we were kids, we might find ourselves trash-talking our former lovers behind their back. We might even go to petty lengths to get revenge. Does that mean you're a bad or immature person? Not necessarily.

The author observes that breakups are often traumatic because they trigger our "fight or flight" response. They tap into an evolutionary defense mechanism that our modern minds don't quite know what to do with. Because our brains and bodies are evolutionarily hardwired to protect ourselves against anything that threatens our survival, we don't know what to do when we face a deep, emotional loss. And, the truth is, it hurts to lose a partner. It hurts to let go of someone we love or admit to ourselves that the romantic fantasies we concocted will never come true. Sometimes, depending on the length of the relationship and the painful nature of the breakup, we may grieve as though someone has died. And all of that is okay! It's okay to cycle through grief, rage, and desperation. It's okay to want your partner back even while you hate their guts. You are absolutely allowed to cycle through the entire spectrum of emotion as you work to process your loss. But it's important that you know how to move forward in a mature and healthy way. Because unless you learn how to let go and move on, it's entirely possible that you will cling to your traumatic breakup-- and the bitterness it generates-- for 20 years or more! And that's not what anyone wants for their life! So, that's where conscious uncoupling comes in.

Put simply, conscious uncoupling is a means of bypassing the negative and toxic feelings we develop when we break up with someone. Instead of succumbing to our angry or hate-filled instincts, conscious uncoupling invites us to transcend bitterness and ascend to an elevated approach at conflict resolution. So, how does conscious uncoupling work? And how can you put it into practice? Well, the first step is to perform a self-assessment and consider your real motivations. So, start by asking yourself why you want to break up. For example, do you want to end this relationship because you rushed into a partnership that wasn't a good fit for you? Do you want to break up because you've realized that you need time to grow and work on yourself before you attempt to create a life with another person? Or are you breaking up because you're angry and you want to hurt your partner? Perhaps you have no intention of achieving a permanent split; rather, you're hurt and angry over a perceived slight and you want to punish them by calling it quits.

No matter what your reasons are, conscious uncoupling always begins with a thorough, introspective analysis of your motivations. It's vital that you assess these reasons before proceeding with your breakup because the process won't work if your heart isn't in the right place. So, before you do anything else, take some time and figure out why you really want to break up and if your problems could be solved by open and honest communication instead. In short, ask yourself if your actions will enrich your life and that of your partner. Are you genuinely doing what's best for both of you? Or are you acting on a selfish or immature impulse? If you ask yourself these questions and your honest analysis reveals that:

- You and your partner simply aren't compatible, and:
- Moving on is the right step for your future

Then it's time to proceed to the next step: the conversation phase.

## Conscious Uncoupling in Action

Now that you're ready to move on to the next phase, let's take a look at how conscious uncoupling works in practical application. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, emotional maturity is one of the core ingredients of conscious uncoupling, so let's start by learning how to achieve that. We've already acknowledged that breakups are a grueling emotional process; there's no doubt about that. We also know that it's easy to get overwhelmed by those feelings and feel justified in lashing out at our partners. This can often result in the same kind of petty behavior we might have indulged in high-school and, let's be honest, we really should be more mature than that. But how do we get there?

The author posits that self-empowerment is the first step to unlocking emotional maturity. Emotional self-empowerment begins when you give yourself the freedom to own your emotions. Here's how it works: let's imagine that you've been rejected by your partner. Maybe they haven't ended the relationship yet, but they've still behaved in such a way that you feel neglected, unloved, or unwanted. Understandably, you're hurt and frustrated. So, what do you do? You lash out at your partner. Maybe you call them names, make hurtful comments, or spread rumours behind their back. And although your instinct to do so is relatable, that's hardly the most mature response. It also won't give you closure or help you work through your emotions. So, what can you do instead? The emotionally mature response is to acknowledge your emotions and take ownership of them. Instead of acting out your feelings in the examples described above, be honest with yourself and say something like, "I'm hurt because I feel neglected," or "Feeling rejected really upsets me because I already struggle with insecurity and worry that people will reject me."

Practicing this type of honesty and ownership will enable you to get a handle on your feelings and move forward in a healthy way. And by being honest with yourself, you'll realize that lashing out at your partner isn't really what you want. Sure, being petty might bring you a fleeting moment

of satisfaction, but it's like putting a bandaid on a broken arm. If you want to truly fix the issue and find closure for yourself, you need to own your feelings and confront the problem. Although the appropriate strategies will vary from person to person, the author advises that jumping into a new relationship immediately after ending one is most never the answer. Instead, you should take time to sit with your feelings for as long as you need to, and invest in healthy coping mechanisms that will enable you to work through them. For example, if you typically pour all your energy into your romantic relationships or you rely on partners to meet all of your emotional needs, it may be time to focus on you for a little while and engage in creative pursuits that will allow you to grow comfortable in your own skin.

Maybe you need to take up a new hobby or take your focus off yourself by getting involved with a charitable cause. Individual needs will vary from person to person, but no matter what feels right for you, it's important to find a healthy outlet that will allow you to reflect, flourish, and grow. However, people typically seek these outlets after they've uncoupled from a dysfunctional connection. So, before you engage in these pursuits, it's important to find a healthy way to end your relationship. Conscious uncoupling enables you to do so by using your newfound emotional insight to initiate an authentic discourse with your partner. And as you do so, remember to be honest and upfront about your feelings. If you feel it's appropriate, you can even share your personal insights with them. For example, if you feel that your partner isn't meeting your needs and that feeling neglected is causing you significant emotional damage, you can tell them that.

Rather than relying on trite cliches like, "It's not you, it's me," you might say something like, "I feel neglected in our relationship. I feel like our partnership is not meeting my emotional needs and that's really upsetting to me. I struggle with worrying about neglect and rejection anyway and this relationship is not enabling me to be the best version of myself. I want to grow and flourish and I don't want to be bogged down by emotions that are

not contributing to my growth. So, as much as I've enjoyed our time together, I think it's time for us to go our separate ways."

If your partner doesn't share these feelings, they might find this hard to hear, but they will appreciate your honesty. Alternatively, your honesty might inspire them to be honest with themselves as well and admit that your relationship isn't working for them either. Of course, this is only an example of the type of response you might give; you can tweak your responses to reflect the issues and level of emotional intimacy you feel comfortable discussing. The author also acknowledges that the process of conscious uncoupling should never be attempted in an abusive relationship. If you're in a relationship that is unsafe, you should get out as soon as possible and you are under no obligation to attempt healthy communication with your abuser. This process is intended only for two adults in a relationship that is unsuccessful but not abusive. So, if it's possible for you to do so, attempt to initiate healthy and authentic communication with your partner so that you can separate honestly and amicably.

## Final Summary

There's no doubt about it: breaking up is hard to do. And unfortunately, it's all too common for separations to end with slamming doors and smear campaigns. But the author believes that this is absolutely unnecessary and that there's nothing to be gained by re-victimizing each other. Instead, she advocates for the practice of conscious uncoupling, a process in which both partners are introspective, authentic, and emotionally mature. By practicing conscious uncoupling in your breakups, you can avoid acrimonious splits and separate with grace.



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