What Second-Chance Couples Know About Love

Getting back together with an ex is risky—but it might pay off.

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So many regrets in life are impossible to rectify. You can't go back in time to study for a failed exam, or take a job offer you declined, or tell someone you care for them before they die. But say you come to believe—and you certainly wouldn't be the first—that your breakup was a mistake. Maybe some memories have started sneaking up on you: the sound of your ex's laugh, their quirky mannerisms, all the little ways they supported you that you took for granted. Maybe they have regrets too. Maybe, in this case, you might actually get a second chance.

In the eyes of the researchers who study them, "cyclical" relationships—those involving one or more "breakup and renewal" cycles—can be troubling. Those cycles are linked to worse relationship quality and more depression and anxiety symptoms. The more times a relationship ends and begins again, the less likely a couple is to be happy in it. But not every rekindled couple gets trapped on that merry-go-round, or thrown off it into the dust. In fact, getting back with an ex is not so uncommon: One 2013 study found that more than a third of cohabiting couples and one-fifth of married ones have broken up before.

Of course, some partners are better off apart. I was curious, though, about those who have reunited—and stayed reunited for years. They couldn't make it work, and then they could. What changed?

I talked with several people who are happily back together with former exes. When their relationships ended, they largely thought that ending was permanent. But time passed; their lives changed, and so did they. And when they returned to each other, they returned determined: They debriefed; they problem-solved; they tested; they improved. Their do-overs, they told me, taught them a lot about what makes relationships last. A solid union requires a curious mix of chemistry, timing, and work—not just for second-chance couples, but for all of us.

Reuniting with a past partner is, for many people, a deeply appealing prospect. In a 2021 Match.com survey of 5,000 single Americans, nearly a third of participants said that they would get back with an ex if they could. If that proportion seems high, consider this: Falling in love changes us physiologically, even permanently. After a breakup, the brain's functional architecture doesn't always go back to the way it was before.

Helen Fisher, an anthropologist who helped administer the Match survey, told me that these changes are adaptive: Finding a partner—"life's greatest prize"—can motivate us to mate and pass down our genes. Not only are we likely to try to win the prize, then, "but we're going to try to keep it." Fisher has identified common stages that people go through after being dumped: first shock, but then protest. People will attempt to change, or make the other jealous—they try to win them back. Even when you're the one who did the dumping, Fisher told me, "the brain doesn't forget love."

With love sticky in their memory, it's easy for exes to envision how things might look if only the past had gone differently. That's called counterfactual thinking, and it goes hand in hand with regret. According to Daniel Pink, the author of /The Power of Regret/, regret over lost or

broken connections is one of the most common types. Usually, there's no way to know whether the rosy scenarios you imagine are just hypothetical. But getting back with an ex, Pink told me, is a "rare chance to actually live a counterfactual." Reunited partners can test whether their regrets are only speculative, or whether they signal something to be salvaged.

After years and years of counterfactual dreaming, reuniting can feel transcendent. Take Lara Osborne and Mark Jevons, who started dating when she was 14 and he was 15; they "had an absolute blast," as he put it, growing up together on the southern coast of England, swimming in the ocean and spending nearly every day together. But their relationship ended when Jevons left to join the Royal Air Force at 19; eventually they both had children with other people, but they never forgot each other. Then, when they spent a night together in 2017, the 19 years prior seemed to melt away. "We still fit perfectly," Osborne told me over email. "I didn't want to go home." Now they're engaged and living in England. Others I spoke with had more gradual but no less compelling reconciliations: They'd kept in touch, or gotten back in touch, and slowly realized that they hadn't felt—maybe would never feel—the same about anyone else.

This heat seems to be common to second-chance relationships. From 1993 to 1996, the late Nancy Kalish, then a psychologist at California State University at Sacramento, surveyed 1,001 participants who'd reunited with a "lost love" after being broken up for at least five years—and found that 71 percent said this was the most emotional romance they'd experienced. That passion, she noted, seemed to make for above-average sex lives. Her sexual-satisfaction scale went from one to five, but many respondents wrote down numbers higher than five, or added notes in the margin. "The sex was the best that anyone in history had ever had!!!!!!!!!!" said one; "WOW!!" wrote in another.

Clearly, rekindled romance has some special force—even when it doesn't last forever. Perhaps that's because in finding a lost love, you get back a lost piece of yourself, too. A second-chance relationship, I believe, is a powerful act of resurrection: By restoring your ex — a part of your past —to the present, you reverse a loss. You also rewrite a narrative. It might feel, however irrationally, like your life has been not just an aimless zigzag—full of wasted years, unnecessary pain—but an arc, always leading back to this person.

But everything that makes second-chance love tempting—and potentially incredible—also makes it dangerous. People who are tempted to get back with an ex might be remembering the joy but not the pain of their past relationship; they might just be longing for familiarity. And, of course, they're not really going back in a time machine; the context is different now, and so are they. You can see why researchers might be concerned for these couples. But Kale Monk, a professor at the University of Missouri who studies cyclical relationships, told me that although he typically associates the breakup-and-renewal cycle with toxic dynamics, his research has shown that it actually encourages some partners to commit to each other anew. Why, then, do some attempts to rekindle lead to sparks, while others end in flames?

According to "relational-turbulence theory," life transitions or disruptions can challenge partners, forcing them to reassess their routines and even their future. But turbulent moments can also present opportunities. Denise Solomon, a communication scientist who helped develop this theory, told me that breakups can lead couples to reset and adjust their relationships. In fact, according to René Dailey, a communication professor at the University of Texas at Austin, those who capitalize on their breakup to change the relationship have the most positive outcomes of all on-off couples.

In order to really reset, couples need to figure out what exactly went wrong, or they can risk falling back into old patterns. Most of the people I spoke with told me that their breakups were a result of failure to

communicate—about what they were going through, what they wanted from life or from the relationship. Kevin and Denise Carney, for instance, got married at 23 and 24, respectively, and had kids soon after; overwhelmed by early parenthood, they didn't discuss their own needs, and divorced while their children were still young. Other people I spoke with had felt they were putting in different levels of commitment than their partner was, and let indignation build up; several told me they had been dealing with some early-life trauma and carried that baggage into their dynamic. Upon reuniting, though, they were all desperate to avoid another split. So they dug deep—not for buried resentments, but for their own responsibility. Teresa Cunningham, who's now remarried to her husband, Bruce, in St. George, Utah, told me that was a revelation for both of them: "Quit worrying about your partner and how perfect
they're supposed to be. My gosh, look at yourself."

Bruce and Teresa are actually a /third/-chance couple. They met through friends in 1973, when he was a student at Brigham Young University and she'd just graduated; they still remember standing on a balcony that night, joking that they'd be married within the week. The following year, they did get married—but about 15 years later, they divorced. One year after that, they remarried, but that time didn't last either; their good moments were so good, but somehow, they couldn't stop seeing each other as adversaries.

Then, in 2009, Bruce's father passed away. When Teresa came to the funeral, she was treated like family; she sat with him and his mother. In 2014, she started joining their Sunday meal each week, eating and talking and playing Scrabble. Eventually, they couldn't deny it any longer: They were still in love. But they knew how ridiculous it seemed. When they got married for the third time shortly after, they were ecstatic—and petrified of another failure.

After about a year of bliss, their old issues started to surface. They tried to talk things through, but they were having a hard time. Then, one day, they tried something that changed everything. /For the next week/, they decided, /let's see each other as perfect/. It was just a casual exercise, but it shifted their mindset; they started giving each other the benefit of the doubt, avoiding what Bruce called "an escalation of misunderstandings." And when they each assumed that the other was in the right, they had to look frankly at their own faults. It was empowering.

Once Bruce and Teresa realized they could /learn/ to resolve their disputes, they were off to the races: They began studying compassionate communication, going to workshops, and reading expert advice. Now, every day, they share positive affirmations—deciding, for instance, to reach for "joyful loving awareness"—and each lists three things they're grateful for, one always about the other. Those practices might sound cheesy, but listening to Bruce and Teresa describe them together, excitedly bouncing off each other, I started to suspect that the specific methods aren't the point. What matters is that they have a
shared project—keeping their relationship going—and they're in it together. "I didn't see us as on the same team before," Teresa told me. "I saw him as wanting this and me wanting this … Now I see us as wanting the same thing. And that really is a good life for the other person."

The Cunninghams feel sure that their whole chaotic journey—more than two decades spent together, and nearly the same amount of independent growth—has led them right to where they need to be. And according to Solomon, certainty about the relationship is crucial for couples weathering turbulence. You might think second-chance couples have heightened /uncertainty/; they know it's possible for their relationship to break. But many of the people I spoke with had explored other options while apart—and came back more confident in their bond. "The grass is no greener; it's just a different shade of brown," Denise Carney learned.

These couples had issues, yes, but being apart was worse. Given the clear option to move on, they chose each other again—even knowing that it wouldn't always be easy. That means their relationship now feels especially precious. They're lucky, they know, to have another chance at all.

Two theories about romance, I'd argue, get a lot of traction in American culture. One holds that partners need a "spark," some fission between their personalities. The other maintains that you could probably be happy with many different people, if the timing is right and you work at it. But second-chancers know that love is a complicated mix of enchantment and effort, of happenstance and strategy.

The people I spoke with had a connection magnetic enough to pull them back to one another, sometimes across decades and continents. Several said their bonds were meant to be—even the ones who preached working at the relationship. "We're like rubber bands," Denise Carney, now remarried to Kevin and living in Phillipsburg, New Jersey, told me. "We can only get so far apart before we're slamming back together again." And research does suggest that chemistry—that complex physical and emotional pull—matters. Fisher believes that if someone fits your "love map," the list of conscious and unconscious things you're looking for in a partner, then there's a good chance they'll continue to, regardless of bumps in the road.

But no matter how unique a bond is, timing can get in the way. I heard about relationships challenged by one partner struggling to find a job, or grappling with their mental health, or moving away; about partners in different life stages, ready for different levels of commitment. The truth is that we're not wholly separate from our circumstances. They shape who we are.

If the timing can be wrong, though, it can be right again in the future. The Carneys got older, more mature, and learned to support each other through parenthood. Others, spurred by their breakups, went to therapy, got new degrees or jobs, and proved their commitment. Bruce Cunningham is studying to be a marriage and family therapist, so he can help couples struggling like he and Teresa once did. As contexts change, people change, and so do their relationships. Even couples who never break up evolve with their circumstances. "It's amazing how many people say, /We were wonderful in the beginning. Then, in our middle years with children, it was too much/," Fisher said. "/And now we're madly in love again/."

One day, then, you might happen upon an ex and find that they're somehow different. Maybe they seem more patient, mellowed out. Maybe they're listening to you without the old distraction. Maybe they've realized they /do/ want kids, or they've stopped drinking so much, or they say they're sorry, so sorry, for how immature they were back then. Maybe they forgive you for your mistakes. Maybe you realize that you have changed, and how funny it is, how very lucky, that people do.

Perhaps a second-chance relationship actually is a sort of time machine—but the secret is to set the dial not to the past, but to the future. To return to old love might be wonderful. Even better is to walk out of the machine into a new world, to find your partner and yourself both transformed and fundamentally the same, and to know, having lost each other before, that you wouldn't want to time travel with anyone else.