

SWIPE LIFE

Can You Ever Really Break Up In The Digital Age?

Once on the internet, always on the internet.



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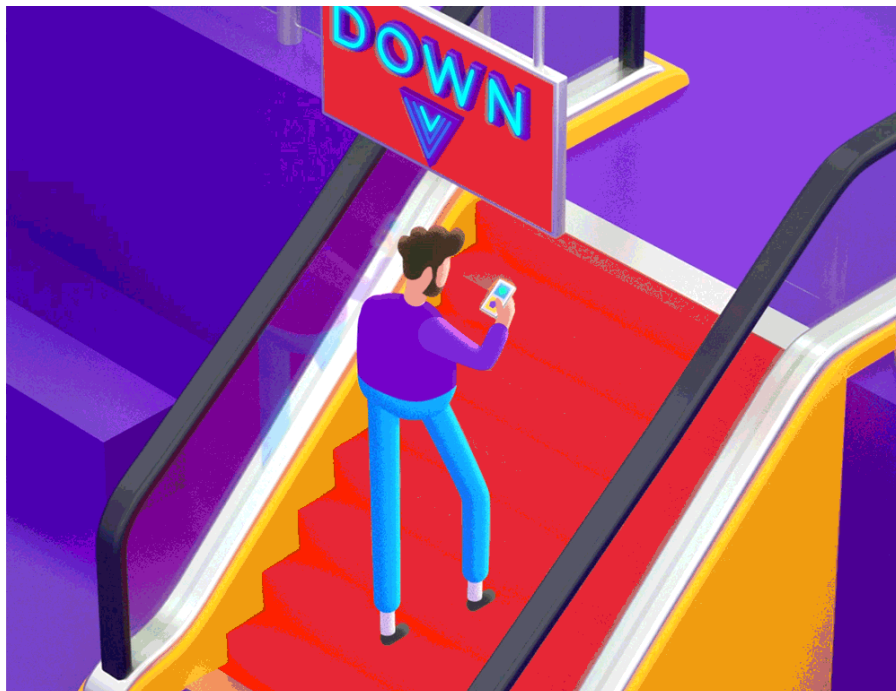


Photo by Sam Burton/Stocksy

It's one of those nights — I'm bored, a little lonely, and although I'm at peace with my breakup, I keep going down the rabbit hole of my ex's tagged Instagram photos. It wasn't intended to be a torture device, but it became one as soon as I found myself face to face with evidence of his moving on with a different girl. I remember this moment clearly. It was the moment I became another casualty of the digital-age breakup.

“Ten years ago, if you broke up with someone, that was essentially it,” says Millennial dating expert and “We Met At Acme” podcast host Lindsey Metselaar.

You parted ways and, albeit wallowing in pain, were able to live in blissful ignorance of a former partner's everyday life. Fast-forward to today's social media-driven culture, and the chances of running into a former boo as you navigate your way through the internet are pretty high, especially when visual platforms like Instagram continue to reign.

“Social media can prolong the pain of a breakup because there is residue. In addition to photos popping up, you usually still follow all of their friends. Seeing their posts and stories will constantly remind you of them — and the cycle continues,” Metselaar says.

Today, the average American is active on three social media platforms — and it's easy to hypothesize that number being higher for those in their teens and 20s. Although the most popular platforms have blocking measures in place, let's be honest: Who among us hasn't looked through their ex's tagged photos only to end up on their new S.O.'s profile and realize that it takes much more than a block button to make it out of a digital-era breakup alive? (Wait, that's me. I'm projecting.)

Here's the real question: Is it possible to fully break up in the digital age? And more importantly, is the process of breaking up in such a public manner affecting our mental health and future relationships? It all depends on your relationship to the internet.

Privacy has always been a fallacy.

“Breakups have never really been private: eventually your friends, family, and community will know,” says San Francisco-based marriage and family therapist Jodie Stein. “What’s changing in our digital age is that we have less control over how the story is told.”

As soon as we include our relationship status as part of our social-media footprint — whether that be in an Instagram caption, a tweet, even a Snap with a funny filter — we set ourselves up for the prying eyes and assumptions of family and friends. “If you are someone who posts often and you go silent during a breakup, people get suspicious. If you are someone who never posts and all of a sudden you are posting after a breakup, people also get suspicious,” Metselaar says. “We live in an age where people feel entitled to your breakup news.”

Whether you’re still rocking Facebook’s notoriously popular “relationship status” section launched in the 2000s, or you’ve debuted your first #couplegoals shot on Instagram, publicly sharing your partnership is, for better or for worse, often taken as an invitation to ask questions. Once a breakup does occur, you might find yourself not being able to mourn the loss in peace, but instead fielding questions like, “What happened with that girl? I LOVED you two together!”

Take off the rose-tinted glasses.

Even more painful than having to revisit the subject with others can be choosing whether to cleanse your platforms of any trace of your relationship. The digital world doesn’t lend itself to an out of sight, out of mind approach, and simply being on your phone might bring back memories that slow down the healing process.

“We may have the tendency to look back and reminisce about the times in which the relationship was working and brought us happiness,” says relationship researcher and psychology professor Marisa Cohen. “When you look at photos of the relationship, it can be especially painful, because you are viewing it through rose-tinted glasses. This is a harsh contrast with the [reality of the] now-ended relationship.”

You can handle the breakup how you want on your own profiles, but when it comes to your ex's social media presence, you have pretty much no say. "It is especially important to give yourself time to heal if you were the person who was broken up with. Continuing to see or be in contact with your ex-partner may prevent you from moving on as you may continue to hold unrealistic expectations that the relationship will mend itself and you will get back together."

Of course, it's possible to unfollow and block away — but for many, gaining the necessary self-control to do so is all but impossible. Mandy, a 25-year-old marketing consultant, can relate. She admits that her breakup wasn't heart wrenching, and she and her ex kept up with each other's achievements and general well-being — that is, until he got a new girlfriend.

"Slowly this girl started showing up more and more in his stories, and every time I saw her, my heart ached — like, physically," she says. "I knew I cared more than I should, and that being social-media friends was not good for me. I eventually just stopped opening any of his posts and had to silence his story on Instagram. I was genuinely happy for him, but it hurt to know that it was officially over."

Others, like 25-year-old promotions assistant Hoku, have no trouble unfollowing as soon as the breakup happens. However, when her exes don't reciprocate, they still end up being present on her social channels. "Seeing their name in my views and likes are constant reminders of them, even if I don't have access to their profile. I think the dating term for that is 'haunting,' and that's what it feels like," she says.

Your mental health might suffer.

All of this can be pretty detrimental to your mental health. Firstly, combined with our previous traumas and wounds, "social media can make us feel judged, rejected, and not enough in more consistent and public ways," says Stein.

It can also heavily affect our ability to move on. According to a study published in the journal "Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking," keeping tabs on a former partner on Facebook can disrupt your emotional recovery and limit personal growth. Participants reported that so-called

Facebook-stalking led to higher distress surrounding a breakup, as well as more negative feelings and longing for their ex. Those who remained Facebook friends instead of checking in on their exes from afar also reported a lower amount of personal growth (measured through self-esteem, attachment style, or one's behavior in their relationships with others).

“Although breakups trigger complex feelings — grief, guilt, anger, relief — the hardest task is often letting go of the primary attachment bond, or feeling that this is your main person,” Stein says. One way to counteract this is lack of contact, but because of the instant window that social media provides into the other person's life, this can be the hardest thing to do. “Similar to an addictive cycle, each time we have a bit of the drug, we must go through the pain of withdrawal again,” she adds.

Suffering through a public breakup doesn't just affect your mental health in the moment. The experience also follows you through future relationships. For one, the way the relationship ended and appeared to end will affect whether you decide to share your relationship on your social media in the future.

Your behavior now, however understandable, can also keep you on the hook. “If your breakup plays out publicly and you lash out or say something negative about your former significant other in a moment of weakness or impulsivity, this can live on,” Cohen says.

So, can you *really* break up in the digital age?

The jury's still out. On the one hand, Metselaar says, not really. “You can unfollow them and all of their friends on social media, but you'll still want to check on them every now and then.”

However, Stein argues that while you can't control what your ex does, you can control yourself. If you establish boundaries and use the delete and/or block functions, you can move on and completely break the cycle. That said, it's not a linear journey. “Be kind to yourself as you slip and get back on course,” she says.

Cohen, who went through a very public breakup herself, stands somewhere in between. “Even now, things either I or my friends said will pop up in my (Facebook) memories. The trace of social media is extremely challenging to

erase, but it's still easier than trying to erase that person from your memory or your heart. If a person was important to you at one point in your life, they will likely leave an imprint on you — and on your online presence.”