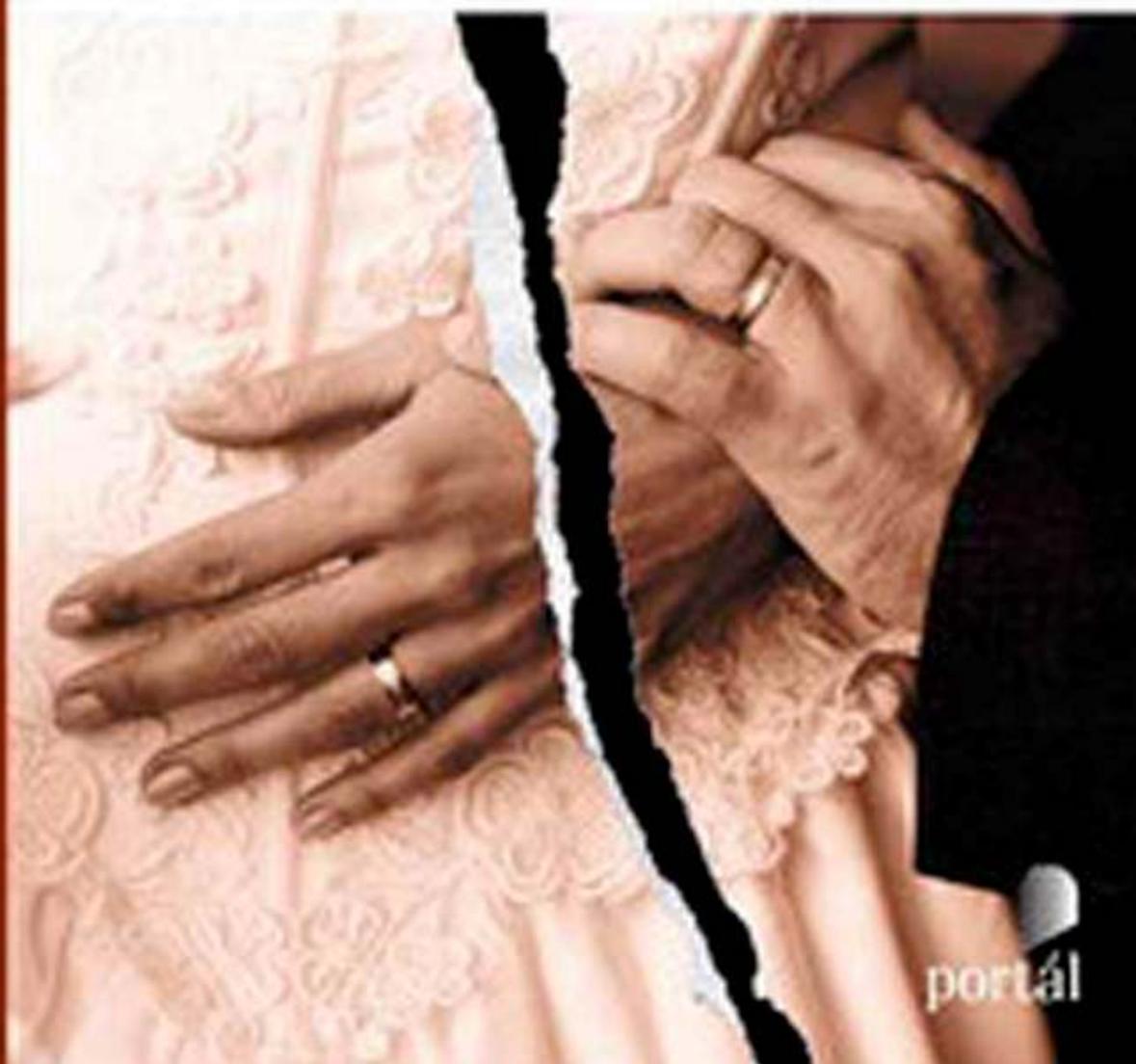


PSYCHOLOGY

Partners and breakups

Jeroným Klimeš



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Introduction

It is said that a treated flu lasts for a week, and an untreated one for seven days. Breakups are similar. Everyone would like to have it over with as quickly as possible, but make no mistake, breaking up is simply a process that takes a certain period of time and it is not possible to significantly speed it up.

However, when you think about the saying about the flu you will find that it is only two-thirds true. Yes, a treated or an untreated flu lasts for a week, but a neglected flu may last for seven months. It is the same with breakups. They also have to last for a certain minimum length of time. However, one may ensure that they are not neglected, for "neglected" breakups can plague you for the rest of your life. The

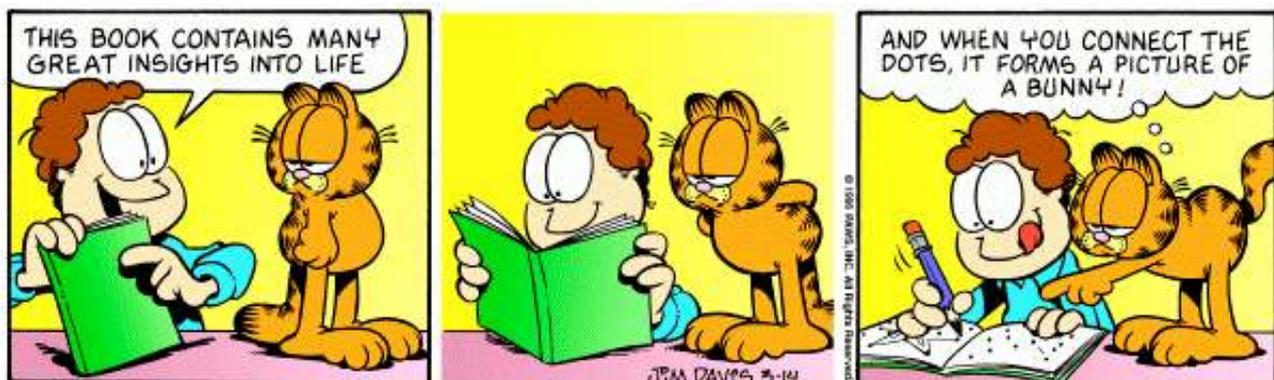
goal of this book is to show the reader how handle a breakup, to understand what kind of forces are working with them in the game, what he or she must do so that the situation does not worsen further, all the things that may happen.

This book is intended for "regular people," and therefore describes normal, natural reactions to a breakup. I am not describing cases here where the divorcing partners display major psychopathology – psychosis, psychopathy, dementia, serious drug addiction, or the like. In such cases, I recommend consulting with an expert in these areas.

While writing I was thinking of two groups of readers: mostly those who are going through a breakup and would like to understand what is going on, why this had to happen to them, and what they can do about it. The second group is comprised of my colleagues – specialists who are trying to guide these individuals along their difficult paths.

Satisfying both of these groups is not an easy task, and therefore I have tried to write a readable text without, on the one hand, an excess of scholarly terminology and references to the professional literature, but on the other, I want to describe things in such depth that the reader can truly grasp the nature of the problem and will be able to effectively take action. In any case, there is a glossary included at the end of the book that explains the basic terminology.

III. 1



The book begins with a description of the stages people go through when their relationships are falling apart. Here we run into many phenomena which we will deal with in greater detail further along in the text. These are the forces of attraction that hold a relationship together and the forces of aversion that break it apart. Of the forces of aversion we will mainly concentrate on manipulation and degenerated communication. We will also get acquainted with fantasy

figures; i.e.: with the way that former partners are preserved in our thoughts, and what kind of damage they can do.

Wishing readers much success in solving their own and other people's difficulties,

JK

Acknowledgements

Completing a book is usually an opportunity to thank all of those who directly or indirectly contributed to its creation. I'm therefore pleased to take advantage of this opportunity to honor the support from those closest to me: my wife Michaela and daughter Judita, and parents on both sides. Among my friends and colleagues I would like to mention Jitka Marelová and Hana Kubíková whose careful editing, pertinent and humorous comments. I would also like to thank all the doctors and nurses who took such good care of me during my own health difficulties, especially lymphomabuster" MUDr. Kateřina Benešová from the Institute of Hematology and Blood Transfusion.

I also want to thank the named authors as well as the anonymous ones who drew the cartoons with which I illustrate abstract processes. They are wonderfully able to make these visible. Thanks are also due to Vojtěch Kučera from the publishing house Portál for his patient editing work.

Chapter 1

Displaced Stages of the Breakup

In the first part of the book we will go over the stages that partners most often experience during their breakups. We will show how these stages are mutually displaced, what impact that has on communication, and how the methods of manipulation and other forms of interaction between the partners change, including fantasy work. The function of the psychologist will also be emphasized during the given stages of the breakup, and the criteria by which is it possible to evaluate whether or not a partner relationship has hope of being salvaged. Particular phenomena are only described here. Their explanations will be found in further parts of the book.

There are a great many types of breakups, but they all have one thing in common. They are preceded by a period in which the partners try and see whether it is still going to work out for them together. Therefore, they invest time, money, effort, fantasy, and compromises into the relationship; in short, they sacrifice all kinds of things to give the relationship further possibilities to develop and live. This is understandably risky, but even those who have the feeling that they do not love the other partner, and that they would like to send them away the next day, or that they are only sort of passively being pulled along by events invest in their relationships. Even these people think over and imagine how life with the partner could possibly be.

One's own breakup brings the necessity of simply forgetting about these investments and cutting one's losses. The losses are always on both sides, but they are not necessarily symmetrical. One of the partners may lose much more than the other. Because of this fact, refined forms of manipulation and fantasies of revenge are often played out between the two opponents.

Relationships fall apart for external and internal reasons. The external reasons are often difficult to influence. It is hardly possible to prevent a partner meeting someone at work. We also cannot stop disease or unavoidable separation. We will dedicate more attention to the internal reasons for the aversion of a relationship, because they are possible to influence. (Though even this is not an easy task).

Partners, like drowning people, usually cannot be reproached for not having tried to be rescued. Rather, with their persistent attempts they inflict damage that hastens the breakup rather than prevents it. In the cases where someone does not pursue any activity at all, it is usually from resignation that stems from a feeling of futility, the sense that these attempts will gain nothing, and from their having no idea what they should do.

The task of the psychologist is to judge the viability of the relationship, to understand the stages the partners are going through, and protect clients most of all against their own defensive reactions that go against their interests.

Conditions of the Stages

One of the most common commissions by clients is answering the questions: “Can I still save this relationship? Do we have to split up? Can we remain friends?” It is possible to find answers to all these questions, but it is usually not easy. The reason is surely the following: the more the partners are mature personalities, the less they need to break up, and rather are likely to find a common *modus vivendi*. If, despite this, they do go their separate ways, their breakups tend to be polite, dignified, and protective of children and of both of the partners. The breakup itself then has had a serious and understandable reason, it is quick, and without manipulation or a war over property and children. The partners are not caught by surprise by forces of attraction after the breakup because they knew from the beginning what they are getting into and what they are losing. In this form, a breakup is, in its way, a joint decision. But how many of these breakups are there?

For example, in the Czech Republic and in the USA, more than 50 % of marriages end in divorce, and most of these divorces are just as foolish and immature as the reasons that once brought the partners together. Immature decisions at the beginning of the breakup increases the likelihood that the breakup can be averted and the relationship saved. We are, of course, working within a vicious circle, because the more immature the decision (and therefore the personality), the less the partner is able to create, maintain, renew and paradoxically, even to end a relationship. <???čím horší schod tím horší rozchod> Fortunately, and also unfortunately, we live with partners not because they are a mature personality, but because we love them. We share with them not only the good, but also the bad, such as their own and even our own immaturity.

The explanations put forth here suppose a certain degree of immaturity that is in fact the condition for the origination of all the stages described. The following features are the most frequent and prevailing attributes of an immature breakup.

1. Asymmetrical decision-making. The breakup is not a joint decision, but a one-sided act coming from one of the partners. For example, Petr Uhl after having been sentenced to imprisonment for fifteen years for his dissident activities for fifteen years, offered to his

wife Anna Šabatová¹ that she did not have to wait for him. This is an offer of a breakup that is a joint decision. Their relationship even lasted through about five years of separation, even though, as A. Š. told me: “It wasn’t easy.” That is evidently the mark of great personal maturity and ability for self-sacrifice. In the description of the stages, we will be assuming, however, that one of the partners approaches the other with the suggestion of breaking up, that it is against the will of the second partner, and that it is unexpected. This forms the starting asymmetry of the decision and divides the partners into the initiator of the breakup and the defender of the relationship.

2. Manipulation. Not only the beginning of the relationship (courtship), but also its end is accompanied by heightened tendencies for manipulation, which were weaker, and may have even seemed to be sleeping during the relationship. The partners’ crisis brings on a situation of war, and the necessity of portioning out everything held in common into his things and her things. Suddenly it’s as if there was twice as little of everything. Before the breakup one vacuum is enough, after the breakup two are necessary. The family home and children of course cannot easily be divided into halves...

For these and other reasons, there appears “either-or” thinking and distribution of guilt: whose fault is everything? Thus, a game develops of determining who is stronger, there is chronic manipulation, perceptions of who’s “up” and who’s “down,” etc. The manipulative war also leads to underestimating the forces of attraction.

3. Underestimating the forces of attraction. The initiator of the breakup expects at the outset that by breaking up he or she will mainly get rid of what bothered him (or her) in the relationship. They do not surmise what the relationship and the partner continuously and unknowingly provide, because they take it all for granted. They do not know that when breaking up, the most difficult thing to overcome are long-term forces of attraction. These forces awaken in the fantasy and paradoxical stages, when the initiator of the breakup is then surprised by their strength. Thus originates another chance to renew and rescue

¹ Petr Uhl and Anna Šabatová are well known dissidents in the Czech Republic who struggled against the communist regime, similar to, for example, their friend former president Václav Havel. Anna Šabatová became Deputy Ombudsman after the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

the relationship. Underestimating the forces of attraction is a common illusion, as seen in the film Kramer versus Kramer.

Immaturity in the relationship, which is indicated by these three characteristics, is the prerequisite for the stages described below. There exist many other types of immaturity in personalities that can complicate a relationship and also the progression of its breakup; for example, an inability to make definite decisions, self-hatred, a need for symbiotic relationships, and psychopathic reactivity (see Glossary).

Graph 1

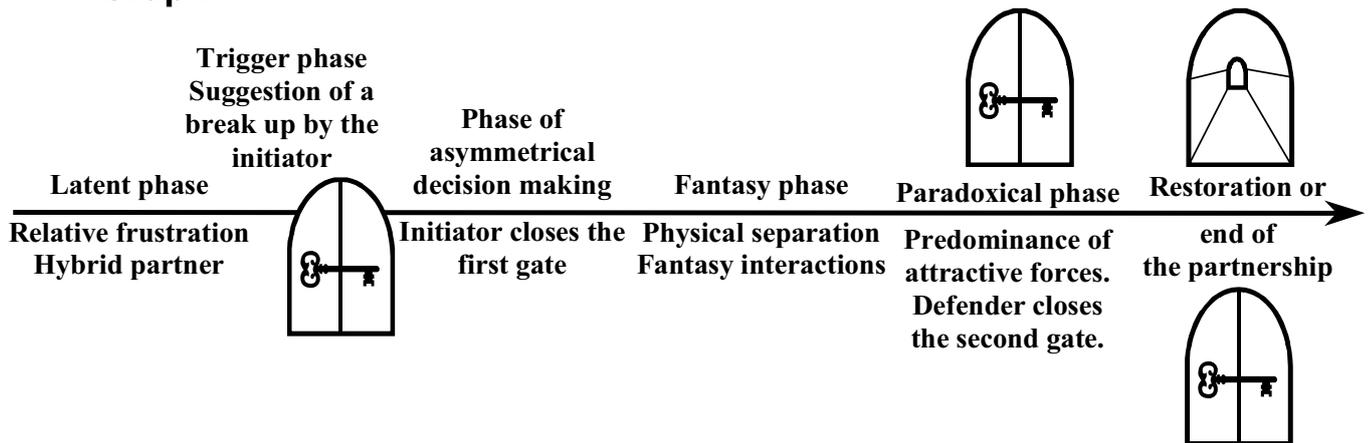


Diagram of individual stages and the main processes going on in them. Each stage brings questions and answers, offers certain possibilities, and takes others away. Typically, these stages are displaced and experienced asymmetrically by the partners.

Latent Stage

It is possible to view partnership as a two-sided offer of a common life path – mental and physical. We ought to reconceptualize stumbling blocks that appear along the way as crossroads from whence the fateful paths of the partners lead in different directions. This divergence can be apparent at the mental and the physical levels. At the physical level this is represented by forced separation, work in a faraway place, and the like. At the mental level it is represented by disagreements, situational and systematic misunderstandings, different expectations and worldviews. In the boundaries between mental and physical separations are illnesses, from somatic through mental. When the degree of divergence exceeds a critical value, one of the partners will begin to propose a formal breakup. This moment usually comes

only as the culmination of a longer-running crisis that the partners either underestimated or else simply did not know what to do about.

Every relationship is made possible when the partners' forces of attraction are stronger than the forces of aversion. The strength of the chain is given by its links; the relationship falls apart when the forces of aversion overcome at least one member of the couple. He (or she) gives way first and suggests a breakup. Thus originates the asymmetry between the initiator of the breakup, who wants to end the relationship, and the defender who wants to preserve it. The terminology of initiator – defender is useful because it is gender neutral, for the initiator and also the defender may be either the man or woman in a couple.

The latent stage manifests itself in the growth of an internal feeling of moving apart which one partner suddenly realizes. The other partner often does not reflect it at all, pushes it aside, undervalues it, or overlooks, for example, the influence of his own ill-tempered outbursts on his partner. Some of them are aware of such things, but they do not know what they should do. This kind of resignation appears outwardly in rhetoric such as: "That's not my problem, it's my partner's. He should work it out for himself." These are exactly the kinds of transfer of responsibility that lead to chronic blindness and de facto also to an inability to seek professional help at this stage. Nonetheless, even in this phase when one partner is more threatened by the problem, a decision to break up can crystallize. (Precisely according to a psychological law: problems, in this case the breakup, are brought on by the one who feels him or herself to be disadvantaged.) This phase tends to last for a long time. It often comprises several years, during which both of the partners may grow increasingly distant from one another.

Each of the two partners, of course, experiences the time in this stage differently. The future initiator of the breakup is in the greater tension at this point, and therefore his subjective time passes more quickly. The opponent – the defender who stands up for the relationship – is for the time being relatively at ease, though in the future they will claim that nothing unusual was going on during this period and everything seemed fine.

The therapist should thoroughly, albeit retrospectively, map what was going on in this stage, because the partner who will be speaking

about it the most is the one who decided upon the breakup – the initiator. The defender will not remember this period, will not consider it important, and probably will reproach the initiator that he is bringing up dirty laundry from the past, as though there were nothing good in their relationship.

This stage is when the relationship stands its greatest chance of being rescued, but at the same time, there is the least opportunity for doing so. The partners simply are not yet going to visit a psychologist at this time.

Relative Deprivation

One friend came to consult with me about her intention to leave her present partner. She had the possibility of beginning a new relationship with a very well-positioned man who had offered her a luxurious vacation abroad. She didn't want to two-time her original partner, so she thought over whether it would be better to end the first, not very functional relationship. When analyzing her situation I expressed her feelings thus:

“Better two birds in the bush than one in the hand.”

“Of course!” she cried out, “That's the old saying!”

“No way, you've got it backwards,” I corrected her.

“Yeah? Really? Better a bird in the hand than two in the bush? Ahhh...aha!” my friend exclaimed in surprise.

However, this mistake she had made exactly described her story in the latent phase.

Sayings like this often express the exact opposite of what people feel. They can be wise counselors, rising above our short-term and often impetuous deeds, and serving as a counterbalance. It's no different with this adage – it also helps bring people's feelings back to equilibrium. The horizon of a new relationship is more attractive than the security of the old one. Future initiators often have this feeling. It is very intense and they are willing to do practically anything in order to prove that they have sufficient reason to break up their relationships. This is a phenomenon that is humorously illustrated in the following picture where a swan is barking in order to convince himself that he is a dog and must therefore leave his wife.

III. 2



© United Media/Bulls

In reality, though, these things are not a laughing matter. They are often described in fairy tales (for example, in Jan Werich's *Fimfárum*): a woman who wants to get rid of her husband gives him impossible tasks to fulfill. The uncompleted task then becomes the supposed grounds for their breakup. To give a further illustration, people often perceive domestic violence as a taboo, so it is incomprehensible to them that, for instance, hysterical and manipulative wives may provoke arguments that devolve into physical violence. Hysterical women mind physical violence less than boredom in a relationship. The violence provoked by them is not the reason for a breakup, but it serves as self-persuasive memory and subjective proof that it is time to change partners, as well as serving to persuade those around her that this man was truly rotten. The behavior of hysterical women is theatrical and extreme, but even in the normal population we meet with the same thing to a lesser degree.

The theory of relative deprivation explains these dispositions (Kunzick, 1995). This theory, originally sociological, explores the relationship between objective frustration and how it is subjectively experienced (i.e.: the relationship between objective and subjective frustration.) It demonstrates that it does not depend on an absolute measure of suffering, but on the comparison (relation) with another condition, with other possibilities, and eventually with the situation of the reference group. The greater the awareness and the hope that one can improve the present situation, the more the given frustration is aggravating and the more energy they put into changing their present situation. There is, therefore, no direct measure, for example, the greater the hunger, the more a person complains. What is important is the situation of the reference group of the person. So long as, for

example, people around them also suffer hunger, they will take hunger to be a normal part of life. Looking at his or her hungry fellows imparts the information that it is not possible to do anything about hunger. In other words, the degree of consciously-experienced deprivation is proportional to the perceived possibilities to eliminate it. If someone is suffering from some unpleasantness it will subjectively bother them more the more they are convinced that it is possible to eliminate the problem. The most frustrating thing is the inaccessibility of the goal that is practically within reach.

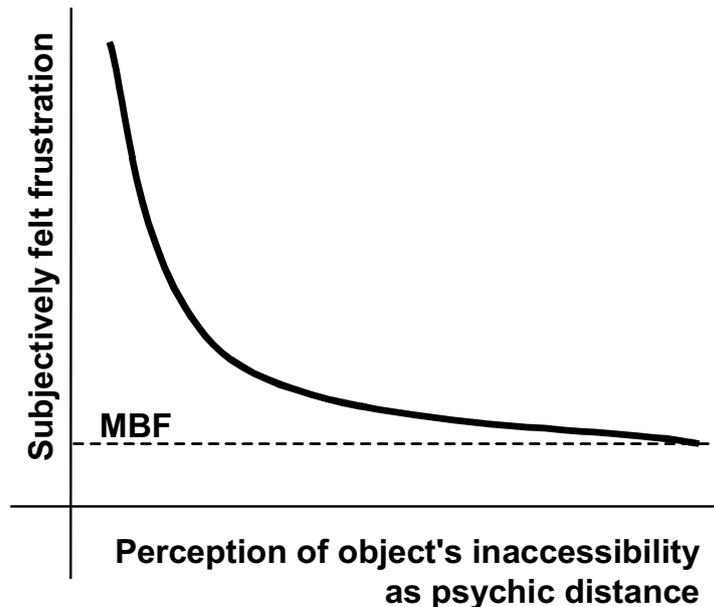
Relative frustration can explain much of the illogical behavior not only of people, but also of animals. For example, it is said that hunters in the rainforest use a peculiar trap for monkeys – they place a banana into a small hole. The monkey can put its hand in, but when it grasps the banana it cannot remove its hand from the opening. The hunters are taking advantage of the fact that the monkey is not capable of letting go of the banana that it holds in its hand. From the external perspective is it absurd to risk one's life for one banana. Even a monkey would not do this if the banana was two meters away, but the relative frustration of its value simply inflates to unrealistic proportions so long as the monkey has it within reach, or even holds it in its hand.

This example illustrates what is happening in breakups. In the latent phase relative frustration has a destructive influence on the initiator of the breakup. This partner, as a rule, suffers from the unpleasant traits of the partner, but the degree to which they irritate her and whether they seem unbearable depends on how much she is considering the possibility of breaking up. If a man says to himself: "I will divorce my wife and then have peace," at that moment his partner begins to seem simply impossible and any more living together as insufferable. He begins to act in accordance with this feeling, and thus the family situation goes downhill.

Sometimes it is curious to listen to the scurrilous allegations with which otherwise very intelligent people support their assertion of the utter uselessness and the dark sides of their partners whom they wish to break up with. For example, a man argues that his wife never brewed him tea. She protests that even at the time of their worst marital crisis, she often poured hot water onto a teabag left in a mug and brought it to his work desk. He then in all seriousness claims that that is not brewing

him tea because he put the teabag there. These absurd debates serve only for one goal – to convince myself that there are sufficient reasons to break up. The partner’s behavior is only a pretense that justifies my plans. A similar example of the effect of relative deprivation can be found in the battles of parents over visitation rights with their children. Here the slightest inconsistency in the court’s execution of judgment lays the foundation for hope to prevail in a manipulative conflict that rages out of control and mostly harms the children.

Graph 2



The curve illustrates the increase in subjectively experienced frustration as compared with absolute frustration as the object becomes more accessible. Absolute frustration is objectively definable. For example, being hungry for a day, going for a month without sex, or not having an MP3 player. People perceive these absolute measures of frustrations differently. The degree to which they are subjectively burdened by their frustration correlates with the hope they have of alleviating it. The most frustrating thing is having the feeling that the source of frustration can be easily removed. They mind it the least when they are convinced that nothing can be done with the situation. The accessibility of the objective is deduced to a great extent by looking to their reference group. If all of the subject’s classmates have an MP3 player, then why don’t I have one? If no one has an MP3 player, its absence does not weigh upon me.

The dotted line shows minimal basal frustration (MBF). This is the minimal perceived frustration without regard for the distance of the objective. Primary needs have a nonzero MBF. For example, going hungry for a day is unpleasant without a view to whether those around one are suffering from hunger or not. Next to this, secondary needs, for example, the aforementioned ownership of an MP3 player, have a zero

MBF. If no one has the device, we do not even know that we are missing out on it.

Relative deprivation can appear in some of the following daydreams (in the case of a woman, analogous for a man):

1. Fantasizing about the qualities of a potential partner (whether real or imaginary);

2. Fantasizing about relief from the bad qualities of the current partner after breaking up with him (or, on the other hand, contemplating the potential losses);

3. Comparing her situation with the life of a friend, neighbor, co-worker (comparing her current husband with other men within the framework of her reference group).

When this comparison does not favour the current partner, the future initiator begins to consider making a change. First these are thoughts that cannot be easily dismissed. Then occasional waves of serious deliberation and doubts. Towards the end, flirting, infidelity, a series of arguments and similar behavior ensue, and eventually lead to beginning the breakup.

The Hybrid Partner

Once the future initiator begins to consider breaking up, gradually his or her idea of the partner, or more precisely, the mental representation of the partner breaks down. It is as though they were living with two partners: one is real and present, but this one isn't worth much in the eyes of the future initiator. The second is potential; that is, mostly based on fantasy and idealization. Thus the hybrid partner has appeared – a partner comprised of the real partner and the fantasy figure of a new potential partner.

This process is typical even in other areas of psychology. For example, with infertile couples the mental representation of the child they are unable to conceive breaks down: into their own dreamed-of baby that they cannot have, and the real one that is offered to them in adoption, and which seems unattractive to them (too old, handicapped, stupid, black, afflicted with “bad” genes, ugly, or whatever). Ultimately, even the bird in the hand and the two in the bush in the old adage represent a hybrid object – both are real and also fantasy representations of satisfying hunger.

The hybrid partner therefore suffers from many distortions. Mostly all the bad things that have afflicted the dissatisfied partner are ascribed to the current, real partner. And, on the other hand, all possible good things seem to represent the promise of brighter tomorrows offered by a new partner. Even if the real partner does something nice, the action is connected with the new partner like a promise: "I could also have this with a new partner, and much more of it."

During this breakdown the forces of aversion come to bear very intensively, but they work at a close range and within a short span of time – that is, they affect only those who are close by, i.e.: the real partner. The forces of attraction are weaker, but they work at a distance and over a longer time span – they are ascribed to idealized, non-present fantasy partners.

Relative frustration distorts the perception of the breakup. The future initiator takes the current state of things as a matter of course; something to which he or she is entitled. They only consider what more she or he could gain or take away by force.

We can express daydreams with a "mathematical" equation in this period:

$$\textit{prospective partner in fantasy} = \textit{current partner in reality} + \textit{bonus}$$

The future initiator takes for granted that all the services of the current partner are going to be provided and will be retained in the future with a new partner.

These feelings are very awkward or difficult to get a handle on and are generally connected with a manipulative attitude. It thus follows that every person suffers from them to a different degree. Unfortunately, the more someone suffers from these feelings, the less he or she is able to realize that this is so. Usually, only after a succession of very similar disappointments and breakups there is some realization of the peculiar process that makes two birds in the bush into one in the hand merely by getting out of the bush and examining one's hand. This is, however, a very painful path to walk, and it leads through difficult personal losses.

Processes Hidden by Ordinary Activities

The existence of the hybrid partner does not have to be too obvious – it can appear as chronic dissatisfaction with the relationship,

comparisons of the current partner with other people who are around, an urgent need to “escape” from the relationship, the feeling that it is not possible to hang in there any longer, and so on. All of these manifestations can be successfully masked by assigning blame - guilt distribution, which we will discuss later on, and in the meantime nothing is necessarily going on with the couple – at least nothing visible to outsiders.

Many people complain after a breakup that they were most hurt by their partner saying up to the last minute that he or she loves them, and then five minutes later announcing that they want to end it all. All of the considerations about the breakup may have been only running through the mind of the future initiator, who until the last moment, outwardly keeps up all of his or her former activities: displays of love, affection, touches, hugs, etc.

We can also find this breakdown of behavior and thinking in other areas of psychology, for example in religious or ideological conversion when crossing from a more into a less normative environment (Klimesh, 1996). We can thus assume that when breakups come like a “bolt out of the blue” in couples whose interactions have been formalized to ritualized communication, one of the partners has a strong fear of abandonment, or is afraid to share their real feelings, and instead outwardly keeps up their show of sweet little rituals.

Inability to Name Negative Feelings

Another treacherous aspect of the latent stage that makes it undetectable is the inability of clients to name the negative sides to their partnership. Again, we begin with a simple example from another field. Anorexic girls have a problem distinguishing negative feelings. Whatever happens to them, everything boils down to the one sentence: “Hmm, I’m too fat, if I was thinner everything would work out.” They repeat this sentence when they meet with something unpleasant – when they hear their parents in the living room having an argument, when their boyfriends leave them, when they feel sad, when they are alone, when they are tired. They react to all of these situations with only one sentence: “I’m too fat.” It is necessary to realize that these girls do know the word “tired,” but they are not able to describe their own experience with it.

Most readers will understand the definition of hypervigilance (heightened watchfulness) but it is unlikely that they imagine any of the concrete experiences being described by this term. It is possible that they have even suffered from hypervigilance at some point in their lives, but they never knew that this bizarre and quite unpleasant state of mind has been given this term by psychiatrists. Similarly, small children do not have the words to describe sexual encounters. They learn these when they reach puberty (therefore, during questioning it is necessary to illustrate sexual abuse on anatomically-correct dolls (called Jája and Pája in Czech). Similarly, not every adult can correctly name the experience termed “heartburn.”

Such gaps in the vocabulary carry tragic consequences for partnership. Clients are not able to describe their partners as they truly are, how they function, and with what forces are moving them. The psychologist only hears what problems the client has with the partner. The client describes his or her partner as an unpredictable generator of nonsensical actions: “But Doctor, just imagine what he did...” – “And why did he do that?” – “I don’t know. He’s just stupid!” Parents of bulimic girls react similarly uncomprehendingly: “Devouring two sticks of butter in one sitting – that just isn’t normal!”

III. 3



Psychology originated when humankind discovered they could not just make do with the term "blockhead"!

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When the psychologist runs into problems of this type, it is usually not possible to limit intervention to counseling only, because

clients literally do not speak the same language. It would be as though the psychologist were giving them advice in Martian. In such cases it is necessary to work through over the longer term with the client, so that he or she can understand the partner's behavior and motives, and so that they become able to name their own negative states of affairs with their rightful names, or, if the case so requires, eliminating a bad habit of trying to solve all their problems by "burning bridges".

Example 1

One intimate friend described her problems with her lover at our occasional meetings. She could count ten lovers on each finger, and still did not know whether and how she should leave her husband. It simply took my breath away when after the three years that we know each other, it came out that her husband constantly mocks her and puts her down publicly in front of their friends. I tried to find out why she never spoke of this earlier. She was able to describe any kind of sexual eccentricity and extravagance without inhibition. Even though her husband had been behaving like this since the beginning of their relationship, it took several years until she was able to put a name to his behavior. If she had begun working with this abusive communication three years earlier, I think that it would have been possible to save her marriage. The man in question loved her, and other than the above-mentioned caddish vice, he was very capable to taking good care of his family, a trait she highly valued. The problem was that this rot at the core of their relationship had been hidden. Neither she nor those around her could see it. Even her husband considered it an innocent, playful way of communicating, proof of his sharp wit, of which he was quite proud. For similar reasons it is often very difficult in therapy to disclose the source of problems, because the client him or herself does not see it, does not spontaneously refer to it, is ashamed of it, does not consider it important, has the feeling that they have to just put up with it, etc.

Trigger Stage

The trigger stage begins with the announcement of the breakup. The partners' divergence in this stage usually appears as an unwelcome surprise or as opposition on one side and an ambiguous decision on the side of the initiator. It often takes the form of a condition or ultimatum: "If you do not change, we will break up." The possibility of intervention is at this point small, but for another reason than in the previous stage. Now there is a speeding-up of subjective time. One action or hasty decision follows another in quick succession so the

psychologist does not usually have the possibility to effectively intervene.

Usually the couple's closest friends are able to intervene, because the partners usually confide in them first. They are not, however, usually wise counselors. When giving advice, they generally look back only to their own stories, their experiences, principles and views which correspond to their own momentary position and do not reflect the current position and stage of the client. A great danger is to be found with friends who only nod their heads, mirroring the position of the client and more or less repeating what he or she says. When they complain and express momentary dissatisfaction they recommend: "To hell with him, you can do better..." They do not in the least anticipate the forces of attraction that are momentarily hidden and will emerge a few months after the breakup.

The basic therapeutic recommendation at this stage is – no big demonstrative or injured gestures, but rather a mental answer. In reality, however, things are usually the other way around. The rejected partner take offense, runs away, for three days is not seen or heard from, moves out quickly, etc. Such external defensive reactions, however empathetically understandable, destroy the relationship. They confirm the ambiguous decision made by the other partner in a more or less formalized manner and make it irreversible.

It is necessary to realize that the suggestion of breaking up is often an example of degenerated communication. The literal meaning of this word says the opposite of what is meant (for more detailed explanation see the Degenerated Communication section.) Here is the challenge: "Let's break up" means rather "Come, please do something so that we can stay together." It is perceived paradoxically as much more heartless: "I don't care about you. I don't love you. You disgust me." It would be good if the partners could see the basis of this degenerated communication. Therefore we can (but only in this phase), even though it is paradoxical, sometimes recommend behaving as though "nothing happened." If a partner comes with the suggestion of breaking up at three-thirty in the morning when he is just returning from the pub, the best solution is not to pick oneself up, run away from the apartment, wander around the city, sleep in the garage, car or office, not show one's face at home for three days, move into a friend's home,

refuse or demand sex, and so on. It is better to react to the partner's real message and try to get to the heart of the problem that is troubling him or her.

The quiet tactic – acting on the outside like nothing is going on and reacting to what is bothering the partner, however, is not usually a spontaneous, naturally-felt defensive reaction of partners who find themselves in this phase. Rather, the typical reactions are hot-headed, impulsive actions that represent the period of nonspecific defense according to Kübler-Ross (see below). For example, the initiator of the breakup may be speaking about a breakup, but is at the same time tender and wants to stroke the girl on the cheek or hug her. His behavior is contradictory, because he himself is not entirely clear on what he wants. The girl, however, resolutely refuses these tendernesses and forces her partner into an unequivocal position: “Do you want to break up with me? Yes or no? Then don't caress me!” She thus hastens the process of breaking up even though she may want the opposite. Paradoxically the same girl will try the “as if nothing happened” tactic in the following stage when it is not nearly as appropriate.

In this phase it pays to seek professional help as soon as possible. The therapist must quickly perform an analysis of the relationship from the following three points of view:

1. Positive and attractive forces – reasons why both partners love each other;
2. Negative and destructive forces which either do not suit one of the partners or both of them;
3. Defensive reactions to what is playing out in the moment, which may be confusing and chaotic and may harm more than help.

On the basis of this analysis various kinds of recommendations may be formulated. Against non-functioning defensive reactions: “If you don't want to break up, don't throw your partner out of the apartment, don't force him into taking an unambiguous position that he does not really feel.” Against the negative forces: “Lock your lips and at all costs do not be ironic (do not taunt or accuse them, and so on.)” For the positive forces: “If your partner liked your game of tickling each other, use it at an appropriate moment. If your partner has a tendency to caress you, write text messages to you, or just be near you, don't throw her out, don't refuse her.”

Example 2

It is good to show that in the beginning there doesn't even have to be a formal suggestion of breaking up. I witnessed a case where a man did not suggest breaking up with his partner formally. He just began discussing with his partner at two o'clock in the morning on New Year's Eve that he had never really loved her. There ensued a series of confrontational "clarification" discussions that ended with his partner getting very intoxicated and moving out. I found out about the breakup in the following email:

"Hi, I now have this kind of really basic problem, after a year and half that jerk notified me that he has fallen in love somewhere else and that he never loved me, and was never in love with me, so I'm now asking my friends for tolerance and patience if I'm acting a little strangely. I feel so terrible, especially because I loved him...p.s. I have been through alcohol poisoning and almost had two guys in one bed."

This woman took tranquilizers, she hardly slept or ate for a week, because she was vomiting everything back up. The last of her things that remained in their apartment were her passport, dictionaries, and CDs. An inability to eat and sleep is the result of stress that accompanies every threat. Increasing the distance along with an increase in activation corresponds to the definition of appetite. We have to consider the shock stage and acute stress as having ended after the following text message: "Just awhile ago I ate a bowl of pasta. The first normal food since the breakup (14 days). Tomorrow I'm going to the hairdresser, so I'm going to be a hot babe again. :-)"

Even if she had taken stock of the events with a cool head, she told herself that it didn't make sense to stay with this person, her feelings told her the opposite and had a suggestion: she didn't want to break up with him despite everything. It is all the more paradoxical that she, rather than he, was the driving force of the fast succession of events that followed. These events – the "clarification" discussions, drunkenness, "These events – "moving out," removal of things from the apartment – actually gave form to his originally unspoken, possibly not entirely clear dilemma between two women. From the partners' crisis, a breakup was created where he was identified with the role of the initiator, and she became the defender. With her utterly natural and understandable defensive reaction, which was supposed to protect her, she achieved the complete opposite. During one week she led the breakup from the trigger stage into the phase of asymmetrical decision making, so that after one meeting during which she tried to keep her emotions under control she sent me a text message: "It's OK now. He wants to help me with work and I should call him on Monday. He says that I should not hold out any hope, and that he wants to try it with the other woman anyway. Asshole." The man at this moment is already determined to break up and will play the role of the initiator. We are

now passing into the phase of asymmetrical decision-making, when there is practically no chance to renew the relationship. A negligible possibility of return is also in the fantasy stage, and it is only in the paradoxical phase that a true small light of hope shines.

Phase of Asymmetrical Decision-Making

During the trigger phase degenerated communication preponderates, and at this point neither of the partners has a true interest in breaking up. This phase ends at the moment when the ambiguous decision of the initiator crystallizes and he or she personally identifies with it. This is the first gate that the relationship has closed behind itself. The following stage of asymmetrical decision-making is defined by one partner being fairly firmly resolved to break up, and the other partner is firmly resolved to maintain the relationship. It is good to realize that with both partners (the principle of parallelism, see below), we are looking at the well-known phenomenon of coping with a serious loss. Its stages according to Kübler-Ross (1997) are:

- 1. Acute shock** reaction with many typical defensive reactions (for example: denial);
- 2. Nonspecific defensive reactions** (for example: non-directed aggression);
- 3. Specific and directed attempts** to handle the problem (for example: negotiating, manipulation);
- 4. Reactive depression** stemming from the realization of the futility of one's own efforts;
- 5. New identity**, reconciling oneself to reality, with a return to the basal level of well-being.

Nevertheless, both of the partners go through these phases at different times and they take significantly different forms. Whereas the initiator more or less mourned the relationship in the latent and trigger phases, the second partner was in the stage of denial during the latent phase and went through a period of aggression mostly during the trigger phase. The asymmetrical stage of the breakup is thus a peculiar mixture of the stage of reconciliation with the initiator and the stage of negotiating with the opponent. Likewise, later acceptance of reality