

Design for life

I waited too long for my ex and now he's engaged to someone else

This week, expert **Fiona Brennan** advises a reader who is devastated at the news that her old flame is about to marry another woman



Dear Expert,

I was in a relationship with a boy for four years during my teens. We broke up when we went to college, but stayed in the same friends group. The main reason for our split was that we were too young, really. In my head I had always thought we would be with other people for a while, but then find our way back to each other.

Recently, however, he announced his engagement to one of our friends who he's been with for two years. I am shocked by how devastated the whole thing has made me. I find it difficult to be out with them and look her in the eye. I also feel stupid. I'm 30 now. Why didn't I ever try to get back together with him? Is it too late to say something?

Dear Reader,

Many of us might aspire to be Edith Piaf in her song *Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien*. However, it turns out that paying attention to regrets is an extremely worthwhile pursuit for our positive emotional wellbeing. Regret is, in fact, one of the most common human negative emotions and very few of us manage to avoid it. You have highlighted something that we rarely contemplate – having regrets is not a bad thing, if we learn from them.

Regrets teach us that rather than suppressing or ignoring our past mistakes, it is best to do the opposite by questioning our choices and behaviour without judgment. In his book *The Power of Regret*, the New York Times bestselling author Daniel H Pink argues: "By understanding what people regret the most, we can understand what they value the most."

The regret you feel right now is one of the toughest types to endure. That is, the fear that you let someone you love get away. My heart goes out to you, so let's now help you move forward.

As a starting point, examine your feelings from a place of self-compassion and not self-blame. Calling yourself stupid will only prolong your pain. You are not alone – many people feel the way you do when an ex becomes engaged. Your regret is an opportunity for you to learn about yourself and your values, no matter what the future holds. The decision you make now affects three people's futures – you, your ex and his fiancée. As a result, you need to consider your next move very carefully – if you make one at all.

Let's break this down for you, as there are a few things to unpack. First love often leaves a long-lasting imprint on us. It is common for people to have dreams throughout their entire lives about their first partner and compare subsequent relationships to their inaugural one. However, that doesn't mean they were the right person to spend our lives with.

As you already know, you were very young when you got together

with your ex. Four years at that age in your development are a long time to be with one person. So, no matter what happens, he will always hold a place in your heart.

This brings me to the crucial point. Are you simply hankering after the powerful flush of first love? If so, I would like you to consider if your desire to say something now is a case of romantic nostalgia or a genuine plea to claim the love of your life? Keep this in mind, and now examine if the regret you feel is because you believed you would always end up back together if you didn't meet anyone else.

Is it possible you are managing a bruised ego, rather than a broken heart? These two things are felt very differently on a visceral level. The first is fuelled by thoughts of jealousy. The second will leave you nauseous and unable to eat or sleep very well.

Research shows that most regrets stem from things we didn't do – the college we never went to, the travel we never experienced – as opposed to actions we did take. Now is the time to act, as long as you have 100 per cent clarity in your mind that you will **commit** to your ex. Not if you are suddenly feeling the pangs of envy because

he is now literally otherwise engaged.

I recommend that you take some time alone in nature to search your soul for the answers you seek. If you can, head off for a few days of peace and allow clarity to come while away from your everyday routines. If, after this time, you can put your hand on your heart and say that your desire to speak out is not a case of nostalgia or jealousy, then and only then must you contact your ex. Your instincts are powerful and you must trust them.

Ask to meet your ex in a neutral space, when he is not busy with work or dealing with any stress. State how you feel clearly. Explain that there is no pressure on him and you completely respect his decision. Ultimately, the

ball is now in his court. You have done what you can, and whether he decides to marry his new partner or not is completely out of your control.

Either way, you can scratch this regret off your list. You will have other regrets in life, but now they will act as a vehicle for you to thrive and not stagnate. I wish you bon courage! ■

Got a problem or something you'd like advice on? Email anonymously by contacting us via businesspost.ie/ask-an-expert and we'll match your query with the best expert we can find on the subject. You can also drop an email in confidence to nadine@businesspost.ie



Fiona Brennan

Fiona Brennan is a clinical hypnotherapist with a private clinic in Blackrock, Co Dublin. A bestselling author, she regularly delivers talks and workshops on a range of areas from stress and anxiety to building confidence and public speaking. She has recently launched a new online course called *Light Up Your World*, an eight-week hypnotherapy programme based on cutting-edge research in the areas of hypnosis, positive psychology, lifestyle medicine, neuroscience and mindfulness. More information can be found on thepositivehabit.com

WHAT I'VE BEEN READING AND ENJOYING LATELY

A classic book by Malcolm Gladwell called *Blink*. It discusses the collective unconscious bias that we carry, and also the importance of trusting our instincts when it comes to making decisions.