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RELATING

When the end is inevitable

By Barbara Ballinger
Special to the Tribune

January 14, 2004

January is a prime time to jump-start resolutions. But it's not just pounds that many people hope to shed starting this month. Many in less-than-ideal dating relationships see the first month of the year as an opportune time to give up the old and get started on the new--in this case a happier, healthier prospect to toast by Valentine's Day.

Yet, for many, making the decision isn't easy. They procrastinate in the same way they hem and haw about eating better, exercising more or breaking a bad habit.

In fact, between Thanksgiving and mid-January is the most popular time to procrastinate about ending a relationship.

"Thanksgiving kicks off the annual relationship freeze, which lasts through the New Year," says Lisa Daily, Ft. Myers, Fla.-based author of "Stop Getting Dumped!" (Plume, \$11).

Los Angeles-based dating author Liz H. Kelly says that the reason procrastination is so pervasive around the holidays and shortly afterward is because your relationship status may be a point of discussion when spending time with family. "There's a lot of pressure around the family table. 'So, who are you seeing now?' is a frequent question," says Kelly, author of "SMART Man Hunting" (Writers Club Press, \$14.95).

Others put off a split so they don't dampen the holiday spirit during parties and festivities. A small percentage of procrastinators stay for less altruistic reasons. They expect a holiday gift, says Trish McDermott, vice president of romance at the online dating service, Match.com.

Even with the clean slate that January brings, goodbyes can drag on for a variety of reasons, most of which have to do with fear, says Rita Emmett, a Des Plaines-based author of "The Procrastinator's Handbook: Mastering the Art of Doing It Now" (Walker & Co., \$10.95).

Emmett cites some of the most frequent ones: making a change for the worse; being alone, at least in the short term; and dealing with a negative reaction by the soon-to-be ex.

Jay Arthur, 52, clearly understands the predicament.

"I feared I wouldn't find anybody better to date and feared being alone," says the Denver-based author of "Attracting Romance" (LifeStar, \$19.95). So, he procrastinated about getting out of a relationship he was in in his early 30s.

For three of the four years he dated the woman, he debated whether to continue or break it off. People waver, he said, because "the relationship isn't bad enough to leave but isn't good enough to stay. It's a double bind. If you stay, you may starve emotionally; if you leave, you may starve more quickly. But too many, including me, choose miserable over lonely.

"I finally realized there are things you have to have, want to have, and which are nice to have. I had to leave because my needs weren't being met."

Often the breakup, as in Arthur's case, is due to an accumulation of annoyances--the proverbial straws that break the camel's back, says Rob Frankel, owner of a Los Angeles-based coaching service.

"The things that you initially found cute you gradually find annoying such as dishes left in the sink," he says. And certainly communication problems, an inability to compromise, vastly different interests or lifestyles, or a lack of affection and availability are all cues to that final goodbye scene.

Other times a big event makes the status quo intolerable, says Sandra Beckwith, a Fairport, N.Y.-based coach.

Meeting someone new also can trigger change because it's easier to leave a relationship when there's someone waiting in the wings or at the other end of a trapeze, Emmett says.

Having a plan is a great boon to moving on, experts say. Emmett suggests verbalizing, writing or picturing fears.

"If you admit that you're afraid you're going to be so lonely that it may kill you, you're able to realize that's an exaggeration. Loneliness won't destroy anybody. It's a crummy way to feel, but you can be in a relationship where your spirit already feels like it's dying," she says.

Beckwith recommends brainstorming with friends on dealing with the fall out. "If you don't think you can afford to live on your own, get a roommate. Surround yourself only with supportive friends," she says.

And Milwaukee-based psychotherapist Barbara Bartlein, author of "Why Did I Marry You Anyway?" (Cumberland House, \$12.95), advises making a clean break to help avoid ambiguity. Also try to avoid long-winded conversations about the split--they can be opportunities for your former boyfriend to woo you back.

Once you do end the relationship, understand that it will take time to get over it. If the

relationship has been dragged out for a matter of years, Beckwith recommends counseling to learn why it took so long for you to end it. She also suggests engaging in activities that you enjoy and perhaps didn't pursue because of your relationship.

Arthur spent more time walking his dogs, played golf, and found other single friends with whom he could go to bars and movies.

He also used the time to think about the kind of woman he wanted to date. "I dated eight different women over the next four months, and learned to recognize faster if I didn't want to be in a relationship with any of them. I didn't drag it out as much," he says.

Kelly also recommends maintaining low expectations when you again begin to date. "It takes time to build a relationship. Keep it lighthearted," she says.

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