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# Everyone Laughed at "Conscious Uncoupling" But It's Still the Best Way to Break Up

Gwyneth Paltrow was onto something with this five-step process.

By [Maressa Brown](#) | Updated on September 4, 2022 @ 11:55AM



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Several years ago, on an early fall day, with the sun still beaming brightly well into the evening, my then-husband and I walked across a busy suburban main street, hand-in-hand, headed to our favorite pizza spot for an impromptu dinner out. After a heartbreaking period of struggling and pushing and hoping and talking, we had just told our couples therapist that we were going to separate. And in the immediate moments that followed, in which we began morphing officially from spouses to friends, there was sadness, sure, but also a surprising lightness between us. I felt optimistic that we could take one step at a time — separation and later, divorce — free of animosity. I felt confident that instead of a dramatic, stressful, acrimonious divorce, we could "consciously uncouple" à la Gwyneth

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Paltrow and Chris Martin.

The neologism is one that's become a part of our breakup lexicon ever since the celebrity couple's 2014 split. At the time, Paltrow wrote on her goop website, "While we love each other very much, we will remain separate. ... We have always conducted our relationship privately, and we hope that as we consciously uncouple and co-parent, we will be able to continue in the same manner." Recently, Paltrow revisited her experience — most recently, last month while chatting with Anna Faris on the *Anna Faris Is Unqualified* podcast, noting, "In a divorce, I've learned so much from something that I wanted least in the world." And therein lies the power of approaching a split as conscious uncoupling.

We dive into what the concept of 'conscious uncoupling' *really* means (and what it doesn't) and how it can help not only in the case of divorce, but any kind of breakup.

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## What Conscious Uncoupling Is – and Is Not

To be fair, public perception of the concept has been that it's just for rich, famous, "woo-woo" types who would have had an easy divorce anyway. "There is this perception that it is this new age spiritual process," says Shannon Chavez, Psy.D., [a psychologist and sex therapist in Los Angeles](#). "But the reality is it's a more modern term that looks at honoring the two people in the relationship and breaking free from tradition. It's this different path that's not really about spirituality but about self-discovery, awareness, and understanding."

[Katherine Woodward Thomas](#), a licensed marriage and family therapist and author of *Conscious Uncoupling: 5 Steps to Living Happily Even After*, coined and created the expression, which she says has become synonymous with "amicable divorce." But people who see it as that alone are missing the point.

Although some people might organically find their way to a friendly split, she says she came up with the concept for people who are struggling with a breakup, full stop. You don't have to have kids or be married, or even have to have your partner on board with the process. In fact, she says conscious uncoupling can be useful for people who are breaking up with a [narcissist](#) who's very punishing and punitive and wants to go to war.

It's also perfectly useful for someone who never married their partner or who was in a very short-term relationship. (Woodward Thomas says only about half of the people she works with on conscious uncoupling are actually getting divorced.) "[It's helpful for anyone who] is just suffering a breakup that's really hard on the heart. I've had people come to my practice

because they were dating someone for six weeks, and they put so many eggs in that basket, and they're just devastated."

According to Woodward Thomas, this is where conscious uncoupling comes into play by helping people to put the pieces of their lives back together after feeling like a bomb went off. The goal of the process is to properly heal in order to fully end one chapter before beginning the next. "Conscious uncoupling is really about the art of consciously completing things that matter to us in a way that lets us move on," says Woodward Thomas. "It's about resolving a lot of the very difficult feelings like anger or rage or the feeling of unfairness, desiring to get revenge or get that person back."

In short, consciously uncoupling is a way of reclaiming your integrity and actually growing from the experience, says Woodward Thomas. She adds that doing the work of conscious uncoupling can help you to welcome love into your life in the future, "and not drag all the unresolved baggage from this into the next relationship or duplicate the same dynamics with the next person."

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## How to Consciously Uncouple

For anyone who wants to follow in Paltrow's footsteps, Woodward Thomas' book lays out a five-step process. It bears noting that the first three steps "have nothing to do with making nice with the other person, even if you have children," the therapist notes. It's all work you can do solo.

### 1. Find emotional freedom.

Even if you saw your split coming, it's totally normal to feel shocked emotionally and physically. "Our intimate relationships actually regulate us emotionally and on a physiological level, so your emotions may be all over the map [after a breakup]," says Woodward Johnson.

In other words, there's an evolutionary reason that you can't stop stalking your ex's IG. But there's absolutely a way to feel more in control. The first step is to self-soothe and [create an inner sense of calm](#) so that your emotions aren't impacting your ability to think straight. One way to do this (besides throwing your phone out a window): Figure out how you can use your negative emotions to your benefit. As you begin realizing that your ex wasn't showing up for you over the years, you could feel mad as hell. But you can also use that anger to fuel powerful intentions like, "From this moment on, no more narcissists" or "I'm only going to date people who see me and show up for me the way I do them," says Woodward Thomas. This allows you to harness the power of difficult feelings and channel it into positive change.

## **2. Reclaim your power and your life.**

The way our psyches process trauma is to think about it over and over, says Woodward Thomas. We often ruminate heavily about what the other person did. But that's a hopeless loop that won't offer clarity or calm.

"What you need to see clearly is your own collusion in how [your ex] was showing up or not showing up, as well as the ways you were giving your power away, minimizing the red flags, ignoring your own deeper knowing, not standing up for yourself, or not negotiating for your needs," Woodward Thomas says.

In short, being able to see yourself as the co-creator of what happened in the relationship — without shaming or blaming yourself — is key in order to move forward in the process. It also helps to understand what was at the root of your co-creating, e.g. you didn't have faith in yourself, or you were overgiving constantly to prove your value.

Then, you can make amends to yourself moving forward. Woodward Thomas advises creating mantras like, "I will always speak up," "I will always value myself," "I will always negotiate for my needs," or "I will always set boundaries."

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## **3. Break the pattern, heal your heart.**

This step is about looking at your blueprint for a relationship, which was likely created during childhood and based on your bond with one or both parents, says Woodward Thomas. You'll want to reflect on how an emotional wound occurred and the story you told yourself about it.

Maybe you lost a parent, so you decided everybody you love always leaves and that you're all alone. Or, you had a narcissistic parent, so you learned that it's dangerous to be seen. "Whatever happened in childhood to any of us is not our fault at all, but we've got to see clearly how we've been generating that story as adults and be responsible for it," says Woodward Thomas.

Connecting with our younger selves can help to correct the narrative. It might look like telling yourself something like, "No, you're not alone. You weren't born to be alone. You have the power to learn how to have healthier relationships, you can do that. It's your destiny to love and be loved."

## **4. Become a love alchemist.**

Woodward Thomas explains that step four is about "hitting the reset button" and "transforming resentment into wisdom and lessons learned." It's the process of forgiving yourself and your ex, then setting an intention for the new form that relationship will take.

This isn't to say you won't still roll your eyes, get all fired up, or bust out the

tissues on occasion. It's just that those emotions won't have the power they once did, because you've done the work required to release your vice grip on them, to make peace with the past, and to feel cool with leaving it there. Once you do that, you'll be able to actually envision and embrace whatever comes next, be that getting your own place or meeting a new partner who's the Machine Gun Kelly to your Megan Fox post-Brian Austin Green.

## 5. Create your "happy even after" life.

Step five is about making it possible for "everyone to win." For instance, in the case of divorce, dividing up joint assets in a generous way, or, for those with kids, setting up living arrangements that are fair for everyone involved.

Then, you'll want to think about what your "new form of family" looks like — maybe that's a lifelong friendship or a healthy co-parenting relationship, says Woodward Thomas, who affectionately refers to her own ex as her "wasband."

But it might not look the same for everyone. A lifelong friendship with your ex is far from the end game of conscious uncoupling — especially if your former partner isn't on board with your efforts, is a punishing narcissist, or perhaps suffers from mental illness. Instead, Woodward Thomas says it's about recognizing what you and they truly can and cannot do as you move forward — and just trying to err on the side of kindness.

## Why Conscious Uncoupling Is So Needed Right Now

Many therapists have adopted and adapted the process for their patients. Chavez is a fan because it helps people feel empowered. "A lot of people say, 'We don't know how to divorce. Every example we've seen from film or friends and peers has been really ugly and abusive,'" she says. "So there's this need for modeling it in a loving, supportive way that honors the relationship and incorporates accountability."

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For me personally, after being freaked out about having to endure that stereotypically ugly scenario, learning about conscious uncoupling actually served to bolster my confidence around ending my marriage. I saw there was a path that could be as respectful as it was amicable and as healing as it was low-stress. For us, the time leading up to our split was so dark and painful, that the last thing I wanted to do was orchestrate a grand, destructive finale. Instead, I wanted to autopsy what had happened — understanding both his role and mine — in order to release sadness, anger, and resentment.

Committing to this meant my ex and I were able to live together for six more months before separating. remain friends once I moved across the

country, and divorce in a simple, straightforward way that didn't require dropping tons of dough on lawyers or even having to go to court. It also meant that I began therapy solo, piecing together how childhood wounds tied into this chapter of my life. I'd never felt more self-aware, empowered, and legitimately ready to move forward.

As Woodward Thomas puts it, splits often make us feel — emotionally and physically — like we're going to die. We won't, obviously, but that doesn't mean we don't need a tool for contending with that grief.

So, while Gwyneth Paltrow's vagina weights and shamanic energy medicine practitioners may not be for everyone when it comes to coping with a universal experience like heartbreak, her go-to breakup strategy really is.

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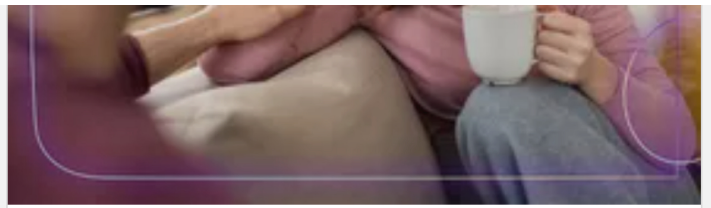




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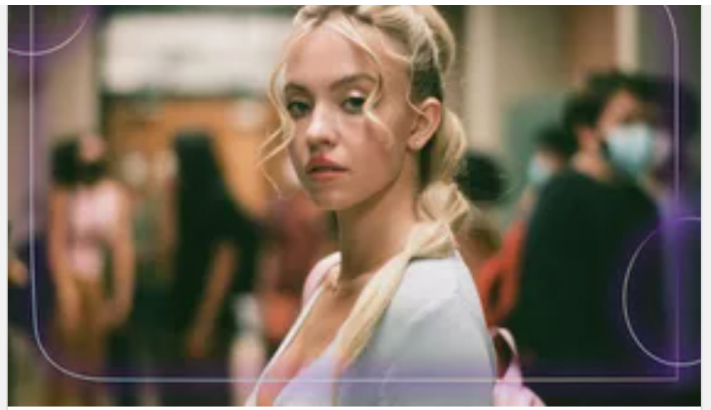




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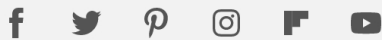
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