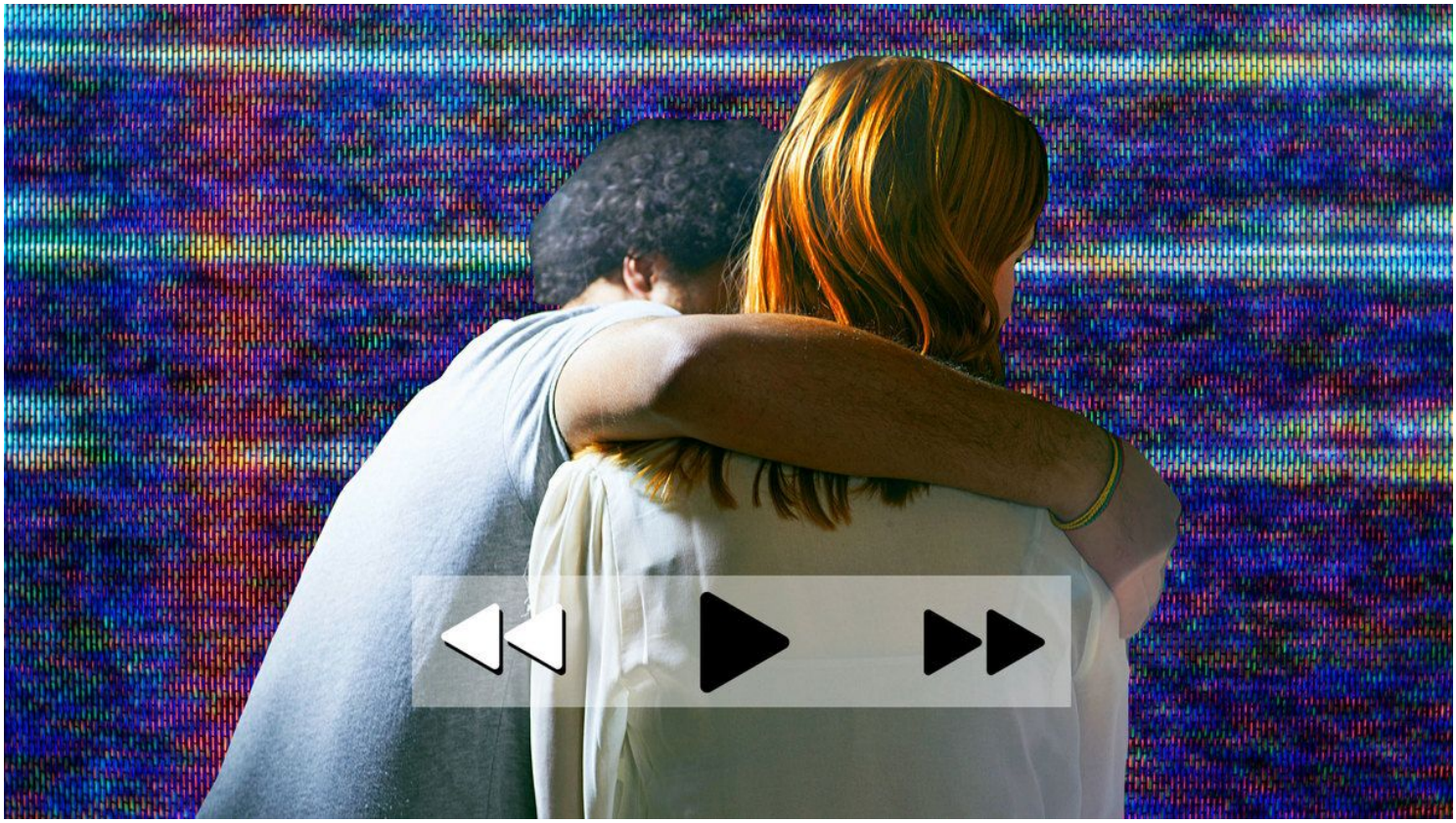
Is It Possible to Get a Relationship Do-Over?

There may be hope for reconciling a relationship that seems like it's doomed.

BY MADELEINE DELIEE PUBLISHED: SEP 13, 2021



AMBER HAWKINS

Over the last year and a half, our relationships have been put through many a test — no more so than our romantic bonds. Whether being cooped up together for too long or not getting enough quality time away from working, schooling, and surviving at home, the pandemic has cast many relationships in high relief.

In exploring how and why we bond with one another, the recently released novel *The Rehearsals* by Annette Christie is all about seeking change — essentially asking, can this relationship be saved? — and determining the change that is, ultimately, most necessary. The book focuses on Tom and Megan, a couple about to be married who decide to pull the plug on their wedding only to discover they're stuck in an endless loop of the day before. After the last year, many of us can relate. Five or six of my friends have recently announced they're separating/divorcing/ending relationships. Depending on whom you talk to, post-pandemic divorce rates have either dropped

(because no one wants to struggle alone) or spiked (because no one wants to struggle with someone they can't stand). Regardless, the last several months have been our time loop: magnifying flaws and cracks and driving us to evaluate what works and what doesn't.

RELATED STORIES



When Texting Is Easier Than Speaking the Truth



What Is Financial Infidelity?

Like the movie *Groundhog Day*, Megan and Tom must repeat their day until they can figure out where they went wrong. What would you change, the book asks, if you had to keep repeating your mistakes until you fixed them? How do you know if they're fixable? But these are questions not just relegated to the world of fiction. For many in relationships that are in jeopardy, the cycle of struggle often involves the repetition of certain toxic behaviors and emotions that a couple may want to fix but can't figure out how. On one hand, that could inevitably lead to a breakup. On the other, the cycle of negativity simply continues on. But what if there was a third option, like Megan and Tom's? What if couples who are on the brink of or even post breakup could get a relationship do-over?

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

That's easier said than done, of course — but according to some experts, it's not beyond the realm of possibility. In fact, we spoke to Pearl and Ellen (their names have been changed for this article), two of the many women who, in the last year and a half, took a hard look at their struggling marriages and decided it was time for change. After more than a year of deliberating, Pearl is proceeding with a divorce; Ellen is deciding to give her husband another shot. One decision, so many ripples.

If you or someone you know is in a relationship rut but want to save what you have, here's how to approach a relationship do-over.

When do you need a do-over?

You need a do-over when you're ready to give up. Before you do, though, it's worth taking a closer look to identify the issues. Dr. Jenn Mann, a marital and family therapist, the host of the VH1 show *Couples Therapy*, and the author of *The Relationship Fix*, says the most essential issue is a lack of connection. Contrary to belief, our enforced physical closeness, she says, has often decreased personal connection. "In this day and age, especially with the stress of Covid, with people working from home, with people schooling their kids from home, running their businesses from home, the stress we're all under, it's very easy to let the connection go to the wayside," she says. Without that, relationships of all stripes can wither. "When the connection is in place, you can work through most things, you can

develop better skills to fight fairly, you can develop better skills to negotiate," she explains. Without connection, however, these physical interactions feel like a time loop or simply going through the motions to get to the next day.

Pearl, who is mid-divorce, attempted counseling twice with her ex. When they didn't see results the first time, she figured the lack of improvement indicated that the problem wasn't significant. "I was sort of like, well, it's not really helping; maybe it's just not that bad," she says. Matters continued to worsen, though, so they went back. But that led her to realize that communication was completely stalled out between them. "It got to the point where I felt like [he] didn't hear me; he only heard the therapist. ... I felt like I was putting in all the energy and effort, and I didn't seem him changing. And so, for me, that was when I was able to say, I'm done."

Mann emphasizes that professional guidance is important for effective restructuring. A therapist, a spiritual adviser, or even a book can provide direction and a less-biased perspective. Ultimately, she says, undertaking a restart "should be a deep commitment to starting fresh in new ways of communicating [and] behaving." Once Pearl saw that was lacking, she could start to move on.



Professional guidance is important for effective restructuring and providing direction and a less-biased perspective.

NED FRISK // GETTY IMAGES

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

How do you get a relationship rebooted?

Taking inventory of existing strengths and weaknesses is necessary for another go. You have to know what you're working with before you can reattempt. Ellen, who has reconciled with her husband, went through a lot of soul-searching within her marriage. She learned that he had a gambling addiction, which led to some family financial instability. That discovery exposed some emotional truths as well. "I was always saying 'I love you' first, always asking for attention," she says. "I can't keep anything to myself." Her husband, on the other hand, had no trouble keeping things to himself. These disconnects ultimately led her to question the marriage and explore separation.

Awareness of triggers and sensitivity to them can also act as a reminder to communicate compassionately, even when fighting. *Rehearsals* author Annette Christie says an inspiration for her book came from a related source. “When I was in university, I took a course called Marriage and Family Relations, and it was for people who were intending to become family therapists,” she says. “And it was fascinating, but I remembered the lesson they taught us on how everybody fights differently, and how a couple has to learn how to fight in order to properly communicate.” Mann believes it’s critical to recognize each other’s limits. “One of the most important tools a couple can use is a time-out,” she says. “This is not an abandonment of the relationship or the discussion — it’s merely an opportunity to calm down before continuing the conversation.”

How do you avoid looping back into those negative patterns?

One way to break a loop is to pay attention to warning signs, like pervasive, routine irritation. “If you find yourself constantly annoyed [in the relationship], you find yourself annoyed at how they’re chewing, the way they’re breathing, like those kinds of things we’ve all had in a relationship, that’s kind of a tell-tale sign,” Mann says. Avoiding sex in a romantic relationship or dodging a friend’s calls or texts could also indicate problems. Pearl recalls that, as her marriage disintegrated, she was less inclined to sleep with her husband. “I just became more and more dissatisfied; I was like, God, if you are not giving me anything, why do I have to sleep with you?” Her ex, she says, didn’t agree, but that realization helped her to see where she was headed. When we ignore these warning signs in relationships, they tend to fester and become bigger issues than they were at the outset. Thus, in a do-over it’s critical to self-evaluate why you might be annoyed at your partner and then communicate effectively to come up with solutions that work for both parties.

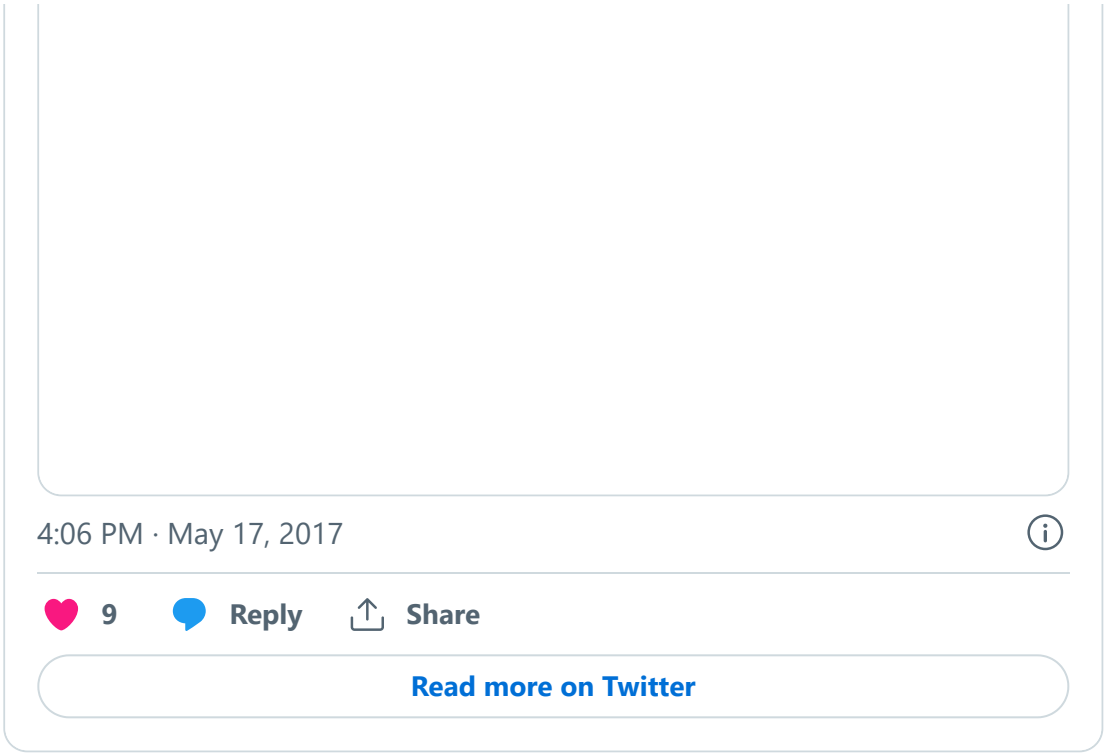
Honest and clear-sighted evaluation of the negative contributions each person has made to the relationship will also help to avoid those dangers going forward. Part of this is what Mann calls “the four R’s”: remorse, responsibility, recognition, and remedy.

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below

The 4
From
pic.tw
— Dr

Dr. Jenn Mann
@drjennmann · **Follow**

The 4 R's of #apology.
From The #RelationshipFix
amzn.to/1TG816r



Each creates a positive, healthy relationship from one that's suffered damage. Feeling sorry for your actions, claiming your role in the problem, acknowledging how you've contributed to the issues, and setting forth an active solution for how to address it — these are all critical components for relationship rebuilding. Ellen had always been reluctant to cause conflict, but she realized this was part of the issue as well. "Everything has a limit," she says. "He had good intentions; he wanted to do more for the family. But he did things without asking me or my opinion." Ultimately, though, she saw that they both had to change. "I don't even like to talk about money, and he says it makes me stressed," she says. "But with me, marriage has to be two people."

When do you say it can't be saved?

Without an actual time loop to hold you in place, how do you recognize when you need to walk away? "You need to know that you've done everything possible to save the relationship," says Mann, especially if children are involved. Pearl believes she continued trying because she thought it was better for her kids. Ultimately, she decided that wasn't the case. "It wasn't better to stay — it wasn't better for me, it

wasn't better for the kids, and whether he [the ex] believes this or not, it wasn't better for him," she says.

A salvageable relationship comes from a willingness to invest in each other, dedication shown through a commitment to learning and growth, whether through reading, therapy, or other action. Pearl didn't see that coming from her ex. Ellen and her husband are in therapy, and he is seeking individual support for his addiction. "That [effort] shows you are willing to do the inside work, you are also willing to be transparent, you're ... committed to not making the same mistake again," Mann says. If either person can't or won't make that investment, it's time to move on.

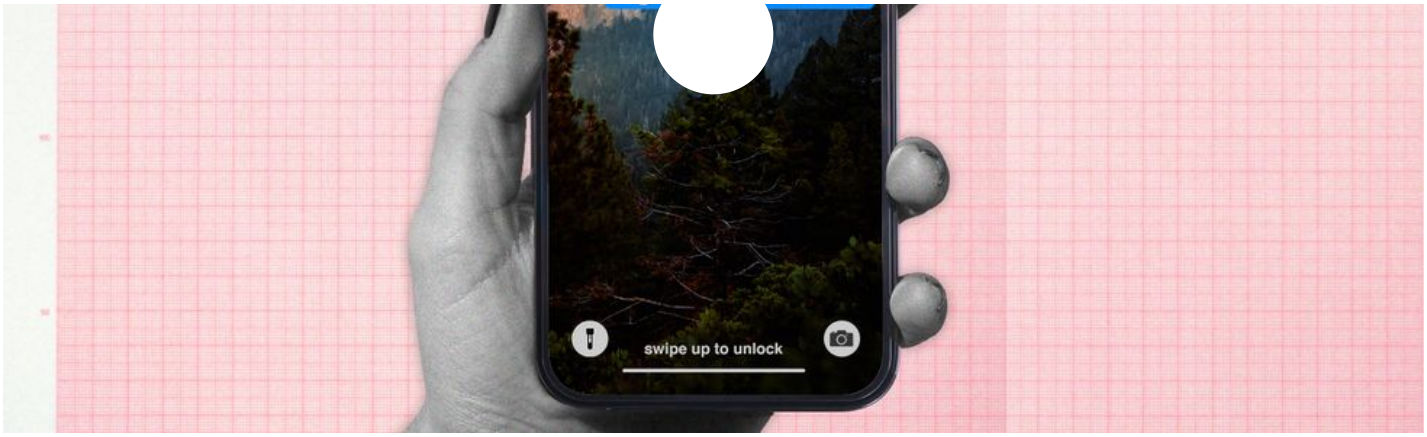
While an endless loop of one lousy day may not be our literal experience, anyone who's felt caught in a troubled relationship can certainly relate to the sentiment. The journey in *The Rehearsals* is, as Christie says, her characters "have to work through everything, good and bad, and decide ultimately is this still what we want? Do we still choose each other?" Ultimately, she thinks, this is the question we all ask.

Madeleine Deliee writes, teaches, and parents in the Washington, D.C. area. She's written for Playboy, CNN, The Washington Post, SyFy Wire, *and many other unrelated outlets. She sometimes tweets about mostly geeky stuff at @MMDeliee.*

Get Shondaland directly in your inbox: SUBSCRIBE TODAY

Watch Next




swipe up to unlock