



Happy endings

New beginnings and fresh starts hold promise and hope, while endings can leave regret, sadness and sorrow in their wake. But it doesn't have to be this way, says *Tanis Taylor*, who discovers the secrets of a grand finale

When I was 28 my boyfriend and I were deported from New York. US Immigration informed us we had a week to leave, but rather than go quietly we decided to depart in the spirit of our adoptive city. We placed an ad in the paper announcing our deportation party and watched as our small flat filled with strangers and friends. By midnight we sat in an empty flat with a bottle of wine and a view of the Twin Towers. We cried and hugged and watched the sun rise over the city that never sleeps and said goodbye in a manner in which Lady Liberty seemed to approve. It was a good ending, but it was the exception to the rule.

Endings are not usually that good. They can be painful and difficult. We tend to rush them or botch them, ignore them or resist them – anything but witness that moment where something finishes for ever and life changes irrevocably.

'We will all experience endings throughout our life, whether or not they are to do with bereavement,' says Cruse Bereavement Care counsellor Rawinder Bhatoa. 'Endings could mean losing personal belongings, a bike being stolen or a lifestyle coming to an end in a downturn.' Each one leaves its mark, while the way in which we experience these everyday endings echoes our particular ending style.

Seeking closure

We might conclude business meetings brashly because we don't know how to finish them, or ruin the last day of our holiday by worrying about the traffic on the M25. We say 'See you later' when, blatantly, we won't, lament over what email sign-off to use (Yours? Best? Regards, Xxx?) and pull the door on messy flats without putting our houses in order first. These are all unconscious endings yet they signify a larger reticence around closure. 'If we can find ways of processing this better,' says Bhatoa,

'of experiencing loss lucidly and learning to deal with it more positively, there's a good chance it may prepare us for those ultimate ends.'

We would all like our endings to be happy, like in the movies, to enjoy the satisfying clunk of closure that accompanies a neat narrative. 'But the challenges of real-life endings have more to do with the nature of life itself,' says Professor Neil Lutsky, a specialist in the psychology of endings. 'Endings can provide sharp reminders of the limits of human control,' he says. 'The psychological challenge is to come to terms with fundamental facts of life we cannot control.'

Mixed feelings

'Endings are full of ambivalence,' says Dr Eolene Boyd-MacMillan, research associate in psychology at the University of Cambridge. We are not just experiencing sorrow but a whole gamut of emotions:

happiness, jubilation, joy, but also guilt, regret, despair and injustice. 'It's hard to acknowledge so many mixed feelings at once so we make everything black and white, all positive or all negative. In reality, though, our experiences are a mix of good and bad, which is harder to acknowledge.'

'We tend to rush endings, to botch them, ignore or resist' them'

In 1999 psychologist and Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman developed the peak/end rule. What we remember of our past experiences is almost entirely determined by two things, he says. 'How the experiences felt when we were at our (best or worst) peak, and how we felt when they ended.' So, to brand your ex a cartoon baddie, for example, is to belittle your experience, to reduce the relationship to a dirty chapter and, with it, to lose its lessons.

But if we can reframe the way we see endings, choosing to see them as transitions, they can offer us the chance to grow. Viewed as such, the end of something becomes a step rather than a stop. This can give us the strength to tackle endings with less fear and look at how to end well, with dignity and awareness. ➤

➔ When Kathryn, 35, and her entire team were made redundant last year, emotions ran high. Some colleagues took their P45s and simply vanished, others spent their energies on tribunals and claims for unfair dismissal. Kathryn took a deep breath and organised a 'work wake' for the remaining staff and her outgoing colleagues. 'I talked about the opportunities, the highlights of the job and told my team how much I enjoyed working with them,' she says. 'We talked about the frustrations, but didn't dwell on them.' Together they toasted, laughed, commiserated and closed one chapter to make way for the next.



Find space for reflection before moving on

Kathryn did with her colleagues, is also a helpful practice. Sharing is cathartic and, if you can put aside your own reactions and really hear what other parties have to say, it offers a chance to grow. 'Endings are opportunities to review what's happened,' says Boyd-MacMillan. 'People in a group can say, "This is

what's been helpful/unhelpful to us'.' Exits can be emboldening. You can ask questions of exes, colleagues and lovers that you would never have dared ask otherwise and – if you can bear to hear the answers – the insights can be hugely influential.

Endings matter because we all need our finales – reminiscence, reparation and resolution – before we can enjoy the rolling credits. Too often we deny ourselves this and are subject to an action replay of unresolved emotions and unfinished chapters. But every ending is an opportunity, whether it's the end of an affair or the end of a holiday, and with the right will we can all stage-manage our departures beautifully, with grace, goodwill and a raised glass. ■

Endings take time

'In the past I might have felt rejected, and gone off to lick my wounds in private,' she says. 'But by "sitting" in my ending, publicly, I came to realise those negative feelings were overshadowing a wealth of positive ones, affirmed by friends and staff members.' A year on, some of the tribunals are still in progress. Kathryn is retraining as a counsellor.

Too often we rush our endings – resurfacing from lengthy relationships too quickly, rebounding into new ones. We must make enough time to say goodbye properly. Doing this while the ending is actually happening gives us the chance to process our feelings in situ and to work with what comes up, be that through journalling, therapy, meditation or art.

We can be so busy putting on a brave face that we skip this vital stage. 'The temptation can be to keep moving forward on automatic pilot, but space for real reflection is crucial,' says psychotherapist Andrea Perry (andreaperry.co.uk). If you keep doing what you've always done you will keep getting what you've always got. 'To do things differently, take the time to look at yourself,' she says, 'to be solitary, to grieve for the past and to allow yourself to spend time in uncertainty, as frightening as that may be.' Being able to reflect publicly on an ending, as

Marking the end

How to gain that satisfying feeling of closure on everyday endings

1 If you're moving house and you want to mark the transition, go around the rooms and say what you enjoyed there, what you didn't like, what you're looking forward to in your next house,' says Dr Eolene Boyd-MacMillan.

2 With unresolved endings, try writing letters. 'In one letter write down all the things you had always wanted to say to someone but never would, and burn it. Then write the letter you would like to give them, and keep it,' says Boyd-MacMillan.

3 If you are leaving work – willingly or otherwise – ask for an exit interview. Request a genuine, honest review of the projects you've worked on and the challenges you've faced. End on good terms, eye contact and a firm handshake.

4 Take two minutes before bed to reflect on the day's events. By reviewing the good and the bad, without preference but with curiosity, endings become part of an ongoing cycle of endings and beginnings, as everyday as they are inevitable.