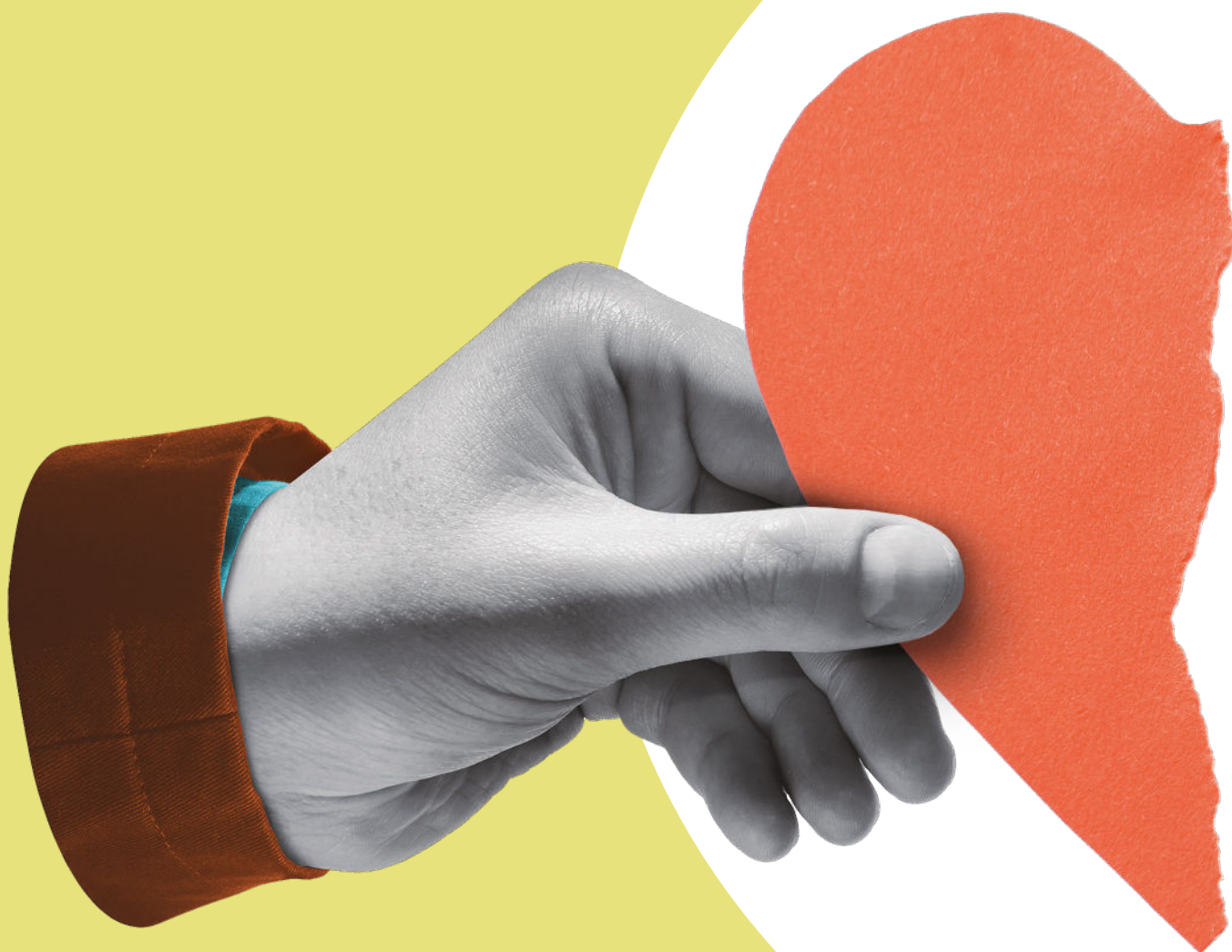




Mending fences

From awkward texts to face-to-face meetings, navigating a reconnection can feel like walking



(and hearts)

through a minefield. Here's how to do it with tact – and realistic expectations. Words **RACHEL SMITH**

PERSONALITY CLASHES, misunderstandings, distance, life – sometimes friendships simply fade. But if you find yourself missing someone you once valued, don't let fear or pride hold you back. It's never too late to reach out and reconnect, experts say.

That said, it's not easy. Being on the outs with someone for whatever reason can be a hefty weight to carry, says psychologist Jacqui Manning. "You can feel rejected and sad, depending on the level of connection, so it can take bravery to reach out. And with family, there can often be obligations one way or another, or other family members taking sides."

It's especially hard if you were the one who was ghosted, adds psychologist Jeremy Cowden. "You can feel as if you're not valued, or you don't matter much to that person," he says. "So trying to reclaim the relationship calls for a little bit of reflection."

And that means considering why you want to reconnect in the first place. Are you acting from a place of nostalgia, rather than a genuine desire to have that person back in your life? Determining which one depends on the rupture, says Jeremy.

"If it was a threat to your values – like a friend with political views you disagree with – you need to figure out if there's a way you can stay connected

that won't always be a source of tension or distress," he explains.

Also, ask yourself how you feel when you walk away from interactions with that person. "If a connection you had was unhealthy, you shouldn't feel you have to maintain the relationship just for the sake of it," adds Jacqui.

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JACQUI MANNING
Psychologist

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GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Hoping that a well-timed text will get things back on track? Not so fast, says Jacqui. "People may or may not respond, they may respond badly, or they may respond kindly – you just don't know what anyone else is going to do, so managing your expectations is important."

How many times should you reach out, and when should you respectfully stop? Jacqui believes three to four times is about right. "It might be worth following up once a year saying something like, 'Still thinking about you'. I think people do appreciate those messages, even if they don't show it."

Not sure how to take that first step? Jacqui suggests starting a text or email with an open-ended message:

"We haven't been in touch for a long time, and I regret that..."

"I've been reflecting on us, and I miss seeing you..."

"I've been thinking about you.

I don't know what happened but

I'd love to know how you are and see if we can get together..."

Steer clear of phrases that might imply it's their fault, whether it is or not, adds Jeremy. "Saying something like, 'You haven't called me in ages. What's going on?' is not going to work and you don't want to pick up an argument right where you left off."

You also need to be prepared that your best efforts may go unanswered. If someone doesn't want to engage with you, there's not a lot you can do, says Jeremy. "It's their choice and you can't force it; it doesn't matter if you're related or have a long history. It's now about trying to make your peace with it."

Jacqui suggests journaling and doing a 'brain dump' – just to get all those feelings out of your head. "And try not to romanticise the connection like we sometimes do with love affairs, thinking things like, 'I'm never going to have a friend like that again'. Accept that there were good bits and bad, and one day you're going to feel better and the grief will pass." ●

OUR PSYCHOLOGISTS' SIX STEPS FOR MAKING THE FIRST MOVE

1.

TALK TO SOMEONE

Before reaching out, try chatting to a professional who's not in your family or friend circles, says Jacqui Manning. "We can paint scenarios in our head about how it'll go, so a psychologist can help you work through that and brainstorm how to deal with different reactions."

2.

TREAD LIGHTLY

"If you're reconnecting after an awkward falling out, keep the interactions low-key at first," says Jeremy Cowden. "If it's a matter of drifting due to busy lives and then you look up and oh, it's been five years, that's a bit easier to navigate."

3.

DECIDE WHAT TO ADDRESS

"Some people might like to clear the air," says Jacqui, "while others might be happy to have the relationship back and acknowledge they don't need to revisit old history. Be clear if you need to address things, though."

"I reconnected with my little brother after 30 years"

SARAH THOMAS, 50

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After my parents split up, my mum remarried and had a son, Charlie. I was 14 at the time and when I'd visit, we got on well, he was a fun, spunky little kid. But there were complicated family circumstances and when Mum died of cancer when I was 18, any contact I had at all with my brother was broken.

It was a horrible time; grieving my mum and not being able to see Charlie. I would've done anything to be reconnected with him. Over the years, it was always in my mind that he was out there. In 2008, I was googling the town where he lived in England and I found him in a photo of a party, smiling and wearing a silly hat. The relief was huge.

The photo had a link to his Facebook profile so I sent him a message. Something like, "I'm your sister and I'd love to connect with you." He replied, but I'd clearly caught him off guard and he didn't quite know how to deal with it.



After that, I'd message him every so often. I wanted to let him digest it and come back to me when he was ready. And in 2022, he asked for my number and said, "Let's have a conversation. I want to get to know you."

We met up in London and I remember walking down the road to the restaurant, thinking, "Everyone around me is going out for Friday night drinks or taking their dog for a walk and no-one gets the magnitude of what's about to happen to me. That I'm seeing my brother after 30 years." It was a day I'd been waiting for, for a long time.

I've learned that we have the same sense of humour. We can have the most amazing conversations. It's just so clear that we're cut from the same cloth.

Now, I feel comfortable with where everything is at. We text every so often; I've stayed with him in London and introduced him to members of Mum's family. We have a mutual understanding that we don't rake over the past; we were both children so what happened was out of our hands. And even after so much time, it feels like it was absolutely the right time for us to reconnect. We both have gratitude, being in each other's worlds again.

My advice to others in a similar situation would be to be patient, and don't feel like you have to fix everything in the first message, the first conversation or maybe even at all. These situations can be huge, so keeping things low-key gives everybody time and space to adjust.

4.

SET LIMITS

"If it's a falling out with a family member and you know you'll see them at Christmas or Cousin Benny's wedding," says Jeremy, "you can create those boundaries knowing you won't have to deal with them the rest of the time."

5.

GIVE THEM TIME TO ADJUST

You may have thought about making contact for a long time but it could be a shock to the other person. "You don't know where you're landing in their life, so give them time to get on the same page as you," says Jacqui.

6.

GO SLOW WHEN REBUILDING

"Once you've reconnected, build the relationship back up on the common ground you have," says Jeremy. "If there's an activity you enjoyed doing together, that's a great place to start."