WELLNESS

We Asked 8 Women in Their 20s What Ended Their Last Relationship

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IMAGE BY PAULA BOUDES

Aside from death and taxes, there's one fait accompli that binds us all: heartbreak. Thanks to rom-coms and reality TV, however, there's a false narrative surrounding what the "typical" breakup looks like. On-screen couples part ways over a simple misunderstanding—and it's nothing that can't be solved with an airport declaration of love. Yet, breaking up in the real world is more like driving on black ice; the issues quietly take root under the banality of everyday life, and the damage is often too deep to repair when it comes to the surface. (Read: the most common reason for divorce).

That said, it doesn't help that 20-somethings are living in a world that's plagued by the paradox of choice. *Are they the one?* has turned into, *Am I settling?* The challenge now has become finding security among an infinite sea of dating apps—and quelling the looming anxiety that you could be happier in another relationship. Plus, how do you *really* know when to call it quits when one TikTok relationship expert says, "Make it work with someone who's emotionally avoidant," and another says, "You're being emotionally blackmailed"? So in an effort to bring some clarity to those who are on the fence—and catharsis to anyone who's afraid to move on—we asked eight women in their 20s what ended their last relationship, and how they're doing today.

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1. The One Who Lost Herself

- **Her:** 25, account manager
- **The Ex:** 28, investment banker
- **Duration of Relationship:** 4.5 years

How It Started: We met my sophomore year of college at an apartment party. He was getting off of the elevator and I needed a plus-one for a party I had the next week. After some liquid courage, I screamed, "Hey, kid, do you want to go to a party with me?" And he was like, "Yeah, why not?" I was impressed by that—we went to the party—and things took off from there.

When Things Went Downhill: The first time things got really bad was at the end of our senior year. Moving to a new city, jobs, graduation—all that kind of stuff was looming. When I brought up the idea of moving to New York, he didn't like it—he assumed it would be me and him moving to New York together, but I said I needed to go on my own. I didn't want to leave him, of course, but it was what was best for both of us at that time and I think he felt abandoned. As a result, he became toxic with his words and began to incite fights that would only get worse with time. And then, the second time things took a turn for the worse was when I found out that he cheated on me during my senior year of college during spring break.

The Last Straw: During COVID, I was furloughed from my job and found out my mom was sick…he was not supportive during any of that. So eventually, I initiated the breakup conversation and told him things weren't going to work out. We weren't going to do long distance, so this time, the breakup felt more sad than angry. We knew the relationship had run its course, and that we both needed to move forward.

Post-Breakup Takeaways: I think the core of the breakup was that I just…wasn't happy anymore. It wasn't going to get any better and it wasn't his job to fix that. I never prioritized myself in the relationship, he always came first, and I feel like I abandoned who I was and what I wanted to do. I worried that I was going to wake up one day in a house with him and two kids and say, "where the hell am I?" I needed to re-discover who I was. That's what your 20s is all about.

2. The One Who Wasn't The "Right" Religion

- **Her:** 25, nurse practitioner
- **The Ex:** 26, realtor
- **Duration of Relationship:** 10 months

How It Started: We met through mutual friends when I first moved to New York. We were really good friends before we got together—we hung out all the time. I wasn't really attracted to him physically at the start, but I loved him as a friend and really wanted somebody who was always going to be there for me. Eventually, the physical attraction grew—it's actually what ended up being the glue of the relationship (until it wasn't).

When Things Went Downhill: I don't think he ever let his guard down in the relationship. He never really expressed his emotions and purposefully held back the entire time. I was like, "Why isn't this guy into me in the same way I'm into him? Why doesn't he show any affection towards me?" He had very religious Jewish parents who wanted him to marry someone with Jewish blood (something I don't have). He was worried that his family would disown him entirely if we stayed together for the long haul. Because of this, the relationship had an expiration date, and he was too afraid to let himself be vulnerable.

The Last Straw: I felt physically tortured for a month or two because I knew I had to end it. I was worried that it would impact my relationship with our shared friend group—and I had such a level of comfort with him that felt scary to give up. But then, it got to the point where I couldn't think about anything else. I woke up from a nightmare I was having about breaking up with him while next to him in bed one morning. I couldn't take it anymore. Then and there, I told him we weren't connecting in the way that I needed, wanted and expected to, and that I can't waste any more time.

Post-Breakup Takeaways: He came back a month later and asked to talk, so we went for a little walk. He told me that he [selfishly] withdrew his love and didn't give me what I needed because he wanted to keep me around, but didn't want to ruin his relationship with his family. I think this gave some much-needed closure and we both seem to be happier apart than we were when we were together.

3. The One Who Was an Emotional Hostage

- **Her:** 26, marketing
- **The Ex:** 27, banker
- **Duration of Relationship:** 6 years

How It Started: We grew up together, but things really took off when we went to the same college. The attraction was always there, but we were at a party freshman year when sparks flew. It was just one of those undeniable nights where you can't imagine being with anyone else.

When Things Went Downhill: The whole relationship was a seesaw between love and hostility. He'd fly off the handle for no reason (that he cared to share), yelling at me and calling me names that made me seriously question my self-worth. And then, the next day, he'd apologize profusely…until he did it again. My friends would often tell me that he was talking to other girls, including his ex-girlfriend, but each confrontation with him resulted in lies and denial. In every explosive fight, I was somehow the person that had done something wrong. I was constantly worried that I'd do something to set him off, or that I was the reason he'd start looking for love elsewhere.

The Last Straw: There were many breakups, but for the final one, he initiated the conversation. The fighting had become so toxic, we couldn't be in the same room with each other. It was time for both of us to find happiness elsewhere, and ending things was the most considerate thing he'd done for me in a long time.

Post-Breakup Takeaways: When you're in a dynamic that [you know] is bad for you, it's hard to see a way out. You become so emotionally invested in helping the other person that you forget how to help yourself. After years of worrying that he'd take back his love—or use it as a weapon against me—I could no longer recognize what a supportive partner looked like. I am now on a journey to rediscover myself, and while it's been hard to deal with the emotional scars he left, I'm starting to recognize the person looking back at me in the mirror.

4. The One Who Needed Consistency

- **Her:** 25, marketing manager
- **The Ex:** 25, financial planner
- **Duration of Relationship:** 5 years

How It Started: We met freshman year in the dorms. He came into my friend's room, and honestly, I thought he was an asshole at first. But then he asked for my number. There was some kind of mystery to him. I was intrigued by him. (And he had what I was looking for on paper: tall with blue eyes.)

When Things Went Downhill: The first red flag was that none of my friends liked him. And then, as the relationship progressed, I realized that he was extremely inconsistent. Sometimes he would be into me, sometimes he wouldn't. I felt super anxious when I was with him. Because of it, there was no trust and we didn't have a good foundation, there were lies and emotional and physical abuse. And then, as things got more serious, I realized that we didn't agree on things from a moral standpoint. It wasn't something where you could really disagree and still have a relationship; we had different values.

The Last Straw: We broke up so many times, I think six or seven times (maybe more). Eventually, though, I was the one who ended it. I just couldn't have the same conversation anymore.

Post-Breakup Takeaways: With me, what you see is what you get, and I need someone who's going to be equally upfront, honest and reliable in a relationship. Between the inconsistency and lack of trust, I knew it was time to find something that would offer stability and security.

5. The One Who Messed Up

- **Her:** 20, actor
- **The Ex:** 21, animal trainer
- **Duration of Relationship:** 3 years, 7 months

How It Started: We met in high school. I was a freshman, my ex was a sophomore. We were paired as love interests for a show junior and senior year, and attraction started then.

When Things Went Downhill: We made it through the transition of college and it was great. Hard, but great. When she got a job as an orca trainer about two years into our relationship, she became very unavailable…things just tanked. Her co-workers weren't nice, she wanted to always hang out with them and not me, she used my family for free food and housing and expensive extracurriculars and trips—and she never cleaned. She just changed.

The Last Straw: This gets dark, but after fighting on and off for a year, I threatened her with my life. I knew that was it. She initiated the breakup a few days later and said she couldn't do it anymore. She needed space and time. She told me the way to get her back is to show her I've healed. I told her I was going to get help for both of us—with or without her. I did, I've been in therapy since, read up on so many mental health books, and I have been doing so much better.

Post-Breakup Takeaways: The core reasons for breaking up was my need to feel seen, and becoming anxiously attached because of it. I handled my emotions extremely immaturely. I miss her—but I also know that love without mutual effort doesn't work. These days, I'm focusing on healing and stepping into a mindset that resembles black cat dating energy: self-aware, self-respecting, and no longer begging for crumbs.

6. The One Who Hated His Friends

- **Her:** 23, graphic designer
- **The Ex:** 25, accountant
- **Duration of Relationship:** 3 years

How It Started: I had just gotten out of a relationship when I met him. It started as a casual college hook-up and neither of us were looking for anything serious. But we had this undeniable chemistry and every time we were together, it felt like way more than a fling.

When Things Went Downhill: The first thing that *really* annoyed me was his lack of time management. Every time we would make plans to go out, he'd get stoned with his roommate. He would then show up incredibly late—and by late, I mean hours later. Almost all of our fights, then, started to stem from his behavior with his friends. He'd constantly prioritize them, and between his job and his social circle, he could never make time for me. His friends were also hypermasculine and he acted like a completely different person when he was around them. He wouldn't answer calls/texts (even when it was an emergency) and defended the vulgar ways they'd speak about women…they were always, "good at heart." They'd also talk about me like I was his angry controlling wife; robbing my boyfriend of his freedom.

The Last Straw: After never-ending arguments over his friends, I was exhausted. I felt myself getting bitter, leading to passive-aggressive comments I couldn't seem to contain. It would lead to blowout fights where we wouldn't speak for days, and then everything would go back to normal. Eventually, I realized I wasn't happy anymore.

Post-Breakup Takeaways: While I loved him very much, especially when we were alone, I realized that his friends said a lot more about him than I initially realized. Making time for the person you love is the least you can do. I was sick of feeling like I was in second place; I knew I deserved more than settling for the bare minimum.

7. The One Who Snooped

- **Her:** 27, tattoo artist
- **The Ex:** 37, self-employed
- **Duration of Relationship:** 7 months

How It Started: I moved into his place after a three-year relationship that just ended for me; he had a room for rent. We immediately hit off, comforted each other after dates gone wrong, watched shows together, ate dinner together…we had a lot of fun when we were just friends. It wasn't flirty at first; we didn't want to cross that housemate/landlord boundary. But I was attracted to his calmness, his physical appearance, his humor…he had this relaxed warmth. He also knew how to cheer me up when I was down. The spark was definitely there, so we decided to see where things would go beyond our friendship.

When Things Went Downhill: I had a bad habit of snooping on his phone from the start of the relationship, due to previous trust issues. Then [one night], I got this horrible gut feeling while he was gaming and went through the phone while he was asleep. Everything was clean and I felt stupid for violating his trust. But then, as I was closing tabs, I saw a site open for erotic workers. The number of chats that were open… I could not count. Most of them were him asking to meet up and not getting a reply. Some he had bailed on, and a couple he had sent nudes to.

The Last Straw: The last straw was simply me finding the disgusting sex chats. That was it for me. I tolerated flirting, white lies and harmless conversations online. The amount and extent of the sex chatting, though, is what did it for me—along with the lying to my face for months. I woke him up, gave him his phone with the open site, and told him my gut was right the whole time. He admitted to everything but [it was too late]. I told him I couldn't be with him right now, but we live together, so we are trying to get through it civilly.

Post-Breakup Takeaways: I'm still going through it. It's hard because you always wonder if it's right, or if things can be fixed. But I realize: I can't constantly question him or want to see his phone. He doesn't see therapy as an option and I don't know how I could trust him.

The right person wouldn't even *think* to lie to me like that. I'm focusing on myself and pouring the love I give into myself instead. It hurts, but as Florence Pugh once said, "It hurts a millimeter less every day."

8. The One Who Was Critiqued

- **Her:** 23, junior agent
- **The Ex:** 24, grad student
- **Duration of Relationship:** 1 year

How It Started: We met during our freshman year of college: My friends and I were at a frat, and he was at the door, telling us we couldn't come in. Initially, I thought he was an asshole. But then, things changed in my senior year. He started chasing me, texting me every day to let me know how much he liked me.

When Things Went Downhill: At the time, I was having a lot of issues with my friends. I was looking for support and advice on what to do, and he responded with ridicule or apathy. He wasn't empathetic to what I was going through. Still, there were deeper issues that became more prominent over time. We had major political differences—he was extremely conservative with beliefs I disagreed with to my core—and it became increasingly difficult to ignore after graduation. I think this was the reason for a lot of passive-aggressive behavior that ensued. If I mispronounced something at a French restaurant, he wouldn't talk to me for 20 minutes because I embarrassed him. If I didn't come over after a grueling day at work, I was a bad girlfriend for taking a moment of respite. Towards the end, I started to feel like there was constant judgment with very little affirmation that I was doing anything right.

The Last Straw: We were coming up on our one-year anniversary and he was freaking out about it. There was one day when he slept over at my apartment, my sister came over and my roommates were there in the morning, and everything seemed fine. Then he left, only to abruptly return an hour later (without warning), saying he had a panic attack. He told me he needed a break, yet texted me the day after, saying it was a mistake. So, we got back together on his birthday, a few weeks before he had finals. (He's a freshman in grad school.) I soon became a complete afterthought. We wouldn't talk for days and it almost felt like we had already broken up. So after his last test, I officially ended it.

Post-Breakup Takeaways: I got to the point where I didn't recognize the person I was before—someone I liked—and realized I was sacrificing the best version of myself to make it work with someone who didn't like me for me. Anyone who puts you in a constant state of insecurity isn't someone that's worth staying with.

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