

The art of letting go

EOA shows you why you should stop seeing 'letting go' as 'giving up'

While life, thankfully, has its simple pleasures such as sandwiches, the feeling of sea sand between your toes, or a mischievous smile exchanged with a stranger, there are certain things that are imperative to a person's wellbeing.

Health, companionship, friendship, and a sense of purpose are only some of them. It is no mean feat trying to keep our heads above water and maintaining a sincere smile while we do so. So what happens when one of our many joys begins to feel like a burden?

What happens when somebody or something that used to fill your life with positivity now leaves you feeling weighed down? Perhaps it's time to let go.

Johannesburg-based psychologist Steven Kaplan believes that if you're trying to identify whether or not it's time to let go of something, be it a romantic partner or a job, you will need to answer certain questions with brutal honesty.

Does time spent in their company make you tired or aggravated, or do you find ways to avoid them or the situation altogether. Have you forgotten why you prioritised this part of your life in the first place? Even if the answer to these is a resounding yes, many people resist cutting certain things out of their life for fear that they are giving up, and haven't tried hard enough.

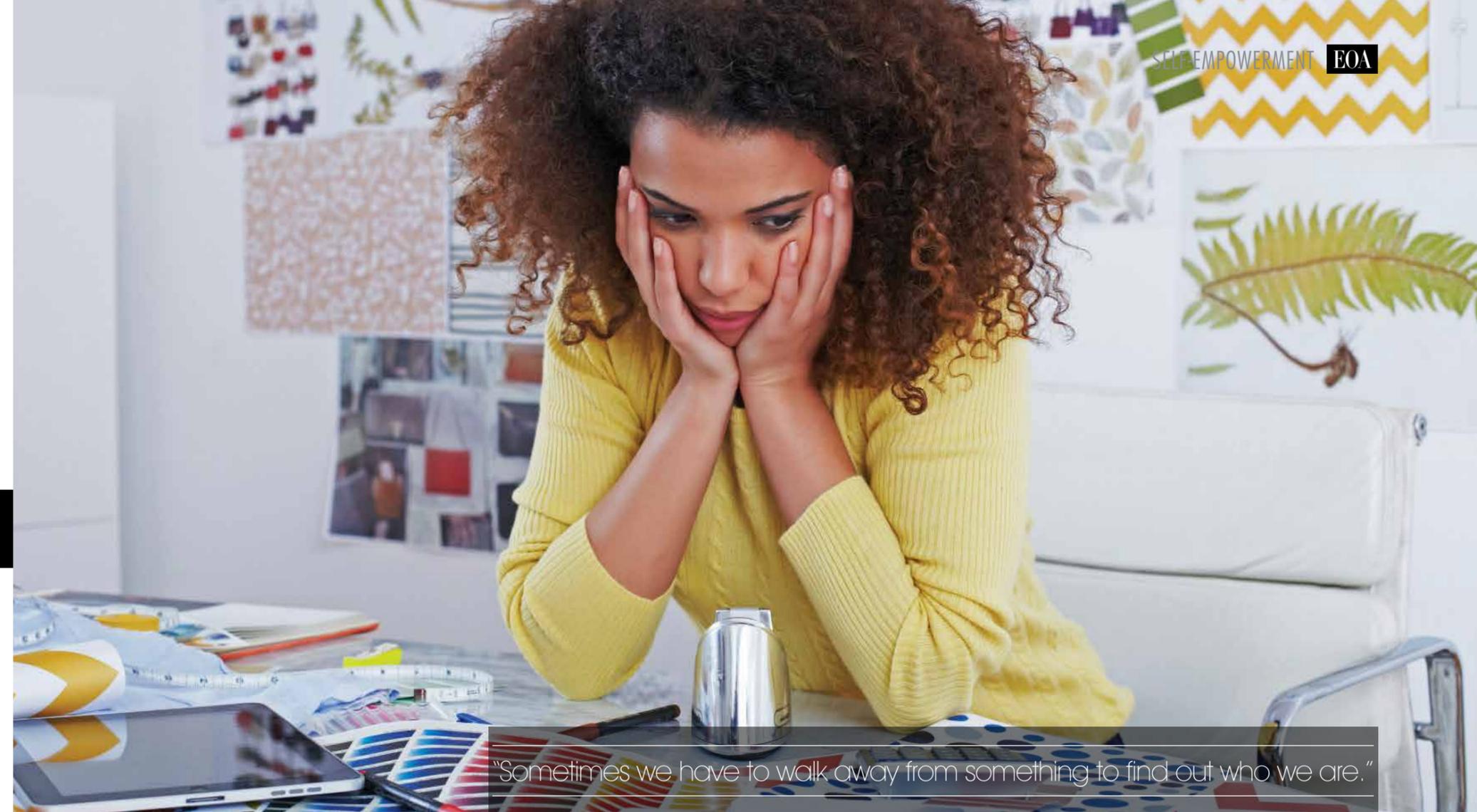
Registered counsellor Andy Nossel from Johannesburg suggests taking your time while addressing the situation, and consciously doing an assessment of sorts. "If a relationship is causing more stress and pain than happiness, it's time to move on. Make a point of noting in your diary which days are good and which are bad in relation to your specific concern. When the bad days outweigh the good, it's time to let go," she says.

However, it might not be a good idea for your testing period to go on for too long because, try as we might to ignore the signs, holding onto something that is no longer contributing to your well being has both short- and long-term negative effects.

"Your self-esteem can take a huge knock if you're in a negative relationship, either personally or professionally. If you feel vulnerable or sensitive in an unhealthy or abusive environment, you almost start believing what someone else is telling you what you're worth."

The trick is to trust in your feelings. If you suspect something is fundamentally dysfunctional, it probably is. "When you hold onto something that's harming you, you forget that although life is often hard, it's really never complicated," Kaplan explains.

"Most people who come to me with this particular question are already aware that their feelings of anger, depression, anxiety



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and despair are completely connected to something that is in fact, already dead. Their confusion about themselves is really just a consequence of their denial."

Why is it then that we are still so resistant of letting things go of things that aren't working anymore? Kaplan says that when it comes to letting someone go in a personal capacity, it is often due to the fear of change and of losing a person which, in itself, can be as hard to cope with as an actual death.

"When the time comes to let go, the best approach is probably still that of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the founder of Hospice. Her work with the terminally ill showed us that all loss is the same, whether it is a literal death or just a figurative one. Letting go is a process that follows the same five steps as dying," Kaplan explains.

And while going through the process of denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and acceptance, it is important to take note of

your feelings and to understand that they are normal. "Everyone has different ways of expressing these, and there are no right or wrong ways, but it is very important to acknowledge that everyone will experience a version of these five steps," says Kaplan.

In the space between denial and acceptance, it is so important to stand strong in your decision despite how tempting it can be to go back to something familiar. A way in which to prevent that regression is to look at the situation for what it is and not for what you'd hoped it had been, suggests Nossel.

"We all have a tendency to remember only the good times. If you're struggling with having left a job or a relationship or a place behind, you need to continually remember why you made that decision. Keep weighing these things up and doing those reality checks."

As lonely and as scary as the process of letting go can feel, the reality of being

weighed down by something that is not meant for you will hurt infinitely more than fear of the unknown. The purpose of living is to continue to move forward, and that means understanding that change is more inevitable and necessary than it is hard.

"Things end and new things begin. It will be difficult dealing with the emptiness you may feel after letting go, but let yourself feel empty for a while if you can. Don't rush to replace it as soon as possible. There is always a very good reason why we held on in the first place. Respect that for what it was, even if it's no longer necessary," Kaplan says.

There's no use fighting it, and it will always hurt, but you'll find yourself there waiting at the end of it. "Sometimes we have to walk away from something to find out who we are. And that means letting go. We probably never really want to because it hurts; but it's always necessary." **E**