

# Thinking about breaking up? You may as well flip a coin

June 20 2014, by Gary W. Lewandowski Jr.

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In their latest book, *Think Like a Freak*, Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner urge readers to think about the world differently by training readers' brains to approach problems in unique ways. In the final chapter, the *Upside of Quitting*, Levitt and Dubner suggest that, contrary to what many people have told you in life, you should quit. That is, when

things get tough, you shouldn't always tough them out and stick with it. Instead, you should quit and do so sooner rather than later.

Because many of us believe in the adage "winners never quit", giving up is a difficult thing to do. The authors describe an experiment where readers submitted a tough [decision](#) they wanted the site to decide for them. You might assume that since economists were behind this experiment, they would implement a fancy algorithm or formula to help readers make the most data-based decision. Instead they used a simple computerised coin flip to spit out an answer. Despite putting a button that said "flip a coin" before the decision was given, readers submitted some rather serious questions, such as, should I quit my job?

What caught my eye was that more than 200 people asked the question: should I break up with my partner? Given that the coin flip said "Yes" half the time, it must have led to 100 break ups. Of course, not everyone who asked the question would follow through on their decision. But the book's authors suggest that most people did follow through.

Think about how bizarre that is. Roughly 100 people who were in a [relationship](#) broke up based on a random decision made by a computer. A survey later on revealed that they were generally happy about their decision.

Surprisingly, this result agrees with research findings. We know that people in relationships predict that they will be sadder about the break-up than they are when it [actually happens](#). My [research](#) found that when you ask undergraduates who recently broke up, "Overall, how would you describe the break-up's impact on you?" a majority (41.3%) rated their break-up as positive, while 25.7% said it was neutral. Only 33% reported that the break-up was negative.

Of course not everyone would be happy submitting their relationship's

future to a coin flip. In fact, doing so in the first place says something about your relationship. If you are willing to take a 50% chance of your relationship ending, it is quite likely that your relationship already has less commitment. Those with more commitment wouldn't take the chance.

Relationships with less commitment are [more likely to break up](#), which may also explain why users were happy when the coin suggested ending the relationship. These users may have sensed that a break-up was imminent and conveniently had a coin-flip to blame. Of course, that coin may be doing both partners a favour since having doubts about your relationship prior to marriage relates to less marriage satisfaction and a [higher likelihood for divorce](#), especially for women.

Ultimately, as far as your relationship is concerned, whether a coin flip can effectively make relationship decisions isn't that important. What may be most revealing is whether you would be willing to allow a coin flip to determine the fate of your relationship.

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