

When a Key Snaps: The Reality of Broken Key Extraction

There is a moment every driver dreads. You turn the key in the ignition or the lock cylinder, and instead of the familiar click, you feel a sickening snap. The key is now in two pieces, and the working end is stuck inside the lock. Panic sets in. You might think the day is ruined, the lock is destroyed, or you need to call a tow truck. In many cases, that is not true. A competent locksmith can handle a broken key extraction quickly and save you a lot of trouble.

I have worked on locks for over a decade, and I have seen every variation of this problem. Some keys break because the metal is worn thin from years of use. Others snap because the lock itself is stiff or corroded, putting extra torque on the key. And sometimes it is just bad luck a brittle key and a tight lock meet at the wrong angle. Whatever the cause, the goal is the same: remove the broken piece without damaging the lock, then get you back on the road.

How Keys Actually Break

Car keys are made of brass, nickel-silver, or steel alloys. They are durable enough for thousands of cycles, but they are not indestructible. The most common breaking point is the shoulder, where the blade meets the bow. If you put too much force on a stuck lock, that spot gives way. The blade stays inside, and the bow is left in your hand. Another common break is right at the tip, usually from trying to force a key into a frozen lock or a lock with a worn pin.

Age matters too. A key from 2005 that has been used daily has microscopic stress fractures. One cold morning, it just lets go. I have also seen keys break because a driver used a key that was a copy of a copy, made from soft metal that never fit properly. That poor fit creates binding, and binding leads to breakage.

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What a Broken Key Extraction Involves

When you call a mobile locksmith for a [broken key extraction](#), the first thing we do is assess the situation. Is the broken piece visible? Is it flush with the shear line? Is the lock part of a car door, the ignition, or a trunk? Each case needs a different approach.

For visible fragments, we often use a pair of fine needle-nose pliers or a specialised spiral extractor. A spiral extractor is a thin, threaded tool that we gently screw into the broken key piece. Once it bites, we pull straight out. It is a delicate process. If you force it, you can push the broken piece deeper or damage the lock pins.

If the key is broken flush with the shear line, we need a different tactic. We might use a small pick to push the pins out of the way, then slide the broken piece out with a wafer-thin tool. Sometimes we use a vacuum or a tiny magnet to get a grip. The key is to work slowly and avoid any action that turns the lock cylinder while the broken piece is inside.



Ignition locks are especially tricky. They have spring-loaded pins and a rotating plug. If you try to extract a broken key from an ignition by turning it, you can shear a pin or break the lock housing. That turns a simple extraction into a full lock replacement. A professional knows to hold the plug steady and work the extractor without turning the core.

Common Mistakes People Make

I have been called to jobs where the driver tried to fix it themselves first. Here are the most common errors I see:

- Using superglue to attach the broken piece back and pull it out. The glue usually runs into the lock mechanism, gumming up the pins and making the lock inoperable.
- Prying with a screwdriver or a knife, which scratches the lock face and can bend the cylinder.
- Spraying lubricant like WD-40 into the lock. That can wash out the graphite powder that helps the lock run smoothly, and it makes the broken piece slippery and harder to grip.
- Trying to drill out the broken key. That often damages the lock beyond repair.

A broken key extraction is a job for proper tools and steady hands. Trying shortcuts almost always costs more in the long run.

When You Need a New Key After Extraction

Once the broken piece is out, the lock is usually fine to use again. But you still need a working key. If you have a spare, you can have a copy made from it. If not, the locksmith can often cut a new key by code if the vehicle is newer, or by impression if the lock is older. Some car keys also have electronic transponders or chips that need programming. That is a separate service, but a mobile locksmith can often handle that on the same visit.

I recommend every driver keep a spare key in a safe place, not inside the car. And if you ever feel a key starting to bind or stick, do not force it. Get the lock checked before the key snaps. A little maintenance goes a long way.

Why You Should Not Ignore a Stiff Lock

A lock that is hard to turn is a warning sign. The cause could be a worn key, a misaligned cylinder, or dirt inside the lock. If you ignore it and keep forcing the key, you are one turn away from a broken key extraction. A locksmith can clean and lubricate the lock with the right products, or adjust the cylinder if it is out of alignment. That costs a fraction of what an emergency extraction would.

I have seen cases where a driver waited too long, and the key broke in the middle of a winter storm. That is not a fun experience. A little prevention saves you from standing in the cold while someone works on your car door.

What to Do When It Happens

If your key snaps right now, here is a quick rundown:

1. Stay calm. Do not try to turn the broken piece with your fingers or a tool.
2. Do not spray anything into the lock.
3. Call a mobile locksmith who does broken key extraction. Give them the exact location and the type of lock (door, ignition, trunk).
4. If the broken piece is sticking out, do not touch it. Let the locksmith handle it.

A good locksmith will arrive with a kit of extractors, picks, and replacement key blanks. Most car door extractions take under thirty minutes. Ignition extractions can take a bit longer, but still usually under an hour.



One thing I always tell people is that a broken key extraction is not the end of the world. It is a common repair, and a skilled locksmith has done it hundreds of times. The key is to call someone who knows what they are doing, not a handyman with a drill.

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I also want to mention that some newer cars have electronic keys with no physical blade. Those do not break in the lock. But many cars still use a traditional metal key for the door, even if the ignition is push-button. So the problem is still out there.

If you drive an older car, or a car that has seen a lot of use, consider having a spare key made from the original, not from a worn copy. And if you ever feel resistance when turning the key, get it checked. It is a small investment that can prevent a roadside headache.

Local GTA Locksmith, serving the Greater Toronto Area, provides professional mobile locksmith services including same-day car key replacement, programming, and repair. If you need help, you can reach them at +1 647-557-8103.