

Too much commitment may be unhealthy for relationships

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Romantic relationships establish special bonds between partners. Oftentimes, passionate rapport leads to permanent partnerships, and ultimately, the start of families.

Sometimes, however, one or both partners place too much emotional weight on their relationship. As a result, men or women may tend to evaluate their self-worth solely based on the outcomes of their romantic interactions. This is what psychologists term as relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE), and, according to University of Houston researcher Chip Knee, it's an unhealthy factor in romantic relationships.

"Individuals with high levels of RCSE are very committed to their relationships, but they also find themselves at risk to become devastated when something goes wrong -- even a relatively minor event," said Knee, UH assistant professor of psychology and director of the university's Interpersonal Relations and Motivation Research Group. "An overwhelming amount of the wrong kind of commitment can actually undermine a relationship."

Knee added that RCSE can trigger depression and anxieties during even the most minor or common relationship-based incidents, such as miscommunication, short spats over noncritical matters or a critique of one's personality or appearance.

It also factors into one or more partners developing manic, obsessive (or needy) behaviors with regard to love.

RCSE might place one at risk for serious mood changes after break-ups, divorce or threats to one's relationship. Identifying it during the early stages of a relationship can prevent such negative outcomes or help partners recognize that they are incompatible.

Knee and a group of researchers observed the impact of RCSE among heterosexual college students in a series of studies. Their findings were presented in the paper "Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem - The Ups and Downs of Romantic Relationships," published in the flagship *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Collaborating with Knee were Amber L. Bush of UH, Amy Canevello of the University of Michigan and Astrid Cook of Idiro Technologies.

Included in these studies was a 14-day diary procedure in which 198 participants recorded the most positive and negative events in their romantic relationships.

Also documented in this daily diary were participants' feelings about themselves and their relationships.

"What we found with this particular study was that people with higher levels of RCSE felt worse about themselves during negative moments in their relationships," Knee said. "It's as if it doesn't matter why the negative occurrence happens or who was at fault. The partners with stronger RCSE still feel badly about themselves."

Individuals with RCSE also are prone to react more emotionally to relationship-based situations, Knee added. Instead of taking a step back, analyzing a situation and determining how to best address it, those with RCSE respond immediately and impulsively.

"When something happens in a relationship, these individuals don't

separate themselves from it," he said. "They immediately feel personally connected to any negative circumstance in a relationship and become anxious, more depressed and hostile."

Source: University of Houston

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