

Passion pitfall: Research finds that rekindling a romance often extinguishes a couple's happiness

February 21 2012

Before renewing romance with an ex, it may be better to move on to the next.

Amber Vennum, assistant professor of family studies and human services at Kansas State University, is studying couples in cyclical relationships -- the term used for a couple who breaks up and then gets back together. She is looking at why couples reunite and how it affects the [relationship](#).

"There has been very little research on this topic, but it turns out that cyclical relationships are quite prevalent," Vennum said. "With college-age kids, about 40 percent are currently in a relationship where they have broken up and then have gotten back together. That's shocking, especially when you factor in the outcomes of being in a cyclical relationship."

For her research, Vennum analyzed information that cyclical and noncyclical couples gave about their relationship and its characteristics. The information was evaluated using the relationship deciding scale, or RDS, which assesses relationship qualities and accurately predicts what the relationship will be like 14 weeks into the future.

While movies, books and TV shows may portray rekindling a relationship as romantic, Vennum found that the results of getting back

together were less than desirable.

Findings showed that couples in a cyclical relationship tended to be more impulsive about major relationship [transitions](#) -- like moving in together, buying a pet together or having a child together -- than those not in a cyclical relationship. As a result, the couples in cyclical relationships tended to be less satisfied with their partner; had worse communication; made more decisions that negatively affected the relationship; had lower self-esteem; and had a higher [uncertainty](#) about their future together.

"The idea is that because people aren't making explicit commitments to the relationship, they are less likely to engage in pro-relationship behaviors, such as discussing the state of the relationship or making sacrifices for their partner," Vennum said. "The thought is that, 'I'm not committed to you, why would I work very hard for you?'"

The findings are in line with those from the only other U.S. research team to study cyclical couples, according to Vennum. That team studied the breakup strategies used by couples in cyclical relationships and their reasons for reuniting. The researchers found that couples said they got back together because they believed their partner had changed for the better or that communications had improved -- but the results indicated otherwise. Additionally, other couples stated that the relationship continued because it was unclear if they had actually ended their [romance](#).

"When cyclical couples break up, they tend to be ambiguous about ending the relationship," Vennum said. "So it can be unclear to one or both partners if they broke up and why they broke up, which leads to them continuing the romantic relationship. Other times the breakup won't be unilateral, so one person pursues the other until they get back together."

Vennum also looked at the effect of premarital cyclicality on marriages.

She found that couples who were cyclical prior to marriage were more uncertain about getting married and began their marriages with lower satisfaction and higher conflict than noncyclical couples. Over time, satisfaction with the marriage continued to decrease for cyclical couples. Additionally, spouses who were cyclical before marriage were also more likely to experience a trial separation during the first three years of marriage.

"It really shows that those patterns of cyclicality tend to repeat," Vennum said. "If you tend to be cyclical while dating, you tend to be cyclical while married. The more you are cyclical, the more your relationship quality tends to decrease and that creates a lack of trust and uncertainty about the future of the relationship, perpetuating the pattern."

Vennum is currently putting together her findings for publication. She also has advice for [couples](#) who have broken up.

"Don't get back together," she said. "Study after study shows that when our relationships are poor, we don't function well. If it seems necessary to get back together, make sure the decision is carefully considered by both people and that specific efforts are made to establish clarity."

Provided by Kansas State University

Citation: Passion pitfall: Research finds that rekindling a romance often extinguishes a couple's happiness (2012, February 21) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-02-passion-pitfall-rekindling-romance-extinguishes.html>

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