

# Research explains why some people have more difficulty recovering from romantic breakups

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Stanford psychologists say rejection, particularly by a romantic partner, can pose a potent threat to the self.

People carry a heavier burden from rejection when they view it as

revealing something about "who they really are" as a person, new Stanford research shows.

The research, published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, examines the link between [rejection](#) and a person's sense of self. Carol Dweck, a professor of psychology, co-authored the paper along with psychology doctoral student Lauren Howe, who was the lead author.

"The research shows that very basic beliefs about personality can contribute to whether people recover from, or remain mired in, the pain of rejection," said Dweck, the Lewis and Virginia Eaton Professor.

Prior research suggests that people typically know how to cope with the emotional hurt of rejection. But sometimes, according to the study, rejections can linger, even for years, and cause problems for future relationships.

"Few things in life are more traumatic than being rejected by someone who knows you well and then, with this insight, decides that she or he no longer cares for you or wants to be with you," Dweck said, adding that [romantic rejection](#), in particular, poses a tremendous threat to the self.

Howe added, "The experience of being left by someone who thought that they loved you, then learned more and changed their mind, can be a particularly potent threat to the self and can drive people to question who they truly are."

## **Rejections and the self**

For their research, Dweck and Howe explored the basic beliefs that people carry with them into a relationship that might make them more likely to link rejection to the self, and thereby magnify and extend the impact of a rejection.

They conducted five studies involving 891 participants who filled out online surveys about both hypothetical rejections and real-life rejections. The participants reported, among other things, how their view of themselves changed because of the rejection. For example, they rated the extent to which "I worry that there is something 'wrong' with me because I got rejected."

How people view human personality was especially significant to the study. For example, participants were queried about whether they believe that people can significantly change their personality (a growth-oriented view), or that "the kind of person you are" is static and thus can't be changed much (a fixed view).

The study found that people differ in whether and how they connect romantic rejections to their self. It turned out that people with a fixed mindset about their personality – those who believe that their personality is simply fixed and unchangeable – allow romantic rejections to linger longer in their lives.

Dweck noted, "To them, a rejection reveals that it is fixed at a deficient level. On the other hand, people who believe in their ability to grow and develop, while of course hurt by rejections, can more readily bounce back and envision a brighter future."

Howe said, "Those who see rejections as revealing a core truth about themselves as a person, something about who they really are, may be more likely to struggle with recovery and carry rejection with them into the future."

She added that people often look toward romantic partners as a "source of information about the self."

## **Future relationships**

The research also found that people who believe that a rejection revealed a new, permanent defect worry that this defect will surface in future romantic relationships.

"This concern haunts them and can make them guarded and defensive in future relationships – something we know is likely to impair these future relationships," Dweck said.

In short, this group sees rejections as changing both their view of themselves and their [relationship](#) prospects in the future, according to the study.

Indeed, these people reported still being negatively influenced by rejections that had occurred more than five years ago, Dweck and Howe wrote.

They suggest that future research should explore whether rejection lingers in nonromantic relationships as well, such as being abandoned by a parent or suffering academic or career failures. Interestingly, Dweck and Howe's research found that rejection from people who are essentially strangers can create problems for people with fixed personality views.

Another issue is whether experiences not directly connected to personhood – such as bad luck or accidents – create long-term negative effects. Altogether, the researchers said this avenue of research may offer ideas on how [people](#) can cope with rejection's lingering impact and learn to "let go of the past."

**More information:** L. C. Howe et al. Changes in Self-Definition Impede Recovery From Rejection, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2015). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167215612743](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167215612743)

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