

On-again, off-again relationships might be toxic for mental health

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Kale Monk, assistant professor of human development and family science, says that a persistent pattern of breaking up and getting back together can impact an individual's mental health, and not for the better. He suggests partners 'look under the hood' of their relationships to determine why the pattern exists. Credit: MU

Sam and Diane from "Cheers." Ross and Rachel from "Friends." Carrie and Mr. Big from "Sex and the City." These are just some of the notable on-again, off-again couples found in pop culture. While their relationships made for storylines that kept viewers entertained, a researcher from the University of Missouri says that the pattern of breaking up and getting back together can impact an individual's mental

health and not for the better. He suggests people in these kinds of relationships should make informed decisions about stabilizing or safely terminating their relationships.

Prior research has estimated that more than 60 percent of adults have been involved in on-off relationships, and more than one-third of cohabitating couples reported breaking up and later reconciling at some point. Compared to relationships without this [pattern](#), on-off relationships are associated with higher rates of abuse, poorer communication and lower levels of commitment.

"Breaking up and getting back together is not always a bad omen for a couple," said Kale Monk, assistant professor of human development and family science. "In fact, for some couples, breaking up can help partners realize the importance of their relationship, contributing to a healthier, more committed unions. On the other hand, partners who are routinely breaking up and getting back together could be negatively impacted by the pattern."

Monk and co-authors Brian Ogolsky and Ramona Oswald from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, examined data from more than 500 individuals currently in relationships. They found that an increase in breaking up and reuniting was associated with more psychological distress symptoms such as depression and anxiety. They did not find meaningful differences between same-sex and [heterosexual relationships](#) in this pattern.

Partners break up and reunite for a number of reasons, a common one is necessity or practicality. For example, a person might stay in a relationship for financial reasons or partners might stay together because they feel they have invested too much time into the relationship to leave. However, Monk advises that former partners should get back together based on dedication, not obligation.

"The findings suggest that people who find themselves regularly breaking up and getting back together with their partners need to 'look under the hood' of their relationships to determine what's going on," Monk said. "If partners are honest about the pattern, they can take the necessary steps to maintain their relationships or safely end them. This is vital for preserving their well-being."

Monk offers the following tips for couples who might want to evaluate their relationships:

- When considering rekindling a relationship that ended or avoiding future breakups, partners should think about the reasons they broke up to determine if there are consistent or persistent issues impacting the relationship.
- Having explicit conversations about issues that have led to breakups can be helpful, especially if the issues will likely reoccur. If there was ever violence in the relationship, however, or if having a conversation about relationship issues can lead to safety concerns, consider seeking support-services when it is safe to do so.
- Similar to thinking about the reasons the relationship ended, spend time thinking about the reasons why reconciliation might be an option. Is the reason rooted in commitment and positive feelings, or more about obligations and convenience? The latter reasons are more likely to lead down a path of continual distress.
- Remember that it is okay to end a toxic relationship. For example, if your relationship is beyond repair, do not feel guilty leaving for your mental or physical well-being.
- Couples therapy or relationship counseling is not just for partners on the brink of divorce. Even happy dating and married couples can benefit from 'relationship check-ups' in order to strengthen the connection between partners and have additional support in approaching relationship transitions.

"Coming out and getting back in: [relationship](#) cycling and distress in same-and-different-sex relationships," recently was published in *Family Relations*, the interdisciplinary journal of applied family science.

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