

When you are unhappy in a relationship, why do you stay? The answer may surprise you

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Samantha Joel, lead author, was an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Utah and remains an adjunct professor at the U.

She is now an assistant professor at Western University in Ontario, Canada.
Credit: Samantha Joel

Why do people stay in unsatisfying romantic relationships? A new study suggests it may be because they view leaving as bad for their partner.

The study, being published in the November 2018 issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, explored the possibility that people deciding whether to end a relationship consider not only their own desires but also how much they think their partner wants and needs the relationship to continue.

"The more dependent people believed their partner was on the relationship, the less likely they were to initiate a breakup," said Samantha Joel, lead author. Joel, who was an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Utah and remains an adjunct professor at the U, is now an assistant professor at Western University in Ontario, Canada.

Co-authors of the study are Emily A. Impett, University of Toronto Mississauga; Stephanie S. Spielmann, Wayne State University; and Geoff MacDonald, University of Toronto.

Previous research shows the amount of time, resources and emotion invested in a relationship can be factors in deciding to end a romantic relationship. Studies also show that a person may opt to remain in an unfulfilling relationship if the alternative—being alone, the available pool of partners, etc.—seems less appealing.

In those cases, deciding to stay or go was based on self-interest, Joel said. But the new study shows the first evidence that decisions about an

unsatisfying romantic relationship may involve an altruistic component.

"When people perceived that the partner was highly committed to the relationship they were less likely to initiate a break up," Joel said. "This is true even for people who weren't really committed to the relationship themselves or who were personally unsatisfied with the relationship. Generally, we don't want to hurt our partners and we care about what they want."

In making that choice, the unhappy partner may be hoping that the relationship will improve, Joel said.

"One thing we don't know is how accurate people's perceptions are," Joel said. "It could be the person is overestimating how committed the other partner is and how painful the break up would be."

Deciding to stay based on a partner's perceived dependence on the relationship could be a double-edge sword, Joel said. If the relationship improves, it was a good decision. But if it doesn't, a bad relationship has been prolonged.

There also is the question of whether staying for a partner's sake is really a prosocial thing to do.

"Who wants a [partner](#) who doesn't really want to be in the [relationship](#)?" Joel said.

More information: Samantha Joel et al, How interdependent are stay/leave decisions? On staying in the relationship for the sake of the romantic partner., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1037/pspi0000139](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000139)

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