

Love connections at heart of unique study

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Psychology professor Samantha Joel heads the Relationship Decisions Lab at Western University . Credit: James Marchment

You meet someone. You hit it off.

Is there any way to know if this [relationship](#) will fly—or simply crash into the sea?

Psychology professor Samantha Joel wants to understand what makes these budding relationships work. It is a secret that, if discovered, could help millions of love-seekers decide whether to invest long-term in a new relationship—or bail before it is too late.

"I've been consistently driven by what makes some relationships good and some relationships not," said Joel, who heads the Relationship Decisions Laboratory at Western and is examining the science of relationships.

To further that understanding, Joel was recently awarded a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council grant valued at \$228,442 over five years to answer key questions about the early stages of a happy romance.

Starting this fall, Getting to Know You will examine 150 new relationships and measure the perceptions and realities of compatibility. This study will be the most comprehensive investigation to date of how fledgling relationship experiences shape the quality of the later relationship.

"It's testing the hypothesis that some couples are more naturally compatible than other couples, as opposed to you make your own compatibility through effort," she explained.

For the study, volunteers in new relationships will be surveyed weekly to understand independent and mutual milestone and perceptions: How quickly do they change their relationship status on social media? How often do they see each other or eat together? Do they feel valued and respected? How quickly do they introduce the other to friends or family?

Additionally, volunteers will complete in lab video sessions with their partners. Experienced coders will later rate the partners' interactions for responsiveness (understanding, validating, caring behaviors) during both positive and negative discussions.

Finally, the volunteers will be followed two years later to determine which factors might be correlated with, or predictors of, relationship sustainability.

Joel's previous work has examined the complex factors that go into ending or staying in established relationships that aren't working out. Often, unhappy couples are too invested in the relationship to leave or

change.

She has also researched people's decision-making in choice of initial first dates, instances requiring virtually no investment by either. She found people much less selective than they believe themselves to be—paradoxically, choosing first dates with people who have two or more traits they'd earlier identified as relationship deal-breakers.

While both studies revealed important aspects about relationships, they didn't answer some basic questions about what started couples on the highway to happy partnerships or the road to relationship ruin.

"The problem with new relationships is that they are really hard to study because they are so ephemeral," Joel said.

For this current study, the goal is to be "more descriptive than prescriptive."

Two models of relationship-building particularly intrigue Joel and will be key to the study:

- The person who invests heavily in the search because they believe compatibility either is, or isn't, from the beginning. They prioritize finding the perfect match and having the [self-control](#) not to waste time and energy on the wrong one; and
- The person who believes solid relationships are built, not born. They throw time and energy into the early stages of a relationship in the belief it will lead to greater long-term compatibility in the long-term.

Ultimately, the answers may help understand the key drivers that can shape a happy, budding relationship into a happy long-term partnership—or hurtle it towards heartbreak.

"That matters. When relationships are going well, that has benefits. When they are not, it has costs."

While not prejudging the results of the two-year study, Joel is excited about the directions it could lead. "It's the kind of project where I have zero doubt that the data will be rich and will reveal interesting truths."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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