

# Aiming for an enduring relationship

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Credit: Singapore Management University

Are you ready for love? It's an age-old question that has inspired pop

songs and romantic literature, as well as fuelling advice columns in celebrity magazines. But will your love endure, or is it just a fling?

The spark of mutual attraction may remain a mystery but there's a science to relationships that can help predict outcomes, according to recent research co-authored by Kenneth Tan, Assistant Professor of Psychology in the School of Social Sciences at Singapore Management University (SMU).

A pertinent factor is timing, a subjective sense that now is the right moment to be intimately involved with someone on an ongoing basis.

"We see from the research that timing is important in that it has an influence on boosting—or undermining—[relationship commitment](#)," Professor Tan says.

For the paper, 'It's about time: Readiness, [commitment](#) and stability in [close relationships](#)', the researchers introduced the construct of commitment [readiness](#) into the larger theory of [relationship](#) receptivity and tested it with data collected across five studies of people currently involved in [romantic relationships](#).

The researchers found that a higher degree of readiness was associated with higher commitment to a relationship. And by controlling for commitment at one time point, results spoke to the temporal precedence of readiness in shaping future increases in commitment.

Readiness also predicted relationship maintenance beyond commitment between individuals and was uniquely associated with more self-disclosure. Although not associated with overall accommodation for transgressions, readiness was associated with less neglect and exit strategies, both of which are destructive forms of relationship behaviors.

Interestingly, readiness was also associated with less loyalty, suggesting that although individuals who were more ready engaged in less destructive responses to conflict, they wouldn't passively wait for things to get better.

No gender differentiation appeared in the initial findings but Professor Tan notes that females may feel more ready if they sense their biological clock is ticking. And he believes the research would also hold for same-sex relationships.

But it's still unclear what gives rise to a sense of being ready for a committed relationship.

"Of course we have some preliminary ideas in mind, [such as] how secure you feel, your self-esteem, how much you are prioritizing a relationship over other issues, and so forth. That's [part of] the next step in the research," Professor Tan says.

## **Yearning for a long-term commitment**

In a related paper, 'Seeking and ensuring interdependence: Desiring commitment and the strategic initiation and maintenance of close relationships', the researchers considered how the intensity of longing for an enduring connection impacted on the likelihood of a successful ongoing partnership.

Again using empirical data, the researchers examined personal attitudes to interdependence through the lens of commitment desirability, which is defined as the subjective desire to be involved in a committed romantic relationship.

In a new insight, the researchers contend that it's not only the level of commitment that's relevant, it's also how much you want to be in a

committed relationship: the strength of the desire.

"It's not that commitment doesn't matter. What we see is that basically [people] have this readiness, or desire, [which has] an added effect on commitment itself. So they sort of work hand in hand," Professor Tan says.

The evidence of three studies found that, in their efforts to have long-lasting relationships, individuals who desire commitment use perceived partner commitment to a similar desire as a gauge to think and behave in ways that facilitate and promote relationship success, as well as to protect themselves against getting too close to a partner who is not also interested in commitment.

But there may be a downside. One of the studies suggested that relying on high commitment desire runs the risk of getting into a relationship with someone who would provide security and need fulfillment in the long term but who is not an especially responsive partner.

In that particular study, the researchers only looked at two kinds of partner—highly responsive and moderately responsive. "We didn't have a low responsive partner because it's more likely that someone won't choose a low responsive partner," explains Professor Tan.

Highly responsive partners were described as "really understanding, really caring, and really trying to validate you as a potential partner".

"Whereas for a moderately responsive one, we said that they were kind of caring and validating, but they also needed their own space. For the most part they seemed like average people," he adds.

Professor Tan points out there are other considerations in maintaining relationships. For example, if there's a growth mindset: thinking that

challenges can be surmounted, that relationships can be built to become better, and that having something for the long term is good because you can still work on things and can progress to become more successful in the future.

## **Implications for public policy**

It's arguable that a human urge to form intimate couples is timeless. But rising divorce rates and the popularity of arrangements such as 'hooking up' and 'friends with benefits' suggest not everyone is receptive to the long haul. And the convenience of online dating sites opens up new impermanent opportunities.

"We started noticing, in terms of demographics, that people are getting married later, people are actually saying they don't want a relationship right now because of certain priorities, they are no longer interested, or they have become resigned to not having a relationship," Professor Tan says.

"We started to wonder why that was the case. So we're trying to tease that apart. I think this is also a question that pertains to [public policy](#): whether it is in the U.S., where we first started thinking about it, or here [in Singapore] where we're thinking about how to boost dating rates, marriage rates, fertility rates and so on."

Future research will consider how readiness can be changed, or how people can be motivated to become more ready, and so the team is looking at antecedents to readiness and desire.

"And [we're] looking at the interaction between readiness and relationship status on wellbeing, and also whether that has any implications on feeling like people's single-hood has been stereotyped, in a sense, and whether that has any negative consequences," Professor Tan

says.

He offers questions such as: "Are you satisfied with life? Do you find there's less meaning because you are not partnered with someone but nonetheless, you are currently ready for one?"

The researchers' analysis of romantic human behavior has a long way to run.

**More information:** Christopher R. Agnew et al, It's About Time: Readiness, Commitment, and Stability in Close Relationships, *Social Psychological and Personality Science* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/1948550619829060](https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550619829060)

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