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Review Article

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# Romantic Relationships Research A Narrative Review

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This review of research on romantic relationships includes studies on characteristics of romantic relationships and risk factors for the dissolution of romantic relationships. The characteristics include mutuality, positive responsiveness, positive interactions, misconceptions and gender differences, with males less frequently initiating break ups and more frequently suffering from them. The risks that appear in these studies include problems outside the relationship like parent conflict, attachment problems, and children. Emotional problems are the most frequently addressed including ambivalence, jealousy, emotional dependence, rejection sensitivity, fear, depression, anger rumination, and neuroticism. Behavior problems have included online dating, phubbing, infrequent physical interactions, ghosting, infidelity, relational aggression, and short sleep duration. Limitations of this literature include the mixing of romantic partners and marital relationships in the same samples and the samples typically including only one member of the relationship.

Romantic relationships have been defined as voluntary, interpersonal connections between two people characterized by emotional intimacy, physical affection, and frequently long-term commitments. This review is based on studies found on PubMed and PsycINFO by entering the terms romantic relationships and the years 2024-2025. Several studies have appeared in the recent literature on romantic relationships that could be categorized as characteristics, predictors, risk factors, mechanisms, and intervention. Of the 36 articles, 7 involve characteristics, only 1 paper involved positive effects, 2 papers on predictor variables, 22 publications on risk factors, only 3 on mechanisms and 1 on intervention.

# **Characteristics of Romantic Relationships**

Romantic relationships have been measured by a few different scales including the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale, The Perceived Relationship Quality Scale. The Relationship Quality Scale and The Lovebird Scale. The Lovebird Scale has been assessed on a large sample (N= 223) [1]. It is comprised of three subscales including mutuality (social interactions that signal trust, acceptance, respect and support), the romance subscale (feelings of love and passion as well as physical

intimacy) and the disconnect scale (indifference and/or ambivalence). Similarly, in a study entitled "Romantic love is not only "romantic" '(N= 462 undergrads and 75 community sample adults), three core elements of love were noted [2]. These included positive responsiveness (which was the most popular), authentic connection and sense of stability. Interestingly, these two groups of researchers arrived at different core elements, possibly because the former group was exploring romantic relationships and the latter group was assessing a more advanced form of romantic relationships called love [1].

Still another group did a content analysis of lay definitions of romantic chemistry (N=200 single and partnered people age 21 to 76 years old) [3]. Nine categories were noted from the most to the least common. These included positive interactions, mutuality, comfort, compatibility, similarity, unexplainable spark, sexual attraction, intense fixation and physiological response. Surprisingly, this research group not only sampled single and partnered people, as if they would have similar definitions for romantic chemistry, but they also sampled a significant age range of people (21 to 76 years) who presumably, at least at the age range extremes, would have different definitions.

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Table 1: Characteristics of romantic relationships (and first authors)

Characteristics	First Authors
Mutuality, romance and disconnect	Cloonan
Positive responsiveness	Chen
Positive interactions	Liepmann
Misconceptions	Langeslag
Gender differences	Bode, Gewirtz-Meydan, Mengzhan, Wahring

A more cynical view was given in a paper entitled "Refuting six misconceptions about romantic love" [4]. The misconceptions included 1) romantic love is not necessarily dyadic, social, or interpersonal; 2) love is not an emotion; 3) romantic love is not uncontrollable, 4) romantic love does not just have positive effects; 5) there's no dedicated love brain region, neurotransmitter or hormone; and 6) pharmacologic manipulation is not near.

Several gender differences have been noted for romantic relationships. In one paper entitled, "Sex differences and romantic love: an evolutionary perspective" (N= 808 couples or young adults), gender differences were noted [5]. The males fell in love more quickly and more frequently. The females reported more intense love, more commitment, and more obsessive thinking about the loved one. These findings are clearly reflected in the subitle "an evolutionary perspective" as these gender differences would relate to the evolutionary advantage of men having several different partners and women wanting a greater commitment and stability for raising the offspring.

In a sample from Israel, gender differences were noted on sexual intimacy in romantic relationships [6]. Men with less traditional roles reported more synchrony between their sexual desire and their partners' sexual desire. Women with more traditional gender roles relied on their partners' sexual desire for the frequency of sex. Men's sexual desire played a significant role in the frequency of sex which also relates to an evolutionary perspective.

In a sample from Malaysia (N= 512, mean age equals 22), females prioritized love in both short and long-term relationships but males only prioritized love in long-term relationships [7]. Females also prioritized marriage in a long-term relationship while males prioritized trust, comfort, and stability In long-term relationships. Sex was a core element in the short term, but not the long-term relationships. These data on love from a Malaysian sample appear to be consistent with those just described for the sample from Israel on sexual intimacy, suggesting some crosscultural similarities even though love and sexual intimacy appear to be different, as sexual intimacy appeared in short-term but love only occurred in long-term relationships for both males and females.

In a paper entitled "Romantic relationships matter more to men than women", the results are given in the title [8]. In this sample, men expected to gain greater benefits from romantic relationships. Specifically, they expected to benefit more in physical and mental health. They were also less likely to initiate break-ups, and they suffered more from relationship breakups likely because of their expected benefits. These data are inconsistent with the data from the previous two studies that suggest more partnerships for men.

# Positive Effect of Romantic Relationships

Surprisingly, only one paper focused on a positive effect of romantic relationships. Having a romantic partner for older adults (N=1419 57 to 85-years-old) contributed to neuroendocrine health [9]. No effects were noted for metabolic or cardiovascular health. The physical intimacy of romantic relationships would suggest more touching which has notably increased neuroendocrine health, i.e. reduced cortisol and increased serotonin levels, in many studies [10].

#### **Predictors of Romantic Relationship Satisfaction**

Only two studies focused on predictors of romantic relationship satisfaction. They included religious faith and spontaneous sex, which are seemingly very different predictors.

In a paper entitled "Religious faith, gratitude, conflict resolution styles, and romantic love", the results are in the title [11]. In this sample (N= 226 married males and females), these factors contributed to romantic love. These seem like very different predictors and unfortunately it was not clear why these very disparate variables were included in this study and which of these predictor variables contributed to more of the variance in romantic love.

In a study that was focused on spontaneous sex (N= 303 including 121 couples), a 21-day daily experience diary was kept [12]. In this sample, spontaneous sex was associated with sexual satisfaction and romantic relationship satisfaction. This methodology seems more rigorous both for the collection of daily diary data and for the assessment of similar variables.

#### **Risk Factors for Dissolution of Romantic Relationships**

Of the 35 papers on romantic relationships in this current literature, 22 or 63% of them were focused on risk factors. That high percentage is perhaps not surprising given the generally negative, problem-focused nature of this research literature. These risk factors can be organized as problems apart from the relationship, emotional problems, and behavior problems.

# **Problems Apart from the Relationship**

Three problems apart from the relationship were the focus of research on romantic relationships. These included parent conflict, attachment problems, and having children.

In a study on parent conflict, adolescents and young adults from eight countries (N= 311) were participants [13]. Adolescents and young adults from these countries (China, Colombia, Italy, Kenya, the Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, and the US) had negative conflicts with their parents. These, in turn, contributed to negative romantic partner conflicts and ultimately to less relationship satisfaction. This phenomenon of early parental conflict transferring to later partner conflict has repeatedly been reported in romantic relationships literature.

In a study entitled "Adult attachment and emotion regulation flexibility in romantic relationships" (N=298), different forms of attachment problems were related to different forms of emotion regulation in romantic relationships [14]. Avoidant attachment

was associated with less interpersonal emotion regulation and more intrapersonal emotion regulation. Anxious attachment was associated with more interpersonal and less intrapersonal emotion regulation. In contrast, emotion regulation flexibility was associated with romantic relationship satisfaction. This was a unique finding as most of the papers in this current literature were focused on relationship dissatisfaction.

Table 2: Risk factors for romantic relationship dissolution problems (and first authors)

Risk Factors	First Authors
Problems Outside the Relationship	
Parent conflict	Goria
Attachment problems	Mosannenzadeh
Children	Buhler
Emotional Problems	
Ambivalence	Zoppolot, Duroc
Jealousy	Duroc
Emotional dependence	Moral-Jimenez
Rejection sensitivity	Shuman
Fear	Tartakovsky
Depression	Hoan
Anger rumination	Dogru
Neuroticism	Visser
Behavior Problems	
Online datin	Hu, Giesen
Phubbing	Dogru, King
Infrequent physical	Clark
interaction	
Ghosting	Freedman
Emophilia	Roed
Relational aggression	Kamaluddin

Children have also been considered a risk variable in a longitudinal study on relationship satisfaction, change within and across romantic relationships [15]. In this sample called the Longitude Study of Generations (N= 2268 16 -to 90-years-old), the participants were seen across 20 years in seven waves. As might be expected, satisfaction was lower in dissolving romantic relationships. It was also lower eventually in new romantic relationships. The mediating variables were children, a dissolving relationship of a shorter duration and a shorter time lag between relationships. Unfortunately, the relative importance of these mediating variables was not determined.

#### **Emotional Problems**

Several emotional problems have also been risk factors for relationship dissolution. They include ambivalence, emotional dependence, jealousy, rejection sensitivity, fear, depression, anger and neuroticism.

In a study entitled "It's complicated: the good and bad of ambivalence in romantic relationships", a 10-day daily diary study was conducted internationally (N=666) [16]. Ambivalence was defined as feeling mixed and conflicted about the partner

who was engaged in both constructive behavior (e.g. wanting to spend more time with the partner) and destructive behavior (e.g. ignoring or criticizing the partner). Ambivalence was a risk factor for both relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution of the relationship. This sequential effect suggests the persistence of ambivalence in this sample.

Ambivalence was also a mediator In a study entitled "Mixed signals: romantic jealousy, and ambivalence in relationships", which included participants from the US, the UK and the Netherlands (N= 1466) [16]. In this sample, jealousy in either partner led to greater ambivalence, which was a risk factor for dissolution of the relationship. Again, a regression analysis was not performed so that it's not clear how much variance in relationship dissolution was explained by jealousy and ambivalence. Relative variance is not determined in mediator/moderator analysis.

Emotional dependence is another risk factor for couple relationship dissolution [17]. In this sample (N= 271 adults 18-to-60 years-old), emotionally dependent adults had narcissistic partners. Narcissism was, in turn, correlated with psychological abuse. These were considered risk factors for undermining relationships, but the rationale for the selection of these variables for this wide age range group was not given. And the relative importance of the risk factors emotional dependence, narcissism and psychological abuse were not determined.

Rejection sensitivity has also been a risk factor for dissolution of relationships. In a study entitled "The long arm of rejection sensitivity and young adults' romantic relationships", young adults from Israel were followed in this longitudinal study (N= 101 adults, 23-to-28-years old) [18]. Although rejection sensitivity decreased during early adulthood, greater rejection sensitivity at age 23 led to maintaining distance and self-concealing by partners which led to less certainty and greater tension in future relationships. It's not clear why the variables that were risk factors in the early relationships were not considered risk factors in the later relationships.

Fear has been still another risk factor for romantic dissolution. In a study entitled "Who is afraid of romantic relationships?", a sample from Israel (N= 1083 adults 18-to-30-years old who were unattached) were surveyed [19]. This sample expressed three concerns about romantic relationships including ineptitude, subjugation and abuse. For ineptitude their concern was failing to meet partners' and family expectations. For subjugation they worried about the loss of independence, boredom, sexual frustration and thwarting one's achievements. The abuse concern involved losing control of resources, being hurt physically or sexually, harming relationships with friends and family, and being accused of inappropriate behavior. These would seemingly be increasingly severe concerns, but in this cross-sectional study, it appears that different individuals were experiencing different concerns. It's not clear why unattached individuals were being surveyed for a study on romantic relationships and why they were reporting concerns as serious as physical or sexual harm.

Depression was also a risk factor for relationships. In a sample of single and partnered individuals (N=1811), single individuals

had less extroversion and conscientiousness [20]. The single individuals also had greater depression. The single status and less extroversion likely contributed to those individuals' greater depression, but that could not be determined in this cross-sectional study. The single individuals were possibly single because of their introversion and depression.

Anger rumination was still another risk factor in a study on heterosexual couples (N= 313) [16]. Based on structural equation modeling, anger rumination and loneliness contributed to romantic relationship problems. Women's anger rumination led to their partners' loneliness. Men's loneliness led to less wellbeing in women. These, in turn, led to relationship problems. Structural equation modeling is appropriate for multiple variables, but the rationale for the selection of these very different variables anger rumination and loneliness is unclear.

Neuroticism was another risk factor for romantic relationships in a study entitled "Traits and mates: the role of personality and intimate relationships" [21]. The traits that were valued in close relationships included kindness and dependability, as well as conscientiousness, agreeableness and extroversion. Relationship dissatisfaction was associated with neuroticism, openness, and low agreeableness. Surprisingly, relationship dissatisfaction was not related to the absence of any of the five valued traits.

# **Behavior Problems**

Several behavior problems have been considered risk factors in this recent literature on romantic relationships. These include online dating, phubbing (turning away from a face-to-face interaction to an iPhone), infrequent sex, ghosting (cutting off all communication with someone without explanation), aggression, and short sleep.

In a paper entitled "Does online dating make relationships more successful?", data from the Pew Research Center (N= 2787) was used to explore this question [22]. In this database, online dating led to less relationship success for marital relationships, but not for non-marital relationships, and only for those who had no discussion regarding their relationship. The absence of discussion on the relationship could explain the less success of the marital relationship or simply the lesser familiarity of the partner.

In a review of 125 studies, research was centered on problems, risks and emotional aspects of online dating [23]. Online dating was said to be associated with insecurities in self–presentation, negative technical communication traits, and deromanticization of society. In this review of 125 studies on online dating it is not surprising that insecurities in self-presentation and negative technical communication traits were reported in several studies but the "deromanticization of society" would seemingly be difficult to measure and not likely to appear as a factor in several studies.

Phubbing has been associated with relationship dissatisfaction in at least three studies. In one sample, the association between partner phubbing and relationship satisfaction was serially mediated by trust and romantic relationship quality (N= 361 Turkish adults) (Dogru et al, 2025). In another sample of young adults in China (N= 772), the participants were currently in a

romantic relationship (King et al, 2025). In this sample, partner phubbing was associated with relational aggression.

In a meta-analysis of partner phubbing and its antecedents and consequences, 52 studies were included (N=19,698) (Ni et al, 2025). The antecedents included attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, depression and loneliness. The consequences included a negative correlation with relationship satisfaction, marital satisfaction, romantic relationship quality, intimacy, responsiveness and emotional closeness as well as increased conflict and jealousy. Once again, regression analysis or structural equations modeling could be conducted to determine the https://us06web.zoom.us/j/8251423332 relative importance of these antecedents and relative severity of these consequences.

Surprisingly, only one study was focused on sexual and affectionate behaviors in romantic relationships. In this profile analysis of adult romantic relationships (N= 336, mean age =29), the adults had been in a relationship for six months (Clark et al, 2025). Three profiles were noted in this sample including infrequent physical behavior, affection-focused and comprehensive. As would be expected, those in the infrequent physical behavior group were less satisfied sexually and relationally.

Ghosting (unilateral ending of a relationship by ceasing communication) has, not surprisingly, been associated with relationship problems in a sample of adults who had both ghosted and been ghosted (N= 80) (Freedman et al, 2025). Based on narrative responses and questionnaires, the ghosters and the ghostees used similar overall levels of positive and negative words. The ghosters reported feeling more guilty and relieved, and the ghostees were more sad, had hurt feelings and experienced a greater threat to their fundamental needs including control, self-esteem, belongingness and meaningful existence.

Emophilia, or the syndrome of having frequent relationships and being unfaithful a great number of times, has been related to relationship dissatisfaction in a Norwegian and Swedish sample (N=2607) (Roed et al, 2025).

In a study entitled "Relational aggression and romantic relationships", Malaysian females were given the Big Five Inventory, Experiences in Close Relationships Scale and the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (N=424 18–30-year-old adults) (Kamaluddin et al, 2025). In this sample, females with low levels of agreeableness, high levels of loneliness, avoidant and anxious attachment styles reported more relational aggression.

Sleep has been affected in a sample of Chinese adolescents who had both started a romantic relationship and experienced a breakup (N= 7072) (Liu et al, 2025). In this study 15% had experienced both a romantic relationship and a breakup in one year. Short sleep duration was reported by 42% (less than seven hours per night) and insomnia was experienced by 15%.

## **Potential Underlying Biological Mechanisms**

A few potential underlying mechanisms have been suggested for romantic relationship dissatisfaction. They include heart rate variability, greater theta power and physiological attunement.

Heart rate variability was reportedly greater in males during conversations with a partner (N= 284 romantic partners) (Kee et al, 2025). Both men and women in the sample reported greater romantic adjustment when frequently speaking with their partner about romantic challenges.

Couples in romantic relationships have also been noted to have greater theta power (Zhong et al, 2025). Greater theta power was said to reflect deeper emotional and cognitive involvement and it's also been associated with relaxation in other research.

Greater attunement in general was found in romantic partners in a scoping review of 62 studies (Bastos et al, 2025). Attunement was noted in heart rate, heart rate variability, skin conductance, respiration, cortisol and alpha amylase. Attunement was said to be shaped by relationship context, emotional tone, individual traits (e.g. empathy and attachment style) and interaction features (e.g. touch, conflict, cooperation). Synchrony was linked to satisfaction, intimacy and coregulation, but also in distress contexts, for example, stress contagion or co-dysregulation.

#### Intervention

In the only Intervention study that could be found in this literature, a group intervention was given for couples experiencing infidelity in their romantic relationships (N=20 women and 4 men.) (Ripoll-Nunez et al, 2025). The group intervention was focused on dealing with thoughts and emotions, understanding infidelity, and forgiveness. A decrease was noted in anxiety, depression, and PTSD and an increase was reported for self-efficacy.

# **Methodological Limitations**

Several limitations can be noted for this current literature on romantic relationships. Both romantic partners and those in marital relationships have been recruited for these studies and often those two groups are included in the same sample. Seemingly, romantic partners and marital partners would differ if nothing else than on the duration of their relationships. At least one study indicated that short-term relationships involved more physical behavior and long-term relationships less physical intimacy. Further, only one member of the relationship has typically been surveyed, which may be a limited perspective. As, for example, males and females have expressed different priorities depending on the length of the relationship. For example, females prioritized love in both short-term and long-term relationships but males only prioritized love in long-term relationships.

Although many risk variable studies have appeared in this literature, only one research group reported that infrequent physical behavior was a risk factor and only one paper appeared on infidelity (called emophilia in that study). Surprisingly, personality mismatch was not explored as a risk variable.

This was generally a negative literature, focused primarily on risk variables. Very few positive effects were noted, and no papers were found on buffer effects. Only one intervention paper appeared in this literature focused on reducing infidelity. Surprisingly, no interventions appeared for relationship conflict. Despite these limitations of the current literature, the results of the studies are suggestive of future research on romantic relationships.

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