Why Women Stay In Dysfunctional Relationships

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Abstract

A good relationship means different things to different people. However, good adult relationships generally involve two people who respect each other, can communicate, and have equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities. Most people would also expect their relationship with their partner to include love, intimacy, sexual expression, commitment, compatibility and companionship. Most couples want to have a successful and rewarding relationship, yet it is normal for couples to have ups and downs. To meet these challenges, and to keep your relationship healthy and happy, you need to work at it. Relationships are like bank accounts – if there are fewer deposits than withdrawals, you will run into difficulties. Sometimes, even when we realize that our relationships are unsatisfying, still we wish to maintain them which ultimately affect our mental health adversely. ***This research paper tries to explore tendency of women to initiate and maintain dysfunctional relationships with partners as the fear of leaving is greater than the fear of staying. Every woman is taught by this society the conservative mantra of unsatisfying relationship- 'Mend it and Don't end it'.***

Keywords: Relationships, Women, Mental Health

INTRODUCTION

There are most often underlying fears and insecurities that prevent people from moving forward into a life that might be less comfortable but ultimately happier and more authentic. Concerns about children, finances, friends, lifestyle and standing in the community can also influence the decision to stay together. According to Rego et al. (2016), when we have already invested a lot of time, effort, or resources in a relationship, many of us continue that investment even when it may not be best for us; we are biased toward continuing unhappy relationships once we have invested in them. Toxic relationships cause feelings of low self-worth, helplessness, fear, anxiety, depression, insecurity, paranoia, and even narcissism which adversely affect mental health of women. Dealing with a toxic relationship creates chronic stress that reduces your immune system, making you vulnerable to several other chronic physical illnesses, including heart disease, chronic respiratory disorders, and gastrointestinal conditions. Whether you're aware of it or not, a toxic relationship may negatively impact your mental health. It can make you feel insecure or bad about yourself, leave you feeling drained and unhappy, place pressure on you to change something about yourself or may even be physically and emotionally harmful.

Researches explaining reasons for maintaining Dysfunctional Relationships

Joel & Impett (2018) 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, This study shows the first evidence that decisions about an unsatisfying relationship may involve an altruistic component. Deciding to stay based on a partner's perceived dependence on the relationship could be a double-edge sword because if the relationship improves, it was a good decision. But if it doesn't, a bad relationship has been prolonged.

In recent research exploring women's decisions about whether to stay in or to leave their relationships, the single most important determinant of women's decisions to remain in their relationships was relationship satisfaction (**Edwards et al., 2011**). Sometimes, women initiate bad relationships, especially those with low self-esteem or those who perceive themselves to be less attractive, have low "comparison levels" (**Thibaut and Kelley, 1986; Luciano and Orth, 2017; Montoya, 2008**). Women with low comparison levels do not expect many benefits from their relationships, but they do expect many difficulties. Individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to become involved in relationships which are of shorter duration, and they experience further declines in self-esteem when their relationships end (**Luciano and Orth, 2017**).

Zayas & Shoda (2015) explained the three different components of attitudes: the cognitive component or thoughts, the affective component or feelings, and the behavioral component or actions are sometimes not aligned with one another. For example, in the case of a bad relationship, your thoughts may be negative, telling you that your partner is not good for you, but your feelings may still be positive. We may continue to love our partners, even though we consciously recognize that we are involved in bad relationships. It is also possible that strong positive and negative feelings toward a partner may co-exist.

Holden et al., (2014) mentioned that if your partner is aware that you want to leave the relationship, he or she may use different methods of manipulation to force you to stay. Emotional manipulation, such as belittling, demeaning, or even threats of violence against future alternative partners, may be used to maintain the current relationship. Men with lower self-esteem, as well as men who are less physically attractive than their partners, may be more likely to use manipulation to prevent their partners from leaving their relationships.

Other Common mechanisms which help to maintain our relationships are "partner-enhancement" and "positive illusions." It refer to the fact that we tend to see our romantic partners positively, sometimes unrealistically so (**Morry et al., 2010; Conley et al., 2009**). Research shows that we value the positive characteristics which our partners display more so than other characteristics (**Fletcher et al., 2000**). For example, if your partner is generous but not thoughtful, you might come to value generosity more than thoughtfulness over the course of your relationship. When our partners reveal negative characteristics, we may downgrade the importance of those characteristics and upgrade the importance of the positive traits our mates do possess (**Fletcher et al., 2000**).

If you are in an undesirable relationship, you might consider alternatives to that relationship, including being alone or entering a different relationship (**Thibaut and Kelley, 1986**). If you perceive that an alternative might be preferable to your current situation, you are more likely to leave your relationship, but if you perceive lower-quality alternatives, you are more likely to stay, even in an unsatisfying relationship. Recent research shows that perceiving poor alternatives to the relationship enhances the likelihood of staying with an undesirable partner, and that women with low self esteem perceive fewer desirable alternatives to their current relationships (**Edwards et al., 2011**).He also suggested that women who are psychologically distressed may not feel like they have the ability to leave their partners.

Theoretical Framework Behind Maintaining Dysfunctional Relationships

- ➤ **Social exchange theory**, which focuses on individuals maximizing rewards and minimizing costs (**Homans, 1958**), provide an initial framework within which to investigate social interaction. This perspective, however, does not typically consider the subjective meanings of these interactions to the individuals involved. Given the notion that individuals calculate costs and benefits in a relatively straightforward way, exchange theory is somewhat limited in explaining why individuals may act in an apparently unrewarding fashion. Yet according to a symbolic interactionist framework, the individual develops subjective interpretations of relationship quality, and may be deeply influenced by the perceptions of others in the immediate environment (peer/family opinions and support), and consistent with social exchange theory (e.g., Rusbult, 1995), considers 'hypotheticals' about what

other possibilities may be available in the future (i.e., perceived alternatives to the current relationship). Prior research has shown that married women may grapple with issues of economic dependence, the presence of children, and a reluctance to end relationships of long duration (Anderson, 2007).

➢ The science of relationships is guided by the **Interdependence theory**, developed by social psychologists **Harold Kelley and John Thibaut (1978)** more than half a century ago. According to the theory, each partner evaluates personal satisfaction with the relationship by assessing costs and benefits. As long as perceived benefits outweigh perceived costs, you're happy with your relationship. For instance, your spouse may make a lot of demands on your time and resources, but also give back a lot in terms of meeting your needs. Or maybe your partner gives little, but demands even less. Interdependence theory predicts you'll be satisfied in either case. It's only when perceived costs outweigh perceived benefits that your attitude toward your relationship sours.

Relationship satisfaction then leads to commitment, according to interdependence theory. More specifically, partners feel committed to their relationship under the following conditions:

- They've already invested heavily in it, giving them the sense that the marriage must have some value.

- They see no viable alternatives that are better than the current relationship.

- They currently feel satisfied with the marriage.

➢ **Baker and colleagues (2017)** note that even the best of marriages have rough patches. Career changes, illness of a family member, and even the birth of a child can bring stressors into a marriage that significantly reduce relationship satisfaction for both partners. And yet they remain committed to the relationship, determined to weather the storm.

According to these researchers, commitment isn't based on a current level of satisfaction with the relationship, as interdependence theory predicts. Rather, it depends on the partner's expected relationship satisfaction *in the future*. In other words, partners remain committed to their marriage because they believe the quality of the relationship will improve over time. Take, for instance, the birth of the first child. Although it's a time of joy for both parents, this positive experience is marred by negative outcomes, such as a reduction in intimacy and increased demands for time and resources. But couples remain committed to each other, not because they're getting their needs met *now*, but because they believe the relationship will be more satisfying later. **In other words, we stay with our partners because we have hope for the future.**

The data that Baker and colleagues have collected seems to suggest the following trends:
- People tend to leave unhappy marriages when (a) they expect the relationship will not improve, *and* (b) they expect they can find a better alternative.
- People tend to stay in unhappy marriages when (a) they expect the relationship will improve, *or* (b) they expect they can find no better alternative.

Final Remarks!

For most people, marriage is an enriching and fulfilling experience. Yet we all know couples that are deeply dissatisfied but stay together anyway. Certainly there are many reasons why these unhappy people don't simply cut their losses, end the relationship, and move on with their lives. If you are a friend or family member of someone involved in a bad relationship, your opinions can help to convince him or her to end his or her suffering. Expressed negative opinions by friends and family members are associated with an increased likelihood of ending a bad relationship (Copp et al., 2015), and our relationships are likely to be

happier and more successful when our friends and family members support our relationships (Sinclair et al., 2014).

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