

The relationship factors people ponder when deciding whether to break up

February 15 2021, by Gary W. Lewandowski Jr.

Top 10 reasons to stay in or leave a romantic relationship

Researchers asked people considering whether to end their relationship what factors someone in their shoes might weigh when making the decision. Respondents came up with a number of reasons, which researchers classified into 50 common themes. Here are the top 10 pros and cons people suggested.

	Reasons to stay	Reasons to leave
1	Emotional intimacy	Partner's personality
2	Emotional investment	Breach of trust
3	Family duty	Partner withdrawal
4	Partner's personality	External reason
5	Enjoyment	Physical distance
6	Emotional security	Conflict
7	Physical intimacy	Incompatibility
8	Financial benefits	Emotional distance
9	Compatibility	Lack of validation
10	Concern for partner	Lack of financial benefits

Credit: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: Joel, S., MacDonald, G., & Page-Gould, E. (2018). Wanting to stay and wanting to go: Unpacking the content and structure of relationship stay/leave decision processes. *Social Psychology and*

Where do you see yourself in five years? It's a standard job interview question, but it's an even better question to ask yourself about your relationship.

The person you talk to, date, move in with, get engaged to, marry, break up with or divorce—it's all up to you. You're in the driver's seat regarding your relationship's trajectory.

Most of the time, you probably cruise along on autopilot, maintaining the status quo. Every once in a while, though, something disrupts that equilibrium and you seriously ponder your relationship's fate.

At some point, most people find themselves facing the complicated decision of whether to stick with it or call it quits. While there's lots to consider when you're pondering your own situation, maybe it would be helpful to know how others deal with these important life decisions. Recent research, [including my own in the field of relationship science](#), has explored how people make these choices.

Factors when weighing a relationship

It feels as if there could be as many reasons someone would decide to maintain or end a relationship as there are relationships.

To learn more about what people actually consider, psychology researchers [Samantha Joel](#), [Geoff Macdonald](#) and [Elizabeth Page-Gould](#) asked over 400 individuals who were questioning their own relationship: "[What are some reasons](#) someone might give for wanting to stay with or leave their [romantic partner](#)?"

Out of all the specific circumstances, 50 common themes emerged.

People came up with 27 broad reasons for staying. These focused on key relationship components such as attraction, physical and emotional intimacy and support. People were reluctant to lose the time and effort they had already invested and were fearful of being alone. They considered pluses, such as the desirable aspects of their partner's personality and how much fun they had together. They also factored in practical issues, including potential family disruption and financial implications.

Participants also suggested 23 general reasons to leave. These included many of the same themes as the reasons to stay, but focused on the negative side—things like a partner's problematic personality, acts of deception or cheating, emotional distance, lack of support and insufficient emotional or physical intimacy.

So many reasons, but what to do?

Listing these themes is one thing. How do individuals factor them into real-life decisions of whether to stay or go? To find out, the researchers did a follow-up study with over 200 people who were contemplating breaking up or getting a divorce.

Roughly half of these participants reported feeling, on balance, more inclined to stay in the troubled relationship. That makes sense—inertia is powerful. Staying often takes the least effort.

However, those same exact people simultaneously had an above-average inclination to leave, meaning they rated themselves as leaning toward breaking up. See the problem? Participants were motivated to stay with their partner at the same time they were motivated to end things. And this ambivalence was very common.

That relationship doubts are so common and people are often conflicted about what to do are what make this kind of research potentially helpful. It lends some order to the chaos by helping to identify what's most important.

A long and winding road

Relationship decisions are rarely as clear cut as "should I stay or should I go?" Instead, people experience subtle shifts in their commitment that build up over time. What contributes to these variations in commitment?

Relationship researchers [Laura Machia](#) and [Brian Ogolsky](#) sought to find out by [interviewing participants in stable relationships](#). At each of eight monthly interviews, 464 participants indicated how serious their relationship was by rating how likely it was they'd marry their current partner—"0% if they were certain they would never marry their partner or never thought about marriage, and 100% if they were certain they would marry their partner in the future." Each time their "commitment to wed" percentage shifted from one interview to the next, researchers asked why.

Participants expressed a lot of reasons for commitment fluctuations—13,598, to be exact. The researchers distilled them down to 14 key themes. The most influential reasons were positive and negative characterizations of the partner and relationship. These included direct statements about the partner—such as "he was fun, considerate and kind"—or about them as a couple—such as "we were drifting apart." As you'd expect, positive statements related more to increased commitment, while negative statements were associated with declines.

The next-most-mentioned reason was circumstances—unforeseen events or experiences such job loss, a partner becoming ill or needing to move.

Interestingly, this kind of life change could either increase or decrease an individual's commitment to the relationship. This finding is further evidence that events by themselves—say, a worldwide pandemic—aren't the sole determinant of a relationship's fate. A couple's existing dynamics play a large role too.

Out of all the possible reasons that nudged people up or down the commitment scale, there was one that stood out as actually predicting whether a couple would break up: cheating. As much as other factors made people feel more or less likely to consider marriage, involvement with another dating partner was the one true relationship-killer.

In the other direction, the study also identified one factor that increased commitment and pushed relationships closer toward marriage: positive disclosure. That's what psychologists call it when you share information with each other that encourages positive feelings, which in turn supports your relationship. Think exchanging stories about your childhoods, getting to know each other on a deeper level, or sharing good news. [These kinds of disclosures strengthen relationships.](#)

Love is a decision—and rarely clear cut

Relationships are complicated, and no one knows for sure what the future holds. It's hard to know what the best decision is if you're thinking about whether to stay with a partner or move on. The best relationships have their issues, while the worst relationships still have their virtues. While you don't want to get stuck with an awful partner, you also don't want to be unnecessarily harsh on what could be a great [relationship](#). Maybe knowing what others consider important factors can help you make your own best choice.

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