

# Study: People are typically inclined to move relationships forward rather than end them

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Credit: cottonbro (Pexels)

When making decisions about what to do with their romantic relationships, people are typically inclined to move relationships forward rather than end them, according to a new paper by Western's Samantha Joel.

These pro-[relationship](#) decisions, she says, favor the initiation, advancement, and maintenance of romantic connections over decisions

that stall or end relationships.

In the new paper published in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Joel and co-author Geoff MacDonald from University of Toronto reviewed the literature on decision making in the context of romantic relationships. Across a range of fields such as [social psychology](#), sociology, [family studies](#), and behavioral economics, they found consistent evidence for a "progression bias," which is a tendency to make decisions that move [romantic relationships](#) forward.

Increasing investment and commitment to a romantic partner feels relatively easy and effortless, whereas decisions that halt or end relationships feel difficult and painful. That is, it feels easier to commit than to pull back from a relationship, at least in the short term. This progression bias may help people work through challenges in relationships, but it may also leave people in relationships that are not ideal.

Joel and MacDonald argued that evolution and cultural norms are behind the tendency to be drawn in the direction of increasing investment and commitment in such relationships.

Joel said evolution may have contributed to the progression bias to the extent that for our ancestors, who did not have as much choice in partners as we do now, having any [romantic partner](#) may have been more important than having an 'ideal' one. That is, people who waited for an ideal partner and missed out may have been less likely to pass their genes down to us.

"Making sure you're paired off may have been more important for the survival of genes than being really choosy and finding an ideal match," said Joel, a psychology professor.

The researchers cited a past study with 10,000 speed-daters that suggested people are open to dating a broad range of romantic partners. Participants said yes to an average of 40 percent of their dating options (34 percent for women, and 49 percent for men).

In another previous study, this one led by Joel, participants were brought into the lab and presented with dating profiles. They were told their potential dates possessed at least one of their personal deal-breakers—traits they had specifically said they did not want in a partner earlier on. When participants believed this was a real dating opportunity, 74 percent of them agreed to date the incompatible suitor, anyway. That is, the progression bias may have led people to take 'the bird in hand' rather than wait for two in the bush.

There are also deep, long-standing [cultural norms](#) and pressures pushing single people towards relationships that are, at best, out of step with current times.

"We experience a lot of societal pressure to be in a relationship. And there's a lot of good research on how singlehood is stigmatized," said Joel. "There are social benefits too, regardless of who your partner is. Culturally, being coupled means being seen as a legitimate social unit."

It may also be another reason why singles appear to be open to a wide range of dating partners, said Joel, as many people are motivated to see potential dating partners in a positive light to the extent they will overlook potential flaws and incompatibilities. If your motivation to be in a relationship is to tick off a social box, most potential partners will suffice to fill that role.

Other past studies examined by Joel and MacDonald found that people tend to become invested in new relationships quickly. In one study with a sample of 122 people who lived with their partners, 36 percent had

moved in together within six months of dating. Another study showed that participants tend to be deeply attached to new romantic partners within three months of dating.

"Often, by the time you've figured out that your partner has some traits or life goals that are incompatible with yours, you've already invested substantially in that relationship. At that point, it's much harder to cut your losses," said Joel. "We don't like to waste our time and energy, and relationships take a lot of both. Ending them takes even more. It really feels like a loss at that point."

In the paper, Joel and MacDonald also addressed potential boundaries for relationship bias and development.

"For many people, it's easier to get into a romantic relationship than it is to get out of one. But it's also important to recognize that for many people, it's not easy to get into a relationship either," said Joel.

**More information:** Samantha Joel et al, We're Not That Choosy: Emerging Evidence of a Progression Bias in Romantic Relationships, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/10888683211025860](https://doi.org/10.1177/10888683211025860)

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