

Relationship dependence

Interview by Anna Basiková for *Moje psychologie* magazine



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What is your opinion about relationship dependence?

To begin with, I do not like the term relationship dependence very much. It has negative connotations and forgets that we, humans, are naturally dependent beings. We depend, for example, on oxygen, temperature, food and, last but not least, on interpersonal connection. Simply put, a small child will not survive on its own, and a lonely adult will not do very well either. Most mammals naturally form packs or tribes. We, humans, form partnerships, families, friendships and communities. Reciprocity and cooperation are fundamental to our mental wellbeing and physical health. In fact, the problem arises when we forget the importance of interpersonal relationships and focus all our attention on just one person.

What causes partner dependence?

It very often reflects underdeveloped other interpersonal relationships, especially the lack of close friendships. But this fact is difficult to identify as the only cause since it is also the result of our upbringing. For example, if I grow up in a family whose mantra is that people cannot be trusted and the best thing to do is just to rely on myself, then, I am probably not going to be very good at creating mutually supportive friendships. Another factor may be the influence of culture. By reading fairy tales and watching romantic films, many people have come to believe that a romantic relationship with a partner is the only significant relationship in life. But what if my partner is busy right now, is unsuitable for me, or I do not have a partner at all at the moment? If I have embraced the belief that romantic partnership is the only important thing in life, then, I would be totally trapped.

Bad experiences from previous relationships also play a crucial role. We have all experienced some level of disappointment, frustration, and hurt in them. But if we have not processed these feelings in a healthy way, they could come back into our lives through addictive manifestations.





What to do if our partner shows signs of relationship addiction?

As I hinted before, I am not a big fan of diagnosis, so I would be very careful to label someone that way. But if I perceive that I lack personal space or my partner tends to get too attached to me, it may be a good idea to have an open conversation about it. It is important to be both honest and sensitive without giving unwanted advice or seeking immediate solutions. It is more advantageous to be curious about the other person and try to discover what emotions, motivations and needs accompany their actions. Afterwards, I can also share my emotions, motivations, and needs. It is mainly about igniting a frank, curious and kind dialogue.

And how do we fight this if we are the addicted one?

It is not useful to fight ourselves very much. A better starting position is to admit that I have these tendencies. If I am courageous, I can reveal my findings to my partner in a conversation. If I do not feel up to it, it is important to talk about them at least with some of my friends or a therapist. Just as in the previous answer, the aim is to generate a kind and curious dialogue with the potential to bring gradual self-assurance, self-confidence, and new insights about the matter. This process of self-updating happens very slowly though therefore, it is necessary to be patient and notice small successes.

Is it possible to maintain the “right level of love” consciously? And if so, how?

It is crucial to realize that love and falling in love is something very different. I try to give my clients a bit of a heads-up about falling in love. Some of them tend to put all their eggs in one basket before verifying that both parties invest in the relationship equally. It usually takes at least six months to verify this properly.

Another hazard about going all in too fast is the danger of wearing out the romantic phase unnecessarily quickly or getting used to an intensity that is not sustainable in the long run.

This may sound a bit controversial, but I strongly believe that it is important to have a healthy network of friends in place at first before embarking on a long-term partnership. For, they are the ones who can carry us in times of partnership crisis and can mitigate at least a few of the huge demands and expectations we place on our partnerships in the 21st century. It is also very beneficial if partners are compatible with each other and have similar ideas about the amount of time they spend together.



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