

Yes, dear: Romantic relationships can make you defensive, 'avoidant'

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Some people in relationships tend to be defensive and avoid prickly discussions and even words like "divorce"—something that can lead to anxiety later, a University of Michigan researcher says.

"Most avoidant people who are in relationships are less happy," said Robin Edelstein, assistant psychology professor who focuses on social/personality psychology, memories and emotions. "While avoiding things can be a helpful short-term strategy, not paying attention to certain things for extended periods of time might be bad for your mental health with consequences for your physical health.

"All the effort to avoid anxiety actually creates more anxiety later," she said.

Edelstein estimates that up to 25 percent of people can be avoidant in some form. Her study appears in the February issue of *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

"They go to these great efforts to hide or forget things so they won't be hurt," Edelstein said. "To ignore something constantly, you have to actually be very vigilant to find it, then work to cover it up. If it's a situation you can control like not seeing a certain kind of movie, you can just avoid the movie but there are many situations you can't control."

In relationships, avoidant people can put off discussing issues that might cause an argument, only putting off the inevitable.

"The best solution is to do something about it rather than just thinking about it or hiding it," she said.

Edelstein and Omri Gillath, an assistant professor of social psychology at the University of Kansas, tested 189 undergraduates both in and out of relationships to measure their reactions to relationship-related information and their levels of attachment avoidance and anxiety.

Highly avoidant people typically dislike physical and emotional intimacy, suppressing emotions while rejecting people who are close to them when under stress. In contrast, people with high levels of attachment anxiety fear being alone and become preoccupied with relationship partners.

People with low scores in avoidance and anxiety are considered secure and neither suppress emotions nor are overwhelmed by threats to their attachment system, Edelstein said. But their study found that avoidant people who were currently in romantic relationships were far more defensive and sensitive, avoiding and trying to suppress emotionally threatening issues, such as intimacy or the threat of separation, in a way that single people didn't.

"Avoidant defensive strategies in adulthood may serve a kind of relationship maintenance function, allowing people who find intimacy threatening to nevertheless maintain their close relationships," Edelstein said. "These strategies take cognitive effort, however, and may have negative effects on later functioning."

Source: University of Michigan

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