

Coping with College Series

Self First, Relationships Second

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Romantic relationships can be wonderful. When they're good, they add meaning and joy to your life, serve as a source of support, and keep you grounded and focused. Unfortunately, they can also become the source of great unhappiness for a lot of people.

I have witnessed and heard about *hundreds* of lousy relationships. These were not abusive or violent. They did not necessarily involve infidelity. They were merely unsatisfying.

And they lasted a long time.

Now, why would two people remain in a relationship that did not really offer them much of anything? It is as if these relationships became more important than the two people in them.

Why does this happen? Perhaps our expectations are out of line. It seems like everyone is on this dating quest to find the perfect mate, the one who will make life complete. We watch characters in movies fall in love, fight the odds, and end up totally fulfilled.

But we don't see what happens after the credits roll. When it comes to navigating our way through relationships, movies don't offer much help. We are just left with these glorified expectations for romantic love. We think that it is the answer to all of our problems. We assume that once we find that relationship, we can rest easy. We then place so much importance on *being* in a relationship that we don't notice what we are or aren't getting out of it.

This is really unfair.

And it's dangerous. Overvaluing romantic relationships is risky because people start to think that their self-worth depends on being in one. And staking all of your happiness on being in a relationship involves several risks. First, you may "lose" yourself in it – stop seeing your old friends as much as you used to, forget about hobbies you enjoyed. You end up defining your *self* through your relationship. So if the relationship was to end, it would feel like most of YOU was ending too. Don't let this happen. Don't confuse your worth with your relationship status. Stay involved in things that matter to you. Carve out time for *just you*.

Another risk is that you put unfair pressure on you and your partner to make the relationship 1) work and 2) be the “ultimate romance.” This pressure makes the relationship feel far from ultimate. It feels more like work. Even worse, you won’t enjoy what’s truly great about it. Every once in a while, casually take inventory of what you and your partner are getting out of the relationship. If it’s hard to come up with much, it may be time to move on.

Finally, placing all of your happiness on being in a relationship can prevent you from even noticing if it is unsatisfying. In her book “The Dance of Intimacy,” Harriet Lerner wrote, “We cannot navigate clearly within a relationship unless we can live without it.” Repeat this mantra: Being single is not a bad thing. Being stuck in an unsatisfying relationship is.