

What's Love Got to Do With It?

February 13, 2014



Overpriced roses and generic greeting cards are flying off the shelves, only to be thrown in the trash in a day or two. Windows, storefronts, even drab office cubicles are festooned in red and pink hearts.

Valentine's Day is a holiday full of schmaltz, material excess, and, sometimes, a bit of genuine romance. But extravagant gestures and fleeting passion do not a relationship make!

So, before things get too sentimental, let's take a step back and consider how people get in, and out, of romantic relationships in the first place.

While the romantics among us may not like to hear it, there is considerable evidence to suggest that some of the most important decisions we make with respect to our relationships – including whom to date, whether to break up, or when to move in together – are based on strict judgment and decision making strategies.

And these strategies aren't unique to relationship decision-making. We use them in many decidedly non-romantic aspects of life, from financial decisions to consumer choices.

Researchers Samantha Joel, Geoff MacDonald and Jason Plaks of the University of Toronto explore the intersection between romance and decision making in a recent article in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*:

“Should I Stay or Should I Go?”

At any given moment, an individual in a relationship has two choices – stay or leave. Researchers call this a “multi-attribute choice,” and each option has certain pros and cons. When either the pros or the cons are very strong on one side, the choice to stay or leave becomes obvious. But things become more difficult when the pros and cons compete:

“Having strong reasons to both stay and leave should lead to ambivalence, which should be psychologically quite distinct from the indifference associated with weak reasons to both stay and leave.”

The difference may be subtle, but it’s important. According to the researchers, ambivalence about whether to get married, for instance, can actually lead to later marital stress and divorce.

“I Can’t Quit You Baby”

Another factor that influences relationship success is what researchers call *ambiguity avoidance* – that is, the tendency for people to stay away from choices with uncertain outcomes.

This phenomenon might explain why some people stay in relationships that are unsatisfying. Choosing to stay is psychologically easier than choosing to leave when the latter choice produces an uncertain outcome (e.g. life with a worse partner, life with a better partner, or life with no partner at all).

“Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?”

The links between decision-making science and relationships are also apparent when it comes to assessing how we’ll feel about our relationships at some point down the line. People are notorious for making errors when projecting future feelings – a phenomenon researchers call inaccurate *affective forecasting*. This can sometimes be a positive characteristic: Underestimating the social pain from rejection may make people more likely to pursue potential romantic partners. But it could also have a negative component as well: Overestimating the pain of a breakup may discourage people from ending an otherwise terrible relationship.

This may not be the most encouraging news on Valentine’s Day, but the research does give us a better understanding of how and why individuals make decisions in relationships.

And maybe that’s what this holiday should be about anyway: Finding that special someone and deciding whether you really want to see them the other 364 days of the year.

Joel, S., MacDonald, G., & Plaks, J.E. (2013). Romantic relationships conceptualized as a judgment and decision-making domain. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22 (6), 461-465. DOI: [10.1177/0963721413498892](https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413498892)