

Media Release

Tainted Love – why people sabotage their relationships

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James Cook University scientists are analysing why people sabotage their romantic relationships.

JCU psychology PhD student Raquel Peel is part of a team investigating the phenomenon. She said little work had been done on people who successfully start a romantic relationship, then destroy it.

“Self-sabotage is a strategy people use to protect or enhance themselves. It’s often seen in the workplace where people introduce barriers to their performance. If they fail, a person can justify it as due to the handicap. And if they succeed they can emphasise their skill in overcoming the handicap.”

Ms Peel said a self-saboteur in a romantic relationship would be committed to a similar, psychologically satisfying, win-win outcome.

“We believe self-saboteurs hold insecure views of romantic relationships. Although they may appear to be doing all they can to maintain the relationship, failure is the expected outcome. In this situation, a person can guarantee a win if the relationship survives despite everything, and also if the relationship fails – because in that case their insecure views are validated.”

Ms Peel said people can sabotage their relationships in many ways, ranging from constantly critiquing their partner to avoiding intimacy.

She said that romantic relationships are very challenging, with many stressors involved.

“One of the obstacles to maintaining them is the balance between stressors and goals – which may involve keeping a sense of independence or retaining a perception of control – and we find people often sabotage their relationships to protect themselves and their goals.”

She said self-sabotaging strategies have different effects depending on how long they last for.

“Short-term self-sabotage can provide the illusion of control over the environment and bolster a person’s sense of self. But long-term it undermines those same things.”

Ms Peel said the self-saboteur’s journey often has a twist at the end.

“People who regularly self-sabotage can find it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. When they tell themselves they can’t do a task, their performance can translate their claims into real outcomes.”

Ms Peel is currently conducting interviews with psychologists experienced in relationship counselling to understand how people behave in romantic relationships and what factors might lead to relationship self-sabotage.

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