

**Is Self-Sabotage Hindering Romantic Relationship Success?**

by

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### **Abstract**

This capstone project aims to delve into the intricacies of romantic love, with a specific focus on the cognitive strategies of self-sabotage that hinder individuals' ability to both initiate and maintain romantic partnerships. Research indicates that self-sabotage manifests as a cycle of self-defeating patterns rooted in insecure attachment styles and negative self-concepts. These patterns, often ingrained from early childhood experiences, significantly shape behaviors, attitudes, and interactions within romantic relationships, ultimately leading to challenges in forming and sustaining healthy and fulfilling long-term connections with others. The cyclic nature of self-sabotage contributes to negative relationship patterns, impacting the components of commitment, intimacy, and passion needed for long-term romantic partnership. My intention is to explore the nuanced interplay between attachment injuries, internal working models, values, beliefs, and societal influences on romantic relationships to deepen understanding of both conscious and unconscious cognitive processes involved in self-sabotage within romantic contexts. This capstone also offers insights into nurturing greater self-reflection and proposes the continued use and further evaluation of the Relationship Sabotage Scale, a clinical instrument designed to assess self-sabotage within romantic relationships (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021).

*Keywords:* Attachment Theory, Internal Working Models, Psychoanalytic Theory, Relationship Sabotage Scale, Romantic self-sabotage

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Reflect on the word romantic love—what emotions and thoughts surface? Maybe, warmth, longing, pain, doubt, curiosity, or desire. The experience of love encompasses a myriad of descriptors, including happiness, contentment, passion, bliss, pleasant, sad, burdensome, discouraging, traumatic, painful, or perhaps, all the above. According to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, love and belonging are vital for personal growth. Maslow believed that meeting these needs is essential for achieving personal growth, self-esteem, and ultimately self-actualization, which is the realization of one's full potential (Maslow, 1943, as cited in Cherry, 2022). Spanning across different variations, love can be platonic, romantic, familial, and self-love. This capstone explores the intricacies of romantic love, particularly its interaction with self-sabotaging adaptive strategies that may inadvertently hinder individuals' capacity to initiate and sustain romantic relationships. Peel and Caltabiano (2019), were the first to examine self-sabotage in the context of romantic relationships. They found a gap in the existing literature, as it lacked research on the definition of self-sabotage and its potential manifestations within romantic relationships. They set out to understand why some individuals can initiate romantic relationships but are unable to maintain long-term commitments. The limited research conducted has indicated self-sabotaging behaviors can impede efforts to maintain love keeping people involuntarily single or repeating destructive relationship patterns (Peel et al., 2019). Despite individuals' desire for intimacy and connection, individuals' dating experiences with self-defeating beliefs and insecure attachment wounds, can make the pursuit of romantic love particularly challenging. This first chapter serves to introduce the topic of self-sabotage in romantic relationships. This chapter sets the stage for the purpose of this capstone, my

positionality as the writer, the importance of this topic to counselling, key definitions, and an overview of the structural layout of this capstone.

### **The Western Evolution of Relationships**

Historically, the practice of people in heterosexual union has been rooted in religion, procreation, economic security, and constructed societal norms defining acceptable forms of relationships and the gender roles of individuals within them. Throughout history, societal norms and expectations have influenced how individuals seek and form romantic relationships and bonds. Sociocultural studies have highlighted the variations in romantic love between Western and Eastern countries. These differences can be attributed to distinct social values and practices prevalent in each culture (Soriano-Ayala et al., 2021). While it is true that ethnographic research has revealed diverse mating systems across cultures, the most commonly practiced form is monogamous marriage or long-term committed partnerships between heterosexual individuals (Regan et al., 2012). This form of relationship is widely prevalent and considered the norm in many societies. As Western society continues to evolve, we are seeing diverse and alternative forms of relationships emerging, highlighting the complexity of human connections that may be increasing challenges in finding and maintaining partnerships.

The proportion of individuals who are single (never married) has been steadily rising in Canada over the past several decades. According to data from the 2021 Census, the structure of families in Canada has shifted with the popularity of marriage decreasing but still being most practiced. Specifically, the census reveals that 64.6% of families consisted of married couples, 19% comprised common-law couples, and 16.4% were single-parent families. Additionally, same-gender marriages have experienced a rapid surge in Canada in recent years (Bush, 2024). This shift underscores the evolving dynamics of relationship arrangements within Canadian

society. As counsellors it is important to understand the diversity of relationships in the modern Western world and how this may be contributing to even more complexity in finding and maintaining intimate long-term monogamous partnership. Navigating the changing dating landscape could be especially difficult for those individuals who already feel insecure, fearful, or anxious in relationships. For counsellors, staying current in dating trends can help differentiate between clients who actively choose to remain single and those who might be engaging in avoidance or cyclic relationship patterns due to tendencies of self-sabotage (Peel et al., 2019). Furthermore, the evolution of technology is reshaping societal norms related to relationships. Online dating and texting add another layer of complexity, affecting how people meet, communicate, and form connections, which in turn impacts their relationship expectations and behaviors (DelGreco & Denes, 2020).

The modern Western world has become more wide-ranging and complicated by factors such as changing societal norms and the influence of technology and social media. While these changes have fostered greater diversity and inclusivity in relationship practices, they may have also introduced new challenges, such as increased difficulty in relationship maintenance and expectations. A dating survey conducted by the Survey Center on American Life in 2023 revealed a gender difference that women are more susceptible to face challenges in finding a partner who meets their dating expectations (Cox, 2023). Expectations are an important factor in dating as they determine desirable characteristics and personality traits one is seeking in partnership (Cox, 2023). However, managing expectations can be a sign to signal if a person is adaptable and realistic in their relationship standards or if their expectations are unrealistic and rigid which may be underlying self-sabotaging tendencies (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). Another challenge with an evolving dating society is interpreting verbal and nonverbal cues. A dating

survey (2020) indicated there are gender differences in how initiating a romantic date is preferred which can result in initiation difficulty. Online dating and texting communication makes it harder to signal romantic interest because there is less availability of in-person indicators making it harder to decode and interpret or misinterpret signs of romantic interest (DeGreco & Denes, 2020). Research published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health in 2020 suggests a link between the use of dating apps and feelings of loneliness, dissatisfaction with life, and a sense of exclusion from society (Castro & Barrada, 2020). This highlights some of the challenges technology may have created in the realm of romantic relationships which could be contributing to challenges in finding and maintaining romantic partnership.

Such difficulties can be discouraging for many, leading to feelings of self-doubt and internalized negativity about oneself and their romantic life, especially those who are more prone to a negative internal working model (how individuals perceive themselves, others, and relationships) (Peel and Caltabiano, 2019). As a relationship counsellor, it is important to be aware of distinguishing between the common challenges of dating compared to self-sabotage tendencies. This capstone aims to help decipher how to detect when relationship challenges are becoming cyclic negative relationship patterns that are undermining one's ability to form and maintain intimate connections.

Romantic love is a complex and multifaceted emotional and psychological experience characterized by intense feelings of attraction, desire, passion, curiosity, and affection towards another person. It involves a deep yearning for intimacy and closeness, often drawing individuals in with an all-consuming infatuation, regardless of whether those feelings are reciprocated. Pablo Neruda (1959) beautifully captures the essence of this in his Love Sonnet XI:

I crave your mouth, your voice, your hair.  
Silent and starving, I prowl through the streets.  
Bread does not nourish me, dawn disrupts me, all day.  
I hunt for the liquid measure of your steps.  
I hunger for your sleek laugh,  
your hands the color of a savage harvest,  
hunger for the pale stones of your fingernails,  
I want to eat your skin like a whole almond.  
I want to eat the sunbeam flaring in your lovely body,  
the sovereign nose of your arrogant face,  
I want to eat the fleeting shade of your lashes,  
and I pace around hungry, sniffing the twilight,  
hunting for you, for your hot heart,  
like a puma in the barrens of Quitratue.

(Neruda., 1959, p. 1)

As Neruda expresses in this poem, love can be an intense and passionate experience that feels like a force that consumes and drives a person in a relentless pursuit. It can bring immense joy and fulfillment but also carrying the risk for heartbreak and disappointment.

### **The Pursuit of Love**

An article on American dating and relationships (Cox, 2023), emphasized 30 percent of Americans stated their inability to find someone who meets their dating standards is a major factor in deciding not to date and to remain single. Dating encompasses a wide range of experiences, from the excitement of initial attraction to the complexities of establishing trust,

navigating commitment, assessing compatibility, and managing expectations (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). A sizable body of research has demonstrated that attachment orientations significantly influence how individuals interpret experiences within romantic relationships. Attachment theory suggests that past interactions with attachment figures continue to exert influence into adulthood. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that internal working models can evolve through significant life events and new relational experiences (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017). In an article by Diane Ackerman (2012), she emphasizes how our significant relationships shape our brains and influence our development. Drawing from Interpersonal Neurobiology, initially developed by Dr. Daniel J. Siegel (1990), Ackerman discusses the brain's continuous rewiring in response to daily experiences and interactions. She highlights how we inhabit a mirror-world in which every important relationship, whether with a spouse, friend, or child, shapes the brain, which has a lasting impact on how our brains develops (positive or negative) and how we relate to others and the world around us. These relational interactions accumulate over time to develop our lens of relationships and how we perceive ourselves in them (Ackerman, 2012).

Relationships involve exploring one's own desires and needs while getting to know another person on a deeper level. For example, in mate selection we are often gaining new perspectives, adopting different habits, exploring new ideas, traditions, cuisines, and environments, and expanding social circles. The rush of attraction and attachment hormones triggers a significant rewiring of the brain in romantic love. Through intimate interactions, we exchange fragments of identity with our loved ones, gradually intertwining to form a unique union, absorbing, and integrating aspects of their being into our own (Ackerman, 2012). Exploring the nuanced realms of attachment injuries, internal working models, values, beliefs, expectations, and societal constructs on romantic relationship can offer profound insights into the

barriers hindering individuals' pursuit of intimacy and connection within intimate partnership (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021).

While it can bring immense joy, connection, and fulfillment, intimate partnership also carries the potential for emotional pain. Experiencing heartbreak can be a deeply painful experience for many individuals. The complexity of relationships can serve as both catalyst and obstacle in forming a secure, healthy bond, which is what I find most intriguing about romantic love. It is not a linear path; rather, it is a fluid experience that attracts one into a whirlwind of emotions, often shifting more rapidly than one can fully process. Understanding a fragment of this dynamic journey is what I set out to explore in this capstone.

### **Purpose Statement**

The primary goal of this capstone is to explore the research question: Are unconscious cognitive strategies of self-sabotage hindering relationship success? Through this analysis, I aim to raise awareness of the intricacies and challenges individuals face in their pursuit of romantic love. The objective is to enhance understanding of how both conscious and unconscious protective cognitive strategies may hinder the initiation and maintenance of long term committed monogamous partnership. This research is intended for counsellors working with clients who find themselves caught in a recurring cycle of relationship breakdowns that may be linked to self-sabotage tendencies. Additionally, this paper seeks to distinguish the nuances of common relationship challenges compared to self-sabotage in romantic love.

### **Contribution to the Field**

Literature in romantic initiation, preservation, and termination is plentiful; however, the area that seems to be lacking evidence is romantic self-sabotage. Throughout my research, I have encountered only five peer-reviewed papers directly addressing self-sabotage in romantic

relationships. Within this empirical research there was the development of the Relationship Sabotage Scale (RSS) in 2021. The RSS offers concise insights into individual relationship dynamics, shedding light on patterns that may lead to destructive behaviors across relationships (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). This scale presents an opportunity for researchers and counsellors to delve into why individuals persist in harmful self-sabotage relationship patterns. By integrating the RSS in practice, there's potential to highlight attachment-related factors, enhancing comprehension of relational outcomes like relationship dissolution and sustaining efforts in relationship preservation (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). In increasing awareness on this topic, this paper seeks to inspire further empirical research in this relatively underexplored area of study. It is essential to note that this paper does not seek to draw definitive conclusions. Instead, its aim is to ignite curiosity and foster a deeper understanding toward individuals caught in a perpetual cycle of relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution.

Additionally, within the five peer-reviewed papers on self-sabotage, there is only one cross-cultural adaptation of the RSS that empirically tests its validity and reliability (Turan & Yildirim, 2023). Therefore, this paper serves as a comprehensive review of existing literature on self-sabotage within romantic initiation and maintenance (Turan & Yildirim, 2023). This paper offers a deeper analysis into the complexities of romantic relationships and the patterns of self-sabotage within them. Furthermore, I aim to increase interest in integrating the RSS as a practical tool with clients and encourage further research to empirically validate its effectiveness in the counselling field.

Lastly, it is important to note that exceptions and variations of romantic partnership, particularly within the LGBTQ2+ community, have not been largely researched. While this capstone paper concentrates on heteronormative western romantic partnerships, it is imperative

for readers to contemplate how the scope and implications of this capstone might change if research were to have more of an inclusive perspective that acknowledges non-heteronormative modes of existence. Research has traditionally focused on heteronormative Western romantic partnership. This highlights a gap in the literature that has been gaining recognition of the need to study and understand romantic partnerships beyond the heteronormative framework. By recognizing and respecting the diversity of relationship choices and experiences in a modern Western world, counsellors can create a supportive and non-judgmental therapeutic environment that empowers clients to navigate their romantic lives in an increasingly evolving society.

### **Reflectivity and Positionality Statement**

I identify as a 36-year-old cisgender heterosexual female, and I am second-generation Punjabi-Canadian. I grew up influenced by both Eastern and Western cultures. Growing up immersed in the juxtaposition of two cultures, I become an analytical child always curious about human behaviour and nature. My upbringing exposed me to contrasting world views particularly in romantic partnership. In the Punjabi collectivist culture, the norm is arranged marriages based on familial and cultural values, emphasizing a commitment to the family. The ability to freely choose one's life partner based on love and mutual attraction was in many ways seen as a privilege, coming from a collectivist culture where marital decisions are traditionally influenced by the family system. On the contrary, in the individualistic Western world, romantic relationships are based on love and attraction, offering greater freedom of choice but also harboring uncertainties in commitment and longevity of the relationship.

Through my own personal journey of self-discovery within romantic relationships, I confronted my own social constructs, values, beliefs, expectations, and boundaries within romantic love. I navigated through the influences of the two worldviews I was immersed in to

decipher my true desires, needs, attitudes, and hopes in partnership, distinct from my collectivist family's expectations and wishes. Through this introspective and difficult process, I found authenticity, ultimately leading me to find my husband whom I never anticipated. An inter-racial partnership that offers a depth of love, attraction, and security that I have never experienced before, reshaping my expectations, beliefs, values, in what love and partnership means. However, despite finding my life partner, the journey of passion, intimacy, and commitment has not been linear. Instead, it has been a fluid experience, demanding ongoing inward attention, flexibility, and adaptability. Reflecting on this journey, I became deeply aware of how relationships continue to push up against boundaries, values, beliefs, and societal structures. It is a continuous dynamic process. I wondered: if I hadn't been privileged to be born in Canada and confronted with the juxtaposition of two contrasting social constructs and beliefs about intimate partnerships, which compelled me to deeply contemplate this topic, would I have settled for a partnership that felt familiar and expected, yet ultimately left me unfulfilled?

In addition to my reflections, I would like to name my spiritual belief in samsara. Samsara, rooted in Eastern religions, encompasses the concept of reincarnation until the soul achieves liberation from the cyclic nature of existence by realizing its divine consciousness (SikhiWiki, 2008). Within this framework and Buddhist philosophy, habits are thought to be a seductive human condition, compelling an unconscious mind into repetitive all-consuming behavior. Once entrenched in these habits, it becomes challenging to break free without consciousness and self-acceptance. Applying this concept to self-sabotage in romantic relationships, I am intrigued by the notion that perhaps, on a spiritual level, we are drawn to unhealthy relationships to help liberate us from past psychological conditioning, leading to unconscious repetitions. Only through conscious awareness of these patterns and our self-

limiting beliefs can we break the cycle and realize our true self. The journey of self-realization and ego awareness within romantic relationships aligns with a path toward Mukti (liberation) that I believe is beyond comparison of any other type of relationship (SikhiWiki, 2008).

My hope for the reader is to leave space for empathy and self-compassion in recognizing the complexity of human relationships. It is entirely understandable to yearn for love, belonging, connection, and intimacy—whether in ways that align with conventional societal expectations or in unconventional ways that diverge from mainstream standards. I am compelled by both personal curiosity and professional interest to gain insight into the intricacies of romantic partnership, as well as the unique opportunities of self-reflection it offers. Acknowledging my own cultural background and spiritual beliefs as a therapist, as well as identifying being part of an inter-racial heteronormative monogamous relationship, it is crucial for me to remain mindful of my own experiences, biases, and assumptions about the experiences of others in this very delicate work.

## **Definition of Terms**

### ***Attachment Theory***

A “conceptual framework [that] explains how experiences in close relationships contribute to generalized patterns of affect and cognition” (Kaurin et al., 2019, p. 118).

### ***Anxious Attachment***

Anxious attachment refers to a style of interpersonal relationships characterized by a heightened sensitivity to perceived threats of abandonment or rejection, along with a strong desire for reassurance and closeness from romantic partners or significant others (Peel et al., 2019).

### ***Avoidant Attachment***

Avoidant attachment refers to a style of interpersonal relationships characterized by a reluctance or avoidance of emotional intimacy, closeness, and dependence on others. Individuals with an avoidant attachment style prioritize independence and self-reliance while minimizing the importance of intimate relationships much to their detriment (Peel et al., 2019).

### ***Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse***

John Gottman's (1990) theory on negative communication patterns that can predict the end of a romantic relationship.

### ***Internal Working Model***

An internal working model develops through early attachment experiences with important caregivers. It plays a crucial part in shaping expectations, beliefs, and behaviors in how individuals perceive themselves, others, and relationships (Wallin, 2015).

### ***Psychoanalytic Theory***

Psychoanalytic theory developed by Sigmund Freud suggests that human behavior is influenced by unconscious drives, conflicts, and motivations, many of which stem from early childhood experiences (Gurman & Messer, 2011).

### ***Relationship Sabotage Scale (RSS)***

A “measure that can be used to understand mediator constructs of relationship outcomes within the attachment framework to explain relationship dissolution and work towards relationship maintenance” (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021, p. 147).

### ***Romantic Self-sabotage***

Defined as, “employing a pattern of self-destructive behaviours in relationships to impede success or withdraw effort and justify failure” (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020, p. 101).

***Secure Attachment***

Secure attachment refers to an interpersonal relationship where individuals have the ability to display flexibility, resilience, and emotional availability. Individuals with a secure attachment have a sense of trust, comfort, and safety in relationships, allowing healthy connections with others (Wallin, 2015).

***Self-sabotaging/ Self-defeating***

Interchangeable synonyms used to describe a phenomenon defined as an action of implementing a barrier to inhibit success or withdrawing effort to rationalize failure (Peel et al., 2019).

**Outline of Chapters**

In the second chapter I will conduct a literature review of the current body of research on self-sabotage in romantic relationships. In addition, I will explore self-protective adaptive strategies, with a particular emphasis on recognizing their underlying causes through the lens of psychoanalytic and attachment theories. For the final chapter, I will provide a comprehensive overview of self-sabotage in romantic relationships, shedding light on its intricate dynamics and offering recommendations within a therapeutic context. By influencing self-awareness with clients and exploring areas such as beliefs, behaviors, motivations, and communication styles, we can foster a deeper understanding of how these factors influence the dynamics of self-sabotage in romantic relationships. This Capstone will provide an overview of the current research on self-sabotage in romantic relationships and how lack of deep awareness of these destructive self-protective strategies may be impeding people from finding and maintaining healthy relationships.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Before we can heal and let go, what ails us deeply must first come to the surface.

—Yung Pueblo, *Inward*

### The Term Self-Sabotage

We have the capacity to push ourselves to exceed beyond our wildest expectations and we have the capacity to get in our own way and hinder ourselves from moving forward. At times, we may even be consciously aware of the self-saboteur ways we stand in our own way, but we are unable to stop this pattern. Self-sabotaging and self-defeating are interchangeable synonyms used to describe a phenomenon defined as an action of implementing a barrier to impede success or withdrawing effort and rationalize failure (Peel et al., 2019). This term was first introduced and defined by Steven Berglas and Edward Jones in their 1978 article. This article tested the hypothesis that college students may choose to take a drug that interfered with performance or enhanced it as a self-sabotaging strategy in response to noncontingent success. Continued research on this topic supported the theory that self-sabotage is a cognitive strategy that develops over time with an overall aim to self-protect, predominantly one's self-esteem and self-image (how one views themselves) (Peel et al., 2019). Researchers have empirically looked at self-sabotaging behaviour using the term self-handicapping in the context of academic performance (Wyse et al., 2023) and athleticism (Molenaar et al., 2021). However, this concept has only recently been considered or empirically researched in the framework of intimate partnership. While self-sabotage is a recognized cognitive strategy used to protect one's image and self-esteem, commonly observed in academia and sports, there is evidence to suggest that examining its role in the context of finding and maintaining love could offer valuable insights into

relationship patterns that affect individuals' ability to establish and maintain meaningful romantic long-term commitments (Peel et al., 2019).

According to Peel and Caltabiano (2020), romantic self-sabotage is defined as, “employing a pattern of self-destructive behaviours in relationships to impede success or withdraw effort and justify failure” (p. 101). The limited research available has pointed to a cycle of self-defeating patterns that are derived from insecure attachment style with factors of negative self-concept as indicators of why people may self-sabotage in relationships (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020). Researchers have highlighted how it is important to understand how some individuals may be able to initiate romantic relationships but not maintain them (Peel et al., 2019). Romantic self-sabotage provides a short-term purpose to self-protect oneself from emotional pain however, it is often counterintuitive and has long-term negative implications in forming healthy and fulfilling interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships (Wei & Ku, 2007). It has been linked with personality traits of low self-esteem, feelings of defensiveness, inability to trust and lack of relationship skills (Peel et al., 2019). In the context of intimate partnership, self-sabotaging behavior refers to the intentional creation of barriers or obstacles that impede the development or maintenance of a healthy and fulfilling partnership. This phenomenon has peaked researchers' interest since it was first introduced by Raquel Peel and Nerina Caltabiano in 2019; however, there remains a lack of understanding of how it manifests in romantic relationships. Future research should replicate these findings with consideration of the limitations identified in the current research. This involves distinguishing between failed relationships (such as those that may have ended naturally) and sabotaged relationships (such as those that ended due sabotage behaviours) to gain a deeper understanding of the different ways this maladaptive strategy may emerge for individuals in romantic love (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). Detection of self-sabotage

can provide valuable insights into the dynamics and challenges faced by individuals when initiating and maintaining romantic partnership. First, we must consider the complexity of romantic relationships to understand how self-sabotage may be playing an underlying role in romantic love.

### **The Complexity of Relationships**

Romantic love is an intrinsic human desire that transcends cultural boundaries (Watkins et al., 2022). It fulfills our need for emotional connection, provides a sense of belonging within a stable social relationship, and helps us form meaningful relationships with others as a fundamental human need (Watkins et al., 2022). Despite the potential for uncertainty and disappointment in romantic love, humans are inherently wired to desire this kind of intimacy (Cherry, 2022). Our brains are wired for social connection, when we are cared for by others our brain releases feel-good hormones such as oxytocin and endorphins (Neff & Germer, 2018). In contrast when our defense-system is activated by perceived threat or danger we release the stress hormone cortisol and adrenaline (Neff & Germer, 2018).

The 21st century brought change to the traditional social construct of romantic partnership. For individualistic cultures in the Western world, relationships are now greatly based on free-choice love-based partnership built on mutual compatibility and attraction (Regan et al., 2012). In a cross-cultural study, there was evidence to suggest post-industrial societies are shifting towards individuals choosing to be single or abstain from dating with the intention to further their education, career, and reserve their personal resources (Apostolou et al., 2023). This shift has permitted the pursuit of love to be based on personal choice, where one may choose to be single out of choice. People who choose to be single may prioritize personal development, social networks, physical fitness, family connections as superior to partnered life (Apostolou et

al., 2023). What needs to be deciphered is if singlehood is preferred as a lifestyle choice or feeling that it is not the right time for a committed partnership compared to underlying self-sabotage motives. For example, those struggling with avoidant tendencies tend to harbour doubts about love, suppress feelings of insecurity, exhibit hesitancy towards being vulnerable with others, and tend to have an asserted stance towards self-reliance which may present as a disguise in the choice to be single (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021).

It must be acknowledged that finding the right mate who encompasses all the qualities one desires is challenging. In this era of free choice partnership, there is a greater importance on certain qualities one may be seeking in a partnership. It is normal to engage in an experimental approach to relationships where the process may involve moving through various relationships in the pursuit of finding a compatible match (Apostolou et al., 2023). However, if there are repetitive cycles of relationship dissolution due to inability to trust a partner, unrealistic expectations that prevent intimacy, or lack of relationship skills that hinder long-term relationship success then there could be something deeper going on that is linked to self-sabotage (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021).

The complexity of romantic relationships is often influenced by cultural, societal, and personal factors that shape expectations and experiences in attracting and maintaining a compatible partner. Although, research has indicated there is a trend in society where people are making a choice to be voluntarily single. On the contrary, research has also highlighted how struggling to navigate the complexities of dating can lead to a higher chance of being involuntarily single (Apostolou et al., 2023). These challenges can vary from individual to individual and may include self-sabotage factors such as lack of social skills and low self-confidence in romantic love. Self-sabotage patterns in romantic relationships may include

constantly moving from one relationship to another, giving up on finding love due to poor dating experiences, making quick assessments and judgments of their romantic partners and ending things, remaining in poor relationships out of fear of being alone or comfortability, adapting their identity to match their partners, or repeating the same negative patterns in multiple relationships (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). What is important to differentiate is if being single is compatibility issues, choosing the wrong partners, personal choice, or if it could be self-defeating beliefs and behaviours that hinder the ability to maintain relationships (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). Understanding these nuances can help decipher if relationship breakdown is due to self-sabotage or simply relationship challenges (Apostolou et al., 2023).

Peel and Caltabiano (2019, 2020, 2021) indicated negative behaviors can be signs of underlying self-defeating motivations such as fear of commitment, low self-esteem, unresolved emotional wounds, or a lack of self-awareness. Recognizing these patterns and understanding the motivations behind one's behavior in romantic relationships can be a step towards self-awareness, personal growth, and ultimately breaking out of cycles that keep one stuck. Furthermore, it is important to consider how romantic partnership has evolved over time and how this may be contributing to self-sabotage patterns.

### **Love in A Modern Society**

In the Western world, gender norms and roles are shifting, and women have been experiencing increased economic and personal freedom. This has allowed women to prioritize higher education and the pursuit of careers before committing themselves to a relationship or increasing educational expectations for potential partners. For example, a survey indicated 49 percent of Americans who have completed a four-year college degree specified they would be hesitant to date someone without a college degree. This preference appears to hold more weight

for women than for men. Notably, an even larger percentage of women with postgraduate education (67 percent) expressed a reluctance to date someone lacking a college degree (Cox, 2023). These progressions in society have expanded the choices available for women to make decisions on romantic partnership that align more with their personal goals and aspirations (Patrick, 2022). With this shift, the traditional values for romantic partnership based on religion, procreation, and economic security have faded to the background. From an evolutionary viewpoint, women still tend to be more selective in choosing mates due to the potential costs associated with poor mate choice such as parental investment (Watkins et al., 2022). This selectivity can manifest in setting a relatively higher standard for commitment or the need for stability from potential partners (Watkins et al., 2022).

Understanding how modern society influences individuals to cycle through romantic relationships when their partners fail to meet all their dating criteria is important to recognize themes of self-sabotage. As mentioned, it is important to have expectations and standards for relationship compatibility; however, avoiding long-term committed relationships due to unrealistic expectations of a potential partner could be considered self-sabotage behaviour when there is no adaptability to be more realistic in relationship standards. Realistically it is unlikely one partner will meet every relationship standard and being able to modify expectations is an important part of the dating process (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). Self-reflecting on how one responds to perceived flaws or shortcomings of a potential mate could be a good indicator of self-sabotage tendencies (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021).

One must also consider how the increased freedom of choice in the Western world may be impacting society by creating a paradox of choice. People are possibly experiencing decision paralysis, where the fear of missing out on the next best option leads them to continuously search

for the perfect partner, perpetuating a cycle of constant evaluating and comparing partners that may impact overall satisfaction with relationships (Apostolou et al., 2023). The digital age of online dating has made finding a potential partner much more accessible to a larger dating pool of possible mates. As highlighted in one article (Apostolou et al., 2023), ancestral ways of long-term union were considerably different from the present-day ones. The article emphasizes how the abundance of options available in online dating can present challenges for individuals due to a limitation in cognitive process that may not be equipped to handle such a plethora of mating options. This can potentially lead to poor choices in finding suitable mates online in contemporary societies (Apostolou et al., 2023). A Pew Research study (Vogels, 2023) identified how dating apps have transformed how individuals meet and form relationships in the last two decades. Online daters agreed it was somewhat easier to find people on these online platforms who they were physically attracted to, shared the same common interests and hobbies with, and were open to meeting in person for the same kind of intimate relationship (Vogels, 2023). Many of these websites and apps claim the high percentages of relationship matches however, there continues to be limited empirical research on the success rates of relationship maintenance through online dating (Vogels, 2023).

What has not been clearly identified in research is how self-sabotage tendencies may increase with the accessibility of social media profiles. For example, a person with trust issues may find themselves with increased feelings of jealousy, insecurity, and disapproval of social-media activity from potential partners which could impact relationship longevity. Additionally, individuals who are avoidant in intimacy may find it tempting or easier to pursue new connections with others with the accessibility of dating apps when dissatisfaction arises in current relationships.

Although there is research on the initiation, maintenance, and dissolution of romantic relationships most researchers agree intimate partnership based on love are inherently intricate and continue to be widely misunderstood (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020). While there are numerous modern ways for people to meet potential partners and a greater freedom of choice in selecting a partner; finding and maintaining love can be a challenging quest for many individuals. The process of two individuals forming a romantic bond is an intricate process and requires a multitude of factors to create a sense of security and satisfaction in the relationship (Fitzpatrick & Lafontaine, 2017). These factors include emotional connection, communication, compatibility, shared values, and mutual understanding. In addition, romantic relationships can be influenced by past experiences, individual personalities, external circumstances, and societal norms. Simply experiencing the human condition of love and connection may not be sufficient enough to maintain a strong committed bond between partners due to the unconscious drives that motivate mate selection. Only in analyzing one's own behaviour in relationships can there be an ability to learn and grow. Self-sabotage can often be an unconscious process, hidden in defensive ways to self-protect, particularly when individuals are not fully aware of how their past experiences, beliefs, and motivations influence their romantic relationships. We must consider how our increasingly modern society presents unique challenges when it comes to initiating and maintaining romantic love, especially for individuals who already struggle in this area.

### **Defining Love**

Defining love has been a focus in the literature to help recognize the obstacles that may hinder it to flourish. Peel and Caltabiano (2019) explored the concept of romantic self-sabotage, recognizing its lack of clear definition in current literature. They first had to summarize the main components of love using Sternberg's triangular theory of love model. This model suggests that

the amount of love or relationship satisfaction experienced by an individual arises from the dynamic interplay and intensity of three key elements: intimacy, passion, and commitment/decision-making (Peel & Caltabiano, 2019). Lange et al. (2015) expand on Sternberg's conceptualization of these three primary components. They explain, the level of love or relationship satisfaction an individual experiences are determined by the interplay of intimacy which involves feelings of closeness and connection; passion which encompasses romantic drive, physical attraction, and sexual desire; and decision/commitment which pertains to the conscious choice to love someone and the commitment to maintain the relationship (Lange et al., 2015). Sternberg's model conceptualizes love as more than a feeling, but as a complex junction of physiological urges, emotions, and conscious thoughts (Lange et al, 2015). This model views love as a complex phenomenon that goes beyond sheer emotion, incorporating a dynamic interplay of physiological drives, emotions, and conscious cognitions. Peel and Caltabiano (2019), go on to explain how these three basic components of love can be combined in various ways, resulting in different types of love. The seven types of love they identify are: liking, infatuation, empty love, romantic love, companionate love, fatuous love, consummate love and one combination resulting in the absence of love (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020). Understanding the different types of love in romantic partnership helps to identify just how complex love is and how it can evolve over time, with romantic relationships often experiencing shifts between the feelings of passion, intimacy, and commitment. The researchers further explain how these components of love can be broken down into various elements, such as partner compatibility, emotional connection, accessibility, responsiveness, engagement, acceptance, self-disclosure, independence, and conflict resolution, which are elements that play a crucial role in maintaining romantic partnership (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020).

Through the definition of love it is important to recognize that love is not a static state but rather a dynamic process that evolves and transitions through multiple stages. Love can vary in intensity, depth, and expression over time, making it challenging for researchers to measure or quantify accurately. The fluid nature of love means that it can be influenced by various factors, such as lived experiences, attachment style, previous romantic relationships, intersectionality of identity (race, socioeconomic status, culture, ethnicity, religion, gender), self-discovery and personal growth, life circumstances including career, and external influences including societal norms and cultural pressures. While researchers have been able to capture the essence of what maintains and dissolves relationships, understanding the complex emotions individuals experience during the stages of romantic initiation and maintenance remains largely unrecognized. Navigating the complexities of relationships, and fostering lasting connections is a multifactorial dynamic process between two individuals. In a 2019, Pew Research survey 67% of daters looking for a relationship said their dating life was not going well (Barroso, 2020). In understanding the complexity of romantic love, one can begin to recognize how the quest for love is challenging. Those who struggle with negative internal working models due to insecure attachment style may find love even more disheartening. Especially, if they are in a continuous cycle of being able to attract a potential mate, yet not being able to maintain a meaningful long-term romantic relationship, and stuck cycling through repetitive destructive relationship patterns (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020).

### **Love: A Multifaceted and Nuanced Human Experience**

It is known humans are social beings inherently hardwired for intimacy and connection. Empirical evidence is proving there is a neurological chemical reaction that includes neuropeptides such as oxytocin and neurotransmitters such as dopamine that are active during

social bonding and maintenance of relationship (Vitale & Smith, 2022). This may explain why as a society we have a deep fascination with romantic love. The experience of falling in love, being in love, and going through heartbreak is a powerful and emotionally consuming experience. Individuals who have attachment related injuries may consciously or unconsciously avoid falling in love due to the intense unpredictable emotional experience. While others may anxiously cling to the feeling of intimacy and closeness that falling in love brings (Castellano, 2018). The theme of love has been a recurring topic in various forms of artistic expression such as poetry, literature, art, theatre, and music, spanning across centuries and cultures. Including the Pablo Neruda (1959) Love Sonnet at the beginning this capstone, illustrating this all-consuming love, where Neruda describes his craving for his love interest. Mario Mikulincer and Philip Shaver (2005), discuss in their research how intimate romantic relationships can elicit intense emotional responses, both positive and negative. They describe how individuals can experience a wide range of emotions, including positive feelings like acceptance, security, love, joy, gratitude, and pride, as well as negative emotions such as frustration, anger, hatred, fear of rejection, humiliation, disappointment, jealousy, grief, and despair (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). As illustrated by Mikulincer and Shaver (2005), love is not easy and can encompass both beauty and pain.

In all romantic relationships it is a dyadic dance where two individuals must work to balance “the goal of seeking closeness to a romantic partner against the opposing goal of minimizing the likelihood of pain and rejection” (Murray et al., 2006, p. 641). How one responds to the intense initial stages of romantic love can be a significant self-reflection point to explore. This stage can unveil deep-seated beliefs and insecurities that may be linked to self-sabotage. These beliefs might manifest as doubts about the possibility of romance or feelings of

inadequacy that activates a need for approval, both stemming from past attachment wounds (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020). One must be able to distinguish between unsuccessful initiation due to self-sabotage behaviours (overly clingy or too dismissive) compared to preferences such as readiness to commit. Readiness to commit to a partner could be a major influence on the outcome of relationship formation, which I explore next.

### **Readiness to Commit**

The concept of being ready for a relationship was empirically examined by Benjamin Hadden and colleagues (2018). They examined a longitudinal dataset of five independent samples to examine the role of readiness in relationship formation and development among single individuals (Hadden et al., 2018). They found feeling ready for a relationship shaped the ways in which individuals pursued relationships including their daily relationship interest behaviours (i.e. flirting, attention to appearance, open to dates). This feeling of readiness among single individuals in pursuit of a committed relationship shaped both relationship formation and relationship dynamics between couples. For example, individuals who demonstrated higher levels of readiness during their single period tended to experience greater satisfaction with and commitment to relationships compared to those who were less ready (Hadden et al., 2018). The results of Hadden and colleagues (2018) research provided evidence to support people who felt the time was right for a relationship showed higher commitment to a relationship (Hadden et al., 2018). Additionally, the research distinguished between individuals with an avoidant attachment style who general display discomfort with intimacy or anxiety about being single. Instead, readiness reflects an individual's personal preference of their readiness for a committed relationship, independent of relationship status or anxiety levels (Hadden et al., 2018).

Hadden and colleagues (2018) research expanded on the Relationship Receptivity Theory (RRT), which suggests perceived personal timing and commitment readiness are core factors underlying relationship readiness, development, and maintenance (Hadden et al., 2018). Hadden's perspective emphasizes that the perceived right time for someone to feel receptive, desire, and be ready for a relationship is influenced by their self-perception, attitudes, and feelings. These factors play a significant role in an individual's desire and commitment for a long-term relationship. In their research, Hadden and colleagues offer three generalized factors underlying the antecedents of one's commitment receptivity to engage in a romantic relationship. They include: 1) a person's past experiences in a committed relationship including previous breakups, experiencing heartbreak, or feelings of being over an ex-partner, 2) preferences and expectations regarding a committed relationship including compatibility with a potential mate or wanting to focus on a career before commitment and, 3) outside pressures for involvement in a committed relationship which including societal pressures, peer influence, and a person's fears of being single (Agnew et al., 2020). This indicates how mate selection intersects with various aspects of our past experiences shaping our preferences, expectations, and perceptions of ourselves and others, which in turn impact how we choose a partner. One must reflect if poor relationship experiences have left deepened emotional wounds. These emotional wounds could be indicative of self-sabotage tendencies when they present with an increased negative self-concept, defensiveness, untrusting of partners, unrealistic high expectations, withdrawing effort to protect self from further pain, or rationalizing not engaging in romantic relationships out of fear (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020).

The feeling of relationship desirability (wanting to be in a close relationship) and relationship readiness (ready to be in a close relationship) can ebb and flow throughout a

person's life and is contingent on many factors including self-perceived timing (Agnew et al., 2020). Having the desire to be in a romantic relationship doesn't necessarily mean one will act on this desire if the other elements of timing and commitment are not aligned. Hadden and colleagues found consistency with relationship receptivity theory, where self-perception of feeling ready to enter a long-term relationship increased commitment and maintenance in a person's cognitions and behaviours over time, including staying in a relationship and leaving the relationship. Agnew and colleagues (2019) found that having strong levels of both commitment and readiness fosters relationship maintenance, while lacking in either element seems to erode stability in long-term relationships (Agnew et al., 2019).

In understanding this important piece around self-perceived timing, it helps to discern between those who are not ready to commit due to timing compared to those who are not ready to commit from fear of intimacy. One must self-reflect on what is the underlying reason that is influencing lack of commitment. In addition, it also may help decipher individuals who are consistently choosing partners who are emotionally unavailable and are not showing elements of commitment and readiness in long-term partnership which may be an indication self-sabotage. When a person repeatedly chooses partners who are either unavailable or untrustworthy, it can heighten their feelings of self-doubt and fear. When dating repeatedly fails to meet a person needs it may diminish the sense of self increasing negative internal working models. To understand how our sense of self intertwines with romantic partnership, I turn to the emotional experience of heartbreak.

### **Heartbreak, Pain, Ego-Identity**

Unrequited love, relationship dissolution, and infidelity are some ways love can bring heartbreak and pain. Although limited, previous research has indicated how the experience of a

breakup is associated with heightened distress and physical and emotional pain. In one study participants who were shown pictures of a former partner and asked to think about rejection showed activation in the sensory components of the brain that experiences pain. Thus, demonstrating heartbreak literally hurts and can indeed be experienced in the same way as physical pain (Dunlop et al., 2020). These emotions can be all consuming for the heartbroken. Carola Kaplan (2019) describes the experience of heartbreak as understood through Freud's psychoanalytic lens. For instance, Freud describes how the search for romantic love is an emotional investment that leaves one vulnerable to suffering. Freud came up with the term "sexual overvaluation" which describes how part of romantic love is a fantasy, where we exaggerate the positive characteristics of the person we desire. We idealize our lover and view them with a lens of desire above criticism, with the attributes we seek in a partner, viewing them with a special uniqueness (Kaplan, 2019). In the early stages of romantic attraction, it is common for fascination with a person to spark ruminations and thoughts about them, even before any romantic engagement has occurred. This initial fascination can lead to a persistent yearning and desire to form a close attachment with the romantic partner, regardless of whether this desire ultimately materializes into a relationship. Freud noted when we allow ourselves to become emotionally attached and to crave the love of another, we expose ourselves to deep devastation if we are rejected by the lover of our desire. Kaplan (2019) expands on this concept by emphasizing that losing a romantic partner is often emotionally recognized as losing a significant aspect of one's own identity. The depth of emotional pain felt after such a loss intensifies with the level of importance the individual placed on the partner, the stronger the attachment, the greater the sense of loss and unhappiness when that person is lost or rejects the desire of the adorer. Kaplan articulates this in her article by explaining:

Although erotic love is the prototype of all happiness because it affords human beings the strongest experiences of satisfaction, the consequence is that its loss is the prototype of all unhappiness (Kaplan, 2019, p. 2). The loss of the loved object is devastating because it is experienced as a loss of the most vital part of the self. The larger the place the loved object has occupied in the lover's thoughts, the more the lover has identified with the loved object, the greater the sense of impoverishment when the lover is lost (Kaplan, 2019).

As Kaplan (2019) and Freud intellectualize, love involves deep emotional attachment. It has the potential to bring immense joy and satisfaction to individuals by creating a sense of fulfillment, happiness, deep connection, and contribute to a sense of purpose and meaning in life for people when met with mutual reciprocity. On the other hand, the loss of love can be a deeply challenging and painful experience. When a relationship ends, when love is lost, or when love is not reciprocated individuals can experience profound unhappiness, grief, and a sense of loss (Kaplan, 2019).

The intensity of the emotional impact of rejection and heartbreak can vary from person to person. Self-awareness of the intensity and how disrupting the love lost or unreciprocated feelings are to an individual could help indicate whether there are underlying feelings of a negative self-concept that relate to self-sabotage. As Kaplan (2019) described, romantic dissolution or romantic dismissal, the sense of loss and rejection is an intense emotional experience were one's ego-identity, self-worth, defense mechanisms, and attachment wounds are threatened and activated. Although this was not clearly identified in research, it may be helpful to reflect on how activated one gets and how much time it takes to repair, grow, and move through heartbreak. This painful experience could be a way to distinguish between those who become stuck in heartbreak which could be indicative of insecure attachment wounds. A person with low

negative self-concept and attachment wounds may desperately try to repair themselves through defensive, criticism, external validation, or becoming rejecting. A low self-concept and attachment wound may show up as internalizing the love lost as self-criticism and self-defeating negative feelings and thoughts about oneself that feel harder to repair (Castellano, 2014). In contrast, a more formed self-concept or secure attachment could in time objectively view the romantic dissolution in both perspectives and view the limitations of the relationship as the cause of the dissolution (Castellano, 2014). Most importantly, an individual with a secure attachment would have the ability to believe that a love lost does not designate them unworthy of love (Castellano, 2014). In the next section, I will delve into various explanations for self-sabotage, specifically focusing on psychoanalytic and attachment theory.

### **Psychoanalytic Theory**

Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory has made significant contributions to our understanding of the ego and personality. He highlighted the psychological organization of personality, which includes wishes, moral standards, defense mechanisms, and judgments about reality. Freud argued that early experiences continue to influence individuals' romantic attachments throughout their lives. Freud acknowledged that achieving genuine love is often a difficult and painful experience. He suggested overcoming obstacles to reach a state of happiness in love demands deep self-reflection and continuous adaptation of one's ego (Sharpless, 2015).

Freud introduced a structural model of the mind consisting of the id (sexual and aggressive instincts), ego (judgment, planning, coping, defensive strategies), and superego (values and ego ideals) (Farrington & Geer, 1991). According to Freud, these three components of the mind influence human personality both consciously and unconsciously. The complexity of the ego gave rise to ego psychology, a specific approach that focuses on understanding how

individuals adapt to external realities while considering their internal drives (Farrington & Geer, 1991). In the context of love and self-sabotage, psychoanalytic theorists would approach these concepts by considering the influence of unconscious desires and conflicts stemming from early childhood experiences. They would explore how these unconscious factors shape an individual's understanding and experience of love, as well as their tendencies towards self-sabotaging behaviors.

Freud believed that love is primarily driven by the unconscious sexual and aggressive instincts and can be seen as a complex interplay between conscious and unconscious processes. He suggested that love involves a process of transference, where individuals may project their unconscious desires, fantasies, and unresolved conflicts onto their romantic partners (Sharpless, 2015). Freud proposed one powerful illusion of love is the belief that loving someone is a matter of free will - independent of influences from past relationships and one's own projections. Freud's perspective challenges this notion, asserting that new love connections are deeply rooted in and significantly shaped by previous emotional attachments (Sharpless, 2015).

Psychoanalysis argues that unconscious motivations, such as unresolved childhood conflicts or repressed desires, can influence the dynamics and choices within romantic relationships needs (Sharpless, 2015). When applying this theory to the concept of self-sabotage, it prompts an evaluation into why individuals may consistently manifest similar relationship patterns and dynamics in their lives. Those who are attempting to heal their attachment injuries could be unconsciously attracting familiar relationships to repair past relational wounds.

When considering implicit and explicit memory and how it is stored in the brain, it validates the concept of unconscious drives that may be in the background of one's desires. For example, explicit memory is conscious memory and consists of facts, concepts, and ideas that

individuals can articulate and express. Explicit memory allows conscious processing of information, reasoning, and meaning making, thus helping individuals define and make sense of their experiences (Malchiodi & Perry, 2015). In the context of romantic relationships, explicit memory can contribute to one's understanding of their thoughts and feelings, allowing them to have an idea of the type of partnership they prefer and desire. On the other hand, implicit memory stores sensory and emotional components related to the body's learned memories. It operates unconsciously and is often referred to as nondeclarative memory. Implicit memory lacks language and can influence one's thoughts and behaviors (Malchiodi & Perry, 2015). These unconscious drives, stemming from past experiences and memories, can operate beneath conscious awareness and impact one's desires and behaviors in ways that may not be directly apparent. As initially theorized by Freud, the interplay between conscious and unconscious processes can shape the dynamics and choices within romantic relationships. While explicit memory provides a conscious understanding of one's desires, unconscious motivations may also play a significant role in influencing one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in romantic relationships.

Through a psychoanalytic lens, it is evident that self-sabotage is deeply intertwined with unconscious thoughts, emotions, and unresolved wounds from the past (Sharpless, 2015). These unresolved childhood conflicts and repressed desires can manifest in romantic relationships, leading to negative patterns and behaviors that hinder relationship success. From an expressive lens often seen in poetry and musical lyricism, relationships can serve as a catalyst for personal growth and self-awareness when these unresolved wounds are brought to the surface and addressed intentionally. One can experience a deep and transformative experience after a breakup when compassionate self-reflection is part of the process. As Jiddu Krishnamurti's (2010) quote

beautifully articulates, “a relationship is the mirror in which you see yourself as you are. If you are capable of looking at yourself as you are without any evaluation, then there is the cessation of fear, and out of that comes an extraordinary sense of love” (n.p.). This quote represents how relationships serve as reflections of our inner most vulnerable selves. Through compassionate self-reflection (a willingness to encounter our fears and insecurities with suspending judgment) we can gain valuable insights into our attachment wounds and inner struggles. As the quote suggests, practicing self-compassion and self-love is essential for nurturing deeper and healthier connections with oneself. Many individuals carry deep-rooted attachment wounds that can lead to core beliefs of unworthiness, fear of abandonment, and feelings of inadequacy. These beliefs can hinder their ability to form meaningful and satisfying relationships. Self-sabotage often arises from these embedded internal working models, affecting one's capacity to establish authentic connections and engage in positive relationships with themselves and others (Peel & Caltabiano, 2019, 2020). Attachment theory offers insight into how early attachment experiences shape individuals' attachment styles, influencing their beliefs, behaviors, and interactions in relationships over time.

### **Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory provides insight to the complexity of relationships. John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth are the pioneers of attachment theory. Attachment theory, as described in the *Affective Science Journal*, is a “conceptual framework [that] explains how experiences in close relationships contribute to generalized patterns of affect and cognition (Kaurin et al., 2019, p. 118). Attachment theory is a powerful framework that has been empirically validated, clinically useful, and theoretically relevant in understanding a multitude of human affect (Levy et al., 2015). For instance, a longitudinal study reviewed by Grossmann & Grossmann (2005), followed

individuals for over a 20-year span from birth to young adulthood and discovered how, “a person’s attachment style is predictably associated with interpersonal behavior and cognitions, relationship quality, emotional regulation, self-esteem, adjustment, and mental health” (as cited in Mikulincer et al., 2009, p. 2). Attachment style appears to be at the centre of a person’s emotional and psychological development that will influence adaptive or maladaptive cognitive schemas. According to attachment theory, human infants require consistent nurturing, availability, responsiveness, and attunement from one or more caregivers to develop a secure attachment and mature into healthy well-adjusted adults (Van Rosmalen et al., 2016). Lack of responsiveness and availability from parents can lead to insecure attachment styles, which may manifest in different behavioral challenges and emotional struggles persisting into adulthood (Peel et al., 2019). Barnes (2017) described how, “adult attachment bonds, like those in childhood, are emotionally intense and demanding, and are defined by the quality of the relationship between the partners” (p. 2). Attachment narratives or mental schemas developed in early childhood may affect romantic love dynamics impacting the ability for closeness and intimacy (Mikulincer et al., 2009).

For instance, Mikulincer et al. (2009) completed a series of eight studies on Israeli undergraduate students, aimed to examine whether individuals with secure attachment styles utilize a secure-base script (mental schema) to process attachment-related information. Through the 8 studies conducted there was evidence to suggest secure individuals tend to assess their relationships and partners realistically; they are more adept at recognizing and appreciating supportive and caring behavior. Additionally, individuals with secure attachment styles find it easier to express their needs and concerns to their partners, as they implicitly trust that their partners will be supportive and capable to handle their requests. This influenced the capacity to

process and forgive partners who may occasionally deviate from their usual supportive demeanor under certain circumstances. In contrast, the research indicated, less secure individuals may struggle with misinterpreting signs of affection and care, leading to a reluctance to seek closeness to promote intimacy. Participants with insecure attachment styles tended to hold narratives that contained less availability and support of their partners. This was more likely to increase feelings of distress by focusing their attention on rumination, catastrophizing, or undermining their relationship (Mikulincer et al., 2009).

Insecure adult attachment styles are typically characterized by two main dimensions: anxiously attached and avoidantly attached. Those who are anxiously attached expect, readily perceive, and overreact to the possibility of being rejected. Researchers have linked self-defeating behaviors such as rejection sensitivity to anxiously attached individuals (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020). This could present as a person becoming overly clingy towards a romantic partner if they perceive distance or rejection from a partner. Individuals with attachment related anxiety tend to focus their feelings on their self-worth and can display anxious thoughts and behaviours (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020). They may require a lot of reassurance from their romantic partner; they may fall in love frequently, experience a lot of self-doubt, often showing a strong desire for approval and validation, or reacting strongly to the fear of rejection. They may experience distress when others are unavailable or unresponsive to their needs and may tie their self-worth and identity closely to their romantic partners (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020).

Those with attachment-related avoidance often base their comfort level in relationships on how intimate and dependent they are with others. People with avoidance tendencies usually restrain or suppress their desire for romantic involvement. An avoidant attachment style show signs of avoidant thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. They may become uncomfortable or distant

when relationships become too close or serious (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020). They may have underlying feelings of insecurity, struggle with intimacy and interdependence in relationships due to fear of abandonment, struggle with trusting others, deny desires for romantic engagement, do not easily self-disclose, and present with a self-reliant attitude to their detriment (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020). Avoidantly attached individuals could lack the ability to be vulnerable in sharing thoughts and feelings with romantic partners and withdraw their emotions (Peel & Caltabiano, 2020). Avoidantly attached individuals may present themselves as shut down or withdrawn emotionally with a romantic partner in times of conflict or when they feel the relationship is getting too serious. Peel and Caltabiano (2021) emphasized how “defense strategies can become self-defeating and, in turn, hinder individual’s chances of a successful relationship” (p. 148). Learned defense strategies for insecurely attached individuals for self-protection could be ultimately hindering love, emotional growth, and romantic connection in relationships. As highlighted in an article by Feeney and Collins (2019), individuals with insecure attachments are characterized by a negative relational schema (how they see themselves and relate to the world), which consequently make them prone to interpreting their partner's behavior in a negative light (Feeney & Collins, 2019). This cognitive process can have a detrimental impact on their relationship dynamics, solidifying that self-sabotage does indeed hinder one’s ability to maintain romantic connection. Next, I will delve into the current research surrounding self-sabotage within romantic relationships.

### **Self-Sabotage in Romantic Relationships**

Raquel Peel and Nerina Caltabiano (2021) conducted a multi-study approach in attempt to define and conceptualise relationship self-sabotage. The research indirectly portrays how self-protection is a self-fulfilling prophecy. A person may have unconscious or conscious beliefs

about romantic relationships which influences their behaviours and consequently the outcome of their relationship. For instance, a person who fears abandonment and believes people always leave tends to use criticism as their self-protective strategy and pushes a partner away and reinforces their belief (Peel et al., 2019). The research on attachment style and romantic relationships has been consistent with evidence to support how stressful situations in romantic partnerships will activate attachment systems, which will subsequently arouse a defence reaction to self-protect. The research is focused on defensive behaviours from insecure attachment, such as rejection sensitivity (anxious) and fear of intimacy (avoidant), as maladaptive strategies to protect self-worth that consequently becomes self-defeating (Peel et al., 2019).

Peel and Caltabiano (2019), identify behaviours that are symptomatic of self-sabotage in romantic relationships and develop a relationship self-sabotage scale for empirical research (Peel et al., 2019). They discovered relationship self-sabotage presents itself differently with varying levels of self-defeating attitudes and behaviours uniquely shaped by a person's history. People who have these self-deprecating beliefs and attitudes tend to generally hold an insecure and negative perspective of romantic relationships (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). Even in cases where individuals are actively seeking to find love, they often have preconceived beliefs that the relationship will end. In their early 2019 research, Peel and Caltabiano completed an inductive qualitative study where they analysed data and discovered 12 main themes and patterns of how people sabotage romantic relationships to protect themselves in their attitudes and behaviours.

The passage below explains further:

- (1) partner attack (e.g., criticism and lack of communication skills),
- (2) partner pursuit (e.g., clinginess),
- (3) partner withdrawal (e.g., stonewalling),
- (4) defensiveness,
- (5) contempt,
- (6) self-esteem issues,
- (7) controlling tendency (e.g., controlling partner's finances),
- (8) lack of

relationship skills, (9) trust difficulty, (10) destructive tendency (e.g., excessive drinking), (11) attitude to affairs, and (12) relationship belief. (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021, p. 150)

In addition, they identified how people's previous relationships with parents, peers, and romantic partners could have contributed to their self-protecting and relationship sabotaging behaviours.

The most significant romantic self-sabotaging themes that came up in their research was defensiveness, trust difficulty, and lack of relationship skills (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). This supports the extensive research by Gottman and Levenson (1992), who found that defensiveness is one of the four horsemen described to negative communication patterns that can predict relationship dissatisfaction and eventual breakdown, which I explore further in the next section.

### **The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse**

John Gottman spent his career as a psychologist studying marriage and relationship dissolution. His research on divorce prediction had a ninety-six percent accuracy rating (Gottman & Silver, 2015). What was most compelling in his research was the concept of The Four Horsemen: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (Gottman & Silver, 2015). These four communication patterns are indicative to erode trust, intimacy, and are detrimental to the relationship. The four horsemen are defined below:

1. Criticism – Although people may have complaints about a significant other, criticism goes much deeper to express negative feelings or opinions about the other's character or personality. It goes beyond addressing specific issues and becomes more personal and generalized.
2. Contempt – This arises from a sense of superiority and disregard over one's partner. It is a form of disrespect driven by long-simmering negative thoughts about the partner. It is a form of anger that looks like mockery, or belittlement towards the other person.

Contempt often stems from long-standing negative thoughts and can be characterized by sarcasm, insults, or hostile body language. It creates a toxic atmosphere in relationships and can significantly damage trust and emotional connection.

3. **Defensiveness** – Defensiveness is considered as a self-protection tactic used as a counterattack when feeling victimised against a perceived threat. It can hinder effective problem-solving and conflict resolution in relationships. It involves responding to criticism or perceived attacks by denying responsibility, making excuses, or counterattacking and blaming your partner. It is a way to protect one's ego and sense of self.
4. **Stonewalling** – Stonewalling refers to withdrawing or shutting down during a conflict or conversation with a partner. When someone stonewalls, they may become unresponsive, avoid eye contact, or physically leave the situation. The stonewaller acts uninterested and uncommunicative to their partner. This behavior can be a result of feeling overwhelmed, flooded with emotions, or unable to effectively communicate.

(Gottman & Silver, 2015).

The concept of the four horsemen has been extensively studied since the 1990s. Research on romantic self-sabotage has identified similar themes that contribute to relationship dissolution. As mentioned, these themes include defensiveness, difficulties with trust, and a lack of relationship skills. Lack of relationship skills encompasses a broad range of challenges, such as ineffective communication, a lack of empathy, difficulties with conflict resolution, and a limited understanding of emotional intelligence. Trust difficulties often stem from past experiences of betrayal, which can lead to an increased inability to trust romantic partners and heightened feelings of jealousy (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). In addition to the four horsemen,

Gottman also identified failed repair attempts as a fifth sign that can contribute to relationship dissolution. Failed repair attempts refer to the inability or failure to effectively resolve conflicts or address issues in a constructive manner. When repair attempts are unsuccessful or ignored, it can lead to unresolved conflicts and a breakdown in the relationship over time (Marriage breakups predictable, 2008; Gottman & Silver, 2015).

When contemplating the four horsemen with the concept of self-sabotage patterns, it provides valuable insight into the relationship schemas and internal working models (relating to the self and others) that may have developed over time, that is negatively impacting relationship stability. The dynamics at play in romantic partnerships are far more nuanced than one might initially realize. By delving deeper into our own behaviors, motivations, and communication styles, we can cultivate a greater understanding of how these dynamics influence us and shape our relationships. This self-awareness can serve as a powerful tool in fostering genuine and more fulfilling connections with others, as well as in identifying when relationship dynamics are unhealthy. Next, I turn to the development of the Relationship Sabotage Scale believed to be a valuable tool in clinical settings for identifying and assessing the intensity of self-sabotage patterns within relationships.

### **Relationship Sabotage Scale**

In their attempt to understand the underlying factors and mechanisms of self-sabotaging behaviors in romantic relationships, Peel and Caltabiano (2021) were able to create a Relationship Sabotage Scale (RSS) to empirically test individual patterns of romantic self-sabotage from the three studies they conducted. The scale is meant to identify attitudes and behaviors that can harm romantic relationships. The RSS is a psychometric empirically tested and validated tool that can be used in relationship counselling. It is designed as a brief 12

question measure with three themes: defensiveness, trust difficulty, and lack of relationship skills. Participants rate each item on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores are indicative of greater levels of self-sabotage in intimate relationships based on three factors. The RSS serves as a valuable starting point for clients to understand relationship sabotage tendencies, patterns of self-sabotage, and possibly offer explanations in relationship dissatisfaction. The RSS is economically feasible to deliver, easy to score, and suitable for individuals of all genders and sexualities, making it accessible and inclusive (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021; Peel, 2023). Peel and Caltabiano explained how the RSS was created as a “measure that can be used to understand mediator constructs of relationship outcomes within the attachment framework to explain relationship dissolution and work towards relationship maintenance” (Peel & Caltabiano., 2021, p. 147). In other words, they wanted to identify the how and why people self-sabotage to provide insight as a step towards breaking cycles of romantic self-sabotage.

Researchers in Turkey adapted the RSS to test the reliability and validity and its effectiveness in measuring attitudes and behaviours that harm romantic relationship in a Turkish context (Turan & Yildirim, 2023). This study from 2023 was the first known adaptation of the RSS outside of Australia where it was first developed. The Turkish analysis showed high reliability, indicating that the scale items consistently measured the construct of romantic relationship sabotage (Turan & Yildirim, 2023). Some interesting information that came from this study was the variable on love attitude which emphasized how not everyone experiences similar feelings in love and defined people’s attitudes toward love in different ways (Turan & Yildirim, 2023). For instance, they used the colour wheel theory of love by John Lee (1973),

which uses Latin and Greek words to describe different attitudes and behaviors towards love and relationships. The study indicated the following:

In EROS individuals tend to believe in love at first sight. Love starts with a physical attraction and individuals put in significant effort to make their partner happy and expect the same level of effort in return.

In LUDUS attachment can be weak and love is like a fun game. Individuals prefer to have a new partner instead of working hard to maintain a relationship, and polygamy may be more commonly practiced.

In STORGE, it is important to establish a friendly relationship such as meeting mutual needs and finding common shared interests. The partner characteristics focuses on compatibility and shared values.

In PRAGMA individuals are decisive in the relationship. This type of love values achieving harmony and importance is placed on factors such as profession, education level, and family structure to achieve a connection.

MANIA is characterized by intense fear of loss and jealousy, along with constant monitoring of the partner. Individuals with this orientation may have difficulty letting go of a relationship even when problems arise.

In AGAPE is considered a self-less love that prioritizes the partner's well-being and involves protecting and supports each other (Turan & Yildirim, 2023).

In this study it was established different attitudes towards love influence individuals' beliefs and behaviors in romantic relationships which can contribute to the self sabotage of romantic relationships. The study mentioned a negative relationship between the Turkish-RSS scores EROS and STORGE (least likely to sabotage), while a positive relationship was found

with LUDUS, PRAGMA, MANIA, and AGAPE scores (most likely to sabotage) (Turan & Yildirim, 2023). This suggests that certain attitudes towards love may be associated with a higher likelihood of sabotaging romantic relationships. Factors such as ineffective physical attraction, negative motivation towards the partner, lack of harmony and sharing, having multiple partners, clinging to sociodemographic characteristics, excessive feelings of losing the partner, constantly putting a partner in the forefront of the relationship, or continually supporting the partner can all play a role in sabotaging a romantic relationship. In addition, the study mentioned the findings of a significant relationship between self-sabotaging (negative beliefs about oneself that typically starts from early childhood experiences) and behaviours associated to sabotaging romantic relationships. Interestingly, one gender was not found to significantly be more of a cause in relationship sabotage, but age was found to be influential where romantic relationship sabotage increased with age (Turan & Yildirim, 2023). This Turkish study brings validity and reliability of the RSS while also bringing into account cross cultural considerations and how differing perspectives on love may increase or decrease self-sabotage (Turan & Yildirim, 2023).

### **Summary and Synthesis**

In carefully examining the research, it has become evident in this literature review that both unconscious and conscious internal working models developed in childhood profoundly influence our perceptions and beliefs about romantic love, as well as how we engage in intimate relationships (Karantzas et al., 2023). As Peel and Caltabiano (2019, 2020, 2021) have highlighted, individuals who experience feelings of low self-esteem, defensiveness, inability to trust, and a lack of relationship skills tend to have higher tendencies of engaging in relationship self-sabotage. These patterns, ingrained from early experiences, shape our behaviors, attitudes, and interactions within romantic relationships, often leading to challenges in forming and

maintaining healthy and fulfilling connections with others. These themes contribute to the development of maladaptive relationship patterns that significantly impact commitment, intimacy, and passion within romantic partnership. Whether rooted in unconscious drives or consciously adopted behaviors aimed at self-protection, these patterns are deeply ingrained cognitive strategies that shape the dynamics and outcomes of romantic relationships. Individuals influenced by an insecure attachment style are particularly susceptible to experiencing relationship dissatisfaction. This susceptibility often manifests in behaviors such as avoiding relationships due to fear of abandonment or rejection, prematurely ending relationships before they become too intimate, projecting unrealistic ideals onto relationships, attaching self-identity to relationships, or remaining in unfulfilling relationships. Furthermore, when a person's sense of self-worth becomes intertwined with the romantic relationship, it is likely to heighten defensive reactions. This heightened defense mode can increase the activation of attachment injuries when challenges arise in the relationship, possibly reducing the ability to repair ruptures. People with insecure attachment styles tend to react with negative cognitive schemas that elicit poor communication patterns, behaviors, and beliefs, which ultimately forecasts relationship dissatisfaction and eventual breakdown.

In the next chapter, I will present recommendations in the counselling field that may be useful in assisting clients experiencing repetitive relationship dissatisfaction. By promoting self-awareness and delving deeper into beliefs, behaviors, motivations, and communication styles, it may help cultivate a greater awareness of how these dynamics shape one's romantic relationships. Encouraging self-awareness can serve as a potent tool in fostering healthier and more fulfilling connections with oneself and, ultimately, with others.

### Chapter Three: Discussion and Application

*I want to know if you have touched the centre of your own sorrow  
if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shrivelled and closed  
from fear of further pain  
I want to know if you can sit with pain  
mine or your own without moving to hide it or fade it or fix it.*

—Oriah Mountain Dream, *The Invitation*

I begin chapter three with a quote from Oriah Mountain Dreamer's (1999) poem, *The Invitation*, as it sets the tone and my intention with this capstone. The poem illustrates love too can be seen as an invitation—a call to embrace authenticity, vulnerability, courage, change, and connection with oneself and others. It serves as a reminder to seek meaning in every aspect of life. It suggests that even sorrow and despair have a purpose in the journey of love, urging us to open our wounds fully, so they can intentionally be repaired. Most importantly, it highlights the significance of self-love, suggesting that our ability to love others is fundamentally linked to how we love and accept ourselves.

This final chapter is a discussion on the research question: Are unconscious patterns of self-sabotage hindering relationship success? It offers a practical approach to the findings from the literature review, as well as the limitations and gaps within the literature. I will also discuss an overview of the research and recommendations to the counselling field, lastly concluding with my final thoughts and reflections.

#### Discussion

Through research it has been established that self-sabotage in romantic relationships is a developed cognitive strategy that serves to self-protect one's self-esteem and self-image (Peel et

al., 2019). Through the literature it has become clear these tendencies are developed cognitive strategies deeply connected to early attachment injuries that manifest later in romantic relationships. Attachment theory has demonstrated our early experiences with caregivers shape our attachment styles, influencing how we relate to others in relationships throughout our lives. Romantic relationship satisfaction is dependent on intimacy, passion, and commitment. The fluctuation of these components is suggested to affect the quality of long-term partnership (Sternberg, 1986). Research has indicated insecurely attached individuals are more likely to have negative internal working models and schemas about themselves and beliefs about romantic relationships that can influence relationship satisfaction and health (Fossataro et al., 2023). These internal representations become the perceived lens which guide expectations and behaviors in relationships. Peel and Caltabiano (2021), identified defensiveness, trust difficulty, and lack of relationship skills as the main themes associated with self-sabotage in romantic relationships. The intensity of these self-sabotage themes varies among individuals due to their unique beliefs, experiences, and personality traits. These themes align with John Gottman's (1999) extensive research into relationship dissolution. The four destructive communication patterns that are indicative to erode trust, intimacy, and are detrimental to relationship quality. The presence of defensiveness and lack of relationships skills in both Gottman's and Peel & Caltabiano's frameworks suggests communication style plays a critical role in undermining relationship health whether it is the beginning stages of romantic initiation or long into the relationship.

In the first cross cultural adaptation of the RSS, the results showed consistency with John Lee's (1973) approaches to love theory (Eros, Ludus, Storge, Pragma, Mania, and Agape). The results indicated different attitudes towards love shaped by perceptions, values, and beliefs may initiate more susceptibility to self-sabotage due to their varied emotional experiences and

interpretations of love. Through this research it shows the importance of continuing to consider how different cultural backgrounds may exhibit self-sabotage behaviors and relationships beliefs based on cultural influences.

Overall, these theories provide parallel perspectives on the complexities of romantic relationships, offering insights into the factors influencing relationship dynamics, satisfaction, and individual behaviors. They illustrate how attachment styles, communication patterns, beliefs, love attitudes, self-perceived timing, and self-sabotage intertwine to shape the course and quality of romantic relationships and determine the trajectory of romantic partnerships. The literature review highlights the validity of unconscious patterns of self-sabotage that impede relationships quality, satisfaction, and commitment. Although, research is indicating that maladaptive attachment styles may increase self-sabotage in romantic relationships, it is important to recognize the early stages of this literature and the limitations and gaps that may be present.

### **The Limitations and Gaps**

The research on relationship self-sabotage is only beginning to gain traction in the counselling psychology field. The limitations of the current studies are important to consider in interpreting the findings and for future research design on this topic. As acknowledged by Peel and Caltabiano (2021), there needs to be consideration of the generalizability of the participants in the current studies and how it does not represent the larger population beyond the specific sample used in the research. It is essential for future researchers to include a broader range of relationship professionals, diverse demographic of groups (including gender, age, diverse sexual orientations, and culturally varied backgrounds), individuals currently in relationships, as well as those individuals who are chronically single when they do not want to be. It would be important for future research to include subgroup sampling to increase representation of relationship self-

saboteurs based on patterns of responses to multiple variables as it might manifest differently across different profiles of individuals. For example, it was identified to research self-identified self-saboteurs who are single and avoid relationships altogether. Increasing purposefully selected samples would help contribute a more nuanced understanding of self-sabotage and its impact on relationship quality and dynamics among varying cultures and groups of people (Hochberger-Brown, 2024; Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). As Lisa Hochberger-Brown (2024) points out in her dissertation, there are associations between romantic beliefs and maladaptive attachment styles however, continuing to build upon the current literature and exploring the various factors that may influence self-sabotage is important to get a more in depth understanding of the complexity of relationships self-sabotage (Hochberger-Brown, 2024).

It was suggested that revisions and improvements to items related to trust difficulty and lack of relationship skills may be necessary. Testing the scale in different contexts and with diverse samples, including clinical settings with practitioners, can help reassess the RSS reliability and validity. Exploring how different behaviors interact and influence each other could provide a deeper understanding into the complex interrelated dynamics contributing to relationship sabotage. Future studies should consider using clinical samples incorporating perspectives from both partners to better capture the dynamics of intimate relationships. For instance, differentiating between failed relationships and sabotaged relationships to distinguish the impact of self-sabotage compared to other types of romantic termination. Continued research on this topic would increase the depth of the literature to help distinguish between common relationships challenges compared to self-sabotage tendencies that impact relationship health. Additionally, considering personality traits and response bias in how the RSS is delivered (i.e.

Online-survey format), in the research context is crucial, as these factors can influence participants' responses and self-assessment (Hochberger-Brown, 2024; Peel & Caltabiano, 2021).

In the current literature on self-sabotage in romantic relationships there is limited information on overcoming this maladaptive coping strategy. The literature heavily focuses on defining self-sabotage in romantic relationships, understanding the reasoning behind it, and the development of the RSS tool to identify and become aware of self-sabotage patterns. A consideration for future research could be to include attachment-related therapeutic interventions or healthy romantic partnerships to explore if it could serve as corrective emotional experiences to reduce self-sabotage tendencies.

### **Recommendations**

With the insights gained from the literature review, in this next section I will include recommendations focused on providing practical applications for attachment-related therapeutic interventions for counsellors. These recommendations aim to increase self-reflection and offer a therapeutic framework that may be impactful when working with individuals with self-sabotage tendencies.

### ***Utilizing the RSS in Practice***

Raquel Peel has added valuable literature on self-defeating attitudes and behaviors that impede intimate partnership success. By continuing to conceptualize and empirically measure relationship sabotage with the use of the RSS, researchers and practitioners can better understand its impact on relationship initiation and longevity of the relationship. The RSS tool can be requested on Dr. Raquel Peel's website. Additionally, Dr Raquel Peel has become internationally recognized as a relationship expert and an award-winning educator and researcher. She offers workshops on relationships self-sabotage among other areas of interest. For individuals or

counsellors seeking information on relationship self-sabotage, it is recommended to explore Dr. Raquel Peel's website and TEDx talk as valuable starting point (Peel, 2023). Peel additionally offers three primary tips on how to work on self-sabotage in romantic love which are: to gain more insight into behaviours in relationships, identifying expectations in relationships, and how to work collaboratively in relationships. She proposes this self-reflection as a good beginning point to untangle from self-sabotage in romantic relationships (Peel, 2023). Building on Dr. Peel's insights into enhancing self-awareness, I will delve deeper into how to increase self-reflection in dating.

### ***Reflective Writing***

As highlighted throughout this capstone one must consider differentiating between common relationship challenges compared to self-sabotage in romantic relationships. Reflective writing could be a helpful tool used for romantic relationships. For instance, during romantic engagement there are many points one can self-reflect independently by journaling about thoughts, feelings, worries, fears, and hopes through out the dating process. Journaling is an effective tool because it is an introspective practice allowing individuals to reflect on their deepest worries and fears. It can also be a checkpoint of how one felt at a certain point in time which can highlight personal and emotional growth as well as being emotionally stuck. Journaling allows one to foster a deeper understanding of themselves and have more self-awareness (Ayers, 2022). Journaling could also be a good indication when to seek counselling because it could help to distinguish repetitive romantic patterns, thoughts, feelings, beliefs that may be hindering growth. It can indicate when self-defeating beliefs and feelings of inadequacy in romantic love are hindering one's self-concept. For example, being overly self-critical in the process of romantic love could be deeper underlying feelings linked to self-sabotage (low self-

esteem, fear of rejection/abandonment that is becoming impeding, inability to trust partners, or unable to communicate effectively). If these themes are reoccurring in the process of romantic love it may help to seek relationship counselling to explore these areas. Below I have formed 12 questions that could be useful journal prompts to help facilitate a deeper introspection process of understanding one's beliefs and attitudes about relationships:

1. What are my fundamental beliefs regarding love and relationships, including what I believe I deserve in romantic love?
2. What are my biggest fears or concerns about romantic love, and what are my hopes, expectations, and values in romantic love?
3. Do I find myself consistently attracted to a certain "type" of person? What traits do I typically find appealing in potential partners? Has my "type" been successful or unsuccessful?
4. When someone expresses romantic interest in me, how do I interpret both verbal and nonverbal cues? On the contrary, how do I convey my own interest to others, and how comfortable do I feel in the roles of pursuer or pursued?
5. In situations where mutual interest exists, what are my expectations for the next steps in the relationship, and how do I communicate my needs and desires effectively (i.e. texting continuously, phone call, suggest meeting in person)?
6. What standards determine whether a date was successful or not, and how do I know that I am interested in a second date? What is my expectation of how the second date is initiated (i.e. how long until the next date and who initiates)?

7. After a date or romantic interaction am I being overly critical in my thoughts or jumping to conclusions? What would it feel like to put this aside? What would I say to a friend in the same situation?
8. If I am considering entering a romantic relationship, what signs do I look for to gauge whether the other person is also ready for commitment? What signs indicate that a potential partner may not be ready for a serious relationship? How long am I willing to wait for shared interest and commitment? Do I want things to unfold slowly? How does the uncertainty of the outcome feel?
9. How do I know when I am being invalidated and treated poorly?
10. How do I know when I am being treated with care and mutual interest?
11. How do I feel about myself when a potential partner does not show signs of interest?
12. What aspects of a partnership am I willing to compromise on within myself and in others, and what are my non-negotiables when it comes to building a relationship with someone (i.e. attraction, financial compatibility, social dynamics, shared hobbies and interests, smoking, drinking, exercise, and other lifestyle choices)? Would this change five years from now?

In reflecting on these questions, one might begin to understand their own fears about relationships, beliefs about oneself in romantic love, expectations of partners and self in love, inability to trust, and how one responds to signs of uninterest or lack of engagement (Peel et al., 2021).

### ***Cultivating Self-Compassion***

My next recommendation is cultivating self-compassion. Kristen Neff (2018) has done extensive research on self-compassion and how to develop this skill. As indicated through out

this capstone, negative self-concepts (internal working model) are often deeply entrenched. This can show up as instinctively blaming oneself in a self-deprecating way that may feel overwhelmingly critical when reflecting on relationship dissolution. In such situations, suggesting self-compassion to someone with a deeply ingrained sense of low self-worth might feel unfamiliar and challenging. It is not something one can easily access when shame and self-criticism have been neurologically wired as the default response. For example, individuals with low self-concept may have a default belief of inadequacy when comparing themselves to others, and worry they are not worthy of love, ultimately fearing romantic partners will see that they are not worthy and leave them (fear of abandonment) (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). This illustrates why self-compassion has an important role to play when healing from attachment injuries that keep one stuck in romantic relationships. By nurturing self-compassion while engaging in self-reflective practices, one creates a safer inward space to explore and address these painful deeper parts. Self-reflection in conjunction with self-compassion can help to rewire ingrained thought patterns that are harmful and unproductive (Neff & Germer, 2018). Neff and Germer's (2018) text *The Mindful Self-Compassion Workbook* offers practical exercises proven to foster inner acceptance and resilience. Combining these exercises with self-reflection through journaling and counselling can be a powerful way to promote healing and growth from self-sabotage in romantic relationships.

### ***Body-Oriented Therapeutic Approach***

In my last recommendation, I will shift focus on the clinical framework considered “bottom-up” or body-based therapy which I would recommend as an effective approach when working with self-sabotage attachment injuries. Expanding on Daniel Siegel's *Interpersonal Neurobiology* (1990), which has been a profound addition to the field of counselling psychology.

Siegel offered the integration of neuroscience, attachment theory, emotion regulation, and developmental models of emotional functioning into clinical models of therapeutic intervention. The expansion of frameworks influenced by interpersonal neurobiology has offered a deeper understanding and empirical evidence for the role the brain, mirror-neurons, and emotions play as a powerful force for healing trauma (Badenoch & Gantt, 2013). Body-focused therapies such as somatic experiencing centre on the body and its memory of past experiences. This approach, as articulated by Levine (1997) and Van der Kolk (2016), starts with the body's instinctive responses, and progresses upward to affect cognitive and emotional processing (Grabbe & Miller-Karas, 2017). In other words, body-focused therapy such as Somatic Experiencing can help activate (in a safe therapeutic relationship) those deeper attachment wounds that are instinctively wired as emotional responses to perceived threat (rejection, abandonment, unworthy etc.). Bottom-up approaches seek to alter how the body reacts to traumatic events, gradually influencing higher cortical systems of the brain (Grabbe & Miller-Karas, 2017). In this process, clients are taught to gradually regulate emotional arousal linked to activating thoughts, feelings, experiences by building tolerance and gradually accepting their internal sensations and associations of difficult emotions (i.e. feelings of rejection or fear of abandonment). Slowly over time, positive relational experiences which have been recognized in counsellor-client relationships have the potential to influence a corrective emotional experience (Lawson-McConnell, 2020). This is much like parenting, a strong therapeutic alliance with a skilled therapist, can foster a relationship that offers a body-based felt sense of safety.

This process can lead to improved self-regulation and the ability for clients to access positive internal resources that increase resilience and well-being, especially for individuals with developmental trauma where the sense of self may be compromised (Grabbe & Miller-Karas,

2017). This therapeutic approach focuses on creating new neural pathways through corrective emotional experiences, which in turn fosters a deeper sense of self by improving emotional regulation and altering reactive responses. By becoming aware of negative bodily sensations triggered by experiences, individuals can learn how to regulate their emotions effectively and communicate more skillfully, thereby enhancing interpersonal relationships. Additionally, research on body maps of emotions suggests that emotions are universally registered in the body across various cultures, highlighting the cross-cultural applicability of this therapeutic approach (Grabbe & Miller-Karas, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

Through this capstone it has become clear romantic love is a multifaceted nuanced human experience that can be difficult to empirically research. There is abundant research on the initiation, maintenance, and dissolution of romantic love and yet there is still much more to understand (Peel & Caltabiano, 2021). For instance, there is a need for further research into differentiating between normal relationship difficulties and self-sabotage tendencies, especially in the context of evolving dating norms. Nonetheless, Peel and Caltabiano (2019, 2020, 2021) have made significant contributions to the understanding of romantic self-sabotage, examining how patterns of self-sabotage develop and affect relationship satisfaction. Their research highlighted how self-sabotage patterns often stem from insecure attachment styles and negative self-concepts (Peel & Caltabiano, 2019, 2020, 2021). From a psychoanalytic framework, the implicit memories of our closest relationships, social connections, messages from larger society all contribute to the way we interact with a romantic partner. The negative feelings that are activated in us through romantic love are often deep-seated attachment wounds that unveil our internal working model (belief system). Insight and self-reflection, as highlighted by Peel

(2023), are crucial for understanding our patterns and triggers in romantic relationships. However, insight alone may not be sufficient to break the cycle of self-sabotage behaviors. It requires a level of self-compassion to avoid harsh self-judgment and criticism, particularly during times of relationship dissolution (Neff & Germer, 2018).

In conclusion, this capstone has underscored how romantic love unites two individuals with unique backgrounds, personalities, and needs. Our past experiences, early attachments, beliefs, and values significantly influence how we navigate and maintain romantic relationships. Understanding these aspects of ourselves is essential in recognizing whether self-sabotage tendencies or negative relationship patterns hinder our ability to form healthy and fulfilling partnerships. By gaining insight into our experiences and behaviors, we can identify and address any self-sabotaging tendencies that may be impacting fulfilling romantic connections.

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