WELLNESS

A College Professor and I Agree: TikTok's "3-Month Rule" Has to Go

READ THIS BEFORE JUMPING ON THE 90-DAY BREAKUP TRAIN

BY SYDNEY MEISTER • PUBLISHED JUL 6, 2025

DASHA BUROBINA FOR PUREWOW

Charles O'Shea had a Hinge resumé that would no doubt end up in Sarah's slush pile: lacrosse player in high school, ΣX brother in college, Deloitte consultant in a Patagonia vest. But it was Friday night on the Lower East Side, and Sarah was blissfully unaware of his profile. Five minutes and a splash of liquid courage later, Charles 'clumsily' knocked her drink out of her hand. "Let me buy you another… and a round for the girls," he offered. She rolled her eyes, hardly annoyed enough to deny her friends a free espresso martini. To her surprise, the banter felt effortless. Even over the thrum of 2000s throwbacks and guys wearing hats and graphic tees (more her type), Charles held her attention. When she mentioned rewatching *The Sopranos*, he asked if Tony reminded her more of her dad or her ex. She laughed harder than expected. For once, she could see why consultants made triple her salary—steady eye contact, quick timing and the rare ability to make a bar feel like a two-top dinner.

Five days later came their first official date: candlelight, tiny plates, too much Cabernet. Then the fourth date, and the sixth. Soon, Charles was a fixture in her routine—Saturday sleepovers, Sunday coffee runs, midweek memes and "thinking of you" texts. And to the naked eye, he adored her. He told her she looked radiant on day four of unwashed hair. He called her "the most interesting person he'd ever met" on repeat. So, she slipped into his life with ease: Parachute bedding, biweekly Sweetgreen, effortless invites to group hangs. It was the kind of domestic rhythm she usually resisted—but with him, felt easy.

But then came month three. The doubt wasn't loud—it was more of a whispering anxiety behind their inside jokes. She'd already accepted that he wasn't her "type," but was that at the cost of finding the partner she always envisioned? He didn't like off-Broadway plays—he hated her taste in music—and he certainly wasn't booking a last-minute trip to Sri Lanka. Charles' passions (sports and the stock market) often made her wonder

whether they had enough in common to sustain something real. And yet, she couldn't deny how much she loved being with him. He made her feel prioritized and valued, secure in a way she hadn't yet experienced. But the gap between their interests and connection led to a question that was keeping her up at night: Shouldn't I be more sure I want a future with him at this point?

While I love painting a picture of NYC dating scene, this little tale has a purpose. It's to show exactly why I—and a professor at California State University—think TikTok's "3-Month Rule" is bullshit.

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MEET THE EXPERT

Dr. Tara Suwinyattichaiporn, PhD, is an associate professor at California State University, Fullerton, specializing in sexual and interpersonal communication. She teaches courses on relational theory, sexual identity, and communication technologies—and received tenure at the age of 32. Her research blends qualitative and quantitative methods to explore how people form, express, and communicate identity in a digital world. With a background in both academic theory and real-world application, she offers a nuanced and affirming lens on how gender roles and societal pressure shape our relationships.

What Is The 3-Month Rule?

Essentially, the Three-Month Rule suggests that 90 days is all it takes to know whether someone's worth dating long-term—whether the "relationship" is worth staying in. Per the TikToker above, "The trend says three months is the time it takes for the honeymoon hormones to fade… Anyone can say they like you, but psychologically, if they're still trying after three months, that's a really good sign." Then they add, "Within three months, their true colors—and true intentions—will eventually show. Which, in return, will help you realize whether or not you two are compatible." Needless to say, I'm biting my writer's tongue…

Why Are the First Three Months of Dating So Important?

Let's return to the example of Sarah and Charles. Three months in, and Sarah found herself in a tug-of-war between connection and compatibility. Charles adored her, prioritized her and made her feel secure in their dynamic. But as their routines settled into place, so did her doubts. Could she genuinely see herself in his world long-term? And was she truly interested in *him*, or just thrilled to be loved by him?

This is what Dr. Tara Suwinyattichaiporn calls the exploratory phase: "During the first three months, you're typically in the 'exploratory phase' of getting to know each other, but not necessarily seeing the deeper layers of who the other person is." In other words, the early days aren't defined by compatibility checkpoints—they're about noticing what makes you curious. Do you like this person enough to ask questions (and actually listen to their response)? Do you want to understand what they truly value? And are they doing the same for you? *This* is what makes the first three months of dating important: Figuring out whether you actually want to buy what they're selling.

Does the 3-Month Rule Really Work?

Short answer? No—not in the way the internet intends it to. The idea that there's a specific window in which love must declare itself is, at best, misleading and, at worst, one-dimensional. It assumes that clarity is something you wake up to on day 90. That, by this time, you're either sure he's your missing puzzle piece—or you're ready to call it quits. And Dr. Tara seems to be in agreement with my opinion that our emotional landscapes rarely move in such clean lines. "A rigid 'three-month rule' is more of a hindrance to dating, rather than an effective tool."

Why? Because building intimacy isn't like climbing a ladder. There are no neat 'steps' in getting to know someone. The TikToker above suggests that any red flag between months two and four is a sign to run—which is true, if you're being treated with blatant disrespect. But the far more likely scenario is another case of internet culture pushing unrealistic narratives. One that says discomfort and doubts are abnormal in the early stages of dating. As Dr. Tara points out, "You need to learn how to regulate your emotional response to someone...the early phase of dating can feel like an evaluation, where you're unsure of where you stand, and trying to 'prove' yourself worthy of commitment." More to the point: Anxiety doesn't always mean there's danger ahead. Sometimes, what feels scary is just a byproduct of letting your guard down. "We self-disclose as a way to deepen intimacy and understanding. It's like peeling an onion: we reveal ourselves layer by layer."

3 ALTERNATIVES TO THE 3-MONTH RULE

1. Energy Audits > Arbitrary Timelines

Instead of outsourcing emotional clarity to a deadline, tune into your own nervous system. The 3-Month Rule implies that certainty arrives on a schedule, but in reality, your body often knows what your brain is still negotiating. "Check in with your energy levels," Dr. Tara advises. "Did it feel like you were with a fountain, or a drain?" She explains, "If spending time with someone consistently leaves you feeling anxious or drained, that

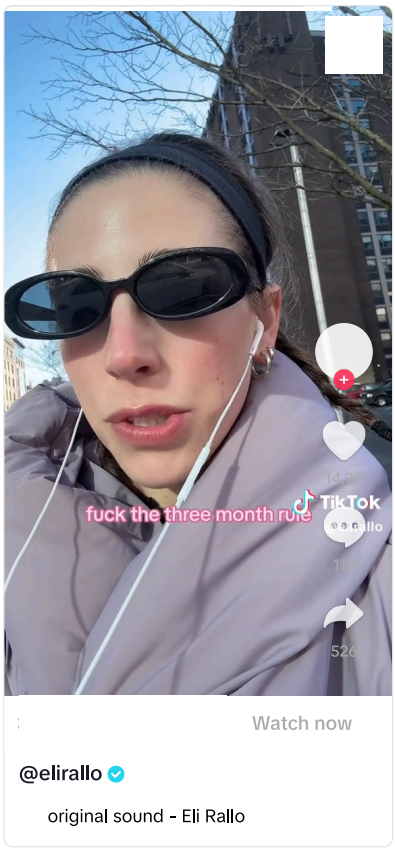
could be a good sign that your body is telling you you're not comfortable or safe with this person." Bottom line: trust your emotional dataset over timelines.

2. Watch for Patterns, Not Performances

While TikTok loves a singular "dump them" moment, most people reveal themselves gradually—and in repetition. That's why a red flag on day 75 matters less than what's been consistent since day five. "If someone constantly shows up late, cancels last-minute, or doesn't follow through on what they promise," Dr. Tara says, "then yes, they may be showing you who they are." The question isn't whether someone makes a mistake. It's whether that mistake has a pattern.

3. Shift Your Mindset From Future to Present

Instead of asking *Are we there yet?* Try asking, *Where are we now?* Dr. Tara suggests a more introspective approach: "Outline some things that are important to you, and make sure that you spend quality time talking about these things. Your main values, your life goals, etc." This isn't about defining the future—it's about reducing uncertainty by communicating. Consistently. (Remember: One conversation can change the entire fabric of a relationship.)



The Final Takeaway

What I hate most about the internet's approach to dating is its lack of depth. It treats relationships like they're linear—reducing love to a train that arrives right on schedule. But genuine connections aren't built upon a sequence of cultural milestones. If you're doing it right—if you're actually growing alongside someone else—you shouldn't be afraid to question who you are. Or who you're becoming.

Does this mean the 3-Month Rule doesn't have its merits? Even a broken clock is right twice a day. If you get to a point where you're staying out of boredom—or worse, staying because you're worried you won't find something better—then TikTok got it right. It's time to get out of Dodge. But making this decision at an arbitrary 90 days is insane to me. Because here's what you won't regret: taking your time. Letting yourself live in the grey a little longer than what's considered "efficient." You won't regret being unsure until you're sure. But you *will* regret cutting a relationship off at the knees just because a carousel of strangers online told you to.

If you want my two cents, the only questions worth asking at month three are: Who am I right now? Who do I want to be? And can I picture that version of myself with the person I'm dating? If the answer's yes, that's the rule to follow.

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