WELLNESS

What Is a Situationship? Here's What a Psychologist Told Me About the Modern Dating Phenomenon

INCLUDING HOW TO BREAK OUT OF ONE

BY SYDNEY MEISTER • PUBLISHED JUL 25, 2024

IMAGE BY PAULA BOUDES

When I first met Harry (not his real name), I had a crush on his frat brother. It happened during my second week of freshman year at a Sigma Chi party—ice luge, "Panda" blaring from the speakers, strobe lights and all. "Are you looking for something?" He asked, clocking my wandering eyes. I was scanning the packed, sweaty basement for his friend. "Uh, no, sorry. Tell me your name again?" I realized my preoccupation was bordering on rudeness. "Whoever he is," he said handing me a shot, "He's not worth it." Well, the kid had my attention. "Who says I'm looking for a guy?" I pressed. He smirked, "You're a 10. Girls like you always have a guy."

You know where this story is headed. One shot led to another and by the night's end, I'd forgotten all about his friend (who I later discovered had a girlfriend). At first, I remember feeling perplexed by this; Harry had a muscular build with neatly trimmed hair that didn't fit my usual "skinny stoner" type. But talking to him was easy, like I'd known him for 100 years. The familiarity of our banter felt addictive and intoxicating—almost as if he were a drug that was custom-tailored for me. When he texted the next morning, I could barely contain my smile in a 300-person lecture hall.

So then, it was five months later, and Harry and I were in constant contact. We exchanged quippy texts in class and snapped photos of the changing foliage and political protestors on campus. We'd see each other every weekend, starting at Sigma Chi, and ending with our legs tangled beneath his denim blue comforter. Yet, despite how intertwined we'd become, there was a stuckness that seemed to define our dynamic.

When Harry and I were together, we *acted* like a couple and I *felt* like his girlfriend, but he was adamant about "seeing where things go." He refused to put a label on our relationship—the mere mention of the term 'exclusive' twisted his face in pain—and I was left with a lingering anxiety that he'd evaporate into thin air. Frat parties soon became about whether we'd go home together. Weekdays transformed into longing for when we'd see each other next. And when we would get together, I felt trapped between wanting him and knowing I needed more.

This, friends, is what a situationship looks like.

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MEET THE EXPERT

Dr. David Tzall is a licensed psychologist practicing in New York. He currently serves as Deputy Director of the Health and Wellness Unit of the NYPD and maintains a private practice in Brooklyn. After completing an undergrad degree in history, his attention shifted to psychology, earning a Psy.D. in Clinical Psychology. His training is in motivational interviewing and dynamic-relational therapies, and he specializes in trauma and recovery, substance use and interpersonal issues. In his practice, Tzall works with individuals and high-conflict couples, and as a parent coach and coordinator, he engages with parents in various parts of their developmental process.

What Is a Situationship?

"A situationship is a romantic relationship that lacks clear definitions or commitment," Tzall says. "Broadly, it is a no-strings-attached relationship or emotional/sexual bond without a title—partners won't define their relationship, place it into a category or set clear boundaries." To that end, a situationship is different from a booty call, since it tends to breed "intense feelings" and "emotional intimacy." While a booty call is about sex without emotions, situationships are *all about* sex and emotions (hold the commitment).

More to the point: Situationships are usually incited by one person who wants the benefits of physical intimacy without the pressures of commitment. For the other person, however, the dynamic can be emotionally draining: "Feelings of insecurity, loneliness and rejection can crop up—and the lack of clear boundaries can make it difficult to establish trust," Tzall mentions, adding, "Self-worth can be greatly impacted when this person begins to feel that they are not worth any type of relationship or love. This can all lead to low self-esteem, and for [anyone who wants commitment], situationships can be deemed as a toxic relationship."

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7 SIGNS YOU'RE IN A SITUATIONSHIP

1. You Don't Put a Label on Your Relationship

Naturally, the first and most defining characteristic of a situationship is that it's *not* a relationship. "Individuals with commitment issues may prefer to keep the relationship casual (i.e., avoid putting a label on it) out of fear that it will become too overwhelming," Tzall says. "Keeping it light and breezy reduces the anxiety for one person, but can have long-term consequences for the other." Meaning that while one person might view defining the relationship as scary or anxiety-inducing, the other person might view it as an essential step forward. "Keeping a relationship as undefined denies the opportunity to navigate complex emotions and experiences."

2. You Don't Make Long-Term Plans

Again, if you reference my scenario above, long-term planning was a pain point. Tzall explains, "Planning anything for the next few months might be out of the question, as that would assume that the relationship is anything more than casual." That's why situationships are often built on day-to-day or weekly plans. "The relationship isn't given time to breathe and play itself out authentically. Rather, artificial barriers are put in its way to prevent it from growing and maturing."

3. They're Seeing Other People

Part of the situationship agreement is that you're not bound to each other by clear commitment. "Seeing other people suggests that the relationship lacks clear boundaries and exclusivity. In a committed relationship, both partners have agreed to be exclusive. However, in a situationship, partners may not have that conversation—or have decided to keep things casual. This can lead to confusion and uncertainty about the relationship's nature and future."

4. You Aren't Introduced to Friends or Family

Given the fact that situationships exclude long-term plans and conversations about commitment, it makes sense why they're rarely introduced to family members (how do you explain this dynamic to your 80-year-old grandmother?). Tzall also notes, "One partner may not feel the need to integrate the other person into their life...they may wish to keep the matters of their social life private." Plus, he says, "This person may only reserve the opportunity for significant others to be welcomed into their family sphere when the relationship feels significant."

5. They Are Inconsistent

If there's one feeling that hits the situationship nail on the head, it's inconsistency. "A partner may be inconsistent about their feelings and behavior—being warm and affectionate one minute, and cool and aloof the next. Communication can also be inconsistent, where one partner may be slow to respond to messages or avoid having serious conversations about the relationship," per Tzall. "Consistency is a sign of a commitment as it brings about more transparency and trust."

6. They Are Emotionally Unavailable

First and foremost, it might be helpful to read up on avoidant attachment styles. As far as situationships go, one partner's emotions might be "unclear" and it's hard to read whether "they have genuine feelings for you—it's difficult to distinguish whether it's just a sexual relationship." Tzall explains, "They may not express how they're really feeling, what the

dynamic means to them…they'll often speak in generalities." To that end, both parties "may be hesitant to open up or share what they are truly feeling."

7. They're Sticking Around for the Attention

Finally, there's the question of why one would opt for a situationship—especially since it's about more than just sexual gratification. According to Tzall, it could be because the person who shies away from commitment enjoys the attention more than they like their partner. More specifically, it could be that they "enjoy the time you spend together, and the attention they're getting, but this person can't picture a future together," he concludes.

WHAT DOES A SITUATIONSHIP LOOK LIKE?

GETTY IMAGES

1. When You Can't Talk About the Future

Anyone who's binged *Sex and The City* will tell you: Carrie and Big were the OG situationship. For those who haven't watched, Big is a commitment-phobe who, despite having strong feelings for Carrie, refuses to move the relationship forward. Despite Carrie's best efforts, she's unable to engage in real conversations about the future she wants to build with Big. Whether it's his urge to "see other people" or deciding to move to Paris on a whim, he refuses to factor Carrie into his long-term plans. In fact, this aversion to commitment spurred an entire theory of its own: Taxi Cab theory. As Carrie's friend Miranda says in an episode, "Men are like cabs; when they're available, their light goes on. They wake up one day and decide they're ready to settle down, have babies, (whatever), and turn their lights on. The next woman they pick up, boom! That's the one they'll marry. It's not fate, it's dumb luck." In that sense, this type of situationship is dictated by timing and emotional unavailability: **Commitment can only happen when both people have their cab lights on**.

NETFLIX

2. When You're Friends Who Hook Up

If you tuned in for season six of *Love is Blind*, you'll likely remember AD and Clay's storyline. From the get-go, there was chemistry between these two—and unlike other couples from the show, they were able to parlay a mental connection into a physical one. Yet, while this couple *seemed* to have all of the ingredients that would make for a successful relationship, Clay ultimately decided to say no at the altar. This is interesting because AD later described their bond as a "flirty friendship" on a podcast. To this day, they'll hug and play around when they see each other, despite enduring a very public breakup. This, in turn, poses the idea that their relationship was more about being friends with benefits. While they enjoyed each other's company and felt good when they were around each other, there seemed to be a lack of incentive for long-term commitment. We've all heard the saying: **Why buy the cow when you can get the milk for free?**

JOSH STRINGER/HULU

3. When There's Someone Else in the Picture

Disclaimer: If you haven't read *Tell Me Lies* or binged the adaptation on Hulu, this is a must-watch for anyone in situationship. The story outlines the tumultuous addiction that stems from wanting someone you can't have. While Lucy is taken by Stephen's charm and charisma, she's completely blind to the fact that he's still in contact with his ex-girlfriend. So, while we see Lucy struggle to understand why Stephen won't commit, we watch in horror as he tries to win back the affection of his ex. True to the title, Stephen lies at every turn, or uses vague language when he can, to create the illusion that *one day* he'll commit to Lucy. And as she clings to the hope that he'll finally make her his girlfriend, **his commitment lies with someone else.**

WHAT MAKES A SITUATIONSHIP UNHEALTHY?

1. They're Addictive

One of the most addictive—and in turn, toxic—elements of a situationship is that it's predicated on the belief that things can change. The person who wants commitment will convince themselves that they can push their partner towards wanting something serious. This is what leads to an internal monologue that's hard to let go of: *If I show them that I'm an incredible partner—that I can give them what they want: sex without commitment—I'll make them see that the benefits of being in a relationship with me outweigh the disadvantages*. This, of course, incites an addiction that becomes about more than just commitment. It's about forcing someone to see how great you are and fixating on the validation you'll feel when they do.

2. One Person Benefits While the Other Compromises

What's ironic about the narrative above is that it's precisely why situationships tend to stay situationships (more on that below). While it's appealing to think, *If I give them what they want, I'll get what I want*, relationships aren't built on a transactional basis. What's happening, in reality, is that one person gets exactly what they want from a situationship —and the other person is compromising on their desire for commitment. While one person benefits from a casual sex dynamic, the other is stuck in a loop of wanting more and not knowing how to get it.

3. There's No Room to Discuss Priorities

Fact: relationships start with a commitment agreement. This doesn't have to mean monogamy—it could mean establishing an open relationship—so long as everyone feels secure in what they want, and is clear on what the other person wants. Situationships, in contrast, are sustained by a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. In order to keep this dynamic afloat, both partners avoid discussing what they want—or what they might want in the future. Again, this works to the benefit of the person who does not want commitment, and to the detriment of the person who does. Perhaps the most unhealthy component of a situationship is the muzzling that occurs for anyone who feels deprived of commitment. They're relegated to the demands of someone else while having to pretend like it's what they want, too. All with the fear that asking for more will put an immediate end to the bond.

Can a Situationship Be Healthy?

The short answer is: Yes...but only if you're aligned on expectations. In some cases, you have a scenario where both people are uninterested in commitment. "This approach can be appealing for those who have demanding careers, busy lifestyles or who are not ready to settle down," Tzall explains. This, in turn, means there's no power imbalance—both people are on the same page when it comes to what they want (and what they're getting) from the connection. "This kind of situationship can offer individuals the freedom to explore and experiment with different types of relationships. They may be similar to 'friends with benefits' situations, where both parties are happy with the level of intimacy and lack of commitment." Long story short? If you feel absolutely nothing when you hear your situationship is seeing other people, you're in a healthy dynamic that works for both of you.

What to Do if You're in a Situationship

I've dedicated an entire article to this topic (read: Soonicorn), but the idea is that letting go of a situationship will set you free. By hyper-fixating on someone else, and making

decisions that don't align with your gut, you effectively block yourself from becoming who you're meant to be. Add to that the fact that the more time you spend ruminating, the less you're able to see the object of your affection for who they really are (read: projectidating). You might find that when you take a step back, this isn't someone who's worth committing to anyway?

At the same time, however, it's worth mentioning that relationships are about timing—and prioritizing yourself is the only way to turn a situationship into a relationship. There's no rule that says a person who's averse to commitment (right now) will *always* be averse to commitment. And while I don't have a crystal ball that can predict if and when they'll come around, I can tell you this: Agreeing to "keep it casual" when you want commitment is not the path to getting more. If anything, it shows them that you don't value yourself as a priority (so why should they?). The best thing you can do is free yourself from the cycle, and hopefully, offer a fresh start if you want to revisit things down the line.

So, What's the Deal on Situationships?

In theory, situationships are great for two people who are looking to keep things casual. Yet, in practice, situationships tend to be toxic and hard to break out of. While the arrangement might start on a level playing field, one person usually develops feelings of wanting more. And when that happens, there's only one thing to do: Break out of the cycle, get back in the dating scene and recognize that commitment won't be a battle you have to fight when you find the right person.

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