WELLNESS

Paging Dr. Freud: The '19 Dating Theory' Is All Over TikTok

HERE'S HOW THE THEORY IS PROVEN BY PSYCHOANALYSTS

BY SYDNEY MEISTER • PUBLISHED JAN 28, 2025

PAULA BOUDES FOR PUREWOW

It's 2016. Brielle sits cross-legged on Adrianna's bed, a towel wrapped tightly around her chest. Her phone wobbles on her knee, bouncing with her anxious leg tick. Adrianna flits around her closet, adding to the mountain of clothes on the floor. She rattles off stories about her first semester at Georgetown—her classes, the boy she's sort-of-seeing and how she swears the bars are better in New York. Brielle nods and smiles where she can, but her mind is elsewhere. She glances back down at her phone. Still no text from Joe.

Adrianna pauses, holding up a high-necked peplum top from Brielle's tote. "Tell me you didn't *actually* bring this to wear tonight?" Her voice drips with mock horror. "Everyone's going to think you joined a convent at Sarah Lawrence."

Brielle twists the edge of her towel. "Joe said not to wear anything… too much," she murmurs.

Adrianna raises an eyebrow. "What's he gonna do, ground you?" She tosses Brielle's top onto the pile and pulls out a low-cut black bodysuit with an attached choker. "You're wearing this. You're welcome."

Brielle holds the bodysuit in her lap, feeling its weight like it's contraband. "I don't know…"

"Brielle," Adrianna snaps. Her tone is sharper now. "It's Thanksgiving Eve. Everyone will be there—all of the older guys." But then she softens when she sees Brielle's face. "Sorry. But

it's not a crime to look hot? Like, love Joe, but I remember a time when we'd fight over this bodysuit…"

Brielle forces an eye-roll. "Jesus, *okayy*," she says, retreating to the bathroom. "I'll try it on." Alone, she slips into the bodysuit and fastens the choker, avoiding her reflection until everything's in place. When she finally looks up, she barely recognizes herself—sharp collarbones, smoky eyes, a flicker of rebellion she hasn't felt since junior prom. For a moment, it feels good. But as soon as she picks up her phone, the feeling dissolves.

She takes a photo and sends it to Joe. Finally, she receives the instant reply she's been hankering for.

"Brielle."
"Are you serious right now?"
"Change that."
"You look like a whore."

Her stomach drops. She types back, "Addie says the other shirt makes me look like a nun." Again, the typing bubbles appear. She can't breathe.

"If you wear that, I'm not going," he sends. "How would you like it if I tried to hook up with all your friends tonight? Maybe I should. For once, I'd love to make you feel the way I do."

His words sting, but there's no time to process them. Brielle unclips the choker and reaches for her towel. She folds the bodysuit neatly, as if to erase the memory, and walks back into Adrianna's room. "It doesn't fit right. I look fat," she says, pulling the peplum top over her head.

Adrianna stares at her for a long moment. "What did he say."

"No," Brielle lies, avoiding her gaze. "It's not a big deal. I just don't want to fight with him tonight." She grabs her phone, goes back to the bathroom, and snaps a photo of herself in the conservative top. She sends it to Joe with the caption, *I don't want to fight tonight.*

His reply arrives an hour later as Adrianna slips on her heels. "I'm just trying to protect you because I love you. You know that. I never want anything to come between us."

Brielle stares at the screen, the knot in her chest pulling tighter. Adrianna doesn't press, but she can feel her friend's unspoken truths lingering in the car. The two head into the bar, and for the rest of the night, Brielle wears a smile that feels as forced as the shirt she's wearing.

What is the 19 Dating Theory?

If you're reading this as a Freshman in college, you no doubt recognize the scene above. Even if you're 59, you might resonate with a younger version of these characters (sans the texting). Enter TikTok's latest phenomenon, the 19 dating theory. Per one viral video, "It's the theory that the person you meet at 19 years old will be the one who you fall the most in love with, but will also be the person that breaks you the most... [They feel like] your soulmate, but they're not the person you're meant to end up with. This is the person that will hurt you and traumatize you forever." (It's a tad dramatic for my taste, but this definitely speaks to the pain of a breakup at 19.)

Why is the 19 Dating Theory Going Viral on TikTok?

This theory isn't just for women. In another TikTok with more than 255.5k views, one man captions his video: "Everyone has that [toxic] person they meet at 19." Hundreds of people echo this in comments, writing, "It's true. Most toxic relationship I've ever had was at 19," and, "She was the worst... and yet the best I've ever had."

Slightly confused? I was too. But then I considered how, to this day, my friends and I could spend hours discussing our toxic college relationships. There's something about that time—the chaos, the naïveté, the way our beloveds eclipsed our reality—that continues to haunt us. It's been several years since we've seen our ghosts from bar crawls past, but we still feel pangs of PTSD when we conjure them up. (This is when my light bulb went off.) **The 19 dating theory aims to answer the hypothesis of why, at 19, so many of us were drawn to toxic relationships**. Is this a new generational pattern—a symptom of growing up with smartphones and social media? Or has toxicity always been a right of passage when you turn 19?

I turned to Freud and his colleague to find out.

Is The 19 Dating Theory Accurate?

If you were a sociology nerd like me, you'd still remember memorizing flashcards for *Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development*. If you have no idea what I'm talking about, this is the Cliffnote's version. Freud believed early childhood was the foundation for all psychological development. Erik Erikson, a student of Freud's, argued that development continues throughout a person's entire life. In the late 1950s, Erikson published his own version of Freud's theory, which says **we develop our personalities through eight stages of psychosocial growth. Each stage is defined by a specific age and challenge, or "crisis," we have to overcome.**

Everyone is born into stage one: infancy. The crisis here is called trust vs. mistrust—we must learn to rely on others in order to meet our basic needs. From there, each stage builds upon the last, and you can't progress without overcoming the previous crisis. Meaning, that you can't move from stage one—infancy—to stage two—early childhood—unless you learn how to trust people. Without overcoming this obstacle, you're psychologically stuck in stage one, despite the fact that (per Erikson) you should reach stage two by 1 to 3 years old.

ERIKSON'S PSYCHOSOCIAL STAGES

STAGE	BASIC CONFLICT	VIRTUE	DESCRIPTION
INFANCY *0-1 year*	Trust vs. mistrust	Hope	Trust (or mistrust) that basic needs, such as nourishment and affection, will be met
EARLY CHILDHOOD *1-3 years*	Autonomy vs. shame/doubt	Will	Develop a sense of independence in many tasks
PLAY AGE *3-6 years*	Initiative vs. guilt	Purpose	Take initiative on some activities- may develop guilt when unsuccessful or boundaries overstepped
SCHOOL AGE *7-11 years*	Industry vs. inferiority	Competence	Develop self-confidence in abilities when comp-etent or sense of inferiority when not
ADOLESCENCE *12-18 years*	Identity vs. confusion	Fidelity	Experiment with and develop identity and roles
EARLY ADULTHOOD *19-29 years*	Intimacy vs. isolation	Love	Establish intimacy and relationships with others
MIDDLE AGE *30-64 years*	Generativity vs. stagnation	Care	Contribute to society and be part of a family
OLD AGE *onward*	Integrity vs. despair	Wisdom	Assess and make sense of life and meaning of contributions

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Here's what resonated most when I was studying this theory in college: **many people (more than you'd think) fail to psychologically develop past stage five**. The crisis you have to overcome when you're 12 to 18 years old is called identity vs. confusion—figuring out who you are (or at least trying to). And this brings me to *my* extension of Freud and Erikson's ideas: Stage five is what separates those who are stuck in high school from those who thrive in adulthood. (I'm talking 24-year-old mean girls who still exclude their friends from plans). It harkens back to the toxicity of "the 19 dating theory," which I believe stems from one person being stuck in adolescence (again, stage five) while the other person is in stage six: early adulthood.

When you're 19 years old, the crisis shifts to intimacy vs. isolation—it's no longer about figuring out who *you* are, but rather who you are *with* someone else. If stage five was all about self-discovery, stage six raises the stakes: can you take your sense of identity and use it to form a healthy relationship? The answer might be no when one person is still stuck in stage five—they're quite literally a walking identity crisis. As a result, a venomous cycle takes root when two people are in a 'stage overlap.' One person is ready to share, grow and connect, while the other is still searching for their footing (dragging both down in the process).

Let's put this into context with Brielle and Joe. Brielle has just entered stage six—19 years old—where she's trying to establish intimacy in her relationship. Yet, while she's searching for a meaningful connection, Joe's sense of self is fragile (he's still stuck in stage five, despite being the same age as Brielle.) In Joe's mind, controlling Brielle—what she wears, who she sees—is a way to affirm his own shaky identity. It gives him a sense of agency and control. Meanwhile, Brielle misinterprets his control as love. It's what causes her insecurities to outweigh what she needs, making it difficult for her to stand up for herself. Her actions—changing out of the bodysuit, folding it like a secret she has to bury, sending him a photo of the "approved" shirt—are her way of prioritizing his approval over her own sense of self. What's more, she believes that by appeasing him, she can avoid conflict and maintain intimacy. But in practice, her reality becomes isolation masquerading as a connection. (Hence why the crisis in stage six is intimacy vs. isolation.)

This is the bottom line. The 19 dating theory pulls from a dynamic built on mismatched needs. Brielle is reaching for connection while Joe is protecting himself from vulnerability. This push-pull creates a toxic cycle: Joe's controlling behavior isolates Brielle, and Brielle's attempts to maintain peace only enable him further. It's like watching a car crash in slow motion—the more she gives, the more he takes, and neither of them learns how to break free. Their dynamic is rooted in (again) mismatched stages of psychosocial development, which is exactly what Freud and Erikson were getting at. Growth requires self-acceptance. And intimacy can't thrive when one person is still stuck searching for their identity.

What Does the 19 Dating Theory Teach Us?

After hours of research, I was left with two takeaways. First, that I probably should've gone to grad school. And second—more importantly—that the 19 dating theory isn't exactly groundbreaking. It's a damped-down TikTok version of something psychoanalysts have studied for years: the idea that we can't truly grow until we reconcile with who we are. And toxic relationships, no matter how painful, are often the catalysts for that growth. They force us to confront our insecurities, our boundaries (or lack thereof), and the people we want to be with—or need to avoid.

To that end, while I've never been in an abusive relationship myself, I've certainly felt stings of toxicity. The stomach-churning texts. The emotional rollercoasters. The subtle ways you shrink yourself to keep the peace. While I've seen more drastic scenarios with friends who broke out of emotionally and physically abusive dynamics, I think everyone feels the echoes of this theory in their own experiences. Whether the toxicity is overt or insidious, it's clear that these relationships challenge us at a pivotal time—19 years old—when we're trying to balance who we are with how we love.

So in short, this theory reminds me that love is as much a learning experience as it is an emotional one. It's messy and formative, and sometimes, you have to meet the wrong person before you even know what "right" looks like. At the precise intersection of identity and intimacy, our relationships—good or bad—are primed to teach us who we are, and who we want to become.

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