What Does It Mean to Be ‘Ready’ for a Relationship?

You don’t have to love yourself before you can love someone else.

Julie Beck  May 8, 2019

Six months after her divorce, Jo Carter, a project manager at a university in Madison, Wisconsin, thought she was ready to date. She had married her high-school prom date a year after graduating from college, and they were together for 19 years before splitting up. “So I’m newly divorced at 41, and I haven’t been on a date with someone new since I was 20, maybe,” she says. “And the dating scene is a little different now.” So she did what many people these days do—she made an online-dating profile on OkCupid.
“But partway through the process, my gut just said no, and I panicked and canceled my account in a huff,” says Carter, now 49. “Someone said something like, ‘Hey, you’re into crosswords, I’m into crosswords too; maybe we could get together and do the crossword some morning.’ And I was clawing at the keyboard in a panic to make this go away. I just sat there looking at my computer thinking, *What just happened here?*

What happened, she thinks now, is that even if she was telling herself she was ready for a new relationship, she really wasn’t. “The story I told myself was: *I’ve been divorced for six months; it’s time to get back out there.* But there was a whole lot going on in my brain that I may not have been consciously aware of. It was another six months before I went on my first date.”

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The idea of being “ready” for a relationship is both ubiquitous and vague. “Readiness” is a well-worn T-shirt people put on and take off over and over again throughout their dating life, an all-purpose explanation for any number of reasons someone might or might not want a romantic partner. Often, it’s not clear what it really means when someone says, “I’m just not ready for a relationship right now.” And any deeper meaning behind that statement is hardly as important as its upshot—no relationship will be had. It’s a cliché that’s easy to hide behind, to use as a smoke screen for the real reasons behind a breakup, or as a shield from the self-exploration that might dredge up more difficult feelings.

Still, as Carter’s story illustrates, feeling ready or not can make a big difference in how people approach dating. But being “ready” means very different things to different people, and a lot of the conventional wisdom about it is out of step with how relationships and life really work.

The concept of being “ready for a relationship” is now so trite that this may be hard to fathom, but it doesn’t seem to have been around that long. In the corpus of books cataloged and searched by Google Ngram,
the phrase doesn’t appear at all until the 1950s, and from then it’s just a blip until the 1980s, when it really takes off.

**Frequency of the phrase “ready for a relationship”**

According to Stephanie Coontz, a professor of history and family studies at Evergreen State College, this is likely because of a reversal in how people think about marriage and commitment that occurred over the course of those decades. “The timing of the word is just about perfectly aligned with a sea change in people’s conceptions of marriage,” she wrote to me in an email. “It used to be that you got married IN ORDER to grow up, settle down, start saving up for a future home, move away from your teenage preoccupation with [yourself] and learn how to handle a relationship.” In other words: You didn’t need to have your life figured out to be ready for a relationship. A relationship is what made you ready for adult life.

Then, in the 1960s and ’70s, more women started arguing for—and attaining—greater financial freedom. As a result of this, and of the gay-rights movement, one societally acceptable path to family life branched into many. Now many see marriage as a capstone, a cherry to be placed on top of the sundae of all the other ways you have your life together. There’s room to ask yourself what you want, and whether you’re “ready” for it. This has led to a new way of thinking about committed romance: as something that requires certain prerequisites.

*Read: People didn’t used to ask for ‘space’ in their relationships*

Of course, there is no shortage of advice about what those prerequisites should be. According to internet listicles, here are some ways to tell if you are ready for a romantic relationship: “You’ve sorted out your own issues.” “A relationship is a want, not a need.” “Your ex is no longer a factor.” “You don’t depend on others.” “You take your time getting to
know someone.”

And here are some things they say make you not ready: “You’re looking for someone to save you.” “You’re not happy with yourself.” “You’re spending more time pursuing love than pursuing your interests.” “You get emotionally involved too quickly.”

To some people, “readiness” is an external metric—Are the circumstances of my life conducive to adding a partner? To others, it’s internal—Do I feel open to being seen by someone? Can I handle the challenges of a relationship?

Externally speaking, being ready is often discussed in terms of timing—“it’s not a great time for me right now” is a typical way of indicating unreadiness without saying so explicitly. A person might feel too busy, too uncertain about the future, or too freshly broken up with to commit to someone new. After all, Harry and Sally had to meet three times before it worked out for them. It’s not enough to find the right person, we’re told. It must also be the right time.

This could be true, to a point. “Timing can be an issue. It doesn’t have to be a deterrent from having a relationship; it’s just a condition to consider,” says Julie Schwartz Gottman, the co-founder and president of the Gottman Institute, where she and her husband, John Gottman, study what makes for successful relationships.

One time Schwartz Gottman emphasizes that people will not be ready for a new relationship is when they’ve just suffered a loss, such as the death of a partner or a divorce.

“They really need time to process,” she says. “Oftentimes people will try to enter into a relationship quickly at times like that, in order to use the new excitement, euphoria, magic to suppress the negative feelings that they’re still living with beneath the surface. As a result, what can happen
is those negative feelings will sneak out the side door and enter the new relationship.”

Much of the time, though, readiness is a subjective, personal assessment. “People have different parameters that they individually consider,” Schwartz Gottman says.

After Schwartz Gottman finished her doctorate, and before she met John, she had some timing concerns of her own. “I’d moved to a brand-new city and didn’t know a soul,” she says. “I had a job and an apartment, but I didn’t have a group of women friends yet. So I decided to give myself six months to establish a couple of close girlfriends that I could bounce thoughts and feelings off of, before opening up to a relationship with a man.”

Others might have young children and may simply not have time for new romances until their kids are older. “Another important timing issue is work,” she says. “When people are young, ambitious, and working hard in their careers, there’s sometimes a difficult negotiation between the demands of a new career and the demands of a new relationship.”

As the median age of marriage in the U.S. creeps up and up, more young people seem to be pushing off commitment in favor of career development, or other forms of tending one’s own garden. But this comes with trade-offs.

“People have different definitions of readiness, like, I have to wait until I move out, or having a stable career, but sometimes those people will also feel later in life like, Now I don’t have any experience or mental capacity to know how to date, because they waited so long,” says Richard Luo, a 31-year-old paralegal who lives in Chicago. Luo says he doesn’t think the idea of getting “ready” for relationships is practical, because life will bring opportunities whether you’re ready or not.
This “social stunting” came up in my colleague Kate Julian’s *Atlantic* cover story on “the sex recession,” as one potential reason why intimacy has decreased among younger generations. “Many students,” Julian writes, “have absorbed the idea that love is secondary to academic and professional success—or, at any rate, is best delayed until those other things have been secured.” But when other aspects of your life line up, when the timing feels right, you might not feel equipped to deal with something you haven’t experienced before. Putting off relationships, it turns out, is a lot like putting off going to the dentist—it becomes more daunting the longer you wait.

*Read: Why college students need a class in dating*

“Most of the time when I hear people say, ‘Now’s not a great time,’ it’s been a way to avoid a tough situation or something scary emotionally, by putting it off,” Natalia Burt, a 30-year-old graphic designer who lives in British Columbia, told me in an email. After all, there may never be a great time—romantic relationships always have to fit in around other life obligations. It may be that these external factors are an easier thing to cite than a more subjective internal sensation that a person just doesn’t feel ready.

Burt said she’s definitely told people she “wasn’t ready” for a relationship at times when she perhaps couldn’t have defined what she meant. Analyzing readiness now, she described it as: “Mentally, you really have to be on the ball, ready to resolve both personal issues and relationship issues. You can’t be someone that shuts down or lashes out during arguments or when confronted. You need to be ready to be vulnerable.”

There’s no doubt that these sorts of skills are helpful in relationships, but Schwartz Gottman isn’t convinced they should be prerequisites, qualities people need to bring to relationships, rather than developing within a relationship. After all, it’s only through practice that people will get better at communicating, for example. If we all waited until we were perfectly...
well adjusted before entering a relationship, the human race would die out.

And yet, what is perhaps the most commonly cited advice about relationship readiness counsels the opposite: *You have to love yourself before you can love someone else.* RuPaul says it. Memes on social media say it (usually on a floral background). Where did this idea come from? I feel as if I've had it in my mind all my life, and yet its origins are impossible to trace. It seems to have sprung fully formed from the head of the god of misguided empowerment. “That’s one of those all-American myths—that you have to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, that you have to be really strong, healthy, and independent in order to be capable of a successful relationship—and it’s absolutely not true,” Schwartz-Gottman says. “In some cases, relationships can help with coping with things like depression or PTSD. People are never in perfect condition for a relationship. People are always bringing in old baggage and past experiences that are painful, that are part of the beauty and truth of their nature. With all of that, relationships can be even deeper and more meaningful.”

Is readiness even a useful way to think about love and commitment? After all, is anyone ever really ready for a big life change? And just because you feel ready for something doesn't mean you'll get it.

“Most of the time, I’m ready to meet my girlfriend, but it doesn’t happen,” Luo says. But he has a girlfriend now, and they met when he was least expecting it. He was feeling “dispirited” and taking a break from dating at the time, he says. Then his friend invited him to a potluck, which he didn’t much feel like going to, “but my friend was bitching me out about how I’m always skipping out on activities she invites me to.” So he went. “And in comes the most beautiful girl that I’ve ever seen. I’m just awestruck. A few months later I asked her out, and we became boyfriend and girlfriend. It’s amazing how life just tosses you a ball in your direction
when you’ve essentially given up.”

Readiness can be about priorities, or about giving yourself time to heal after a loss. Readiness can be preparation, packing a backpack full of communication skills and an open heart, on the chance that you’ll need them on your journey. But readiness might also be a sort of magical thinking—Once I’ve gathered all the ingredients, then the spell will be complete, and a relationship will appear.

“A lot of people feel like, If I do X, Y, or Z, then this will happen,” Luo says. “But life rarely ever works that way, except for taxes and death.”

“There’s a certain amount of fatalism that enters into my thinking about this,” Schwartz Gottman says. “You can be ready for a relationship for years, but are you lucky enough to find somebody that’s right for you? Lots of factors determine whether a relationship is going to be successful: Readiness may be one; luck is another.”

A pair of recent studies conducted by Christopher Agnew, a social psychologist at Purdue University, and his colleagues examined whether self-reported readiness was linked to people’s likelihood of entering a relationship, and to the level of commitment to relationships they were already in. Both were small studies that looked just at young adults, so it’s hard to apply their findings more broadly, but they raise the interesting possibility that readiness—or, at least, a person’s sense of his or her readiness—could affect one’s ultimate romantic success.

“Those who report greater commitment-readiness tend to think and act differently: They behave in ways that maximally facilitate the development of a new relationship,” Agnew told me in an email. “More specifically, they pay more attention to their physical appearance, view the notion of closeness with another more positively, think more often about dating, and have greater confidence that they will be successful in forming a relationship.” In one study, single people who reported greater
readiness were more likely to pursue and enter a relationship over a three-month period. In the other, people in relationships who reported greater readiness also reported greater commitment to those relationships. Is self-reported readiness at the beginning of a relationship going to doom or save it in the long term? It’s hard to say.

These days, Jo Carter feels readiness as an openness that shapes her dating experience. “If I can’t be somewhat hopeful and intrigued by the possibility of a new connection, I feel like I’m making life more miserable for me and not being fair to anybody who’s trying to contact me,” she says. “A relationship is two people coming together and co-creating an experience. And you’ve got to be in it for the inevitable adventure that’s going to take place.”

Readiness, then, is not a result of achieving certain life milestones, or perfect mental health. And checking off items on a checklist doesn’t guarantee a relationship when the checklist is complete. It’s impossible to be ready for a relationship. But feeling ready—making that mysterious mental leap—matters.

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