

## Press release

Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz

Kathrin Voigt

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UNIVERSITÄT MAINZ

## Transition point in romantic relationships signals the beginning of their end

**Dissatisfaction in a relationship will inevitably lead to separation at some point / Recent study is based on the concept of terminal decline**

The end of a romantic relationship usually does not come out of the blue but is indicated one or two years before the breakup. As the results of a psychological study have demonstrated, the terminal stage of a relationship consists of two phases. First, there is a gradual decline in relationship satisfaction, reaching a transition point one to two years before the dissolution of the relationship. "From this transition point onwards, there is a rapid deterioration in relationship satisfaction. Couples in question then move towards separation," said Professor Janina Bühler from the Institute of Psychology at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU). She conducted the corresponding investigation in collaboration with Professor Ulrich Orth of the University of Bern. Their paper was recently published in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

Analysis built on national studies from Germany, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands

It is a common fact that satisfaction in a romantic relationship declines over time. This reduction in satisfaction is particularly marked in the first years of a relationship, and a distinctive low point is often reached after a period of ten years. Instead of considering the processes that occur in the time-since-beginning of a romantic relationship, Janina Bühler and Ulrich Orth decided to look at the time-to-separation of relationships for the purposes of their research.

With this in view, they used data from four representative studies conducted in Germany, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. All these countries are WEIRD, i.e., Western, Educated, Industrialized, Educated, Rich, Democratic, and their individuals are free – by law – to decide about their relationship status. For each of the four data sets covering a total of 11,295 individuals there was a control group roughly the same size consisting of couples that had not separated. The surveys in the four countries were conducted over different periods of time, ranging from 12 to 21 years. In the case of Germany, the researchers employed the data of the Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (pairfam), a multidisciplinary longitudinal study. In all countries, the subjects were asked to specify how satisfied they were right then with their existing romantic relationship.

Using the available data, Bühler and Orth assessed the extent to which the satisfaction with the relationship developed in the light of their subsequent separation. "In order to better understand dissolving relationships, we examined them from the point of view of time-to-separation. To do this, we applied a concept that is in general use in other fields of psychology," said Janina Bühler. Based on the data of the four national representative studies, the researchers were able to determine that relationships can be subjected to what is known as terminal decline. This decline in relationship satisfaction occurs in two phases. The initial preterminal phase, which can have a duration of several years, is characterized by a minor decline in satisfaction. However, this is followed by a transition or tipping point from which there is an accelerated decline in satisfaction. The terminal phase of a relationship after this transition point lasts 7 to 28 months, one to two years on average. "Once this terminal phase is reached, the relationship is doomed to come to an end. This is apparent from the fact that only the individuals in the separation group go through this terminal phase, not

the control group," explained Bühler.

Partners assess the terminal phase of a relationship differently

At the same time, the two partners do not experience the transition phase in the same way. The partner who initiates the separation has already become dissatisfied with the relationship at an earlier point in time. For the recipient of the separation, the transition point arrives relatively shortly before the actual separation. They experience a very rapid decline in relationship satisfaction.

"Partners pass through various phases. They do not normally separate from one day to the next, and the way these phases impact on the two partners differs," added Bühler. In many cases, couples seek help too late, i.e., when the transition point has already been reached. "It is thus important to be aware of these relationship patterns. Initiating measures in the preterminal phase of a relationship, i.e., before it begins to go rapidly downhill, may thus be more effective and even contribute to preserving the relationship," concluded Bühler, who also works as a couples therapist.

Recognition by the APS for innovative contributions to the subject

Janina Bühler has been Junior Professor of Personality Psychology and Diagnostics at Mainz University since January 2022. From January 2024, she has headed an Emmy Noether Research Group that investigates the interactions between relationship events and the personalities of partners in a relationship. In February 2025, she was nominated a Rising Star by the Association for Psychological Science (APS). This designation is given to early career researchers whose innovative work has already advanced their field and signals great potential for future contributions.

Images:

[https://download.uni-mainz.de/presse/o2\\_psychology\\_relationship-satisfaction.png](https://download.uni-mainz.de/presse/o2_psychology_relationship-satisfaction.png)

How satisfaction with a relationship declines prior to separation. The chart presents the results of pairfam, the national representative longitudinal study undertaken in Germany. (ill./©: Janina Bühler)

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Professor Dr. Janina Bühler (photo/©: Henry Freitag)

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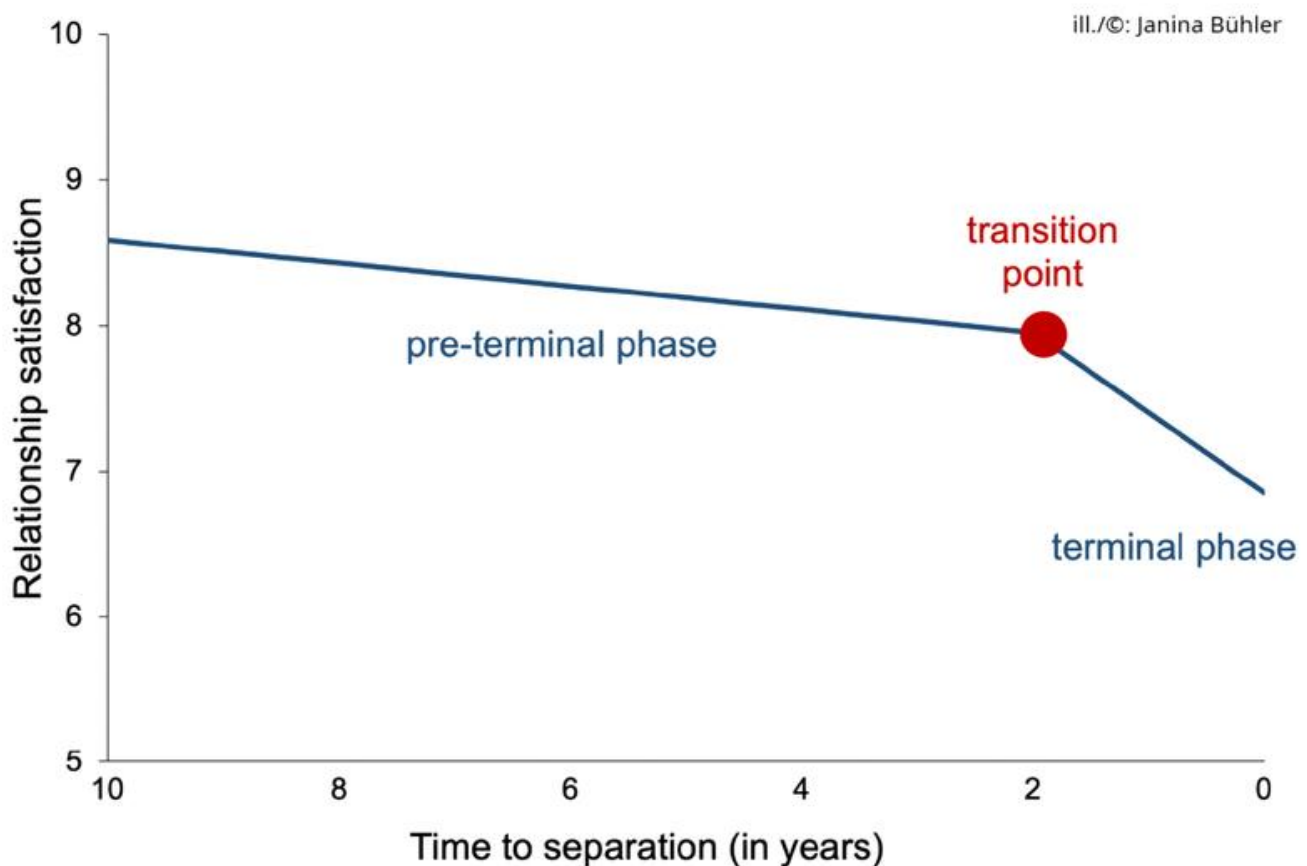
contact for scientific information:

Junior Professor Dr. Janina Bühler  
Personality Psychology and Diagnostics  
Institute of Psychology

Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz  
55099 Mainz, GERMANY  
phone: +49 6131 39-27817  
e-mail: [jbuehler@uni-mainz.de](mailto:jbuehler@uni-mainz.de)  
<https://www.ppd.psychologie.uni-mainz.de/jun-prof-dr-janina-buehler/>

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How satisfaction with a relationship declines prior to separation. The chart presents the results of pairfam, the national representative longitudinal study undertaken in Germany.  
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Professor Dr. Janina Bühler  
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