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Can You Ever Really Escape Your Ex?

Your repeated attraction to a certain "type" may come down more to psychological comfort than a mysterious connection.

By Faith Hill

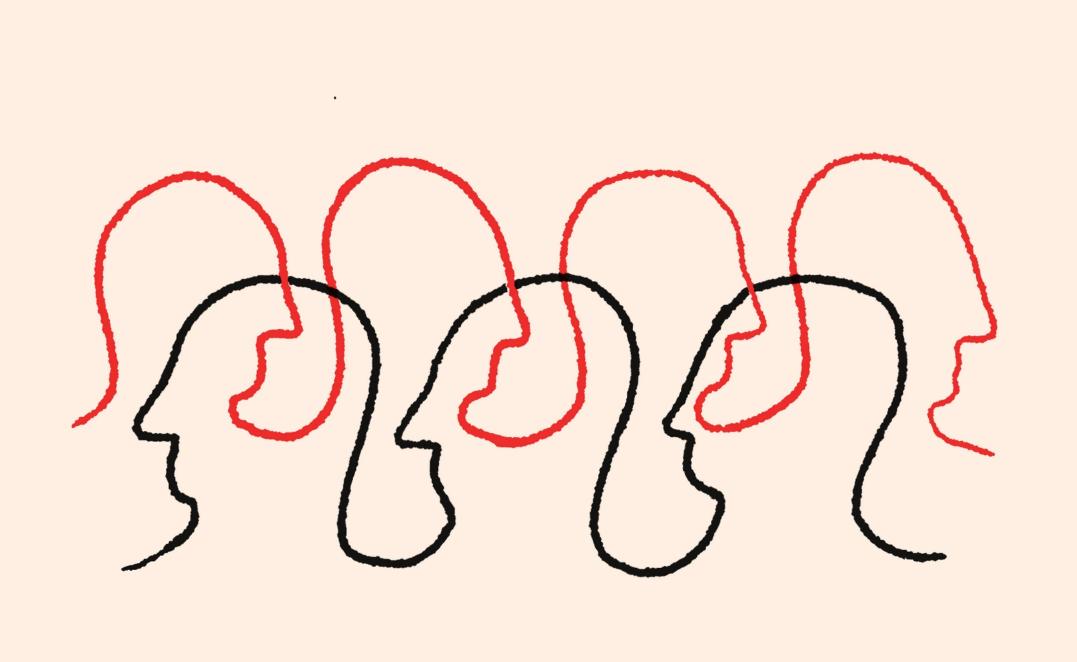


Illustration by The Atlantic

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Cool-but-not-too-cool artists; warm, friendly nerds or cold, unfriendly secret nerds; emotionally distant people; bossy, round-faced women; sensitive weirdos.

These are a few of the responses I got when I asked friends: "What's your type?" No one seemed particularly surprised by the question, and a significant number responded without missing a beat. Nearly everyone gave me a highly specific answer. Some of them astutely described the kind of partner I really have seen them consistently attracted to; some, I thought, might just be trying to wrangle a motley crew of exes into a logical pattern. Either way, I got the sense that their romantic type was something they'd thought about a lot.

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The notion of a "type"—a combination of physical, psychological, or other traits we're repeatedly drawn to in a partner-feels entrenched in American culture. But it's certainly not celebrated. Rather, "type" is often described as a vice, a pattern we fall into but shouldn't. Cycling through versions of the same human template in one's dating life, after all, sounds pretty futile. Saturday Night Live's spoof of reality dating shows in 2021 was called <u>What's Your Type?</u>; the joke, in large part, was that the bachelorette was inexplicably but consistently into men who were plainly terrible. Actual love-competition series don't feel that far off from SNL's parody: Contestants frequently say things such as "He's my type on paper" and "She's not who I usually go for." They may pursue the very person they *aren't* initially pulled to—a hero's journey that the audience cheers for-but many of them end up with their classic sort. In real life, coaches, influencers, therapists, and journalists exhort singles to "date outside their type"; clearly, the thinking goes, things haven't been working out so far. (What's that they say about doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results?)

Evidently, many people have narratives about their own romantic preferences. But I wanted to know whether a "type" really does tend to guide our dating decisions—and, if it does, whether that truly is such a bad thing. Obviously, it's unhealthy if you're using it to stereotype, or to fetishize people's physical qualities. But I thought there might be a way to reconcile being open-minded in who you date with recognizing that you respond for a reason to certain values or personality traits. So I spoke with some psychologists.

They told me that type is real, but maybe not in the way you think. It's not a random collection of attributes that magically compel you; on the contrary, it could have roots you can trace clearly to the formative relationships of your past. And it might serve you to do so.

There do tend to be similarities among the people we date. In one set of 2017studies, for instance, researchers found that subjects' past partners were similar on measures including attractiveness, IQ, and educational aspirations. (That held true whether the relationship was casual or serious.) Another study in 2019 studied participants' former and current partners, and found consistencies in the "Big Five" personality traits: agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and openness to experience. Some research has even suggested that people have stable "types" when it comes to specific physical attributes such as eye color.

But this phenomenon can be explained, at least partly, by demographic stratification: We're more likely to meet and spend time with people who are near us, and the people near us are likely to share certain characteristics. Elite-college students tend to date their classmates; astrophysicists might disproportionately pair up with other scientists. The authors of the 2017 study, for instance, found that when they controlled for the school their subjects were attending, the degree to which the participants had discrete preferences for some traits, such as IQ and academic ambitions, decreased significantly. Hypothetically, dating apps could help connect you to people who aren't as likely to live in your neighborhood, hang out in the same groups, or show up to the same activities—but that doesn't always mean people use them that way. Scholars have found

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that even beyond physical proximity, we're still more likely to date people who are similar to us. They call this depressing finding "assortative mating": People tend to couple up with those who match them on factors such as educational background and income.

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That might appear a little different from the kinds of niche inclinations my friends told me about. Usually, when we talk about type, we're implying a set of clear, specific, and personal tastes. But people's stated preferences don't always match their real ones. "People don't know themselves super well," Claudia Brumbaugh, a psychologist at Queens College, City University of New York, who has studied romantic proclivities, told me. And studies suggest that when it comes down to it, the traits people end up valuing in actual relationships are pretty basic, and remarkably consistent across cultures: kindness, intelligence, physical attractiveness. Brumbaugh guessed that if people are prompted to pick a type, they might think to name something unique: "artistic," say. The traits that might actually draw them to a partner wouldn't come to mind; they're just too obvious.

And yet, we aren't all attracted to the same kind, smart, and good-looking people all the time. There might be another reason you go for a certain type, aside from their proximity or similarity to you: They remind you of someone you've dated in the past.

Researchers have found that familiarity can increase our attraction to someone. That can happen with exposure to one person over time, but someone might also feel familiar because they're similar to a person we've known before. Brumbaugh has studied this in the context of attachment theory, which describes how our past experiences can shape how we form and interpret new relationships. She's found that when someone meets a person who resembles their ex-partner, they tend to feel more anxiously attached to them—more worried about rejection or getting their approval—than they'd typically be with a stranger. But they're also likely to be less avoidant, meaning they're more willing to talk and open up. "If someone reminds us, whether consciously or unconsciously, of a past partner," Brumbaugh told me, "they're going to feel more safe, more approachable."

This might happen even if a new date reminds you of an ex you'd rather forget. Our early relationships create a framework for what romantic connection looks like: what emotions you'll feel, what behaviors will be appreciated or dismissed, whether you can assume honesty or good intentions. So if you've experienced a partner who, say, makes you feel small, finding another who does the same might confirm your perception of how relationships work. Your repeated attraction to a certain "type," then, may not be a mysterious connection but rather just psychological comfort. "Having a sense of control and predictability over our world" is hugely important, Brumbaugh told me. Perhaps so much so that it can feel easier to repeat bad patterns than to have our ideas about partners-and love, and relating to others-shattered.

In this sense, "type" is about not just the type of person you gravitate toward but also the type of relationship dynamic you fall into: how you communicate or show affection or trust. Matthew Johnson, a professor who studies couples at the University of Alberta, in Canada, has found that people's relationships tend to have consistent qualities. In <u>one study</u>, he measured a handful of factors—including relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction and frequency, perceived instability, frequency of conflict, and how partners opened up to and expressed admiration for each other—in subjects' past and current relationships, and found significant similarities. "We have kind of prototypical ways of relating to others," Johnson told me—given that we tend to select similar mates and act in fairly stable ways, "you're going to get this cocktail of a lot of consistency from one relationship to the next."

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So perhaps if someone's type is "sensitive weirdos," that doesn't necessarily mean they like to date only these people. It might just mean that they've dated a sensitive weirdo in the past, and that's how they learned how to be in a relationship. Now they feel comfortable to some degree with people who share those traits—and their own habits might attract new sensitive weirdos, or vice versa. Those romantic reverberations can be dangerous, as Brumbaugh pointed out. Some studies back up the idea that a first love—even when it just seems like a silly teen romance-can set a bad benchmark, whether it's because you don't expect enough in subsequent relationships or because you expect too much. But maybe it's not always an ex-partner's bad qualities that drive a person to find someone similar; perhaps it's nostalgia for the qualities they loved, Yoobin Park, a postdoctoral researcher at UC San Francisco, told me. And maybe, with repeated exposure, you can even learn how to respond gracefully to the traits you don't love as much.

That's not to say you should date the same kind of person over and over again. But perhaps it does mean that the answer isn't to avoid doing so at all costs, either. What really matters is that you're aware of the consistencies in whom you choose to partner with; you consider *why* they might exist, historically; and you're honest about your own part in it. People tend to focus on the initial choice of a significant other, as if responsibility ends there, when, really, dating someone new might not transform the outcome at all. Whomever you pair up with, your flaws and insecurities will remain, to some degree. In all of your various romantic entanglements, the one absolute constant is you.

Faith Hill is a staff writer at The Atlantic.

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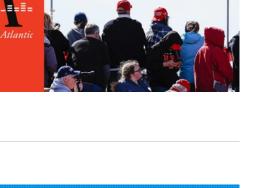
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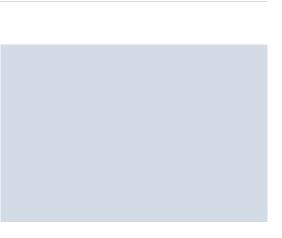
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