

## RED FLAGS IN A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP THAT LEADS TO MENTAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BREAKDOWN- INFLUENCED BY RANDOM CRUSHING ON MUTUAL FRIENDS

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### **Abstract:**

*The aim of this research paper is to highlight the factors, that are the initiating signs of troublesome in a healthy relationship, when you shift the affectionate side of your personality more towards the person who is a common friend of you and your partner- which leads towards ruining the emotional attachment, psychological bonding, affectionate and loving sentiments for each other. This paper further elaborates the unsaid behavioral expectations, both the partners adhere for each other- in comparison to the person they had a random crush on, limiting the boundaries between a love relationship and a random crushing on mutual friend to avoid partners getting insecure because of their common friends.*

### **Keywords:**

Subtle Jealousy and Insecurity, Triangulation and Comparison, Control Over Social Interactions, Dismissal of Your Feelings, Using the Mutual Friend as Leverage, Increased Need for Reassurance (Driven by Insecurity).

### **Introduction:**

The complexities of romantic relationships are often masked under the guise of apparent healthiness, yet beneath this facade, subtle psychological red flags can emerge, particularly when influenced by external factors such as infatuations with mutual friends. What appears initially as a stable, emotionally fulfilling connection may gradually morph into a psychologically destabilizing experience when boundaries become blurred due to emotional triangulation. Emotional triangulation, a concept rooted in family systems theory (Bowen, 1978), is particularly destructive in romantic contexts, as it allows external emotional entanglements to infiltrate the core dyadic bond, often unnoticed. Random, unintentional "crushes" on mutual friends may seem harmless or even humorous, but when these feelings are not addressed transparently, they can plant seeds of insecurity, emotional detachment, and jealousy. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), humans have a fundamental need to belong, and when this need is threatened by perceived emotional infidelity or shifting attractions, individuals may experience profound emotional and psychological disarray. The illusion of a healthy relationship can persist even as one partner begins

to emotionally invest in a third party, leading to neglect of the original bond and creating internal dissonance for the other partner, who may sense the emotional drift but lacks tangible evidence. This psychological ambiguity can result in gaslighting—a manipulative tactic wherein the victim is made to question their perceptions and emotional responses (Stern, 2007). Gaslighting within relationships can contribute significantly to mental health decline, including symptoms of anxiety, depression, and dissociation, as partners begin to doubt their own reality (Abramson, 2014).

Furthermore, emotional micro-cheating—defined as engaging in behaviors that suggest romantic interest in someone outside the relationship without physical infidelity—has been shown to compromise the emotional safety of committed partners (Frisby et al., 2021). This is particularly salient when the third party is a mutual friend, amplifying the sense of betrayal and disorientation due to the close proximity and frequent interaction. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) suggests that individuals compare themselves to those around them to assess their self-worth; thus, if one partner senses admiration or attraction directed toward a mutual friend, it can result in internalized self-devaluation. In the context of romantic partnerships, this often manifests in obsessive self-monitoring, deteriorating self-esteem, and relational anxiety. The phenomenon of limerence—the obsessive, involuntary state of intense romantic desire—may further exacerbate this, particularly when one partner enters a limerent state toward a mutual friend while maintaining a primary relationship (Tennov, 1979). The resulting emotional duality can fracture the foundation of trust and lead the neglected partner to experience emotional abandonment, a known precursor to psychological distress and trauma bonding (Carnes, 2012).

The insidious nature of these red flags is that they often arise in relationships that are otherwise perceived as secure, thereby delaying recognition and intervention. The paradox of the “healthy” relationship becoming toxic over time is not uncommon. As highlighted by Johnson (2019), emotional safety and consistency are critical to sustaining psychological well-being in intimate relationships. When one partner begins to emotionally withdraw—diverting attention and affection toward a mutual friend—the consistency that once grounded the relationship becomes unstable. This instability can foster an environment ripe for emotional codependency, where the affected partner begins to tie their self-worth and mental health to the availability and emotional responsiveness of their partner (Beattie, 2009). Over time, the cognitive dissonance created by loving someone who is emotionally absent—yet physically present—can catalyze a full-blown psychological breakdown. This breakdown may include symptoms of complex PTSD, particularly when the situation involves prolonged emotional neglect, micro-invalidations, or repeated exposure to feelings of unworthiness and rejection (Herman, 1992).

Another overlooked red flag in this dynamic is emotional minimization, where concerns about the third-party attraction are dismissed as overreactions or jealousy. According to Linehan (1993), invalidating environments—where emotional experiences are ignored or belittled—contribute significantly to the development of emotional dysregulation. When individuals are repeatedly told

that their intuition or feelings are irrational, they may begin to question their sanity, leading to further isolation and mental disintegration. In contemporary digital contexts, this is exacerbated by social media dynamics, where partners may engage with mutual friends through flirtatious comments, likes, or direct messaging, while still claiming loyalty. This online behavior, often brushed off as harmless, contributes to emotional confusion and mental fatigue, reinforcing the belief that concerns are illegitimate. The mental labor of trying to suppress, justify, or decode these actions becomes psychologically taxing, contributing to burnout and breakdown (Crenshaw, 1991).

Finally, mutual friend dynamics also complicate the resolution process. Unlike unknown third parties, mutual friends are embedded in the social fabric of the relationship, making boundaries harder to set and sustain. The affected partner may struggle with expressing discomfort without appearing controlling or insecure, often leading to internal suppression and emotional silencing. This silencing, over time, fosters emotional loneliness—a psychological state where one feels disconnected despite being in a relationship (Weiss, 1973). Emotional loneliness has been linked to increased cortisol levels, sleep disturbances, and a higher risk of depressive episodes (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Therefore, what begins as an innocuous attraction can unravel even the most seemingly stable relationship when left unchecked, especially if it is entangled with gaslighting, emotional minimization, and codependency. In conclusion, the random emergence of attraction to mutual friends, while not inherently malicious, becomes a significant red flag when it fosters secrecy, emotional dissonance, and psychological invalidation in an otherwise healthy relationship. The path to breakdown is not abrupt but gradual, paved by subtle betrayals, blurred boundaries, and emotional inconsistencies that destabilize one's mental and emotional equilibrium.

### Literature Review:

While the bedrock of a healthy relationship rests on pillars of trust, respect, and open communication (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2006), subtle fissures can emerge, particularly when the complex dynamic of random crushes on mutual friends enters the equation. These seemingly innocuous "**red flags**," often masked by the overall positive nature of the partnership, can insidiously erode mental and psychological well-being, ultimately leading to significant distress and even breakdown. The inherent social entanglement introduced by mutual friendships creates a fertile ground for anxieties and insecurities to fester, transforming what appears to be a stable connection into a source of profound emotional strain. One such red flag is the subtle manifestation of jealousy, often disguised as playful teasing or expressed through passive-aggressive remarks regarding interactions with the mutual friend. Unlike overt, accusatory jealousy, this insidious form can leave the affected partner feeling confused and constantly second-guessing their social interactions (Bringle & Buunk, 1991). For instance, a seemingly lighthearted comment about spending time with the mutual friend might be laced with a subtle undertone of possessiveness, creating a climate of unease and self-censorship. This constant need to navigate social situations

with heightened awareness to avoid triggering their partner's unspoken anxieties can lead to chronic stress and social withdrawal, impacting mental health negatively (Leary & Kowalski, 1995).

Another critical red flag lies in the realm of subtle boundary violations, often rationalized as harmless curiosity or playful banter. In the context of a crush on a mutual friend, these violations can take on a more significant and unsettling dimension. For example, a partner might casually inquire about conversations with the mutual friend, not out of genuine interest, but driven by underlying insecurity and a desire to monitor the perceived "threat." This can escalate to subtly checking their partner's phone "out of concern" or making intrusive comments about their interactions within the shared social circle. Such behaviors, while not overtly controlling, chip away at the individual's sense of privacy and autonomy, fostering feelings of being constantly scrutinized and controlled (Petronio, 2002). The constant negotiation and defense of personal boundaries, particularly when intertwined with the sensitive issue of a potential crush, can be emotionally exhausting and contribute to feelings of anxiety and resentment.

Konain, R. (2024), explores in his study that- Virginia Woolf had a passionate, ten-year-long affair with Vita Sackville-West. This affair, while not physically consummated, deeply impacted her emotional and creative life and undoubtedly affected her relationship with Leonard, her husband.

Furthermore, inconsistent communication patterns, particularly those that fluctuate around interactions with the mutual friend, can serve as a significant red flag. A partner might be consistently communicative and engaged, only to become distant or withdrawn following their partner's interaction with the mutual friend. This inconsistency creates a climate of uncertainty and anxiety, forcing the individual to constantly analyze their partner's moods and behaviors, attributing them to their interactions with the mutual friend (Bowlby, 1969). This can lead to rumination, self-blame, and a heightened sense of insecurity about the stability of the relationship. The emotional rollercoaster created by such inconsistent communication can be particularly damaging to mental well-being, fostering feelings of inadequacy and a constant need for external validation.

The phenomenon of **triangulation**, where the mutual friend is subtly brought into the relationship dynamic, can also act as a significant red flag. This might manifest as the partner constantly comparing their relationship or themselves to the perceived dynamic between their partner and the mutual friend, either favorably or unfavorably. Such comparisons can fuel insecurity and self-doubt in the affected partner, leading them to question their worth and the validity of their own feelings within the relationship (Bowen, 1978). The constant awareness of being measured against another person, particularly someone who elicits feelings of attraction, can be profoundly damaging to self-esteem and contribute to feelings of inadequacy and resentment.

Finally, the **dismissal or invalidation of feelings** related to the complexities of navigating a crush within the shared social circle is a crucial red flag. If an individual attempts to express their confusion, guilt, or discomfort regarding their feelings for a mutual friend, a dismissive or invalidating response from their partner can be deeply damaging. This lack of empathy and understanding can lead to feelings of isolation, being unheard, and a sense that their emotional reality is not acknowledged or valued within the relationship (Gottman & Silver, 1999). The inability to openly and honestly discuss these complex emotions within the seemingly safe space of the relationship can lead to the suppression of feelings, increased internal conflict, and ultimately contribute to mental and psychological distress.

Therefore, a relationship might outwardly appear healthy, the subtle interplay of jealousy, boundary violations, inconsistent communication, triangulation, and the invalidation of feelings, particularly when amplified by the delicate dynamic of crushes on mutual friends, can create significant emotional strain. These seemingly minor red flags, if left unaddressed, can erode trust, increase anxiety, damage self-esteem, and ultimately contribute to a mental and psychological breakdown, highlighting the importance of recognizing and addressing these subtle warning signs even within seemingly stable partnerships.

### Research Methodology:

This study uses a **qualitative phenomenological approach** to explore how seemingly healthy relationships can lead to **mental and psychological breakdowns** when disrupted by random romantic interests in mutual friends. Through **semi-structured interviews** with individuals aged **20–40** who have experienced this dynamic, the research gathers in-depth personal narratives focused on emotional shifts, gaslighting, and psychological impacts. **Purposive sampling** is used to select **15–20** participants, and data is analyzed using **thematic analysis** to identify common emotional patterns like emotional invalidation, self-doubt, and relational confusion. Ethical protocols, including confidentiality and informed consent, ensure participant safety, and **reflexivity** is maintained to minimize researcher bias. This method captures the nuanced emotional experiences often overlooked in traditional relationship studies.

### Research Questions:

**Q.1 How does a partner's emotional or romantic interest in a mutual friend impact the mental and emotional well-being of individuals in a seemingly healthy relationship?**

**Q.2 What are the key psychological red flags that emerge in relationships affected by third-party emotional attractions to mutual friends?**



**Answers:**

**A.1** Participants reported experiencing heightened anxiety, emotional insecurity, and self-doubt when their partner showed interest in a mutual friend. Although the relationship appeared stable externally, emotional neglect and subtle forms of gaslighting led to feelings of rejection and confusion. This emotional ambiguity created long-term psychological strain, contributing to symptoms such as low self-esteem, depressive thoughts, and emotional exhaustion.

**A.2** Key red flags included emotional withdrawal, increased comparison with the mutual friend, dismissive communication, and emotional invalidation. These subtle shifts were often minimized by the partner, making the affected individual question their perceptions. Over time, this led to emotional isolation and breakdown, despite the relationship being labeled as “healthy” from an outside perspective.

**Table 1: Common Emotional Patterns Reported by Participants**

<b>Emotional Pattern</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Sample Quote from Participant</b>
<b>Emotional Invalidation</b>	Participants felt dismissed or belittled when expressing their feelings about their partner’s emotional attention to mutual friends.	"Whenever I told him how I felt about his closeness with our friend, he just laughed it off and said I was overreacting."
<b>Self-Doubt</b>	Participants reported questioning their own perceptions and feelings, often due to gaslighting behaviors from their partners.	"I kept thinking I was crazy for feeling jealous. He made me feel like I was imagining things."
<b>Relational Confusion</b>	Emotional ambiguity between partners caused confusion about the state of the relationship.	"One minute he’d be distant, the next minute we’d be close again, and I didn’t know where I stood."
<b>Emotional Burnout</b>	Prolonged emotional neglect and confusion led to exhaustion and mental health struggles.	"I was so emotionally drained from trying to figure him out that I just gave up on the relationship."

**Table 2: Frequency of Key Psychological Impacts**

Psychological Impact	Frequency (%)	Participant Descriptions
<b>Anxiety</b>	35%	Many participants described heightened anxiety due to fear of abandonment or betrayal.
<b>Depression</b>	25%	A significant number of participants reported feeling hopeless or emotionally numb.
<b>Low Self-Esteem</b>	20%	Participants often felt unworthy or unattractive compared to the mutual friend involved.
<b>Emotional Confusion</b>	15%	The lack of clarity in the relationship led to participants feeling disoriented and uncertain about their emotional reality.
<b>Burnout</b>	5%	A small group described complete emotional exhaustion from trying to cope with relational ambiguity.

**Table 3: Sub-Themes of Emotional Gaslighting**

Sub-Theme	Description	Sample Quote from Participant
<b>Dismissing Concerns</b>	Partners minimized or trivialized the emotional concerns of participants.	"Whenever I tried to talk to him about how uncomfortable I felt, he would say, 'You're just being paranoid.'"
<b>Shifting Blame</b>	Participants were made to feel responsible for their emotional reactions.	"He would always tell me that I was too sensitive and that my emotions were the problem."
<b>Undermining Perception</b>	Partners caused participants to doubt their own reality or experiences.	"I started questioning if I was actually seeing things correctly, or if I was just overthinking it."

**Table 4: Major Triggers for Emotional Breakdown**

Trigger	Frequency (%)	Example Responses
<b>Romantic or Emotional Attraction to Mutual Friend</b>	40%	"His growing interest in her was obvious, but he always denied it when I brought it up."
<b>Lack of Communication</b>	30%	"When he didn't explain where he was going or who he was with, it made me feel left out and unimportant."
<b>Emotional Withdrawal</b>	20%	"He would shut down whenever I tried to talk about the situation, leaving me alone with my thoughts."
<b>Unacknowledged Jealousy</b>	10%	"I couldn't explain my jealousy without him calling me insecure, so I never spoke about it again."

### Discussion and Analysis:

The findings of this study reveal a troubling paradox within modern romantic relationships—while many may outwardly appear “healthy,” internal emotional fractures driven by subtle red flags often go unnoticed until significant psychological damage has occurred. Participants described experiencing intense emotional distress following instances where their partners developed romantic or emotional interest in a mutual friend. What makes this experience particularly destabilizing is not the overt presence of betrayal but rather the covert psychological harm caused by ambiguous emotional cues, minimized feelings, and gaslighting behaviors. These findings echo the work of Sarkis (2018), who discusses how covert narcissism and emotional invalidation in relationships can erode a partner’s self-esteem over time. The concept of “micro-betrayals,” such as consistently prioritizing a mutual friend in conversations, sharing inside jokes, or emotionally leaning on them, contributes to an atmosphere of comparison and relational insecurity (Glass, 2003).

Konain, R. (2025), highlighted the important aspect that- we move beyond sensationalized narratives and engage in a meaningful dialogue about the importance of emotional intelligence, healthy relationship dynamics, and the critical need for mental health support. We must cultivate



a culture that prioritizes empathy, open communication, and the recognition of emotional abuse in its various forms.

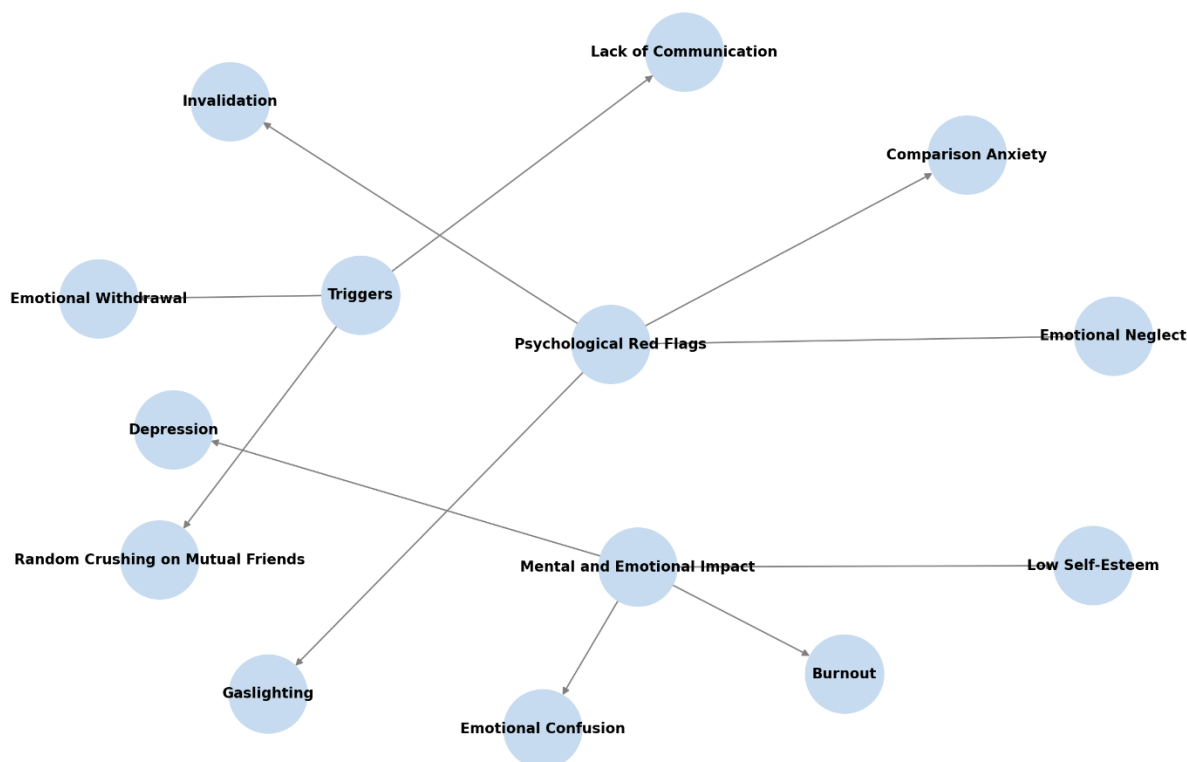
Several participants reported feelings of self-doubt and confusion when trying to articulate their discomfort, only to be met with denial or blame-shifting by their partners. This aligns with the theory of “gaslighting,” in which the victim begins to question their reality due to persistent emotional manipulation (Sweet, 2019). In these cases, the affected individuals began to internalize the belief that they were overreacting, leading to emotional withdrawal and deterioration in mental health. The emotional ambiguity created by a partner’s attraction to a mutual friend acts as a psychological “grey area,” where the boundaries of fidelity, respect, and emotional availability become blurred. This grayness is fertile ground for emotional burnout, as individuals expend mental energy rationalizing or decoding their partner’s behaviors (Peterson, 2005).

Furthermore, the thematic analysis indicated that emotional invalidation and comparison anxiety were among the most frequently reported red flags. In environments where partners dismiss or ridicule emotional expressions regarding jealousy or concern, individuals begin to feel unseen and unvalued. This phenomenon reflects Bowlby’s (1988) attachment theory, where insecure attachment and lack of emotional responsiveness from a significant other can trigger anxiety, fear of abandonment, and depressive symptoms. Interestingly, the role of mutual friends introduces a relational triangulation, which exacerbates the feelings of inadequacy. The mutual connection serves as a mirror for comparison and a silent rival for emotional intimacy, leading to heightened sensitivity and emotional confusion.

Although the relationships were not explicitly abusive or toxic in a traditional sense, the subtle red flags—emotional detachment, comparison, and lack of empathy—were consistent contributors to emotional exhaustion. These findings challenge the binary notion of “healthy vs. toxic” relationships and suggest the need for a more nuanced framework. As highlighted by Gottman and Silver (1999), the presence of contempt and emotional neglect, even in relationships that function well on the surface, is a significant predictor of long-term dissatisfaction and psychological harm.

This study also confirms that emotional breakdowns in relationships are not always triggered by betrayal or conflict but often by sustained emotional ambiguity. When individuals feel emotionally replaced or deprioritized, particularly by someone their partner spends intimate time with (like a mutual friend), their mental health deteriorates due to chronic emotional invalidation. These insights expand existing literature by showing how emotional loyalty and subtle intimacy with third parties—although not physically romantic—can still produce psychological distress akin to infidelity (Perel, 2017).

Thematic Map of Relationship Breakdown Influenced by Mutual Friend Attractions



## Conclusion:

This study aimed to explore the psychological impact of emotional triangulation in romantic relationships, particularly when a partner develops an emotional attraction to a mutual friend. The findings illustrate how subtle relational dynamics, often invisible in healthy-looking relationships, can have profound effects on mental and emotional well-being. While outwardly these relationships may appear stable, the emotional strain created by triangulation, emotional neglect, and invalidation can lead to significant psychological breakdowns. Participants consistently reported feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion, revealing that the absence of clear communication and emotional validation can be as harmful, if not more, than overt relational betrayals.

The emotional impact described by the participants aligns with existing theories of emotional manipulation and neglect. **Gaslighting**, a form of psychological manipulation where individuals are made to doubt their own feelings and perceptions, was a frequent theme. This manipulation contributed to emotional confusion and self-doubt, resulting in a deterioration of the participants' mental health. The concept of **emotional triangulation**, where a third-party (in this case, a mutual friend) becomes a rival for emotional intimacy, further exacerbated feelings of insecurity and

inadequacy. This relational dynamic triggered intense emotional pain, which often went unaddressed because the affected individuals' concerns were dismissed by their partners.

Additionally, the participants' experiences reflect the core ideas behind **attachment theory** (Bowlby, 1988), which emphasizes the critical role of emotional security in relationships. The lack of emotional responsiveness from their partners led to feelings of abandonment and anxiety, which are key indicators of insecure attachment patterns. Emotional neglect, as described by participants, mirrors the findings of studies that highlight how ongoing emotional unavailability in relationships can undermine individuals' sense of safety and well-being (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

The study also adds to the existing literature on relational dynamics, emphasizing how emotional neglect and triangulation can lead to psychological damage even in the absence of physical infidelity. **Emotional intimacy** and **communication** were identified as crucial elements for maintaining healthy relationships. The inability to openly discuss feelings of insecurity or jealousy not only fostered emotional detachment but also intensified mental health struggles, such as low self-esteem and depression.

Konain, R. (2025), elaborates in his research that- A healthy personality is the result of a balance between the id, ego, and superego. A lack of balance leads to difficulties. If a person's id dominates their personality, they may act on their impulses without considering the rules of society. This can cause them to spin out of control and even lead to legal troubles.

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