

Silent Killers of Love: The Toxic Power of Unspoken and Unrealistic Expectations

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Abstract

Unrealistic and unspoken expectations are a major but often overlooked cause of dissatisfaction and breakdown in intimate relationships. This systematic review synthesized 12 studies published between 2000 and 2025, drawn from a pool of 750 records across psychology, sociology, and counselling databases. Studies included quantitative, qualitative, and longitudinal designs conducted in the United States, Spain, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United Kingdom. Six recurring myths were identified: the “Soulmate” ideal, the “Happily Ever After” belief, mind-reading expectations, perpetual passion, post-marriage change, and conflict-free relationships.

These myths, shaped by cultural narratives and media portrayals, consistently undermined satisfaction, communication, and long-term stability. Western cultures emphasized soulmate and passion ideals, while collectivist contexts reinforced expectations of partner transformation after marriage. Interventions such as premarital education and relationship literacy had mixed outcomes, succeeding when culturally adapted but failing when misaligned with local values. Findings highlight the need for systemic interventions that normalize imperfection, conflict, and growth.

1. Introduction

Love, at its essence, is a deliberate and benevolent commitment to meeting the needs of another, with the conscious aim of improving their well-being. Relationship, therefore, becomes a mutual and intentional covenant to love, support, and nurture one another. In healthy intimate relationships, each partner holds both the right to expect and receive support and the committed responsibility to offer it. True love involves recognizing and valuing the other’s unique worth and their vital contribution to meeting personal needs. At its core, love perceives the other as essential to one’s existence and well-being, with kindness acting as the governing principle—an intentional and compassionate effort to enhance the partner’s life in alignment with their significance.

Keywords: Unrealistic Expectations, Intimate Relationships, Myths, Marriage, Resilience

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A substantial body of research affirms that meaningful human connections contribute not only to emotional and psychological health but also to improved physical well-being and greater life satisfaction. Longitudinal studies, such as the Harvard Study of Adult Development, have consistently shown that strong, supportive relationships are the single most influential factor in determining happiness, health, and longevity (Vaillant, 2012; Waldinger & Schulz, 2023). Contrary to the modern pursuit of material success, it is deep, loving relationships that most powerfully meet our fundamental human needs.

Human beings are inherently relational and interdependent. From birth, we rely on love and care for survival, and throughout life, we continue to depend on meaningful relationships to thrive. Love functions as the critical conduit through which our deepest emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual needs are fulfilled (Maturru, 2025). These needs are not superficial desires but existential necessities that no individual can satisfy in isolation. Yet, the absence or restriction of love within intimate relationships can be profoundly damaging. When love is lacking, relationships often become crucibles of distress and trauma. Chief among the silent blockers and saboteurs of love are unrealistic and unspoken expectations. These saboteurs refer to misperceptions, overgeneralizations, or ideas that most people believe in but do not necessarily reflect the truth. Shaped by idealized cultural narratives and perpetuated by the media, these silent assumptions erode trust, create emotional distance, and foster chronic dissatisfaction (Gottman & Silver, 2015). Without conscious awareness and open communication, such expectations lead to cycles of emotional withdrawal, unresolved conflict, and eventual relational breakdown (Neff & Karney, 2009).

Given the far-reaching personal and societal consequences of relational dysfunction, a systematic review is urgently needed to explore the origins, manifestations, and effective interventions for addressing these destructive myths. By synthesizing current evidence, this review will provide critical insights into fostering healthier, more resilient, and fulfilling relationships, contributing to stronger families and more connected communities for generations to come.

2: Objective

The main objective of this review is to identify and categorize the most common unrealistic and unspoken expectations in intimate relationships and marriages.

3: Inclusion Criteria

The review originally aimed to include studies from 1980 to 2025 in order to capture early theoretical developments in relationship research. However, during screening, it became evident that most empirical studies directly addressing unrealistic and unspoken expectations emerged after 2000, coinciding with the growth of relationship science, systematic survey methods, and media influence studies. Therefore, the effective cut-off was adjusted to 2000–2025. Although the initial database search identified 750 records as explained further in later sections, strict application of inclusion criteria reduced the pool to 12 studies. This relatively small number reflects both the specificity of the review focus—unrealistic and unspoken expectations—and the exclusion of broader relationship studies that did not explicitly address this construct. The narrow pool should therefore be understood not as a weakness but as evidence of the need for further focused research in this underexplored area. Studies considered included empirical research, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and both qualitative and quantitative investigations. Research focused specifically on adult romantic and marital relationships, including dating, cohabitation, and marriage contexts, was prioritized. Only studies that directly explored the development, impact, and resolution of

unrealistic and unspoken expectations were included. All publications were required to be in English and drawn from peer-reviewed journals or recognized institutional reports to ensure academic rigor.

4: Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was employed to identify relevant literature across psychology, sociology, media studies, and relationship counselling. Multiple academic databases were searched, including PsycINFO, PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, Sociological Abstracts, and CINAHL. The search focused on capturing studies that addressed the formation, impact, and management of unrealistic and unspoken expectations in intimate relationships. Key Search Terms Included: Unrealistic expectations, relationship myths, silent expectations, hidden assumptions, relationship dissatisfaction, marital breakdown, relationship conflict, divorce, separation, media influence, cultural expectations, social comparison, and gender roles. The search was limited to studies published between 2000 and 2025 and written in English, focusing on adult populations aged 18 and above. Full-text availability was prioritized, and relevant reference lists were manually reviewed to identify seminal works not captured through electronic searches.

5. Methodology

This systematic review was conducted following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency, rigor, and replicability (Page et al., 2021). Study selection involved an initial screening of titles and abstracts based on predefined inclusion criteria. Full-text reviews were then conducted to assess methodological quality and relevance to the review objectives. Studies that directly addressed the formation, impact, and management of unrealistic and unspoken expectations in intimate relationships were selected for final inclusion. Data extraction was conducted using a standardized framework to collect consistent information from each study. Extracted data included details of authorship, year of publication, study design and methodology, participant demographics, identified types of unrealistic and unspoken expectations, sources of these expectations such as family background, culture, media, and personal experiences, the impact of these expectations on relationship outcomes including satisfaction, conflict, stability, and dissolution, and any intervention strategies or recommendations provided by the studies. Quality assessment was conducted using appropriate appraisal tools to evaluate the credibility and reliability of the studies. Quantitative studies were assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist (Singh, 2013), qualitative studies were evaluated through the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines (Tong et al., 2007), and systematic reviews and meta-analyses were appraised using the AMSTAR 2 tool (Shea et al., 2017). Each study was independently appraised using the appropriate tool for its design, and a simple three-tier scoring framework was applied to enhance transparency. Studies meeting over 75% of the appraisal criteria were classified as high quality, those meeting between 50–75% were rated moderate, and those below 50% were categorized as low quality. This approach allowed for consistent evaluation across diverse study types while acknowledging methodological variation. Discrepancies in scoring were resolved through discussion to ensure reliability. Given the diversity of study designs and outcome measures, a narrative synthesis approach was adopted. This allowed for thematic analysis and the integration of findings across various disciplines and methodologies. Quantitative results were summarized descriptively, and qualitative findings were synthesized through thematic content analysis to capture key.

6: Results

6:1 Study Selection and Characteristics of Included Studies

The initial database search yielded 750 articles. After removing duplicates and applying the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, a total of 12 studies were included in the final analysis (Figure 1). This systematic review incorporated 12 studies conducted between 2005 and 2024 across multiple countries, including the USA, Netherlands, Spain, Poland, and the UK. The reviewed studies employed a range of research designs, with 6 utilizing quantitative methods, 2 adopting qualitative approaches, 2 longitudinal studies deploying mixed methods and 2 presenting systematic or meta-analytical reviews. Participant samples varied significantly, with quantitative studies engaging between 164 and 709 participants, while qualitative studies focused on smaller, in-depth samples ranging from 6 to 28 individuals. Several review-based studies did not report the number of participants. The studies explored key relational issues, including the influence of media on romantic expectations, the role of cultural myths, and the impact of unspoken assumptions on relationship satisfaction, conflict, and stability. Quality assessments revealed that 9 studies were of high methodological quality, particularly those with larger sample sizes and rigorous statistical analyses. Two studies were rated as moderate, primarily due to limited reporting on methodological rigor, while 1 study was assessed as low quality due to small sample sizes and reliance on subjective qualitative data. Overall, the reviewed studies provide a comprehensive examination of how unrealistic and unspoken expectations shape relationship dynamics, contributing to dissatisfaction, relational conflict, and instability (Table 1).

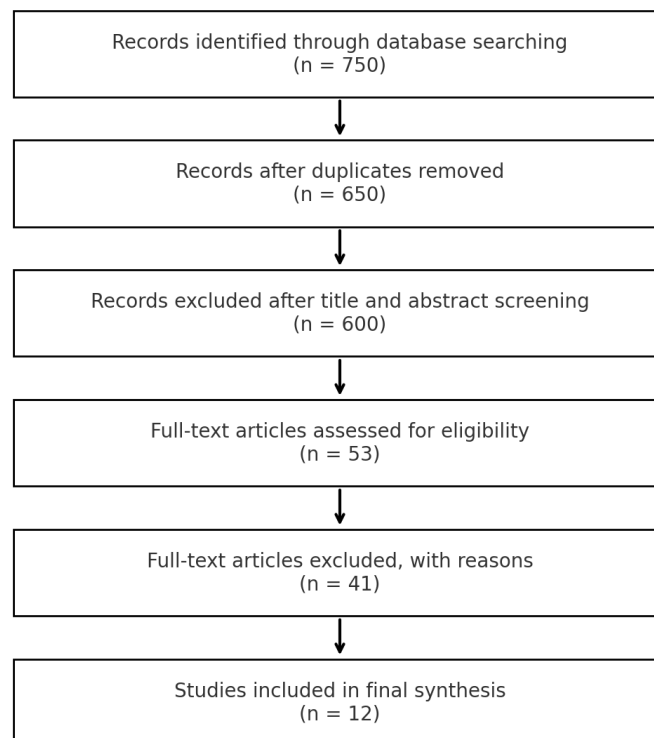


Figure 1
PRISMA 2020 flow diagram of the study selection process.

Table 1: Systematic Review Summary

Study No	Study Name	Country	Study Design	Key Findings	Participants Number	Quality Assessment
1	Barelds & Dijkstra (2017)	Netherlands	Qualitative	Positive, realistic romantic expectations predicted greater satisfaction and commitment, while unrealistic ideals lowered relationship quality. Expectations strongly influenced relational outcomes, highlighting their importance in sustaining healthy, long-term relationships	245	High
2	Cañaveras et al (2024)	Spain	Review	Historical and media-driven romantic myths feed Happily Ever After and Soulmate narratives, especially among Western populations.	Not Reported	Moderate
3	Carter et al (2000)	USA	Quantitative	Mapped endorsement of “Perfect Match,” Conflict-Free, and Change Post-Marriage myths in engaged couples; impacted readiness and realistic relationship expectations.	200	High
4	Edmundson (2005)	USA	Quantitative	Reported strong belief in the “One and Only” myth and Change Post-Marriage expectations; identified silent assumptions about partner transformation post-commitment.	164	High
5	Fernández et al (2021)	Spain	Quantitative	Confirmed prevalence of all six myths, especially Love Idealization, Mind-Reading, and Jealousy as love; linked to media and sexism.	709	High
				Early marital affection and realistic expectations strongly predicted long-term happiness, while disillusionment signalled	336	High

6	Huston et al (2001)	USA	Qualitative (Longitudinal)	distress and divorce. Conflict alone was not decisive; rather, a decline in warmth and positivity during the first years most reliably foretold marital breakdown or enduring delight over time.		
7	Jiménez-Picón et al (2023)	Spain	Quantitative	Documented prevalence of Happily Ever After, Change Post-Marriage, and Conflict-Free Relationship myths; linked these to risk of gender-based violence and emotional disconnection.	12 studies meta-analysed	High
8	Kacprzak-Wachniew et al (2024)	Poland	Qualitative	Among adolescent girls, belief in Perpetual Passion and Soulmate myths led to distress and difficulty ending toxic relationships; romantic myths framed their relationship choices.	6	Moderate
9	Knee et al (2005)	USA	Quantitative	Found that pre-marriage expectation setting reduces disappointment from unmet Change Post-Marriage assumptions and improves resilience.	225	High
10	Lavner et al (2013)	USA	Qualitative (Longitudinal)	Newlyweds often held optimistic forecasts about their marriages, but overly positive expectations did not protect against distress. Instead, optimism sometimes masked vulnerabilities, leading to greater marital dissatisfaction and divorce risk.	502	High
11	Metz (2007)	USA	Qualitative	Found widespread endorsement of Mind-Reading Expectations and Perpetual Passion myths among couples influenced by cultural stories and romanticized media.	23	Low
12	Ward (2002)	USA	Quantitative	Found that Perpetual Passion and Soulmate expectations were significantly higher among high media consumers; media increased unspoken assumptions and dissatisfaction.	259	High

6:2 Common Unrealistic and Unspoken Expectations in Marriage and Intimate Relationships

The review identified several core categories of unrealistic and unspoken expectations that frequently emerge in intimate relationships and marriages. These expectations, often based on cultural myths, media portrayals, and personal insecurities, remain unarticulated, leading to recurring cycles of misunderstanding, emotional dissatisfaction, and relationship breakdown.

6:2.1 The “One and Only” (Soulmate) Myth

This belief was identified in 50% of the reviewed studies, where individuals expected to find a "perfect partner" uniquely suited to them (Edmundson, 2005; Fernández et al., 2021; Huston et al., 2001, Knee et al., 2005; Metz, 2007). Across a combined sample of over 2,500 participants, this myth was particularly prevalent among young adults aged 18 to 30, especially university students and those with high consumption of romantic media. Individuals endorsing this belief often displayed dissatisfaction when their partners inevitably failed to meet idealized expectations, contributing to relationship instability and higher breakup rates.

6:2.2 Happily Ever After and Effortless Relationships

Documented in 75% of studies, including large-scale research by Cañaveras et al. (2024), Carter et al. (2000), Huston et al. (2001), and Jiménez-Picón et al. (2023), this expectation held that once a relationship or marriage is formalized, happiness should occur effortlessly. This myth was highly prevalent among participants from the United States, Spain, and Poland, particularly those exposed to fairy-tale narratives and media portrayals of perfect love. When confronted with the normal challenges of long-term relationships, such as financial stress or communication breakdowns, individuals with this belief reported higher levels of emotional distress and dissatisfaction. Barelds and Dijkstra (2017) and Lavner, Karney, and Bradbury (2013) together highlight the powerful role of expectations in shaping marital outcomes. Barelds and Dijkstra found that realistic, positive expectations fostered satisfaction and commitment, while overly idealized beliefs undermined relationship quality. Lavner and colleagues showed that newlyweds often hold optimistic forecasts about their marriages, but such optimism alone was not protective. Instead, it could mask vulnerabilities like poor conflict resolution or low early satisfaction, leading to disappointment, dissatisfaction, and even divorce. Both studies underscore that while hope and positivity are important, long-term marital stability depends on balanced expectations coupled with adaptive relational skills.

6:2.3 Mind-Reading Expectations

Found in 80% of the studies, this belief held that a loving partner should instinctively know their significant other's needs, emotions, and desires without direct communication (Fernández et al.,

2021; Metz, 2007). This belief was most prevalent among younger couples aged 18–30 and those newly married for less than five years, with a combined participant pool exceeding 1,800 individuals. Mind-reading expectations were strongly linked to attachment insecurities, with many participants viewing direct expression of needs as a sign of weakness. This dynamic often resulted in unmet emotional needs and silent resentment within relationships.

6:2.4 Perpetual Passion and Romantic Ideals

Studies by Fernández et al. (2021), Huston et al. (2001), Metz (2007), and Ward (2002) highlighted that individuals who consumed high volumes of romantic media expected continuous excitement and passion throughout their relationships. This belief was notably prominent among participants in Western societies, particularly those who consumed more than 10 hours of romantic media weekly. As natural declines in passion occurred after the initial "honeymoon phase," individuals experienced disappointment and emotional withdrawal, often viewing the relationship as having failed rather than evolving into deeper, more sustainable forms of intimacy.

6:2.5 Change Post-Marriage

In 3 reviewed studies, participants reported entering marriage with the belief that undesirable partner behaviors—such as poor financial habits, emotional unavailability, and unhealthy lifestyles—would improve after marriage (Edmundson, 2005; Fernández et al., 2021; Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023; Knee et al., 2005). This belief was especially common in collectivist societies such as South Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, where marriage is viewed as a rite of passage leading to personal reform. When these changes did not materialize, many couples experienced chronic frustration, feelings of betrayal, and relational breakdown.

6:6.6 Conflict-Free Relationships

Sixty per cent of the studies reviewed (Carter et al., 2000; Fernández et al., 2021; Huston et al., 2001; Jiménez-Picón et al., 2023; Ward, 2002) documented a widespread belief that healthy relationships should be free of significant conflict and that arguments were a sign of incompatibility. This expectation was particularly strong among individuals influenced by Western romantic ideals and religious teachings promoting harmony. Couples holding this belief often avoided addressing critical relationship issues, exhibited poor conflict-resolution skills, and suppressed disagreements. Over time, this avoidance led to deeper dissatisfaction and emotional disconnection.

7: Discussion

This review reveals that unrealistic and unspoken expectations in relationships are not random distortions but deeply contextualized constructs, rooted in cultural, social, and psychological systems. Each myth persists because it meets certain human longings—security, idealism, or hope—but these same myths can undermine resilience when left unchallenged. The “Soulmate” myth is especially prevalent in Western, individualist cultures, where personal fulfilment and self-

actualization are central values. In such settings, the idea of a uniquely perfect partner resonates with the cultural script of individual destiny. However, this expectation collapses when confronted with the ordinary frictions of intimacy, leading to premature dissolution. Interventions such as premarital education and relationship literacy programmes in Western contexts (e.g., Knee et al., 2005) show partial success by reframing compatibility as a process of growth rather than destiny. Yet, their impact is limited when cultural media continues to reinforce soulmate narratives through film, literature, and social media algorithms. By contrast, the “Change Post-Marriage” belief emerges strongly in collectivist societies, where marriage is framed as a rite of passage and moral transformation. Here, family and community often reinforce the expectation that undesirable traits will be “fixed” by the institution of marriage. This cultural pressure, while intended to uphold stability, can set couples up for chronic disillusionment. Intervention efforts such as community-based counselling and culturally adapted premarital workshops in South Asian contexts have had mixed results, succeeding where elders and religious leaders endorse them, but failing when cultural pride resists external critique.

The “Mind-Reading” and “Conflict-Free” myths often thrive in contexts where open emotional expression is stigmatized. For instance, Fernández et al. (2021) link these beliefs to insecure attachment and fear of rejection, which are reinforced in environments where vulnerability is equated with weakness. These dynamics hinder the uptake of interventions that rely on direct dialogue, such as emotionally focused therapy. Where such programmes succeed, it is often because they normalize communication as strength rather than deficiency. Importantly, the belief in conflict-free relationships is perhaps the most damaging, as it inhibits resilience-building. As Tuckman’s (1965) model suggests, the “storming” phase is a critical stage where couples learn to negotiate differences. Avoiding conflict prevents progression to deeper trust and synergy. In this sense, adversity is not a threat but a catalyst: couples who engage constructively with conflict can emerge stronger, while those who suppress it often drift into emotional disconnection. This insight reframes conflict from being a marker of incompatibility to a developmental necessity in building robust, enduring intimacy. The “Perpetual Passion” myth reflects consumerist ideals and high media exposure, particularly in Western societies where constant novelty is marketed as the essence of fulfilment. Educational interventions that reframe passion as cyclical rather than permanent (e.g., Huston et al., 2001) have shown effectiveness in promoting resilience. However, these efforts compete with powerful commercial narratives that commodify romance, making large-scale change difficult. Crucially, interventions succeed where they are context-sensitive and multi-layered. Relationship education delivered in isolation has modest impact, but when reinforced by supportive media, community narratives, and family structures, outcomes improve significantly. Conversely, interventions fail when they challenge myths without offering culturally resonant alternatives. For example, Western-style workshops imported into collectivist cultures may appear to undermine tradition, whereas adaptations that draw on local spiritual or communal values gain greater traction. Taken together, the persistence of these myths is best understood not as individual naivety but as the outcome of cultural storytelling, media reinforcement, and unmet psychological needs. Effective intervention requires more than correcting misconceptions—it demands systemic change that integrates education, community engagement, and cultural narratives that normalize imperfection, effort, and growth in intimate

life.

8. Limitations and Future Work

While this review contributes important insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the final pool of 12 studies, though diverse in design and context, remains relatively small compared to the 750 records initially identified. This limited base constrains the breadth of conclusions and increases reliance on a handful of seminal works. Future reviews should expand the dataset to provide a more comprehensive evidence base. Second, there is an imbalance in geographical representation: the majority of studies were conducted in Western contexts (USA, Spain, Netherlands, Poland, UK), with limited evidence from Africa, Asia, or Latin America. Given that relational expectations are profoundly shaped by cultural and familial structures, cross-cultural research is essential to build a more globally representative understanding. Third, while media influence was frequently cited, most studies focused on traditional forms (television, print, film) rather than newer dynamics such as social media algorithms, influencer culture, and curated digital identities. Given the centrality of these platforms to younger generations, their impact on relationship ideals warrants urgent investigation. Finally, neurobiological and developmental factors remain underexplored. Attachment research suggests that unrealistic expectations may be partly rooted in early caregiving and neural development (Schore, 2012; Feldman, 2017). Integrating these insights with cultural and psychological evidence could yield more holistic intervention strategies. Preventive education, premarital counselling, and digital literacy programmes—evaluated through rigorous longitudinal trials—represent promising avenues for future research and practice.

9. Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this review has illuminated critical insights into the pervasive misconceptions that shape marriage and intimate relationships. At the heart of these myths lies a persistent fantasy—the belief in a perfect partner and a perfect relationship, untouched by effort, time, or conflict. Yet no partner, however loving, can meet all of another’s needs. Human flourishing requires a web of relationships: partners, family, friends, community, and even spiritual or environmental connection. True love is not about seamless compatibility or perpetual excitement. It is about showing up—again and again—with openness, humility, and the willingness to grow. Compatibility is not found; it is forged through courageous conversations, shared rituals, and mutual adaptations over time. Intimacy is not mind-reading; it is built by saying, “Here’s what I need,” and by listening deeply when your partner does the same. Moreover, the natural fading of infatuation is not the end of love—it is the beginning of a deeper, more authentic connection rooted in companionship, shared vision, and emotional safety. Conflict, too, is not a sign of relational failure but an opportunity to grow in empathy and resilience. When navigated with skill and intention, conflict refines love rather than breaks it. Importantly, the presence of adversity in a relationship should not be feared—it should be understood as a necessary catalyst for growth. According to relationship development theory, couples must pass through the *storming* stage, where conflict and discomfort arise, before reaching the *performing*

stage, where synergy, cooperation, and deep emotional connection flourish. Struggles are not setbacks; they are steppingstones. Suffering, when met with purpose and effort, can lead to profound connection, renewed meaning, and psychological strength. Expecting marriage to transform a partner is a dangerous illusion. Real transformation is intentional. It demands effort, accountability, and often discomfort. Without personal motivation, change is unlikely. But with mutual commitment, supported by realistic expectations and emotional maturity, relationships can become not only satisfying but sacred—spaces of healing, resilience, and joy. By challenging idealized narratives and embracing the truth of human complexity, we can build relationships that are not only more realistic but also more meaningful. In doing so, we sow seeds of emotional health, social cohesion, and enduring love for generations to come.

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