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WOMEN

Seeing someone, but not really: Why people stay in situationships that blur friendship and romance

Situationships may sound like a modern dating trend, but romance without the assurance of commitment has long existed, often leaving those involved feeling emotionally drained and stuck.



A situationship is when you have the romantic connection and perks of a relationship, but without the commitment. (Photo: iStock/Jajah-sireenut)

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Izza Haziqah Abdul Rahman

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You're seeing someone, but not really.

except neither of you ever says what that something is.

You're not together, but you're not "just friends" either.

That was what Zanariah Abdul found herself in when she was a junior college student. Now 31, the teacher finally has a word for it: situationship.

Anisa Hassan, a relationship coach and the founder of matchmaking agency Date High Flyers International, described a situationship as "a romantic connection that feels like a relationship – without clarity or commitment".

She added: "There are no labels, no direction, no timeline, yet the two of you are physically or emotionally bonded to each other."

Situationships can be between friends, colleagues, or even people who are married to other people.

Some may describe it as a Gen Z phenomenon and yet another confusing element of modern dating. However, Willynn Ng, the regional head of markets at Tantan, a global dating app originating from China, disagrees.

"Situationships have always existed, just under different labels," Ng said. "In previous generations, situationships were known as just 'seeing someone' or having 'special friends'."

However, she added that what's changed for Gen Z and today's dating scene is the scale and prevalence of situationships: "Dating apps and social media make ambiguity more visible and easier to sustain, particularly in a dating culture shaped by choice and flexibility."

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

For Zanariah, whose five-year situationship was primarily emotional, it was exciting at first.



Some find situationships fun and easy because they don't come with official labels like boyfriend or fiancée. (Photo: iStock/visualspace)

Jane Tan, 32, who works in the entertainment industry, echoed that sentiment. Her situationship in her late 20s made her “feel good to be noticed and cared for in a special way without having to think too much about what would happen next”.

But the casual nature of the situationship came with an undercurrent of confusion.

“Because we weren't officially together, asking for attention when I was sad or happy felt uncharacteristic and clingy,” Zanariah said.

At times, she received mixed signals.

serious, but he kept dismissing and deflecting the issue. She also found out through mutual friends that he had multiple situationships with other girls besides her.

“It hurt, even though we weren’t really together. And being in limbo made everything worse, because nothing felt genuine and I kept doubting myself and whatever he said,” she said.

“Once, I asked him to stop texting me since he wasn’t serious about me, but he said he still wanted my company as ‘just friends;” she added. “It was distressing because he was not treating me like ‘just a friend’ at all. He was so sweet, yet there was no sense of security or consistency; he came and went whenever he wanted.”

Tan’s situationship, which lasted less than a year, was slightly different. She said neither she nor the other party wanted to move on from each other, yet they felt “too unserious” about a relationship, which made it emotionally draining.

“I was emotionally and physically invested, and I’m sure he was too, but we had no end goal. We just kept putting off talking about what we were because it seemed easier,” she said.

“It felt suffocating – I felt this need to hide the relationship so my friends wouldn’t judge me because it seemed like we were just playing with each other.”

Anisa said that this tension is baked into situationships from the start.

“Many people enter them for connection without pressure – a form of companionship without heavy conversations, expectations or responsibility,” she said.

“You get companionship on demand, so you’re not lonely,” she added. “But you also get flexibility and freedom without being tied down.”



Situationships can feel suffocating when one person wants a committed relationship, while the other does not, and the former is already too emotionally invested to walk away. (Photo: iStock/Johnce)

Family therapist from Just2Hearts Counselling, Winny Lu Aldridge, noted that situationships can also function very differently for each party.

For some, she said, they provide an ego boost: “Having someone reciprocate emotional or romantic feelings can make a person feel desired and worthy, especially when there’s no need to work on a committed relationship.”

Some people intentionally remain in situationships – or even maintain multiple ones – as a way to feel good about themselves and reaffirm a belief that they are wanted, she added.

“It becomes a way to exercise control when they know they have people emotionally or physically available to them,” Lu Aldridge said.

Even for those who want a serious relationship, or who know that they deserve better than being in limbo, Lu Aldridge acknowledged how difficult it can be to leave a situationship once an emotional bond has formed.

“Once someone feels attached, whether or not they are in an official relationship, letting go becomes emotionally difficult,” she said.

You get companionship on demand, so you're not lonely, but you also get flexibility and freedom without being tied down.

The trade-off, however, is a persistent lack of certainty – crucial to any stable romantic relationship.

“In a healthy relationship, you won't feel as though you need to mask your affection, pretend to be someone else, or be anxious about being abandoned,” Anisa said.

“Both parties share their energy, time and commitment towards a common goal and trust that the relationship they're building leads to peace and happiness that they both deserve,” she added.

Conversely, situationships are defined by their lack of reliability.

“In a situationship, you're always one meeting away from someone walking out on you, ghosting you or ignoring that it meant something to them,” Anisa said.

Over time, that ambiguity can erode self-worth – something Tan and Zanariah experienced firsthand.

“I know I should have walked away, but it was hard. I felt like a puppy, just waiting for him or making myself available whenever he needed me,” Zanariah said. “I also lost a bit of my sense of self.”

Tan added: “In hindsight, I pretended on the surface that I wasn't serious, when I probably wanted a real relationship.

“I sub-consciously started changing myself to adapt to him in the hopes that he'd finally be with me. Deep down, I secretly kept asking myself, ‘Why am I not enough for him to choose and love me?’”

THE GRIEF IS REAL



The uncertainty that comes with being in a situationship can be stressful. (Photo: iStock/Jay Yuno)

“Admittedly, a part of me hoped that he would still choose me. And even when I had a feeling he wouldn’t, I wish I could say that I proudly ended the situationship on my own terms,” she said.

“But it ended because he found and finally committed to someone else.”

The end made her feel as though she had “really broken up with him, even though we never defined what we were”.

Lu Aldridge explained that, unlike a conventional breakup, the end of a situationship often comes without warning, conversation or closure, even though the emotional attachment is just as real.

“We grieve the end of situationships because when it was happening, we felt attached to them,” she said. “This sense of attachment can be activated by someone, regardless of

they were ‘with’ wasn’t their official boyfriend or partner.”

Without clear endings or mutual acknowledgement, the grief has nowhere to go and can linger far longer than expected, Lu Aldridge said.

Such people – often women – may feel stuck not because they don’t want clarity or security, but because the emotional cost of leaving feels greater than staying.

Zanariah became “depressed” after finding out he got married, whereas Tan said she felt a sense of relief when hers ended, but still experienced intense grief. It took at least a few months before either stopped missing the situationship.

Having a situationship end without proper closure can be emotionally damaging, Anisa said. One of her clients was in a situationship for 10 years, hoping that the man would commit to her. But he, too, married another woman..

“She was grieving a ‘relationship’ that had no closure,” Anisa said. “As a result, she started doubting herself and anyone who showed any form of genuine affection to her, and when the right person finally came, she was too emotionally unavailable and distant.”

MOVING ON FROM A SITUATIONSHIP

Leaving a situationship, or recovering from one, can be difficult – especially for the person who hoped it would turn into a relationship – but it’s possible, Anisa said.



Most people want a stable and healthy relationship, but being stuck in a situationship is highly unlikely to lead to that. (Photo:iStock/Ridofranz)

Anisa highlighted three key steps: Clarity, courage, and consequences.

“Clarity refers to being honest with oneself about the situation at hand,” Anisa said. “That includes asking difficult yet crucial questions: Is this building towards something real, or is it merely a stop gap to avoid loneliness or feel worthy for a short period of time?”

The second step is courage, which Anisa explained requires deeper self-reflection and, for some, uncomfortable honesty.

“It includes questions many avoid,” she said. “Is this relationship leading to commitment, or am I settling for small pockets of time on someone else’s terms? Am I even worthy of being committed to?”

The third and most challenging step is enforcing consequences. While many people talk about boundaries, Anisa said few truly uphold them.

“A boundary is deciding that you are no longer available for relationships without direction,” she said. “And no longer willing to ‘just see where things go’.”



Zanariah took about a year before she could [move on from her situationship and meet other men.](#)

Self-forgiveness was key to her healing: “I do feel ashamed sometimes when I think about how I allowed myself to be treated, but I forgive myself for not knowing any better – I was a kid.”

She was able to experience the happiness and security she previously yearned for when she entered a new relationship with a man who made her feel safe. He proposed to her a year ago.

“In a way, I’m grateful things worked out the way they did,” she said. “I was able to move on, and I finally learned what a true, genuine relationship feels like.”

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