

Friends-First Romantic Relationship Initiation

by

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We acknowledge and respect the lək̓ʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSANÉĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

Most romantic relationships begin as friendships, a process called friends-first initiation, yet very little research has been devoted to understanding how such relationships form. Instead, research has focused on dating initiation, whereby strangers meet, experience passion, go on dates, and eventually form an emotional and romantic bond. This narrow focus on dating initiation disproportionately emphasizes passionate intimacy as the necessary precursor to pursuing a romantic partner and ignores the bi-directional association between passionate and emotional intimacy. I conducted two studies using qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate how the transition from friendship to romance occurs, with the goal of understanding the relation between passionate and emotional intimacy in this pathway to romance. In Study 1 ($N = 24$), I used thematic analysis to examine narrative accounts of friends-first initiation, and the resulting themes reflected a progression of increasing emotional intimacy, emerging passionate intimacy (i.e., romantic/sexual feelings), a transition phase (e.g., turning points, uncertainty), and a decision to change the social identity of the relationship from “friends” to “romantic partners.” In Study 2 ($N = 476$), I compared and contrasted the timeline and feelings of emotional intimacy, passion, and romantic interest for dating initiators and friends-first initiators across 28 relationship milestones. Results revealed important group differences in the pace of romance, the role of friends and family, and sexual experiences. For example, friends-first initiators knew their future partner much longer than dating initiators before romantic courtship began (about two years compared to around two months), and reported a much longer length of courtship than dating initiators (more than two years compared to just under nine months). Friends-first initiators also introduced their partner to their other friends and family much sooner while emotional intimacy, passion, and romantic interest were still developing, whereas dating initiators did not make such introduction until much later when high levels of intimacy were established. Furthermore, although friends-first initiators experienced lower passion and romantic interest than dating initiators when they first met their future partner,

friends-first initiators experienced higher passion, emotional intimacy, and romantic interest compared to dating initiators on their first date, and higher emotional intimacy during physical intimacy (e.g., kissing, cuddling, sex). Taken together, my research revealed that dating initiation and friends-first initiation differ in substantive ways that could have implications for longer-term relationship satisfaction, stability, and longevity.