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The Solution to College Students' Romantic Dilemmas from a Multitheoretical Perspective: A Study Based on Real Cases

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the underlying causes of a college student's romantic dilemma and evaluate the effectiveness of a comprehensive psychological intervention. The student, from a reconstituted family, experienced parental divorce, paternal abandonment, and maternal neglect in childhood, developing low self-esteem, sensitivity, and difficulty in interpersonal relationships due to early traumas. The research explores how these factors, combined with her boyfriend's repeated infidelity and her inability to end the relationship despite social opposition, form a complex emotional predicament. The subject was a female college student with a history of family dysfunction. The study employed psychodynamic, social learning, and cognitive-behavioral theories to dissect the interplay of early experiences, family environment, social-cultural influences, and cognitive biases. A 28-week intervention included trust-building, cognitive restructuring, emotion-behavior training, and social circle expansion. Assessments involved psychological tests, behavioral observations, and evaluations of interpersonal relationship changes. The intervention yielded significant improvements: psychological assessments showed enhanced self-esteem and emotional regulation, while behavioral observations indicated better coping strategies. Her social network expanded, and relationships with family and friends were repaired. She demonstrated reduced attachment to the toxic relationship and improved decision-making skills, confirming the intervention's efficacy in addressing both cognitive and emotional challenges. This case provides empirical evidence for addressing similar emotional dilemmas, highlighting the role of early trauma and cognitive biases in maintaining dysfunctional relationships. The study underscores the importance of integrating multiple theoretical frameworks in intervention design, as each theory offers a unique perspective on the problem and contributes to a more comprehensive solution. It also emphasizes the critical role of family and social support systems in mental health restoration. A strong support network can act as a buffer against stress and promote recovery. This research offers practical insights for clinicians treating individuals trapped in comparable romantic predicaments. Clinicians can draw on the intervention methods and strategies used in this study, such as the combination of different theoretical approaches and the focus on social support, to develop more effective treatment plans for their patients. Moreover, it calls for more attention to be paid to the mental health of college students from disadvantaged family backgrounds, as they may be more vulnerable to romantic relationship problems.

Keywords: Romantic Dilemmas; Psychological Intervention; Family Background; Cognitive-Behavioral Theory; Social Learning Theory

1. Case Introduction

The protagonist of this case is a college student who has fallen into a difficult emotional dilemma amid a complex family environment and a tortuous romantic experience. She began dating her boyfriend in the 11th grade, and their relationship lasted for three years until they broke up during her freshman year of college. A year later, in March of this year, they reconnected and entered an ambiguous phase. However, from May to June, she repeatedly hinted at the need to formalize their relationship, only to be evaded by her boyfriend each time. Although this raised her suspicions, she still believed it might be due to timing issues. In mid-June, the two stopped contacting each other

for more than half a month because the boyfriend couldn't tolerate her minor temper tantrums. During the summer vacation in July, she took the initiative to meet him, and they decided to reconcile. After reconciling, she accidentally checked his phone and discovered a series of shocking and unacceptable facts: During the ambiguous period from March to June, the boyfriend frequently chatted with different girls, discussing private and inappropriate topics. Even after reconnecting with her, he continued to share daily life with other girls and even showed intent to develop closer relationships with them. Other incidents caused her severe emotional harm, revealing the dark and selfish aspects of his personality. Despite the boyfriend's behavior causing profound hurt and all her friends explicitly opposing their continued relationship, she has been unable to resolve to leave him. Even though filled with anger, she still harbors expectations for the relationship, repeatedly forgiving his mistakes and remaining trapped in emotional entanglement.

2. Background

2.1 Family Background
2.1.1 Structure and relationships in the original family
The protagonist grew up in a reorganized family. Her parents divorced when she was young, and she lived with her mother. As the main breadwinner of the family, her mother was busy with work every day to make a living, making it difficult to provide sufficient care and attention during the protagonist's growth. The mother has an irritable and straightforward personality, and is accustomed to using tough methods when dealing with problems. This educational approach not only made the protagonist lack a sense of security during her growth, but also led to serious obstacles in communication between mother and daughter.
2.1.2 Relationship with father and stepfather
During the protagonist's growth, the role of her father was long absent. Before she entered high school, her father occasionally contacted her, but since the third year of junior high school, communication between the two almost completely broke off. Her father's repeated and decisive abandonment made her deeply disappointed in him, and she gradually gave up expecting care from her father in her heart.

Although her stepfather is thoughtful and tries to understand her thoughts when she has fierce arguments with her mother, the frequent quarrels between her stepfather and mother create an unstable family atmosphere. This environment has kept her psychologically distant from her stepfather, unable to be as close as an ordinary father-daughter relationship, and it is difficult for her to confide her true thoughts and feelings to her stepfather.

2.2 Romantic Background
2.2.1 Development process of the relationship
The protagonist met and fell in love with her boyfriend in the 11th grade, and the relationship lasted for three years. During these three years, they experienced many things together, which built a deep emotional foundation in her heart. After a year of separation, the two reconnected and entered an ambiguous phase. During this period, she was full of expectations for the relationship and eager to formally establish romantic ties with her boyfriend. She repeatedly hinted at this, but the boyfriend always evaded giving a direct response.
2.2.2 Problems and conflicts in the relationship
In the romantic relationship, the boyfriend showed obvious double standards. He had no sense of boundaries or moral principles when interacting with other girls, frequently engaging in inappropriate interactions. However, when the protagonist communicated normally with her gay male best friend (who grew up with her), he became extremely sensitive and even gave her the silent treatment for several days. This behavior pattern of "being strict with others while lenient with himself" seriously hurt the protagonist's feelings and led to the continuous accumulation of conflicts between them.

2.3 Personal Traits
2.3.1 Social attitudes and habits
After entering university, the protagonist has shown obvious resistance to building new interpersonal relationships. She believes that starting a new relationship is troublesome and feels tired of complex social interactions, so she rarely takes the initiative to participate in social activities, resulting in a relatively narrow social circle.
2.3.2 Personality characteristics
The protagonist's personality is characterized by low self-esteem, high sensitivity, and nostalgia: Low self-esteem makes her lack confidence in

facing emotional issues and prone to doubting her own worth. High sensitivitymakes her particularly attentive to changes in her boyfriend's behavior and attitude, with emotions easily affected. Nostalgia makes her always reminisce about the good times spent with her boyfriend in the past, making it difficult to let go of the relationship.

3. Analysis

3.1 From the Perspective of Psychodynamics
3.1.1 Early trauma and emotional dependence
From a psychodynamic perspective, the protagonist experienced significant life events such as parental divorce and paternal abandonment during childhood, leaving deep emotional scars in her psyche [1]. During her growth, the lack of emotional care from her mother further exacerbated her sense of insecurity. This long-term emotional deprivation led her to subconsciously develop a strong yearning for intimate relationships, seeking to obtain the love and security she lacked in childhood through romantic partnerships [2]. As a result, when her boyfriend showed initial concern and care, she quickly became deeply invested and overly dependent on the relationship.
3.1.2 Inner conflict and ambivalence
After discovering her boyfriend's inappropriate behavior, the protagonist fell into intense inner conflict. On the one hand, her rationality told her that the boyfriend's actions were unacceptable, and continuing such a relationship would only bring her more harm. On the other hand, her emotions made it difficult to let go of the years-long relationship. The fear of abandonment formed in childhood made her afraid of falling back into loneliness and helplessness after ending the relationship [3]. This conflict between reason and emotion has left her unable to make decisive decisions when facing the boyfriend's issues, only able to struggle in pain.

3.2 From the Perspective of Social Learning Theory
3.2.1 Influence of the family environment
In her family environment, the protagonist has long witnessed her mother's irritable temper and frequent quarrels between her parents. This unhealthy family interaction pattern has become a model for her to learn and imitate [4].

Subconsciously, she may believe that quarrels and conflicts are normal in intimate relationships, thus developing a certain degree of tolerance for her boyfriend's inappropriate behavior. Moreover, her mother's approach of lacking communication and emotional exchange when dealing with problems has also affected her communication style in romantic relationships. As a result, when facing conflicts with her boyfriend, she is unable to effectively express her feelings and needs [5].
3.2.2 Role of social culture and social circles
In today's society, the concept of "fast-food love" prevails, where people often focus more on instant emotional experiences in romantic relationships while ignoring long-term management and loyalty [6]. This social and cultural atmosphere may have made the protagonist numb to some problems in the relationship, reducing her sensitivity to her boyfriend's inappropriate behavior. Meanwhile, her narrow social circle and lack of diversified interpersonal support mean that when facing relationship dilemmas, she cannot obtain sufficient advice or support from friends or other social connections, further exacerbating her sense of isolation in this relationship [7].

3.3 From the Perspective of Cognitive-Behavioral Theory
3.3.1 Cognitive biases and irrational beliefs
The protagonist has certain cognitive biases, particularly an excessively idealized perception of her relationship with her boyfriend [8]. She regards her boyfriend as her emotional anchor, believing that only by maintaining this relationship can she achieve happiness and security. This irrational belief makes her reluctant to acknowledge reality when facing the boyfriend's problems; instead, she repeatedly makes excuses for his behavior, attempting to maintain the superficial stability of the relationship through forgiveness. Additionally, her cognition of interpersonal relationships is one-sided: she deems establishing a new relationship extremely difficult and risky. Such cognitive biases further limit her ability to break free from the current dilemma [9].
3.3.2 Behavioral patterns and emotional reactions
In the long-term romantic relationship, the protagonist has developed a dysfunctional behavioral pattern. Whenever her boyfriend acts in a hurtful way, she chooses to forgive him. This behavior not only fails to make the

boyfriend recognize his mistakes but also reinforces his inappropriate conduct [10]. Meanwhile, such a pattern has trapped her in a habitual emotional response when facing similar issues—feeling angry yet powerless, unable to take effective action to change the status quo. This vicious cycle of emotions and behaviors has caused her to become increasingly entrenched in the relationship.

4. Intervention Process

4.1 Establishing a Trusting Relationship and Conducting Psychological Assessment (Week 1-2)

Initial Contact and Relationship Building: In the early stage of intervention, the interventionist established a trusting relationship with the protagonist through gentle and patient communication. By earnestly listening to her emotional experiences and inner troubles, the interventionist made her feel understood and respected. During the listening process, the interventionist provided timely emotional responses, expressing sympathy and concern for her experiences, laying a solid foundation for subsequent intervention work.

Application of Psychological Assessment Tools: To comprehensively understand the protagonist's psychological state, the interventionist applied multiple psychological assessment tools, such as the Symptom Checklist 90 (SCL-90) [11], Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) [12], and Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) [13]. These assessments revealed obvious issues in depression, anxiety, and interpersonal sensitivity. Her SCL-90 scores indicated severe symptoms in multiple dimensions, while BDI and BAI scores suggested moderate depressive and anxious emotions.

4.2 Cognitive Restructuring to Change Irrational Beliefs (Weeks 3–8)

Identification and Analysis of Cognitive Biases: After establishing trust and completing the psychological assessment, the intervenor collaborated with the protagonist to deeply analyze her cognitive biases and irrational beliefs in the romantic relationship. By guiding her to recall specific interactions with her boyfriend, the intervenor helped her recognize the excessive rationalization of his behavior and unrealistic expectations for the relationship. For example, when discussing the boyfriend's

frequent chats with other girls, the intervenor prompted her to reflect on whether such behavior aligns with the norms of a healthy romantic relationship, enabling her to realize the irrationality of consistently making excuses for his actions. Implementation of Cognitive Restructuring: Targeting her cognitive biases, the intervenor adopted cognitive restructuring techniques to help her establish rational cognitive patterns [14]. The protagonist was guided to re-evaluate her values and needs within the relationship, understanding that a healthy partnership should be founded on mutual respect, loyalty, and trust. Through role-playing, case analysis, and other methods, she learned to view problems from diverse perspectives and develop critical thinking skills. For instance, by examining cases of healthy relationships, she compared her own experiences, identified issues in her relationship, and was encouraged to set reasonable romantic goals and expectations.

4.3 Emotional Management and Behavioral Change Training (Weeks 9–16)

Learning Emotional Management Skills Given that the protagonist tends to lose emotional control when facing her boyfriend's issues, the intervenor taught her emotional management techniques, including deep breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation, and the ABC model of emotion [15]. Through learning these techniques, she was guided to adjust her emotional state quickly during agitation, avoiding impulsive decisions. For example, when she became emotional while recounting her boyfriend's hurtful behavior, the intervenor led her to practice deep breathing—inhaling and exhaling slowly to calm down. She was then prompted to use the ABC model to analyze the root cause of her emotions, recognizing that feelings are triggered not by events themselves but by her interpretations of them. This helped her challenge irrational beliefs and regulate her mood.

Development and Implementation of Behavioral Change Plans to address her dysfunctional behavioral patterns in the relationship, the intervenor collaborated with her to formulate a behavioral change plan, which included: Setting clear behavioral goals: For instance, when the boyfriend exhibited inappropriate behavior, she would no longer forgive him immediately. Instead, she would communicate calmly, expressing her feelings and needs. If he failed to

acknowledge or correct his mistakes, she would learn to protect herself—e.g., by taking a temporary separation to create space for reflection. Ongoing support and feedback: The intervenor maintained regular communication to monitor plan implementation, providing timely affirmation for progress and guidance on overcoming challenges.

4.4 Social Expansion and Support System Building (Weeks 17–24)

Social Skills Training Considering the protagonist's narrow social circle and lack of effective social support, the intervenor provided social skills training, covering: How to initiate communication with others   Strategies for building and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships   Techniques for expressing opinions and emotions Through simulated social scenarios and role-playing, she practiced and enhanced her social abilities in real-time. For example: Simulated situations like chatting with strangers at parties or participating in club activities were designed for her to apply learned skills.   The intervenor provided on-site guidance and feedback, helping her refine her approach.

Establishment of Support Systems She was encouraged to actively engage in social activities (e.g., club events, volunteer work) to expand her network and connect with like-minded individuals. Meanwhile, the intervenor assisted her in: Reevaluating and repairing relationships with family and friends to restore emotional support from these bonds.   Receiving continuous guidance during social participation: The intervenor tracked her progress, encouraged her to share experiences, and provided timely help with challenges. For instance, when she struggled with communication at a club event, the intervenor: Guided her to analyze the root cause of the issue.   Helped her develop solutions and encouraged her to reattempt communication.

4.5 Consolidation and Closure Phase (Weeks 25–28)

Reinforcement of Achievements In the late intervention stage, the intervenor focused on consolidating prior gains by: Reviewing the intervention process with the protagonist, summarizing her progress in cognition, emotional regulation, behavioral change, and social skills. This helped her recognize personal growth, such as: Shifting from excessively rationalizing her boyfriend's behavior to objectively evaluating issues during cognitive restructuring. Applying learned techniques to manage emotions effectively.   Successfully altering her response patterns to the boyfriend's inappropriate actions. Boosting self-confidence by highlighting tangible changes, encouraging her to apply acquired skills in daily life and maintain positive mindsets and healthy behavioral patterns.

Intervention Closure and Follow-Up Gradual termination of intervention was initiated after confirming her ability to independently address life challenges. Post-intervention follow-up was maintained to prevent regression, including: Regular check-ins via phone or WeChat to monitor her life and mental state.   Providing timely guidance when she encountered difficulties. For example: Communicating with her 1 month, 3 months, and 6 months after intervention to: Assess her progress in romantic relationships, interpersonal interactions, and personal life.   Acknowledge achievements and offer advice on emerging issues.

5. Evaluation of Intervention Effects

5.1 Changes in Psychological Assessment Results

After the intervention, psychological assessment tools such as the Symptom Checklist 90 (SCL-90), Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), and Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) were used again to evaluate the protagonist. The results showed significant decreases in her scores for depression, anxiety, interpersonal sensitivity, and other aspects. In the SCL-90, symptoms in multiple dimensions were significantly relieved. The BDI score indicated that her depressive symptoms reduced from moderate to mild, while the BAI score also showed a marked improvement in her anxiety, suggesting a significant enhancement in her psychological state.

5.2 Changes in Behavior and Emotions

Behavioral Changes in Romantic Relationships The protagonist showed obvious behavioral changes in her romantic relationship. When her boyfriend exhibited inappropriate behavior again, she no longer blindly forgave him as before. Instead, she could calmly communicate with her boyfriend, express her feelings and bottom line.

If her boyfriend failed to recognize and correct his mistakes, she would decisively take action to protect her rights and interests. For example, once her boyfriend chatted too frequently with other girls, she did not silently endure it as in the past. Instead, she took the initiative to communicate with her boyfriend, clearly stating that such behavior hurt her. She warned that if he did not change, she would consider ending the relationship. Through this approach, her boyfriend began to realize his mistakes and gradually reduced inappropriate interactions with other girls.

Enhancement of Emotion Management Ability Her emotion management ability has been significantly improved, and she is no longer easily controlled by emotions. When facing setbacks and difficulties in life, she can use the learned emotion management skills to maintain calmness and rationality. For instance, after failing an exam, instead of falling into prolonged depression and anxiety as before, she quickly adjusted her emotions through deep breathing exercises and positive self - suggestion. Then she carefully analyzed the reasons for the exam failure, formulated a study plan, and prepared for the next exam.

5.3 Improvement in Social and Interpersonal Relationships

Expansion of Social Circle Through participating in various social activities, her social circle has been significantly expanded. She has met many new friends and established good interpersonal relationships with them. Unlike before, she is no longer afraid of socializing, but can take the initiative to communicate with others and actively participate in social activities. For example, she joined a volunteer community at school, where she met many like - minded friends. They participated in various public welfare activities together, which not only enriched her life but also made her feel the fun of social interaction.

Repair of Relationships with Family and Friends Her relationships with family and friends have also been repaired and improved. Communication with her mother has become smoother: she can understand her mother's hardships, and her mother has begun to pay attention to her inner feelings, giving her more support and encouragement. Her relationship with friends has also become closer. When encountering problems, she can talk to friends and get their help and support. For instance, she and her mother participated in a parent - child activity together, during which they enhanced mutual understanding and their relationship became more harmonious. In getting along with friends, she learned to listen and understand, and friends are more willing to share bits and pieces of life with her.

6. Conclusion

In this case, the protagonist exhibited a series of psychological problems and behavioral disturbances under the influence of a complex family background and an unhealthy romantic relationship. A 28 - week intervention was conducted by comprehensively applying multiple theories and methods, including psychodynamic theory, social learning theory, and cognitive - behavioral theory. The intervention process covered multiple links, such as establishing a trusting relationship, cognitive restructuring, emotion management and behavior change training, social expansion and support system establishment, as well as consolidation and termination stages. After the intervention, the protagonist achieved significant improvements and progress in psychological state, behavioral performance, social interaction, and interpersonal relationships. This indicates that the comprehensive application of multiple psychological intervention methods is effective for cases where psychological dilemmas are caused by family and romantic problems. Meanwhile, it also emphasizes the important role of family and social support systems in maintaining individual mental health. In future mental health work, more attention should be paid to the family and social environments in which individuals grow, early identification and intervention of potential psychological problems should be implemented, and the mental health development of individuals should be promoted.

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