

Emotional Numbing in Modern Dating: Is Dating Fatigue a Subclinical Trauma Response?

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Abstract—The dating practices of today's society rapidly change due to digital platforms which create dating fatigue that brings about emotional exhaustion and relationship disengagement and decreased interest in dating. This review investigates whether emotional numbing which people experience during dating fatigue qualifies as a subclinical response that originates from trauma or as a temporary change in attitude or a psychiatric disorder. The paper uses literature from trauma psychology combined with emotion regulation research and attachment theory, learned helplessness and chronic stress studies to show how repeated relational stressors lead to emotional blunting, avoidance behavior and motivational withdrawal. The research shows that dating fatigue represents a process through which people control their emotions because they have experienced ongoing relationship difficulties. The clinical implications of framing dating fatigue through a trauma-informed model that avoids creating mental health disorders extend to psychoeducation and upcoming research measurements of relationship intimacy and emotional health in online dating environments.

Keywords—Dating Fatigue, Emotional Numbing, Subclinical Trauma, Avoidance, Learned Helplessness, Modern Dating

I. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of romantic relationships has reached a complete transformation during the past ten years. The development of dating applications together with changing societal commitment standards and faster social connections between people, has created new methods for people to start relationships, keep them, and end them. The new socializing methods have created more chances for people to meet others, yet they have also brought about fresh mental health challenges. The modern academic and popular media use dating fatigue to describe a new dating condition which leads to people feeling emotionally drained and developing negative outlooks and becoming unmotivated to start new romantic relationships after facing multiple unsuccessful dating attempts (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage, 2022). The emotional symptoms of dating fatigue show all the psychological symptoms which people experience

after traumatic events, which researchers developed as scientific criteria.

People with dating fatigue report that they experience emotional numbing as their most significant dating-related problem. People with emotional numbing lose their ability to feel happy and their ability to show feelings and they develop a feeling of isolation from other people (Litz et al., 1997). Researchers have examined emotional numbing since the Vietnam War because it serves as a main negative emotional response which people use to protect themselves from overwhelming feelings (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022). People who experience multiple relationship stress or face relationship termination and rejection from others, which nowadays happens too often in dating relationships, will develop emotional blunting.

Modern dating environments which use app-based platforms let users experience rejection and ghosting and ambiguous loss and intermittent reinforcement at high rates. Research on rejection sensitivity indicates that people who go through social or romantic rejections multiple times will develop new emotional processing abilities which lead them to avoid people and stay alert and stay by themselves (Downey & Feldman 1996). People start to protect themselves from emotional pain by showing less emotional dedication to others which leads them to feel less and remove themselves from social situations. The pattern shows how people with trauma show avoidance-based coping methods which they use to handle their trauma at a level which does not meet clinical standards (Bonanno & Mancini 2012).

The process of avoidance serves as a main link between dating fatigue and frameworks which deal with trauma. The field of trauma psychology defines 'avoidance as the process through which people try to escape all reminders which bring back their painful memories including their emotional responses and their need for close relationships and their experience of dangerous situations' (APA 2022). People who

date in the current world use avoidance to avoid making emotional connections and to keep their dating activities at a minimum or to stop dating altogether. Users of dating apps who experience burnout through qualitative research report that they use emotional checkout and automatic dating as methods to avoid feeling disappointed (Chan 2017). People who use these techniques to achieve immediate comfort end up with emotional distance which makes them more socially distant from others.

Moving forward we see, the patterns of avoidance behavior which people show can also get analyzed through the perspective of learned helplessness. Learned helplessness which Seligman (1975) first described shows that people who face persistent negative situations which they cannot control will stop believing their actions can change anything. People who face repeated cycles of dating which include hopeful moments and financial investments yet materialize dating failures without receiving proper reasons tend to develop feelings that their dating efforts will result in loss. People who believe that their efforts and emotional vulnerability and openness will no longer permit them to create meaningful relationships will experience passivity together with decreased drive and emotional shutdown. The research evidence establishes a connection between learned helplessness and depressive symptoms which result in emotional withdrawal and reduced goal-directed activities observed in dating fatigue narratives (Abramson et al., 1978).

The two conditions share similarities yet dating fatigue needs to remain separate from clinical trauma disorders. The diagnostic criteria for trauma require that people experience actual or probable death or severe bodily harm or sexual assault (APA, 2022). Most dating experiences do not meet these criteria. Contemporary trauma theorists now recognize that relationships experience two types of stress which are subclinical and cumulative because they combine multiple instances of low-level stress that produce lasting psychological effects (Herman, 1992; McLaughlin et al., 2017). The pattern of dating fatigue operates as a stress response which develops through ongoing relationship disappointments instead of through specific traumatic experiences.

Research studies have established empirical evidence for the existence of emotional numbing as a

phenomenon that occurs outside of traumatic experiences. The combination of chronic stress and burnout together with attachment insecurity creates a situation where people experience emotional distress for an extended period which results in their ability to feel emotions being diminished and their ability to connect with others being disrupted (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). The attachment theory framework explains how repeated relationship disruptions lead people with avoidant attachment styles to use deactivating methods which include blocking their emotions and creating distance from others. The methods used here do not represent mental health disorders but they turn into problem behaviors when they create barriers to emotional connection in different situations.

Neurobiological research demonstrates that continuous stress exposure affects how the brain processes rewards and detects emotional significance which results in decreased capacity to expect positive results (Pizzagalli 2014). The dating process may result in reduced emotional excitement which leads to emotional numbness and a complete lack of interest in potential romantic partners. The results demonstrate that dating fatigue includes distinct psychological processes which go beyond simple changes in attitude.

The clinical and societal effects of this conceptual framework establish its significance. The practice of pathologizing dating fatigue results in people losing their right to experience natural emotional reactions which occur during relationship challenges. The practice of dismissing dating fatigue as a minor issue fails to recognize its potential to affect both mental well-being and relationship dynamics. Dating fatigue should be understood as a subclinical condition which resembles trauma because it causes distress without requiring diagnostic identification. The current psychological movement supports mental health assessment through dimensional systems which focus on specific contexts (McNally 2016). The study investigates whether emotional numbing which occurs during dating fatigue can be understood through trauma-based frameworks without creating excessive medical diagnostic standards. The research investigates the relationship between emotional blunting and avoidance and learned helplessness and contemporary dating practices to determine whether dating fatigue functions as an emotional defense mechanism against both reoccurring relationship

strain and mild traumatic stress reactions. The development of this answer will affect how therapy operates and how psychoeducation works and how researchers study relationships through online communication platforms.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The growth of digital dating platforms together with changes in societal attitudes towards relationships and the development of faster social interaction methods have brought permanent changes to the traditional method people establish romantic relationships. The dating apps Tinder Bumble and Hinge enable users to create and assess romantic relationships through quick partner selection processes which depend on their physical looks and treat their potential dates as disposable items (Hobbs et al. 2017). The platforms enable users to find romantic partners but they create extra emotional work which brings about uncertain situations and makes users face rejection multiple times.

The academic and popular world uses the term dating fatigue to describe a mental condition which results from emotional exhaustion and leads to decreased dating motivation and relationship cynicism and less emotional response after multiple dating failures (Degen & Kleeberg-Niepage 2022). People experience dating fatigue because they face relational stressors which build up over time until they reach permanent emotional detachment and pessimistic thinking.

People who use online dating services go through two distinct phases which start with positive feelings and end with negative outcomes according to research on digital dating (LeFebvre et al. 2019). The emotional process which people face during their daily life needs actual physical fighting experience between them and their social environment (McLaughlin et al. 2017). Dating fatigue develops into a mental condition through continuous relationship breakdowns instead of being a temporary phase which people experience. Dating fatigue develops into a mental condition which people experience through continuous relationship breakdowns.

Emotional numbing describes a condition which prevents people from feeling pleasant feelings while diminishing their ability to show emotions and their ability to connect with other people (Litz et al., 1997).

Emotional numbing has existed as a fundamental symptom group which defines post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) since its inception for combat veterans and people who experience interpersonal trauma (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022). The system operates as a safety mechanism which restricts emotional connections to safeguard against additional mental distress. Emotional numbing occurs during traditional conflict situations but researchers have documented its presence in situations which involve long-term pressure and exhaustion and extended periods of emotional distress (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). People who experience emotional numbing describe their feelings as "flat" while they feel disconnected from others and show no emotional response to things that used to make them happy. Emotional blunting occurs independently from flashbacks and hyperarousal which are typical symptoms of fear-based trauma with this finding showing that numbing develops without exposure to Criterion A trauma.

Dating fatigue narratives show that the most painful result of repeated romantic failures is emotional numbing which people experience after they have been let down. The people involved show decreased excitement toward potential partners while they display trouble forming emotional connections and they experience emotional withdrawal which they use as a mechanism to protect themselves. Researchers need to investigate how emotional numbing functions within dating fatigue because this phenomenon creates a conflict between using trauma-informed frameworks and understanding normal relationship pressure.

Modern dating environments expose individuals to high frequencies of rejection and ambiguous loss and intermittent reinforcement. Ghosting has become a common relational experience through its practice of terminating all communication without providing any explanation which has become especially common in app-based dating (LeFebvre et al., 2019). People who experience ghosting as a form of rejection process their feelings through their ongoing treatment of the situation because they remain without definite answers about their rejection. The research about rejection sensitivity shows that ongoing social rejection leads people to become more alert about social dangers while they develop methods to protect themselves from those dangers (Downey & Feldman, 1996). People who possess

high rejection sensitivity will expect others to reject them. These individuals handle emotional distress through emotional withdrawal. The emotional suppression which occurs during this time develops into complete emotional detachment through hypervigilance.

The digital dating process enhances these tendencies because it provides more chances for people to experience rejections throughout their dating journey. People who use app-based platforms need to make quick judgments about others because these apps treat users as temporary items which makes it hard for them to develop their emotional connections with others (Hobbs et al., 2017). People who experience rejection-related emotional states, which happen repeatedly throughout their experiences with others, face challenges because these emotions remain unaddressed. These emotions create emotional exhaustion, which acts as a primary reason people experience dating burnout.

The concept of avoidance serves as the main element in trauma psychology because it describes how people try to escape their internal and external reminders of their traumatic experiences which include their inability to create emotional bonds and their need to maintain safe social distances from others (APA 2022). People who use avoidance right after their traumatic event will experience temporary benefits, but their emotional detachment and relationship problems will increase when they continue to use avoidance as their main strategy. Dating fatigue leads to people developing avoidance patterns which include making emotional connections.

Users who experience dating app burnout use emotional detachment as their main method to prevent their feelings of disappointment (Chan 2017). People exhibit these actions which reflect trauma-related avoidance methods although they have not experienced a specific traumatic incident. Bonanno and Mancini (2012) state that people develop avoidance coping skills because they experience multiple stressors which do not require them to experience a major traumatic event. Dating fatigue develops into a subclinical stress response because people use avoidance to protect themselves from the ongoing pressure that comes with their relationships. People who need immediate emotional relief should use avoidance because it gives them temporary relief,

but they should know that it will produce emotional detachment and social isolation, which will lead to their long-term dissatisfaction.

The concept of learned helplessness functions as an extra theoretical framework which researchers use to study how people withdraw emotionally from their relationships when they experience dating exhaustion. Seligman (1975) established learned helplessness as a psychological condition in which people who face uncontrollable negative situations develop the belief that their efforts will not succeed which results in them becoming inactive and losing their drive and ability to feel emotions. People today trust their dating partners with their time and emotional energy and money yet most relationships they start will end either suddenly or without any clear resolution. People who fail to build strong relationships after multiple attempts will start to believe that showing their emotions brings them negative results. Abramson et al. (1978) established a connection between learned helplessness and depressive thinking through which people experience both hopelessness and diminished capacity to feel emotions. The stories people tell about dating fatigue include resignation when they say that nothing will succeed and their belief that sharing their feelings will lead to suffering. The cognitive changes which take place establish learned helplessness patterns which lead to emotional numbness through which people lose their ability to feel emotions. The process develops through various stages which depend on specific situations in the environment while the process produces emotional disabilities that match those of major depressive disorder.

The emotional numbing which people experience during dating fatigue can be understood through the relational framework of attachment theory. Individuals with avoidant attachment orientations are more likely to use deactivating strategies which include suppressing emotional needs and minimizing closeness and maintaining emotional distance. The pattern of dating failures will strengthen avoidant behavior in people who formerly had secure attachment. People use emotional regulation techniques that defend against attacks because their relationships face instability and rejection and they experience uncertain loss which undermines their attachment security. The process of emotional numbing which occurs here operates as a deactivating

method that helps users maintain their independence while reducing their risk of becoming vulnerable.

The use of attachment-based emotional numbing does not result in any harmful effects on mental health. The strategies become maladaptive when they begin to affect emotional intimacy in all relationships instead of their original dating purpose. The distinction allows for dating fatigue to be understood as a subclinical relational stress response instead of a psychiatric disorder.

The research results from neurobiological studies support the idea that dating fatigue represents an emotional condition which people develop through their dating experiences. Chronic stress exposure alters reward processing systems in the brain, particularly within the mesolimbic dopamine pathway, which then results in decreased anticipatory pleasure together with diminished motivation (Pizzagalli, 2014). These changes create anhedonia-like experiences which result in people showing less excitement together with reduced emotional reactions.

People who experience repeated romantic failures develop diminished reward sensitivity which makes their future dating experiences less emotionally satisfying. The neurobiological reduction of emotional responses corresponds with the personal accounts which describe emotional numbness and disinterest in dating. The changes which occurred during this time period resulted in important emotional processing changes which extended stress over time.

People must recognize dating fatigue as a separate condition which differs from clinical trauma disorders despite their shared characteristics. Most dating experiences do not fulfill the diagnostic requirements for PTSD because the disorder's criteria need actual or threatened death serious injury or sexual violence to occur (APA, 2022). Modern trauma theorists recognize that multiple relational stressors and subclinical stressors create enduring psychological effects which do not reach diagnostic criteria for mental disorders (Herman, 1992; McLaughlin et al., 2017). People experience dating fatigue because they develop a stress condition which resembles trauma based on their exposure to continuous relationship harm instead of specific traumatic incidents. The current system maintains

equal treatment for common emotional responses while it protects the actual distress that people experience during modern dating situations.

The study of dating fatigue through a subclinical trauma-informed framework provides essential knowledge which benefits psychotherapy methods, psychoeducational programs, and relationship studies. Clinicians who treat their patients should first explore the emotional state of their clients before conducting diagnostic assessments. The study focuses on three main areas which include interventions based on emotional control and attachment restoration and purpose-based treatment methods. When society acknowledges dating fatigue as a genuine emotional state it refutes the beliefs which consider emotional distance to be either cynicism or personal inadequacy. The study demonstrates how current dating customs experience relationship problems because of both structural elements and technological developments.

The research shows that dating fatigue-related emotional numbing shares fundamental psychological similarities with trauma responses which include avoidance and learned helplessness and attachment deactivation and stress-induced emotional blunting. The best explanation for dating fatigue shows that it functions as a subclinical cumulative stress reaction which does not meet criteria for a psychiatric disorder. The framework enables precise understanding of the situation while maintaining both diagnostic accuracy and emotional competency.

III. DISCUSSION

The current study investigated emotional numbing in contemporary dating through a lens of trauma-related research which investigated whether dating fatigue functions as a subclinical stress reaction or as a temporary change in attitude or as a mental health condition. The research results show that dating fatigue constitutes a significant emotional response mechanism which people use to cope with continuous relationship difficulties according to scientific evidence from emotional blunting research and avoidance mechanisms and learned helplessness and attachment control systems and chronic stress research. The discussion unites these findings to present theoretical advancements which demonstrate

practical value for society and future studies which need to be conducted.

Dating Fatigue as an Adaptive Emotional Response
A central implication of this review is that emotional numbing in dating fatigue can be understood as an adaptive emotional regulation strategy rather than a sign of emotional deficiency or disinterest in intimacy. People tend to suppress their emotions because they think emotional involvement brings more costs than benefits according to present day models of affect regulation (Gross 2015). People dating in contemporary society experience multiple rejections which lead to emotional discomfort about their relationships because they have learned to expect rejection from others who do not share their feelings.

Allostatic load theory maintains that people who undergo repeated stress must develop new systems to control their body and mind functions which will help them achieve emotional balance (McEwen 2007). People who experience dating fatigue through emotional numbing process their emotions through a new emotional response system which developed after they faced persistent social pressure. The phenomenon of emotional blunting creates the appearance of indifference yet it functions as emotional protection mechanism which helps people process their feelings. The research demonstrates that emotional behavior of withdrawn daters results from their current situation rather than their natural tendency to avoid relationships.

Emotional Numbing Beyond Trauma Pathology
The study demonstrates that emotional numbing extends beyond the boundaries of traumatic medical conditions because it represents a continuous spectrum of emotions. The study shows that emotional blunting develops through chronic stress exposure which occurs without fear-based traumatic symptoms according to Treadway and Zald 2011. People with dating fatigue experience emotional numbing which does not include the main PTSD symptoms because they lack intrusive memories and hyperarousal, which demonstrates the need to separate between actual diagnostic trauma and emotional responses that resemble trauma.

The HiTOP system uses dimensional psychopathology models to demonstrate how emotional processes are shared among different

diagnostic groups, which includes emotional detachment and diminished reward responsiveness (Kotov et al., 2017). The emotional response of dating fatigue exists within this dimensional framework because it develops through relational instability which creates specific dating contexts that do not require a complete diagnostic evaluation. The system maintains diagnostic value while it confirms emotional distress as a legitimate psychological state.

People use emotional disengagement and avoidance behaviors to evaluate their potential costs and benefits during their decision-making process. People with dating fatigue show specific behaviors which include distancing themselves from their emotions and decreasing their dating activities and stopping their intimate relationships. The research in behavioral economics demonstrates that people modify their work effort when they see their rewards decrease while their emotional expenses stay the same (Baumeister et al., 2018). People who want to date will stop searching for romantic partners when they find that single their emotional connections.

People who experience dating fatigue will choose to avoid their dating activities because they want to protect their emotional resources. People experience emotional connections within their friendships and family relationships and professional relationships but they choose to end their romantic connections. People with dating fatigue develop a particular way to avoid dating situations which shows that their dating problems stem from situational stress rather than common emotional impairments. Research on situational avoidance demonstrates that people tend to use avoidance behavior when they encounter emotional threats which happen repeatedly (Hayes et al., 2012).

Cognitive Shifts, Meaning-Making, and Learned Helplessness

The discussion of learned helplessness in dating fatigue extends beyond motivational disengagement to include disruptions in meaning-making. Contemporary cognitive models show that people develop motivation problems after experiencing repeated uncontrollable stress which makes them lose their ability to control their environment and their understanding of fairness and their social relationships (Maier & Seligman, 2016). The dating experience teaches people who face repeated failures

that all relationships will end and they will always get hurt from being open to others.

People who experience cognitive changes will react according to research findings about hopelessness and expectancy violation because their emotional response becomes less active when they face multiple unmet expectations (Carver et al., 2010). The process of emotional numbing occurs after people develop new methods to evaluate their emotions because they stop making emotional connections. Dating fatigue develops because people create a relationship between their thoughts and their emotions which leads to emotional blunting that changes their understanding of relationships.

Attachment Flexibility and Contextual Insecurity
This review presents its key contribution through its examination of attachment orientation which functions as a static concept. Researchers who study attachment theory now recognize that people display attachment flexibility which leads to changes in their attachment security based on different situations (Fraley et al. 2015). People who experience repeated relationship breaks during dating will develop avoidance methods which will last throughout their dating period until they reach a point of secure attachment.

The evidence shows that people who experience dating fatigue show emotional numbing which functions as a temporary reaction to their attachment system instead of being a permanent attachment characteristic. People use emotional disengagement to create a balance between their need for independence and their desire to protect themselves against danger when they are in unstable relationships. The ability to acknowledge this flexibility stops people from diagnosing emotional withdrawal as a serious psychological problem when they still show emotional connection throughout their other life activities.

Neurobiological research

It establishes dating fatigue as a condition linked to trauma experiences. The study of stress-induced changes in dopaminergic systems shows that multiple unfavorable results lead to lower reward expectations and decreased motivation to pursue goals (Berridge & Robinson, 2016). People who date lose their enthusiasm for new partners and their ability to display emotions and their desire to date new people.

The effects change according to different situations but they can be restored to their previous state. Dating fatigue causes emotional blunting that resolves itself when people enter new relationship situations or stop dating in stressful situations. The ability to restore normal functioning shows that dating fatigue should be understood as a temporary emotional reaction to stress instead of a permanent psychological disorder.

Clinical Implications

The subclinical trauma-related response of dating fatigue requires assessment and treatment methods which depend on this understanding. Clinicians should wait until clients show complete symptoms before diagnosing depressive or trauma disorders for clients who experience emotional numbness during dating situations. The therapeutic process will focus on three main areas which include emotional processing and expectation recalibration and meaning reconstruction.

People can benefit from acceptance-based and compassion-based intervention methods. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) teaches people to stop avoiding their experiences while they work on developing their core emotional states through the therapy process (Hayes et al., 2012). The process of compassion-focused therapy enables individuals to transform self-blame into emotional safety, which they can achieve through their connections with other people (Gilbert, 2014). The methods used in this study allow researchers to study emotional numbing, which they do not consider a mental health disorder.

Societal and Cultural Considerations

The recognition of dating fatigue as an authentic emotional response creates a cultural conflict which links emotional withdrawal to cynical behavior and emotional unavailability. Modern dating cultures establish emotional resilience as a highly valuable quality while they disregard the total emotional damage caused by multiple rejections. The way people experience emotional distress in digital dating platforms arises from structural elements which include disposable relationships and unlimited user options and missing accountability structures.

The public discussion and relationship education work are affected by this particular viewpoint. The social acceptance of emotional fatigue will help people with dating burnout because it decreases their feelings of shame and self-blame while it helps them

establish better limits and recover their emotional balance.

IV. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The existing literature shows multiple gaps which this review has identified as its main contribution. Most studies show emotional numbing behavior through research from other areas without direct investigation of dating fatigue. Researchers need to conduct longitudinal studies, which investigate how people with dating relationships develop their emotional numbing. The research needs to identify how different cultural groups and genders and sexual orientations experience dating fatigue, because dating customs and relationship challenges show major differences among different social groups.

Future research can improve its results through the use of physiological stress and emotional regulation measurement methods which include cortisol reactivity and neural reward processing to investigate the biological factors that cause dating fatigue. The experience of emotional numbing and the process of finding meaning in contemporary dating settings can be examined through qualitative research methods.

V. CONCLUSION

The study used evidence from modern dating fatigue research to determine if emotional numbing should be classified as a subclinical trauma response or a temporary condition that leads to decreased interest and psychiatric disorders. The research findings indicate that dating fatigue results from emotional processing that develops over time through repeated relationship challenges according to the combined evidence from trauma psychology and emotion regulation and attachment theory and chronic stress research. People who experience emotional numbing together with avoidance and motivational withdrawal behavior use these symptoms as protective mechanisms which help them prevent additional emotional damage in unstable dating relationships.

The conceptualization enables precise understanding which maintains emotional distress assessment at both extreme levels. The psychological mechanisms which underlie dating fatigue share similarities with trauma-related disorders yet the condition fails to meet criteria for diagnostic assessment because of its emotional blunting and reward dampening and

cognitive disengagement and attachment deactivation symptoms. The psychological effects of interpersonal stressors that people experience repeatedly throughout life become substantial because these stressors include rejection and ghosting and ambiguity.

The clinical and societal consequences of dating fatigue become evident through its identification as a subclinical stress response. The healthcare professionals should treat emotional numbing and relational withdrawal through contextual understanding which requires them to use emotional processing techniques together with meaning-making methods and practices that help restore relationship safety instead of using diagnostic terms. The framework shows that current dating practices need to be understood through their fundamental social mechanisms which create emotional responses that people experience during their dating activities.

Researchers should use longitudinal studies combined with cross-cultural research and neurobiological methods to study dating fatigue because these approaches will help them understand how this condition develops over time and varies between different people. The recognition of dating fatigue as a psychological response establishes a path for understanding digital era intimacy and emotional resilience which combines empathy with theoretical research.

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