

Intermittent Reinforcement in Relationships

WHY THE UNPREDICTABLE KEEPS YOU HOOKED

Intermittent reinforcement happens when positive experiences — affection, attention, closeness — are unpredictable. The rewards come sometimes, but not always. This variable pattern can create a powerful pull, making it hard to walk away even when a relationship feels painful or inconsistent. This is an educational overview, not a tool for diagnosing abuse — if you are concerned about your safety in a relationship, please reach out to a professional or a domestic violence support service.

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What Is Intermittent Reinforcement?

Sometimes rewarding, sometimes not.

When positive behaviour — love, attention or effort — happens at irregular intervals, it becomes more powerful than consistent reward. The brain keeps anticipating the next positive moment, so we stay engaged, even through disappointment and hurt.

"The unpredictability keeps the possibility alive."

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How It Works in the Brain

Anticipation activates the reward system.

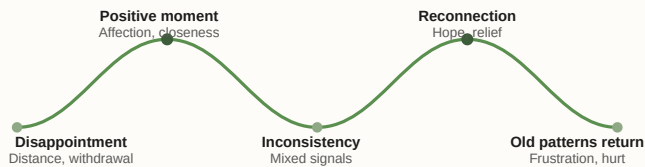
Unpredictable rewards trigger dopamine, a chemical linked to anticipation, motivation and learning. Because the good moments are inconsistent, the brain works harder to get them — becoming more attentive, emotionally invested, and more tolerant of the negative moments in between.

"It's not just what you receive, but when you receive it, that matters."

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The Pattern

A cycle of highs and lows.



The good moments keep you invested, even when the overall pattern is hurtful or inconsistent.

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How It Can Affect You

The highs can feel very good — the lows can be confusing.

EMOTIONAL IMPACT

- ☐ Hopeful and optimistic
- ☐ Anxious or preoccupied
- ☐ Confused and uncertain
- ☐ Tolerant of hurtful behaviour
- ☐ Focused on potential, not reality
- ☐ Difficulty letting go

COMMON THOUGHTS

- ☐ "Maybe this time will be different."
- ☐ "They do love me."
- ☐ "The good moments make it worth it."
- ☐ "I can't give up when it's this good sometimes."
- ☐ "If I try harder, things will change."
- ☐ Other:

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Examples in Relationships

Unpredictable rewards can look like:

- ☐ They are warm and affectionate, then distant or cold
- ☐ Periods of great connection followed by withdrawal
- ☐ Mixed messages ("I love you" then "I need space")
- ☐ Inconsistent effort (making plans, then cancelling)
- ☐ Occasional grand gestures after conflict
- ☐ Hot-cold communication (intense contact, then silence)
- ☐ You never know which version of them you'll get
- ☐ They keep you hoping things will change

Other examples specific to my experience:

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Reflection

Noticing the pattern can create choice.

What are the good moments that keep me hoping?

What negative moments do I tend to overlook or minimise?

How does this pattern affect me over time?

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Moving Towards More Clarity

Understanding the pattern can help you make more intentional choices.

- ☐ Notice the whole pattern, not just the good moments
- ☐ Be honest about whether there is consistent change, not just temporary effort
- ☐ Consider what you are hoping for vs what is actually happening
- ☐ Reconnect with your values and what you need in a healthy relationship
- ☐ Seek support to explore your options and next steps

*"Consistent behaviour creates safety.
Unpredictable rewards create attachment —
but not always a healthy relationship."*

Greater awareness. Kinder choices. A healthier you.

SOURCES Skinner, B. F. (1938). *The Behavior of Organisms: An Experimental Analysis*. Appleton-Century. Walker, L. E. (1979). *The Battered Woman*. Harper & Row.

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