

Negative relationship behaviors are related to trauma symptoms following romantic breakups: a correlation study

Abstract

Several negative relationship behaviors have been related to romantic breakup distress which, in turn, has been related to trauma symptoms following romantic breakups. This Survey Monkey correlation study assessed the direct association between negative relationship behaviors and trauma symptoms to formulate a profile of those at risk for trauma symptoms following romantic breakups. The survey included the Breakup Reasons Scale (a measure of negative relationship behaviors including loss of intimacy, affiliation, sexuality and autonomy), The Trauma Symptoms Checklist-38, and other factors related to breakup reasons. Correlation analyses suggested that scores on the Breakup Reasons Scale (negative relationship behaviors) were significantly related to trauma symptoms following romantic breakups. This relationship was explained by the loss of intimacy. In addition, negative relationship behaviors were significantly related to a more serious romantic relationship of longer duration, lower ratings of the relationship, less physical affection, more verbal abuse, more hours posting messages on the internet and a “betrayal being known to others”. These data suggest that these reliable scales and ratings could be used to form a profile for those at risk for a breakup and for those who might need intervention for trauma symptoms following a romantic breakup.

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Introduction

Negative Relationship Behaviors Are Related to Trauma Symptoms Following Romantic Breakups.

A growing literature on romantic breakups has focused on the distress and negative emotions following breakups as well as several risk factors for the distress and trauma, buffers for the distress and trauma, and interventions directed at those problems. In contrast, very limited literature has addressed the negative behaviors that lead to the breakup and the ensuing trauma symptoms.

Notable effects of romantic breakups include the negative emotions of depression, anxiety and anger.^{1,2} More serious complications involve elevated catecholamines that can lead to immune dysfunction³ and the broken heart syndrome^{4,5} which mimics a heart attack. Several risk factors have been studied for breakup distress and trauma including being dumped or rejected,⁶ having intrusive thoughts^{7,8} and Internet surveillance of the person who initiated the breakup.^{9,10}

Buffers for the breakup distress and trauma have included rebound,¹¹ negative reappraisal of the relationship,¹² and insights about the breakup leading to posttraumatic growth.¹³ Interventions that have been directed at reducing breakup distress and trauma include participating in research,¹⁴ writing narratives about the breakup,¹⁵ Internet group support,¹⁶ and tryptophan (a natural precursor to serotonin that reduces depression).¹⁷

In contrast, very limited research has focused on reasons or behaviors that have led to romantic breakups. Research on reasons for breakups would importantly inform the literature on how to facilitate relationships and prevent breakups. In a longitudinal study, the primary reason for breakups was an unequal involvement in the relationship.¹⁸ This phenomenon was thought to be similar to the “romantic disengagement” preceding breakups reported by others.¹⁹

In that study, romantic disengagement was related to the loss of intimacy as a reason for breakup.

The loss of intimacy has been a contributing factor as has the loss of affiliation, the loss of sexuality and the loss of autonomy. In a study on breakup reasons given by high school students, for example, the students’ explanations for breakups were reviewed and encoded using a qualitative analysis method.²⁰ The responses were assigned to codes for content categories including intimacy, affiliation, sexuality, and autonomy. The authors reported that problems with affiliation and intimacy were the most prevalent in adolescents’ breakups. One of the problems of the study, however, was that the students were only being asked to give the most important reasons for the breakup when, in fact, the breakup may have occurred for many reasons. In this study, loss of affiliation was cited by 44% of the adolescents as being the primary reason for romantic breakups and loss of sexuality was given as the primary reason by 20% of the sample. The literature, however, is inconsistent about the reasons for breakup. For example, in another study on adolescents, an age-related decline was noted on the focus of sexual and affiliative dimensions of relationships favoring a greater focus on intimacy factors.²¹ In another study, however, sexual dissatisfaction, boredom with the relationship, and a lack of reciprocal love were the most important causes of the termination of relationships.²² In addition, autonomy problems including partner dissimilarity and different work styles were also explanations in that study²² as well as in another study.¹⁸

A Breakup Reasons Scale was created from many items of the high school breakup reasons study²⁰ and was administered to university students.²³ In that study, only the intimacy subscale differentiated the high and low breakup stress groups. The study, however, was limited to university students and some have suggested, for example, that affiliation becomes more critical after adolescence.

The present study attempted to correct for previous study confounds by sampling a broader age group and exploring not only the relationship between scores on the Breakup Reasons Scale and the Trauma Symptoms Checklist but also to assess other factors related to the Breakup Reasons scale including relationship ratings, the amount of physical affection, and verbal abuse. Exploring the relationships between the Breakup Reasons Scale scores and the physical symptoms of the Trauma Symptoms Scale scores was important because the trauma scale was tapping more serious problems than the thoughts and feelings that were assessed by the Breakup Distress Scale in previous studies.

Method

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via a study flyer posted on Facebook that listed inclusion criteria for the study, sample items and a link to Survey Monkey where the survey was completed. The inclusion criteria were being at least 18-years-old and having recently experienced a romantic breakup.

Participants

The sample was comprised of 102 individuals (77% female), ranging from 18 to 55 years ($M = 28.17$, $SD = 9.06$). A G^* power analysis suggested a sample size of $N=76$. The ethnic distribution was 51% Non-Hispanic White, 20% Asian, 6% Black, 4% Hispanic and 19% other. Of the various types of relationships, 77% were girlfriend/boyfriend, 19% lived together, and 4% were married. The length of the relationships ranged from 0-3months (3%), 3-6 months (13%), 6-9 months (16%) and greater than 12 months (68%). The months since the breakup had occurred ranged from 0-3 months (54%); 3-6months (11%); 6-9 months (12%); and greater than 12months (23%).

Scales

The survey was comprised of The Breakup Reasons Scale and The Trauma Symptoms Checklist-38 as well as demographic variables and other ratings related to the relationship.

The Breakup Reasons Scale²³ is a twenty-item scale including four subscales on negative relationship behaviors that have been labeled loss of intimacy, affiliation, sexuality and autonomy. The loss of intimacy items include poor communication, distrust, unreciprocated love, diminishing considerate and caring behavior, diminishing empathy, frequent disagreements/arguments, infidelity and hypersensitivity. The loss of affiliation items include boredom, lack of time together, dissimilarity of interests, dissimilarity of personality traits, diminishing fun, diminishing excitement, and increasing time doing own activities, for example, working out or going on the computer. The losses of sexuality items include sexual dissatisfaction, diminishing physical attraction and diminishing physical affection. The autonomy items include problems maintaining independent self and having to have own way or being overly controlling. Each of the items was rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all), to 2 (somewhat) to 3 (moderately so) to 4 (very much so). The internal consistency for this 20-item scale is high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$). The Cronbach's alphas for the subscales were moderate to high (intimacy = .84, affiliation = .79, sexuality = .71; autonomy = .67).

The Trauma Symptoms Checklist-38 used in this study is an adapted version of the Trauma Symptoms Checklist-40²⁴ that addresses 38 physical and psychological symptoms that relate

specifically to breakup: 1) 6 physical symptoms including headaches, weight loss (without dieting), stomach problems, dizziness, passing out, and having trouble breathing; 2) 6 sleep disturbances including insomnia, restless sleep, nightmares, waking up early in the morning, not feeling rested in the morning, and waking up in the middle of the night; 3) 10 sexual disturbances including sexual problems, low sex drive, sexual over activity, not feeling satisfied with your sex life, fear of men, having sex that you didn't enjoy, fear of women, bad thoughts or feelings during sex, being confused about your sexual feelings and sexual feelings when you shouldn't have them; and 4) 16 psychological problems including feeling isolated from others, "flashbacks" (sudden, vivid, distracting memories), anxiety attacks, loneliness, "spacing out" (going away in your mind), sadness, trouble controlling your temper, uncontrollable crying, trouble getting along with others, memory problems, feeling that things are "unreal", unnecessary or over-frequent washing, feelings of inferiority, feeling tense all the time, feelings of guilt, and feeling that you are not always in your body. The internal consistency for this scale was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$). The items are rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (never) to 1 (seldom) to 2 (sometimes) to 3 (often).

Other ratings that were included were : 1) "Rating of relationship before you broke up-including ratings from (1) for ok to (4) wonderful"; 2) "Type of relationship with person rated as (1)boyfriend/girlfriend, (2)living together, (3)married" ; 3) "How long did this relationship last including (1)0-3months; (2)3-6months; (3) 6-9; (4) 9-12; (5) >12months"; 4) "What percentage of the time spent with your partner did you engage in physical contact (kissing, hugging, holding hands, etc.)? rated as (1) 90-100%, (2) 80-70%, (3) 60-50%, (4) 50-40%, (5) <40%"; 5) "Was one of the reasons for the breakup that he/she betrayed you and it was publicly known by others? Rated as (1) Yes, (2) No"; 6) "Did a third person or friend tell you of his/her intentions to breakup? rated as (1) Yes, (2) No"; 7) "Approximately how many hours per day do you spend posting messages? Including (1) 0, (2) 1-2, (3) 3-4. (4)>4"; and 8) "Did any of your partners ever abuse you verbally or in any other way? Rated as (1) Yes, (2) No. "

Results

Correlation analyses suggested that negative relationship behaviors (scores on the Breakup Reasons Scale) were (Table 1): 1) positively correlated with the Trauma Symptoms Checklist scores suggesting that more negative relationship behaviors were related to more trauma symptoms after romantic breakups; 2) negatively related to ratings of the relationship prior to the breakup, suggesting that more negative relationship behaviors were related to lower relationship ratings; 3) negatively related to physical affection suggesting that more negative relationship behaviors were related to less physical affection; 4) a positive relationship to verbal abuse by partners suggesting that more negative relationship behaviors were related to more verbal abuse by partners. 5) positively related to the number of hours posting messages suggesting that more negative relationship behaviors were related to more hours posting messages; 6) positively related to "betrayal being known to others" suggesting that more negative relationship behaviors were related to "betrayal being known to others"; and 7) positively related to "a third person telling you about the intended breakup" meaning that more negative relationship behaviors were related to "a third person telling you about the intended breakup".

The Breakup Reasons Scale was then entered into a correlation analysis on its subscales including loss of intimacy, affiliation, sexuality and autonomy. As can be seen in Table 2, the subscale scores were significantly related to the total Breakup Reasons Scale scores.

Table 1 Significant correlations between Breakup Reasons Scale scores, Trauma Symptoms Checklist scores and other negative behaviors

Variables	Correlation coefficients	p levels
Trauma Symptoms Scale score	0.25	0.02
Serious relationship rating	0.23	0.02
Duration of relationship rating	0.20	0.05
Relationship rating	-0.47	0.001
Physical affection rating	-0.28	0.01
Verbal abuse rating	0.23	0.02
Hours posting messages	0.20	0.05
Person telling you about intended breakup	0.22	0.02
Betrayal known to others	0.24	0.02

Table 2 Significant correlations Between Breakup Reasons Scale scores and its subscales including loss of intimacy, affiliation, sexuality and autonomy

Subscales	Correlation coefficients	p levels
Loss of intimacy	0.86	.001
Loss of affiliation	0.83	.001
Loss of sexuality	0.65	.001
Loss of autonomy	0.63	.001

When the Breakup Reasons Scale subscale scores were entered into a correlation analysis with the other Scale scores and ratings, only the Loss of Intimacy Subscale score was significantly related to scale scores and ratings that were significantly related to the Breakup Reasons Scale, suggesting that the loss of intimacy subscale scores were explaining the relationship between the Breakup Reasons Scale and the Trauma Symptoms Checklist scores. As can be seen in Table 3, Loss of Intimacy Subscale scores were 1) positively related to Trauma Symptoms Checklist scores suggesting that the loss of intimacy was related to trauma symptoms, 2) negatively related to ratings of the relationship prior to the breakup suggesting that less positive relationship ratings were related to loss of intimacy; 3) positively related to verbal abuse suggesting that loss of intimacy ratings were related to verbal abuse; 4) positively related to “betrayal being known to others” suggesting that loss of intimacy ratings were related to “betrayal being known to others”; and 5) positively related to “a third person telling you about the intended breakup” meaning that loss of intimacy ratings were related to “a third person telling you about the intended breakup”.

Table 3 Significant correlations between Loss of Intimacy Subscale scores, Trauma Symptoms Checklist scores and other negative behaviors

Variables	Correlation coefficients	p levels
Trauma Symptoms Scale score	0.32	0.04
Relationship rating	-0.45	0.001
Verbal abuse rating	0.25	0.01
Person telling you about intended breakup	0.22	0.02
Betrayal known to others	0.24	0.02

When correlation analyses were conducted on the relationships between the Intimacy Subscale scores and the Intimacy Subscale items, significant correlation coefficients were noted for all the Intimacy Subscale items and the Intimacy Subscale scores (Table 4). These coefficients were significant for the items including poor communication, distrust, unreciprocated love, non-caring, diminished empathy, disagreements/arguments, infidelity and hypersensitivity.

Table 4 Significant correlations between Lack of Intimacy Subscale scores and Lack of Intimacy Subscale items

Items	Correlation coefficients	p levels
Poor communication	0.61	.001
Distrust	0.65	.001
Unreciprocated love	0.66	.001
Diminishing considerate & caring behavior	0.73	.001
Diminishing empathy	0.78	.001
Frequent disagreements/arguments	0.68	.001
Infidelity	0.55	.001
Hypersensitivity	0.61	.001

Discussion

That the Break Up Reasons Scale scores were significantly correlated with trauma symptoms is not surprising given that break up reasons (negative relationship behaviors) have been related to breakup distress in a previous study²³ and breakup distress, in turn, has been related to trauma symptoms.³ The data from the present study uniquely suggest that negative relationship behaviors contribute to more serious physical symptoms as measured by the Trauma Symptoms Checklist than the previously reported relationships between The Breakup Reasons Scale and the Breakup Distress Scale that taps less serious cognitive/emotional feelings.²³ Surprisingly, although the Trauma Symptoms Checklist includes more serious physical symptoms than the Breakup Distress Scale, which has been considered a measure of posttraumatic stress, the Trauma Symptoms Checklist has not been referenced as a posttraumatic stress scale.

The significant relationships between the Breakup Reasons Scale scores and the serious type of relationship as well as the longer duration of the relationship are surprising. A greater number of negative behaviors would be expected to diminish the seriousness and shorten the length of the relationship. However, negative relationship behaviors may take longer to surface in more serious romantic relationships. And, at least one other researcher has noted a positive correlation between negative relationship behaviors and lengthy relationships.²⁵

That the relationship rating preceded the Breakup Reasons Scale in this survey and was highly correlated with the Breakup Reasons Scale scores suggests that it is a reliable rating of the relationship that was not influenced by the lengthy Breakup Reasons Scale. Having only one rating of the relationship versus a twenty-item scale (the Breakup Reasons Scale) would make for a more efficient profile for identifying those at risk for breakup trauma. On the other hand, the Breakup Reasons Scale assesses different types of negative relationship behaviors including loss of intimacy, affiliation, sexuality and autonomy. Knowing the specific types of breakup reasons may help inform prevention/intervention protocols.

Although all the subscale scores of the Breakup Reasons Scale were significantly correlated with the total scale scores, the loss of intimacy was the only subscale score that was significantly related to the same survey scale scores as the total Breakup Reasons Scale scores. These included the variables trauma symptoms, relationship rating, verbal abuse, betrayal known to others and intended breakup reported by a third person. These results were not surprising as the loss of intimacy subscale was related to the Breakup Distress Scale previously reported for a university student sample.²³ That the loss of intimacy subscale was related to the Trauma Symptoms Checklist in the more diverse sample of the current study highlights the importance of intimacy for relationships. It was not surprising that all of the eight intimacy items were significantly related to the Lack of Intimacy Subscale scores including poor communication, distrust, unreciprocated love, non-caring, diminished empathy, arguments, infidelity and hypersensitivity.

Significant correlations also occurred for other negative behaviors not tapped by the Breakup Reasons Scale (that maybe should have been called the Negative Relationship Behaviors Scale). The significant correlation between the Breakup Reasons Scale scores and less physical affection is not surprising as at least one item on the Breakup Reasons Scale is loss of physical affection. That significant relationship might, in turn, explain the correlation between Breakup Reasons Scale scores and verbal abuse given that less physical affection has been related to more verbal aggression in at least one study which was a cross-cultural comparison between adolescents in Paris and Miami.²⁶ In that study, adolescents in Paris were receiving more physical affection from their peers and, in turn, they were less verbally and physically aggressive toward their peers.

The survey questions including : “Approximately how many hours per day do you spend posting messages?”, “Was one of the reasons for the breakup that he/she betrayed you and it was publicly known by others?”, and “Did a third person or friend tell you of his/her intentions to breakup ” suggests excessive time on social media. Social media²⁷ and surveillance^{9,10} on social media have been noted to have negative effects on relationships. The significant correlations between the Breakup Reasons Scale scores (negative behaviors) and these social media variables might be bi-directional or reciprocal.

Several methodological limitations of these survey data should be mentioned. The data are based on self-report that requires recall. The breakups occurred on average 3 months earlier and they may have also been biased by breakup distress that was still occurring as the participants completed the questionnaires. Longitudinal studies that tap negative relationship behaviors before the breakups occurred might yield more objective and informative data than retrospective data.

Conclusion

In addition, potential mediating variables might be assessed based on more sophisticated analyses as, for example, structural equations analyses. Breakup reasons and trauma symptoms based on observational studies may further elucidate the breakup distress phenomenon. Negative relationship behaviors as they are occurring and after they do or do not lead to a breakup might further inform this literature. Nonetheless, the data from this study suggest that those experiencing romantic breakups are having trauma symptoms that relate to earlier negative relationship behaviors and specifically loss of intimacy. Further, a profile based on these scales and ratings could be used to identify those who need interventions following romantic breakups to help reduce trauma symptoms.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest to declare.

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