

Romantic breakup distress: a narrative review

Abstract

This narrative review includes all 30 papers that were published on romantic breakup distress over the past five years. Although the prevalence of romantic breakups is still as high as 82% of adolescents and young adults, there is relatively little literature. Earlier research focused primarily on the negative effects of romantic dissolutions, while the more recent research involves risks and predictors of the breakups. This review includes different types of romantic breakups, negative effects like depression as well as positive effects like posttraumatic growth. The predictors include finding words on social media that are predictive of romantic breakups as early as three months in advance of the breakups, as well as negative behaviors, lack of self-esteem and grit, narcissism and demographic risk factors including female gender. Interventions have included “storying” about the breakup, Internet Group Therapy and Emotion Based Therapy. Methodological limitations of the literature continue to include the samples which are typically limited to the initiators of the breakup, self-report data taken cross-sectionally, and the limited number of studies that could be systematically reviewed and meta-analyzed.

Keywords: posttraumatic growth, romantic breakup, chemical therapies, relationship

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Tiffany Field

University of Miami/Miller School of Medicine and Fielding Graduate University, USA

Correspondence: Tiffany Field, University of Miami/Miller School of Medicine and Fielding Graduate University, USA, Email tfield@med.miami.edu

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Earlier literature

In a book entitled “Heartbreak” the literature of 2000-2009 on romantic breakup distress was reviewed (Field, 2009). The chapter titles reflect the focus of that romantic breakup research including 1) the phenomenon, 2) rejection, betrayal and loss, 3) social-emotional pain, 4) intrusive thoughts, 5) dreams and insomnia, 6) crying, 7) loneliness, depression, anxiety and anger, 8) complicated grief, 9) psychological therapies, 10) chemical therapies, 11) recovering, and 12) finding love again.

A review of literature from 2010-2019 on romantic breakup distress and recovery included studies that focused on factors that differ from those of the current review by Field. That research was primarily on the effects of breakup distress including sadness, anger and the broken heart syndrome (called cardiomyopathy or takotsubo for the Japanese octopus fishing pot that looks like the left ventricle of the heart following breakup distress). The risk factors for breakup distress included being the “dumpee” versus the “dumper”, internet surveillance of the “dumper”, having been in a spiritual relationship, intrusive thoughts, an orientation towards future relationships or a fear of being single, having the relationship as part of your identity or your self-worth and experiencing social constraints like criticism. Protective factors included having been more committed to the relationship and then continuing to experience closeness in that relationship but also having a rebound relationship. Effective interventions include a writing task describing the breakup, online group discussions of the breakup and tryptophan for its serotonin-enhancing (depression-reducing) properties. Limitations of that literature were much the same as the current literature including lack of generalizability from the mostly female university student samples and potentially biased self-report data.

Prevalence of breakup distress

The prevalence of romantic breakup distress is highly variable. In a review on four studies, 82% of the participants experienced heartbreak with 14% currently experiencing heartbreak.¹ Those who continued having heartbreak were more likely to be single, neurotic and insecurely attached. Surprisingly, heartbreak was unrelated to demographic and personal traits. “Storying” heartbreak contributed to self-improvement.

Types/strategies of breakups

Several different types of breakups have been noted (see Table 1). In one study that compared individuals who broke up over the past six months (N= 71) with those who were still in a relationship (N=46), heartbreak was described by two components including “sudden loss” and “positive affect”.² The sudden loss component included feelings of betrayal, rejection, anger, unexpectedness of the breakup and complicated grief symptoms. The lack of positive affect component included current negative emotions and not feeling hopeful. Both components were significantly correlated with depression, which was occurring in 27% of the breakup group and 14% in the relationship group. And the females had higher depression scores than the males. Limitations of the study included the authors failing to include “having a new partner” as an exclusion criterion.

Table 1 Types of romantic breakups

Types	First Author
Sudden loss and positive affect	Verhallen
Communication modes-open, closed, positive tone, withdrawal	Hoffman
Ghosting	Kay
Ghosting, orbiting and rejection	Panconi
Initiators of breakup	Akbari

In another study, different communication modes during romantic dissolution were described for college student initiators (N=174).³ Emotional intimacy was a greater predictor than attachment style of open strategies. The strategies included direct/open (in person, close friend) indirect/closed (leaked information via friend), positive tone (emphasis on good things in the past) and withdrawal (avoided contact). Those with more intimate relationships were more likely to use direct/open and positive tone communication modes and less likely to use avoiding/withdrawal and indirect/closed strategies. It is possible that the more open and positive tone relationships were characteristic of the relationships per se that then continued into the dissolutions.

In a study entitled “An empirical, accessible definition of ghosting of the relationship dissolution method”, the ghosting phenomenon was noted in a sample of Canadian 17–29-year-old participants (N= 499).⁴

in this study, ghosting was defined as one person suddenly ignores or stops communicating without saying why. The study is limited by being primarily women (65%) and being white (56%).

In another study comparing the psychological consequences of ghosting, orbiting and rejection, ghosters comprised 26 to 39% of the sample (N=176) and victims of ghosting comprised 29 to 47% of the sample.⁵ The ghosters were said to be attachment avoidant and ghostees anxiously attached. Orbiting was defined as periodic following the victim on social media sites without any direct communication with them. Ghosting appeared to have more severe effects with negative attention and rejection being more disturbing than no attention at all in turn being greater than unexpected and unfair. Orbiting appeared to be between ghosting and rejection in terms of distress. Limitations of this study were its young female sample who had experienced breakups a long time ago with no record of the frequency of their appearing on social network sites.

Most of the studies have sampled initiators of breakups, possibly because they have been considered less distressed and have volunteered more frequently for research on breakup distress. However, the initiators have been considered distressed in at least one study entitled “Neglected side of romantic relationships among college students: breakup initiators are at risk for depression”.⁶ In this research on 460 college students from 8 universities who were seeking treatment for depression, 347 met criteria for being initiators of breakups. Breakup distress and depression in this sample were related to and mediated by self-compassion and self-forgiveness. Different stages were noted including relief, guilt, depression, hope and acceptance. The average amount of time that each of these stages involved was not clear. In addition, the study had the limitation that the sample was exclusively depressed initiators.

Effects of breakup distress

Most of the literature on the effects of breakup distress has highlighted emotional upset and depression, as well as posttraumatic stress (see Table 2). In a study entitled “The impact of posttraumatic stress symptoms, posttraumatic stress, cognition, and interpersonal dependency”, 180 college students were given the Posttraumatic Stress Scale.⁷ Posttraumatic stress was associated with psychological comorbidities. That relationship was mediated by a negative view of self and self-blame and it was moderated by an assertion of autonomy. Although the breakups had occurred two years previously, as many as 45% of the sample were still experiencing emotional upset.

Table 2 Effects of breakup distress

Effects	First Author
Posttraumatic stress	Fang
Depressive symptoms	Acolin
Relational schema change	Brunson
Perceived posttraumatic growth	Owenz

In a paper entitled “The trajectory of depressive symptoms in the context of romantic relationship breakup”, 23 young adults had experienced as many as a total of 156 breakups during the two-year study.⁸ The increased depressive symptoms returned to pre-breakup levels within three months. Negative appraisal and low sense of control were significant moderators of greater depressive symptoms.

Positive effects have also been noted following relationship dissolution. In a paper entitled “Lover and learner exploring relational schema change following relationship dissolution”, 328 university students were participants.⁹ The time since breakup widely ranged from 1 to 36 months and as many as 52% were in a current relationship.

The more time that had lapsed, the more positive the schema were. However, the positive change in schema regarding the ex-partner and the relationship may be related to being in a current relationship and having satisfaction and closeness in the current relationship. As is the case for most of these studies, the conclusions are tenuous given that they are cross-sectional, the samples are mostly women and women typically talk about their relationships more than men. In addition, most of the results are potentially biased by being recall data.

In another study entitled “Perceived posttraumatic growth may not reflect actual positive change”, 100 of 599 participants experienced breakups.¹⁰ The participants were followed across 10 weeks of a relationship prospectively rather than retrospectively, which has been more typical of posttraumatic growth studies. Actual growth was unrelated to distress, perceived growth or breakups. The authors suggested that positive reappraisal may be a more appropriate term for the growth in relationship choices and behaviors. In this longitudinal sample, optimism at baseline predicted positive reappraisal at the end of the 10-week period.

Risk factors/predictors of breakups and breakup distress

Predictors/risk factors have been the focus of most of the recent research on romantic breakups and breakup distress (see Table 3). They have mostly involved predictors of breakup distress, although some have focused on predictors of the breakups as well as the distress that follows. These have ranged from finding words on social media sites such as Reddit and Facebook, having positive memories, negative behaviors, lack of self-esteem, lack of grit, personality factors such as narcissism and demographic variables including gender and socioeconomic status.

Table 3 Risk factors/predictors of breakup and breakup distress

Risk factors/Predictors	First Author
Language markers	Seraj
Posts before and after breakups	Fox
Positive memories	Polacio-Gonzalez
Negative relationship behaviors	Kanter
Low self-esteem	Cross, Sullivan
Slow recovery and chronic distress	Verhallen
Narcissistic admiration and rivalry	Seidman
Early adversity	Bae
Multiple predictors	Yuan, Carter, Scott, Van der Watt

In a paper entitled “Language left behind on social media exposes the emotional and cognitive cost of a romantic breakup”, language markers that were apparent on the social media platform Reddit identified potential breakups three months in advance of the breakups.¹¹ These markers were apparent on Reddit and sub-Reddit forums. And, surprisingly, they were unrelated to relationships and seemed to be comparable for divorce or dealing with “major life secrets”. The database included 1,000,027,541 posts from 6,803 Reddit users including posts that were two years surrounding the breakups in various domains of life, not just relationships. The language markers that appeared three months before the breakups peaked the week of the breakups and returned to baseline six months later. Specifically, increases were noted in I-words, we-words and cognitive processing words (characteristic of depression, collective focus, and the meaning-making process respectively). Those who posted for longer periods were less well-adjusted a year after the breakup, although psychological aftereffects on average lasted six months.

In another study on social networking sites, 97 students were given course credit for engaging in mixed methods research which included content analyses of surveys and interviews.¹² Over 3500 posts before and after breakups were analyzed for their role in the breakups. More than 50% of the participants were initiators, half of whom said they used Facebook to signal the breakup event. The dumpers rather than the dumppees were thought to be less affected, making it easier for them to signal the breakup. The persistent appearance and surveillance of the breakups exacerbated the breakup distress.

Positive memories have also been noted to exacerbate breakup distress. In a study entitled “Distress severity following a breakup is associated with positive relationship memories among emerging adults”, the participants (N =91, mean age= 20) kept a diary on their memories by Polacio-Gonzalez. Positive relationship memories led to greater breakup distress and negative memories led to not only greater breakup distress, but also to greater depression.

In a meta-analysis on positive and negative relationship behaviors as potential predictors, 64 dyadic studies were included.¹³ Positive relationship behaviors were not significant predictors of relationship quality or dissolution, but negative relationship behaviors were significant predictors.

Low self-esteem has also been a significant predictor of lower wellbeing following relationship dissolution. In a large sample study (N=1333 breakups and N=1333 still in relationships), propensity score matching was used to compare later well-being of the two groups.¹⁴ Controlling for pre-dissolution well-being, the dissolution group had less well-being, and it was more pronounced in those with lower self-esteem. However, the effect size was small, suggesting that the vulnerability related to low self-esteem may be less than assumed.

Self-esteem was also a significant predictor of breakup adjustment in a paper entitled “Plenty of fish in the ocean”.¹⁵ In this study, breakups during the last three months were assessed for predictor variables (N= 866 participants). Self-esteem, along with optimism and grit were significant moderators of breakup adjustment.

In a paper entitled “Depressive symptoms trajectory following romantic relationship breakup and effects of rumination, neuroticism and cognitive control”, four groups were selected based on Major Depression Inventory scores (N=82).¹⁶ The four groups included resilience, fast recovery, slow recovery, and chronic distress. The slow recovery and chronic distress groups had greater neuroticism and rumination leading to their chronic breakup distress.

In a paper entitled “Narcissistic admiration and rivalry and reactions to romantic breakup” narcissistic admiration involved admiration-seeking and self-promotion while rivalry was defined as defensive and diminishing others.¹⁷ The narcissistic admiration group had greater anger and less sadness while the rivalry group had greater anger, sadness, and anxiety.

A few studies have been conducted on multiple predictors of breakups and breakup distress including demographic variables such as gender and income. In a paper entitled “Relationship dissolution following marital infidelity: comparing European Americans and Asian Americans”, investment model variables were explored (N=325).¹⁸ Investment model variables including gender, income, infidelity, alternative commitment and divorce attitudes led to the stay/leave decision for European Americans. However, only the attitude toward divorce was a predictor of breakups for Asian Americans.

In a paper entitled, “Romantic breakup: difficult loss for some, but not for others”, positive variables were noted in a sample of

undergraduate students (N=286).¹⁹ Positive variables including happy, less anxious, sense of relief and freedom were associated with being female, black, heterosexual, and especially being an initiator of the breakup.

In another paper on the reasons for relationship dissolution in female same-gender and queer couples, female same-gender females experienced greater dissolution rates compared to male same-gender and mixed gender couples.²⁰ Retrospective reasons that were given included too much arguing and conflict, mental health problems, infidelity and lack of sexual satisfaction.

In other research on multiple factors associated with breakup distress, 886 individuals from low and middle income countries (70% female) comprised the sample.²¹ The risk factors/predictor variables for breakup distress were being female, not being religious, being Catholic, having a minority sex orientation, having greater childhood adversity and lifetime trauma exposure.

Early adversity was also noted in a larger sample of young adults (N=9275).²² In this study, four classes ranged from those who maintained stable romantic relationships to those who had multiple cohabitation dissolutions and divorces from 18–30 years. Early socio-economic adversity predictors were revealed, including disrupted transitions to adulthood, conflict and low levels of future orientation.

Buffers/interventions for breakup distress

At least one buffer and three interventions have been noted in this recent literature on romantic breakup distress (see Table 4). Self-compassion can be viewed as a buffer and the more formal interventions have been storying, Internet Group Therapy and Emotion-Based Therapy.

Table 4 Buffers/interventions for breakup distress

Buffers/interventions	First author
Self-compassion	Zhang
Storying about heartbreak	Dunlop
Internet-based group therapy	Kia
Emotion-based Therapy	Erteza

In a study entitled “Self-compassion promotes positive adjustment for people who attribute responsibility of a romantic breakup to themselves”, three studies were included (N = 441) by Zhang. Self-compassion (controlling for self-esteem, attachment style and prior relationship characteristics) predicted better romantic outlook and boosted self-improvement motivation regarding future relationships.

In a review of 4 studies already mentioned, writing or “storying” about heartbreak led to self-improvement.¹

In a study on Internet-based Group Therapy, students with adjustment disorder due to romantic breakup distress during 2020 (N =30, mean age= 18-38 years-old) were given 90-minute sessions.²³ At a one-month follow-up post-test, the therapy group had greater distress tolerance and cognitive emotional regulation strategies than the group without therapy.

In an Emotion-based Therapy intervention, women from Iran (N=30, 18-35 year-olds) had 10 sessions of 90-minutes each.²⁴ The therapy contributed to 73% less mental pain at the follow-up, 40% less avoidance at the follow-up and 80% greater forgiveness at the follow-up.

Methodological limitations of the literature

Several of the methodological limitations of this literature are similar to those that were apparent in an earlier review on romantic breakup distress by Field. These include a limited number of studies which at this time may relate to infrequent research being conducted during COVID but also limited funding for relationship studies which has been a continuing problem.

Sampling has also been a continuing problem of this literature including the demographic homogeneity of the samples being primarily young, white females. At least one research group has addressed additional sampling problems in a paper entitled “Generalizability of results from dyadic data”.²⁵ In this paper, the authors discussed the problem of the data deriving from one participant, usually the initiator of the breakup. Other problems they discussed include conflict and satisfaction at baseline being weaker predictors of breakup among those without versus those with a co-participating partner. Further, dissatisfied couples are less likely to participate in the research and especially in a dyadic study. In addition, individuals with attachment avoidance are less likely to participate. And, still another problem is that couples in asymmetrically committed relationships are less likely to participate as are dual career couples. Further, dyadic data are costlier and more time consuming to collect. As the authors suggested “not having a partner for a survey study is two times more likely to lead to breakup”. These conclusions were based on a longitudinal 5-year study in the US and Germany (N= 5118 participants at baseline and follow up five years later). A related problem is that having a new partner at the time of the breakup survey is a possible confounding variable.

Other methodological limitations include most of the data being cross-sectional rather than longitudinal, making it impossible to determine causality or directionality. And the data have typically been self-report with limited recall reliability. As is typical of most research, the researchers have focused on variables of interest, leading to the limited number of systematic reviews and meta-analyses in the literature. Although multiple measures have been assessed in other studies, they are often not submitted to regression analysis or structural equation modeling to determine their relative significance or the variance explained by the various variables.^{26–28}

As already mentioned, the current literature has focused more frequently on breakup styles and predictors of breakup distress in contrast to the earlier literature that was more related to the negative effects of breakup distress. Hopefully these predictor/risk data will enable more accurate profiling of those who need intervention as well as inform more effective interventions for breakup distress. Surprisingly, intervention research has rarely appeared in this recent literature. However, those few studies have suggested that breakup distress can be ameliorated by interventions.^{29,30}

Conclusion

This narrative review includes all 30 papers that were published on romantic breakup distress over the past five years. Although the prevalence of romantic breakups is still as high as 82% of adolescents and young adults, there is relatively little literature on breakups and breakup distress. Earlier research focused primarily on the negative effects of romantic dissolutions, while the more recent research is more related to risks and predictors of the breakups. This review includes different types of romantic breakups, negative effects like depression as well as positive effects like posttraumatic growth. The predictors include finding words on social media that are predictive of romantic breakups as early as three months in advance of the breakups, as well

as negative behaviors, lack of self-esteem and grit, narcissism and demographic risk factors including female gender. Interventions have included “storying” about the breakup, Internet Group Therapy and Emotion Based Therapy. Methodological limitations of the literature continue to include the sampling typically being limited to the initiators of the breakup, self-report data taken cross-sectionally, and the limited number of studies that could be systematically reviewed and meta-analyzed.

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Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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