



Attachment Styles, Breakup Distress and Post-Breakup Growth following Relationship Dissolution.

Ishika Bhardwaj*, Dr. Shruti Dutt**

*- M.A. Clinical Psychology, Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Noida,

** - Assistant Professor, Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Noida.

ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study was to examine the relationship between attachment styles, breakup distress and post breakup growth following romantic dissolution of adults. 100 participants within the age range of 18-27 and hailing from different socio-economic backgrounds gave their consent to be a part of this study. Participants completed self reported questionnaires for Attachment styles (Experiences in Close Relationship Scale- Short Form (ECR-S)), Breakup distress (Breakup Distress Scale) and Post breakup growth (Post Traumatic Growth Inventory). Data was analysed using Pearson's Correlation using SPSS software. Results indicated a significant relationship between Attachment styles and Breakup distress, while no significant relationship was found between breakup distress and post breakup growth and attachment styles and post breakup growth. However, there was a weak correlation between the two respectively. In Conclusion, people with insecure attachment styles experience greater breakup distress even after a significant amount of time has passed since the breakup, following which they do not experience positive growth. There were some limitations to the study that can be addressed by future researchers such as the self-selection of the participant samples in these tests may have reduced the universality of our outcomes. The few prior studies on this subject may also be a limitation to research.

Keywords: Attachment Styles, Breakup Distress, Post Breakup Growth, Insecure Attachment

INTRODUCTION

There are significant individual variations in how people respond to romantic breakups; while some report little psychological or somatic disturbance, others report intensified sadness and anger, negative thoughts, a decrease in life satisfaction, worsening physical health, and the first signs of mental disorders like major depression. Although there is evidence that there are variations in breakup misery, few research have looked at the personality factors that determine personal growth after a breakup—the possible benefit of ending a

relationship (Sbarry & Emery, 2005). Despite the fact that attachment theory is frequently used to explain the beginning, continuation, and end of romantic relationships, no prior research has connected individual variations in attachment style to post-breakup development (Marshall et al., 2013). The purpose of the current investigations was to close this research gap and further investigate the relationship between post-breakup growth and breakup suffering. In order to comprehend individual variances in post-breakup distress and personal development, we must talk about attachment theory.

Attachment Theory

The attachment theory holds that an infant's interactions with care providers throughout infancy shape internal frameworks of self and others that guide affect, cognition, and behaviour throughout a person's lifetime. When care providers are consistently accessible and responsive, people are more likely to develop a secure attachment style, which is characterised by self-confidence that one is deserving of love, reliance on an attachment figure as a safe foundation from which one can explore the world, and a desire for proximity, comfort, and support from carers. (Marshall et al., 2013). Contrarily, persons with insecure attachments frequently had caretakers who were either irregularly accessible and responsive (attachment-anxious people) or neither available nor responsive (attachment-avoidant people). Adults who are severely anxious frequently overindulge in closeness, reassurance, and praise and harbour self-doubts about their worth and lovability. They also fear rejection. Anxious persons frequently use hyperactive strategies to re-establish proximity when providers seem inaccessible, such as crying, imploring, clinging, or throwing a fuss. On the other hand, those who are very avoidant tend to be excessively self-reliant, sceptical of other people, and uncomfortable with closeness. Deactivation tactics, which aim to restore self-sufficiency by defensively lowering distress and proximity-seeking, are commonly used by attachment figures when they are seen to be unreachable. (Marshall et al., 2013)

How Attachment Styles Affect Adult Relationships

Understanding how attachment style influences and moulds one's interpersonal relationships can help them comprehend their behaviour, view their partner, and respond to intimacy. One may more clearly comprehend what they want in a spouse and how to handle conflicts after they've recognized these patterns. It's important to realise that the strength of an attachment is not just reliant on the amount or quality of a baby's care, even if it does play a key role in the formation of attachment patterns, especially in the first year. Instead, the basis for attachment is nonverbal emotional communication that grows between a provider and a newborn. (Robinson et al., 2023)

Breakup Distress

Disbelief over the breakup and a sense of loneliness and emptiness following the loss were among the symptoms that made up the concept of breakup anguish. (Tiffany et al., 2009). The Breakup Distress Scale (BDS, Field et al., 2009) total score was operationalized as the breakup distress score. Recent neuroscience research suggests that our brains absorb romantic breakups in a way that is comparable to how our bodies

process physical pain. Because it represents the loss of not only the partnership but also of their shared future responsibilities, aspirations, and hopes, a couple's separation can be incredibly painful. It is in our nature to be with at least one other person in order to increase our chances of surviving. This explains why moving on from an ex-partner may be difficult for many people. The kinds of connection we experienced as kids have a direct effect on how we grieve and handle relationship loss. (Relationship Breakup and Loss, 2016)

Post Breakup Growth

Positive psychological alterations that take place after enduring a potentially traumatic event have been given various labels, including stress-related growth, flourishing, or antagonistic growth (Owenz & Fowers, 2018). The most popular and in-depth model is the theory of posttraumatic development (PTG; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996). A good psychological change can take place in (at least) one of the subsequent categories, in accordance with Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996): interactions with others, possibilities for growth, inner fortitude, spiritual transformation, and appreciation of life. PTG has been conceptualised as a coping strategy or as the result of a person's battle with a traumatic event.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of 100 participants in the age range of 18-27 with ((65 females, 35 males). Participants consisted of students pursuing graduation, post-graduation to people who are working. The only inclusion criterion was that participants had to have self reported a romantic breakup. Participants were not excluded based on any other demographic characteristics, including but not limited to: gender, sex, ethnicity or sexual orientation. In terms of relationship status, 79 participants reported not being in a current relationship/ single, 19 participants reported currently involved in a romantic relationship. 1 participant identified as being married. With regard to the romantic breakup of focus, 34 participants reported ending the relationship, 42 participants reported their former partner ended the relationship, and 24 participants reported the breakup was mutual between the two partners. Additionally, participants were asked about the physical intimacy of the relationship if they were comfortable to which, 70 people responded to the question. 50% participants responded yes and 50% participants responded no as to being involved in a physically intimate relationship.

Procedure

Through a standardised questionnaire, data for this study were gathered. There was a disclaimer that these inquiries into previous relationships can trigger upsetting emotions, and it was advised to seek care if necessary. The first page of the questionnaire also contained a repetition of this letter. The informed consent form was then presented to the subjects, who had the choice of acknowledging that they had read it and giving their agreement to the test or declining to participate. After that, participants responded to a demographic survey and questionnaires for each variable were presented.

Measures Used

1. Breakup Distress Scale

The Breakup Distress Scale (BDS) was created by Field et al. (2013) using the Inventory of Complicated Grief created by Prigerson et al (1995). I measured the participants' level of distress as it particularly related to their breakup from their romantic relationship using the BDS. The BDS was created by Field et al. (2013) by rephrasing grievance-related items to make them breakup-related items by switching each item's subject from the deceased to the former love partner. As a result of this procedure, three statements were left out (for example, "I hear the voice of the person who died speaking to me"; Field et al., 2013). Participants use a scale of 1 (not at all) to 4 (very much so) to indicate how much the item pertains to them. Examples of such statements are, "I think about this person so much that it's hard for me to do things I normally do," and "I feel that life is empty without the person" (Field et al., 2013). Internal consistency for the scores on this scale was high in terms of psychometrics (Cronbach's alpha =.94; Field et al., 2013). By discovering a substantial positive correlation ($r = .87$) between BDS scores and the Beck Depression Inventory, Field et al. (2013) demonstrated the BDS's convergent validity. It's important to highlight Field et al.'s (2013) study, which supports the usage of the measure in present study. Internal consistency based on the current sample was Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.927$. For the final score, the individual items' 4-point ratings are added.

2. The Experience in Close Relationships Scale- Short form (ECR-S)

A 12-item self-report adult attachment type assessment with a close relationships focus is called the Experience in Close Relationship Scale- Short form (ECR-S). It assesses maladaptive attachment in romantically involved adults and provides ratings on attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance, two key aspects of adult attachment. The ECR-S has a stable factor structure, acceptable internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and construct validity, according to the results of the anxiety and avoidance subscales. According to correlations between the two measures, attachment anxiety is linked to emotional reactivity while attachment avoidance is linked to emotional cutoff. A percentile of 50 represents a typical and healthy attachment, whereas higher percentiles indicate more difficulties with adult attachment. The minimum score for each scale was 7 and the maximum score was 42. While those with higher scores are positively correlated with depressive, anxious, interpersonal discomfort, or loneliness, those with lower scores are thought to have an insecure adult attachment orientation.

3. The Post Traumatic Growth Inventory

The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI, 1996) instructions were adjusted to ask participants how much their lives had changed as a result of the breakup, following the same strategy as (Tashiro and Frazier, 2003). Using a 5-point Likert scale with the anchors: Not at all (1) and a great deal (5), 21

items (such as "I developed new interests," "I'm more likely to change things that need changing," and "I discovered that I am stronger than I thought I was") were evaluated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Emerging adults frequently engage in romantic relationships, and because they typically last only a short while, breakups are also frequent. Between 30% and 80% of cases of posttraumatic growth have been reported. Improved interpersonal relationships, increased empathy, and personal sturdiness are a few examples of post-traumatic growth. (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). The goal of the current study was to find association between adults' attachment styles, breakup distress, and post-breakup growth.(18-27). The data was analysed quantitatively using SPSS software to achieve this goal. Surveys with demographic data were sent out, asking about the duration of the relationship, how long it had been since it ended, whether they were in another relationship at the time, and other facts. Likert scale ratings for each variable's intensity were appended along with the standardised questionnaire.

Table 1: Correlation between Attachment Styles and Breakup Distress

Correlations

		AS	BD
AS	Pearson Correlation	1	.257**
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.005
	N	100	100
BD	Pearson Correlation	.257**	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.005	
	N	100	100

****Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (1 tailed)**

Table 1. shows Pearson's Correlation between Attachment styles and Breakup distress among adults in the age range of 18-27. The correlation coefficient came up to be 0.257 which was found to be significant at the 0.01 level ($r = 0.257$, $p < 0.01$). The results showed that there is a positive relationship between Attachment Styles and breakup distress and this means that attachment styles play a significant role in the degree of distress experienced during a breakup. The interpretation is supported by other research papers that state, those who have an insecure attachment style, particularly those who suffer attachment anxiety (anxious-preoccupied), report feeling more tired, needing more time to recover, and displaying more distress and

psychopathology (Seiffge-Krenke, 2006; Garrido Rojas et al., 2016). Additionally, in the study by Yárnoz-Yaben (2010), it was discovered that the anxiety dimension was associated with a higher degree of dependency on the former partner. As a result, it was determined that the attachment dimension, which favours the triggering of negative thoughts and feelings, played a key role in influencing a poor adaptation to the new environment. This demonstrates that the degree of distress felt following a split with a romantic partner is strongly predicted by attachment patterns. In the current study, only seven of the 100 people exhibited secure attachment styles, which was a surprising and intriguing finding after these factors were scored. People with secure attachment styles bounce back more quickly from a breakup than those with insecure adult attachment styles, according to a study by Sbarra and Emery (2005).

Table 2: Correlation between Attachment Styles and Post Breakup Growth

Correlations

		AS	PTG
AS	Pearson Correlation	1	-.056
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.290
	N	100	100
PTG	Pearson Correlation	-.056	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.290	
	N	100	100

Table 2. shows Pearson's Correlation between Attachment styles and Post Breakup Growth among adults in the age range of 18-27. The correlation coefficient came up to be -0.056 which was not found to be significant at the 0.01 level ($r = -0.056, p < 0.01$). The results showed that there is a negative relationship between Attachment Styles and Post Breakup Growth and this means that attachment styles do not play a significant role in the degree of growth experienced by an individual after the breakup. The reasons could be the time frame since the breakup has occurred. For most participants they have had a recent breakup, thus there would be more distress because of the breakup then growth. There seems to be more variety in the research findings on the relationship between PTG and insecure attachment styles. Arikan and Karanci (2012) observed a positive link between the insecure anxious attachment style and PTG in non-clinical samples, however Nelson et al. (2019) found a negative correlation. Positive connections between the

insecure avoidant attachment style and PTG have also been identified (S. Dekel et al., 2011), even though more evidence points to a negative association in this area (Arikan et al., 2016).

Table 3: Correlation between Breakup Distress and Post Breakup Growth

Correlations

		BD	PTG
BD	Pearson Correlation	1	.002
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.494
	N	100	100
PTG	Pearson Correlation	.002	1
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.494	
	N	100	100

Table 3. shows Pearson's Correlation between Breakup Distress and Post Breakup Growth among adults in the age range of 18-27. The correlation coefficient came up to be 0.002 which was not found to be significant at the 0.01 level ($r = 0.002$, $p < 0.01$). The results showed that there is a weak positive relationship between Breakup Distress and Post Breakup Growth and this means that the degree of breakup distress does not play a significant role in the degree of growth experienced by an individual after the breakup. The fundamental explanation for this might be because it is more difficult for people to develop and change their mindsets when there is greater sorrow. According to Tashiro and Frazier's research, people's personal characteristics (such as increased self-confidence and independence), relationship-maintenance behaviours (such as better communication skills), environments (such as cultivating better relationships with friends and family, focusing more on school or work), and expectations of potential romantic partners all showed positive growth after a breakup. Additionally, these researchers discovered that women, highly pleasant people, and those who credited external rather than internal motives for the breakup had greater post-breakup growth. In accordance with research demonstrating that divorce may inspire personal improvement, other studies have discovered that women who are separated from or divorced report having undergone more personal development than women who are still married.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

It is assumed that if future research incorporated a more direct measure of attachment security, such as the Relationship Scales Questionnaire, people with secure attachment styles would experience less breakup suffering than people with insecure attachment styles. The self-selection of the participant samples in these tests may have reduced the universality of our outcomes. The fact that these studies used retrospective ratings of breakup distress makes them vulnerable to memory bias. Future exploration ought to accordingly lay out whether the post-separation working of connection in people with insecure attachment style really surpasses their gauge after some time, as the current discoveries, or whether it adjusts to pre-separation levels or even abatements. Another impediment could be the utilisation of correlation for the purpose of statistical analysis. As this study used a correlation between attachment styles, breakup distress, and post-breakup growth, subsequent studies could use multiple regression analysis to investigate the various attachment styles and areas of personal growth in depth. The few prior studies on this subject may also be a limitation to research. On the subject of attachment styles and post- breakup growth, there is a lack of research. This research gap might be filled by future researchers.

CONCLUSION

The study was conducted to understand the association between Attachment Styles, Breakup Distress and Post Breakup Growth. A total of 100 participants who had ever gone through a breakup between the ages of 18-27 years from India took part in this study. The results indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between Attachment Styles and Breakup Distress while there was no significant relationship between Attachment styles and Post Breakup growth and Breakup Distress and Post Breakup Growth. Researchers were able to develop a preliminary understanding of how people respond to the possible point of vulnerability associated with a relationship dissolution by researching attachment styles for those going through a breakup. The breakup distress is significantly predicted by the attachment styles. Other variables like the length of time since the separation and who initiated the breakup can also help predict how distressing the breakup will be and post traumatic growth following the dissolution of the relationship.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my guide and mentor, Dr. Shruti Dutt, for her guidance and support throughout the research process. I'm a better person and student for having travelled this journey with her.

REFERENCES

- Agbaria, Q., Mahamid, F., & Verones, G. (2021). The association between attachment patterns and parenting styles with emotion regulation among palestinian preschoolers. *Sage Open*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244021989624>
- Akhtar, Z. (2013). The effect of parenting style of parents on the attachment styles of undergraduate students. *Language in India*, 12(1), 555-566.
- Association, A. P. (2013). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5) (5th ed., Vol. 5). *American psychiatric association*.
- Brooks, M., Lowe, M., Kevan, N. G., & Robinson, S. (2016). Posttraumatic growth in students, crime survivors and trauma workers exposed to adversity. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 98, 199-207.
- Brunoa, J., Machadoa, J., Ferreira, Y., Munscha, L., Silèsa, J., Steinmetza, T., Rotondaa, C., Vismarab, L., & Tarquinioa, C. (2019). Impact of attachment styles in the development of traumatic symptoms in French women victims of sexual violence. *Sexologies*, 28(1), 25-30. 10.1016/j.sexol.2018.04.006
- Calhoun, L. G., & Tedeschi, R. G. (1999). Facilitating Posttraumatic Growth (1st ed.). *A Clinician's Guide*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410602268>
- Civiotti, C., Dennis, J. L., Maran, D. A., & Margola, D. (2021). When love just ends: an investigation of the relationship between dysfunctional behaviors, attachment styles, gender, and education shortly after a relationship dissolution. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 2130. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.662237>
- Field, T. (2013). Breakup Distress and Loss of Intimacy in University Students. *Psychology*, 1(3), 173-177.
- Field, T. (2020). Romantic breakup distress in university students: A narrative review. *International Journal of Psychological Research and Reviews*, 3(30), 1-20. 10.28933/ijpr-2020-01-2406
- Field, T., Poling, S., Mines, S., Diego, M., Bendell, D., & Pelaez, M. (2021). Trauma symptoms following romantic breakups. *Journal of Psychology and Clinical Psychiatry*, 12(2), 37-42. 10.15406/jpcpy.2021.12.00700
- Gleeson, A., Curran, D., Reeves, R., Dorahy, M. J., & Hanna, D. (2021). A meta-analytic review of the relationship between attachment styles and posttraumatic growth. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 77(7), 1521-1536. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.23156>
- Honari, B., & Saremi, A. A. (2015). The Study of Relationship between Attachment Styles and Obsessive Love Style. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 165, 152-159.
- Kashyap, S., & Hussain, D. (2018). Cross-cultural challenges to the construct “posttraumatic growth”. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 23(1), 51-69.
- Marshall, T. C., Bejanyan, K., & Ferenczi, N. (2013). Attachment Styles and Personal Growth following Romantic Breakups: The Mediating Roles of Distress, Rumination, and Tendency to Rebound. *PLoS one*, 8(9), e75161. 10.1371/journal.pone.0075161

- Nelson, K. M., Hagedom, W. B., & Lambie, G. W. (2019). Influence of Attachment Style on Sexual Abuse Survivors' Posttraumatic Growth. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 97(3). <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12263>
- Norona, J. C., Scharf, M., Welsh, D. P., & Shulman, S. (2018). Predicting post-breakup distress and growth in emerging adulthood: The roles of relationship satisfaction and emotion regulation. *Journal of adolescence*, 63, 191-193. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2018.01.001>
- Owenz, M. B., & Fowers, B. J. (2018). Perceived post-traumatic growth may not reflect actual positive change: A short-term prospective study of relationship dissolution. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 36(4), 3098-3116. 10.1177/0265407518811662
- Relationship Breakup and Loss. (2016). All Relationship Matters. Retrieved April 16, 2023, from <https://www.allrelationshipmatters.com.au/insights-healthy-relationships/relationship-breakup-loss>
- Robinson, L., Segal, J., & Jaffe, J. (2023). How Attachment Styles Affect Adult Relationships. HelpGuide.org. Retrieved April 16, 2023, from <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/relationships-communication/attachment-and-adult-relationships.htm>
- Sbarra, D. A., & Emery, R. E. (2005). The emotional sequelae of nonmarital relationship dissolution: Analysis of change and intraindividual variability over time. *Personal Relationships*, 12(2), 213-232.
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (1996). The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory: Measuring the positive legacy of trauma. *Journal of traumatic stress*, 9, 455-471.
- Tiffany, F., Miguel, D., Martha, P., Osvelia, D., & Jeannette, D. (2009). Breakup distress in university students. *Adolescence*, 44(176), 705-727.
- Yost, D. M. (2018). Social Media Surveillance and Attachment Style in Breakup Distress. Immaculata University.
- Young, K. M., & Yujeong, K. (2018). Factors affecting posttraumatic growth among college students. *The Open Nursing Journal*, 12(1), 238-247. 10.2174/1874434601812010238
- Zhou, X., Zhen, R., & wu, X. (2019). How does parental attachment contribute to post-traumatic growth among adolescents following an earthquake? Testing a multiple mediation model. *European journal of psychotraumatology*, 10(1), 1605280. 10.1080/20008198.2019.1605280