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## Experiencing Romantic Loss in College: The Role of Social Support on Mental Health

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EXPERIENCING ROMANTIC LOSS IN COLLEGE:  
THE ROLE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT ON MENTAL HEALTH

A Honor's Thesis

by

Keirstin Harkleroad

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## ABSTRACT

The loss of a romantic partner can be a significant life event in one's life. Breakups vary in intensity and length, but any strong enough bond being broken creates a life event. Pearlin's Stress Process model posits that in the face of a life event, such as the loss of a romantic partner, social-psychological resources can buffer the adverse effects of stressors on mental health. This study focuses on the resource of various sources and types of social support to gain an understanding of how individuals cope with a breakup during the already-stressful life stage of college. Using thematic analysis techniques to examine semi structured, in-depth interviews of 8 college students, I find that social support levels are increased directly following a breakup. Specifically, I identified 3 themes following Pearlin's model: *Sources of Stress*, *Mediators of Stress*, and *Manifestations of Stress*. *Sources of Stress* were broken down into sub-themes that characterize the romantic relationship and the breakup experience: *Relationship Distress*, *Strength of Relationship*, *Breakup Distress*, and *Current Stressors*. *Mediators of stress* contain sub-themes that define the sources and nature of social support: of *Negative Reflection*, *Spike in Support*, *Family Support*, and *Best Friend, Best Supporter*. The theme of *Manifestations of Stress* are in regards to the mental health outcomes of *Depressive Symptoms*, *Present Well-Being*, and *Individual Rediscovery*. The findings of this study support the main tenets of the Stress Process Model in that social support serves as a buffer to the mental health effects of a breakup. However, the negative effects of losing one type of social support, that of the romantic relationship, was attenuated by the increase in support by existing support systems, especially those who have previously experienced similar heartbreak. This study highlights the importance of maintaining a strong social support system while in a relationship, which, this study shows, can compensate for the loss of that romantic relationship. For the most effective support

following a romantic split, the results of this study indicate that having someone who has been through such an experience is the most helpful. More research can be done specifying on college relationships and the strength of these breakups, as much literature today prefers the coverage of divorce as a life event instead of breakups. Colleges should seek to further develop structures and services to help students foster social support in response to the findings of this study.

Specifically, this study suggests that peer support groups might be particularly beneficial in mediating the relationship between the loss of a romantic relationship during college and poor mental health outcomes.

College breakups are frequently reported as the worst events in university students' lives thus far (Liang and Horn 2020). Students enter relationships subconsciously aware that the partnership only has two ultimate, potential outcomes: success or failure. The experience of a breakup during this formative time of life typically creates distress. Psychological distress rises as a result, with studies investigating results of decreased self-esteem, stress (Liang and Horn 2020), poor time orientation (Gilbert and Stifers 2011), anxiety, and even intrusive thoughts (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, and Delgado 2009). Though relationships themselves are incredibly specific to those experiencing them, sociologists draw similarities and locate common patterns. Frequently drawn patterns are found by measuring social support.

Social resources are crucial for the well-being of individuals in the face of stressors such as the loss of a romantic relationship, as studies continue to test the plethora of benefits of having healthy relationships with others (Pearlin 1981; Turner 1981). Though the strength and type of support may differ, all can benefit from having people on their side, even if it does simply mediate the stress of life (Pearlin 1981). This concept can be applied to a plethora of situations, with college being an area of particular interest. The physical experience of being on a college campus itself allows for more social interaction to occur, especially when surrounded by those with similar interests as oneself. The college environment was created with socialization and networking in mind, attempting to create a space of well-being during a formative time of life. Despite being in an environment that makes socializing easier, college is also a difficult time for many.

The adverse mental health effects of a romantic separation creates added stress for college students today (Gilbert and Sifers 2011). Students experience the general difficulties of separating from family and creating a sense of self, while some also undergo additional

responsibility from work, romantic relationships, financial distress, and others' needs. The mental health of university students takes a toll as issues such as depression, anxiety, and stress increase year after year (Pedrelli, Nyer, Yeung, Zulauf, and Wilens 2015). As mental health becomes more of a concern, both due to its relevancy and rise in numbers, it is crucial to understand both what is causing decreased levels of mental health and what can develop to mediate the negative symptoms.

College breakups severely affect the mental health of undergraduate students, but with increased levels of social support, it is hypothesized that the mental toll of a breakup is more bearable. Separation during this time of life often means replacing the most prioritized social resource, causing distress in some while finding a replacement if the proper support is not already in place. Best friends, family, therapists, and others may step up in this time of need, but it is projected that best friends more quickly and more effectively replace the loss of a love connection, ultimately lowering depressive effects. The role of social support in buffering the mental health effects of a breakup is to be investigated through the process of in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### THE STRESS PROCESS

In reference to social support, sociologists refer to the Pearlin's Stress Process as a guideline for stress and any associated variables (Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, and Mullan 1981). This model explains the process of social stress through the sources of stress, the mediators of stress, and the manifestations of stress. Though sources of stress could be a variety of things, the interest of researchers' frequent life events and chronic life strain as the catalysts of their stress models. Mediators have multiple possibilities as well, though social support is the

preferred variable. The last domain, manifestations of stress, include both physical and mental effects, though psychological distress often covers the interest of research (Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, and Mullan 1981). The Pearlin Stress Process model is applicable through many different variables if they fit into one of the 3 categories. Though previous sociological research does not specifically place college breakups as the source of stress, utilizing this model to investigate the relationship between romantic separation in college, social support, and the mental health effects of these variables interacting can be done following Pearlin's process.

### *Sources of Stress*

Though college provides opportunity and education for students, it also offers a plethora of potential stressors. Students are learning how to exist independently for the first time, struggling simultaneously with parental autonomy, feeling homesick, gender identity, navigating morality, and choosing a career, all existing with other stressful factors (Newman and Newman 2003). As some manage components of emotional difficulty and academic difficulty easily, it is not so simple for the rest, especially those new to campus. The group most prone to stress from forceful adaptation are college freshmen, as they are experiencing new social and emotional demands (D'Zurilla and Sheedy 1991) while the demographic with the most stress due to academic expectation, pressure to succeed, and post-graduation plans are upperclassman (Beiter, Nash, McCrady, Rhoades, Linscomb, Clarahan, and Sammut 2015). While the ages of individuals in these categories tend to be separated by class, all fall into a category found before adulthood. The age range of 18 to 24 has been labeled by developmental specialists as "late adolescence," portraying a lower level of maturity than most expect (Baghurst and Kelley 2014). Change is a constant for individuals in this period of life, something Pearlin notes leads to stress, as individuals are not tolerant to change, especially if one feels to be in a state of equilibrium

before the disruptor occurs. With change comes the necessary period of readjustment, something extremely uncomfortable for many, resulting in extreme vulnerability to stress and both the physical and psychological consequences of this stress (Pearlin, Liberman, Menaghan, and Mullan 1981).

### *Romantic Relationships*

Romantic relationships have naturally interested sociologists, though most research focuses solely on marital relationships. There is, however, some research on social support specific to significant relationships, one of these being romantic relationships. The existence of a dyadic romantic relationship significantly impacts the amount of additional social support one needs, as monogamous couples typically view each other as primary sources of such support. These preferred sources of support come with the consequence of expectation, however. The model created by Pierce, Sarason, and Sarason (1990) revealed that people develop expectations surrounding the availability of social support when it comes to significant relationships (Pierce, Sarason, and Sarason 1991). Understanding the level of expectations that one has towards a partner requires knowledge about the depth of such a relationship, something the Quality of Relationships Inventory (QRI) aimed to investigate. Researchers have used the QRI to measure relationship-specific views of available support. This assessment looks at both relationship-specific perceptions of available support and the perception of interpersonal conflict, including relationship depth (Pierce, Sarason, and Sarason 1991). It is not just the perception of support that is crucial in essential relationships. Situational factors also take part both through the strength of potential supportive behavior and through the variables that predict such support (Gurung, Sarason, and Sarason 1997). Even with this information, researcher insists that the individual, the couple, and the social context of a relationship must be understood to truly get the



full picture (Felmlee, Sprecher, and Bassin 1990). With all components of a relationship not being completely revealed through interviews, some use a different tool to measure the strength of relationships, and consequentially the negatives of these couples.

Relationship stability is typically reviewed using a longitudinal study due to the specificity of dyadic pairs. Predictors of relationship stability are subjective based on the research team, though quality and social exchange of relationships are frequently chosen in these cases (Berg and McQuinn 1986). Other variables include the sexual nature of the relationship, the exclusivity of the relationship, relationship length, orientation to sexual relations, and satisfaction levels (Hill, Rubin, and Peplau 1976; Lloyd, Cate, and Henton 1984; Douglas and Atwell 1988; Vaughn 1986). Sexual variables yield conflicting results, however, as sexual involvement showed no correlation to relationship continuation 2 years in an earlier study, while a 3-month longitudinal study (1987) showed sexual involvement having a positive effect on relationship stability (Hill, Rubin, and Peplau; Simpson). The most concrete conclusions have been drawn to find that both love and maintenance of a relationship to significantly predict the outcome of a romantic relationship (Berg and McQuinn 1986; Felmlee, Sprecher, and Bassin 1990). With love and maintenance often comes time spent together, another potential variable of measurement. Homans's (1950) findings conclude that two people spend time together if they get along. The application of this to relationship stability creates the idea that the more time two spend together in such a specific relationship, the more intertwined their lives are, giving more reason to stay together (Felmlee, Sprecher, and Bassin 1990). Even as couples spend more time together, differences in equity and relationship investments are potentially disrupting factors. Further research is needed to draw conclusions in terms of equity, as current research focuses on the absolute level of inequity as opposed to the type of inequity experienced. This only leaves

room for over-benefitting and under-benefitting, of which under-benefitting inequity holds greater power in the potential to terminate the romantic relationship, as the person receiving fewer benefits from the relationship is more likely to leave (Sprecher 1986). To further understand the nature of these romantic relationships, research must take Kelley's (1983) advice and incorporate social factors.

The numerous variables of romantic partnerships do not exist in a vacuum but are affected by social networks (Huston and Burgess 1979; Parks, Stan, and Eggert 1983). The assumption of the public is that family and friend connections positively affect relationship stability, though this is not always the case. Positive support is received when there is a strong sense of dyadic identity through the lens of a social interactionist perspective, though this develops alongside the supporters' reactions and opinions on the couple (Lewis 1973). Ultimately, everything is held to a higher degree in significant relationships in comparison to simple social support, creating much more distress when these close relationships are disrupted. When an individual's main supporter is someone that they can no longer go to, there is a large adjustment that must be experienced. Though sociologists have focused on marriage and sometimes investigate divorce, social psychologists have filled the gaps in this research so far, revealing relationship disruptors, such as a breakup, or lack of social relationships have both been tied to physical and mental disorders as individuals become accustomed to a new way of life, without their main person (Felmlee, Sprecher, and Bassin 1990; Bloom, Asher, and White 1978; Thoits 1983).

### *Mediators of Stress*

Though stress exists ubiquitously because of the disequilibrium experienced at this time of life, it is often not confronted individually. Social support is a resource that looks different for

everyone, but in general refers to the love, compassion, and sympathy experienced mutually with expectations and obligations to assist each other in times of need (Cobb 1976). The parameters for social support include family and close friends but also exist in less prominent ways. Support networks include neighbors, friends of friends, classmates, and other minute resources. Social support acts as a buffer to negative mental health effects when coping with distressing events and with support towards continuous adaptation (Aneshensel, Phelan, and Bierman 2013). Increased levels of social resources have been paired with many positive effects such as decreased rates of stress, anxiety, and depression along with a reduction in the amount of medicine one must take, increased recovery rates for both physical and mental health, and other positive results (Cobb 1976). The effects of stress can clearly be lessened with the implementation of social support.

### *Social Support*

Sociological research frequently discusses the importance of social support for both mental and psychological well-being. This support is commonly divided into received and perceived social support, with the field of sociology typically favoring the latter (Turner and Turner 2013). Perceived social support references the knowing that one is valued as an individual. This requires either feeling that one is loved, valued, or able to rely on another person in a time of need (Turner and Turner 2013). The social support less discussed by those in the field is that of received social support, which is simply in reference to things others do for a person's benefit (Barrera 1986; Vaux 1988). While received support is more concrete as it refers to physical action on behalf of another, measuring the perceived social support has been shown to carry more weight. Sociologists, Wethington and Kessler echo this sentiment, revealing that perception of support allows for time for psychological adjustment, something extremely

valuable for life and general, and promotes reflection prior to the collection of data on such support (1986).

Perceived social support continues to be used in the field, all adding to the significance of this in one's life. The benefits of such support are many, though there are two main explanations as to why this aspect of life is so crucial (Turner and Turner 2013). The developmental perspective focuses on how one must experience a form of perceived social support which in turn influences both personality and social development. The other perspective takes the form of a situation-specific model, utilizing perceived support as a coping mechanism following stressful events or circumstances (Cohen 1992; Pierce, Sarason, and Sarason 1996; Pierce, Sarason, Sarason, Solky, and Nagle 1997; Uchino 2004; Umberson and Montez 2010). Both perspectives allude to the short-term and long-term effects of social support on psychological well-being. The two have their advantages and disadvantages, with the developmental perspective focusing on the long-term effects as personality and social skills adapt over time. The situation-specific model allows for the specification of the social environment, especially in reference to a specific event (Pierce, Sarason, Sarason, Solky, and Nagle 1997; Turner and Turner 2013).

As research surrounding social support grows, the foundation it is built upon in the field of sociology remains the same. Cassel (1976) and Cobb (1976) famously hypothesize that social support acts as a buffer to the negative aspects of life's stress. Cobb's (1976) reasoning was based on social support's ability to facilitate coping with crises, allowing for the individual experiencing distress to adapt to change. This support has been shown to not just simply facilitate coping, but ultimately it has been shown to mediate physical and mental health impacts of major life transitions and unexpected crises (Turner and Turner 2013). This protective effect created by social support was reviewed by Henderson's (1992) search to prove the validity of

these conclusions. Henderson found 4 of the thirty-five social support-depression studies did not specifically report a buffering effect, while all other sources noted this aspect (1992; Turner and Turner 2013). Others accept the validity of Cobb's hypothesis but continue the research by comparing the buffering effects of social support to the direct effects it has on mental health (Thoits 2011). It is in this research that the strength of the direct impact on mental health is noted as stronger than the impact social support has by being a mediator. Separating the result of social support into indirect and direct effects allows research to continue more specifically, with some seeing opportunities to further elaborate by comparing the structural and objective portions of social relationships, along with the frequency of socialization one has. Coming back, full circle, Thoits (2011) ties perceived social support to the buffering effect, where support exists as indirect assistance to negative consequences. Here, the most effective stress buffers come from significant others in forms such as love, care, sympathy, and influential support while validation of feelings, advice, and role modeling are best received while coming from someone who has experienced the stressor (Thoits 2011; Turner and Turner 2013). These findings led some to seek more information specific to stronger social supporters as they seem to provide heightened positive effects.

### *Manifestations of Stress*

The existence of stress commonly leads to other negative mental health effects, as stress itself is a broad category that rarely stands alone (Pearlin, Liberman, Menaghan, and Mullan 1981). High levels of stress create physical and psychological issues for those without adequate resources (Cobb 1976; Pearlin, Liberman, Menaghan, and Mullan 1981). To categorize stress, some separate artificial responses, and authentic, unconscious responses in reference to interview questions. This leads to depression, a symptom of stress, being more commonly utilized due to

its raw nature and measurability (Pearlin, Liberman, Menaghan, and Mullan 1981). The variable of depression can be self-reported through use of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CESD-R), allowing for more authentic results in survey instances. This scale measures how often symptoms of depression are experienced out of 4 options, with questions pertaining to depressive symptoms.

Just as stress fails to stand alone, the variable of depression, though more easily isolated, can be indicative of rumination. Periods of extended depression have potential to turn into this hyper fixation on distress symptoms and over-analysis of the causes and consequences of experiencing distress (Nolen-Hoeksema 1998). Untreated depression takes form as rumination more commonly in women, and most commonly in those who already experience depressive symptoms. When responding to stressful life events, the tendency one has to ruminate about such events is indicative of future episodes of strong levels of depression and increased suicidal thoughts. This means that depressed individuals who tend to ruminate will create more negative past memories (Lyubomirsky, Caldwell, and Nolen-Hoeksema 1988) while viewing present situations as overly negative and have a hard time viewing the future as positive (Lyubomirsky and Nolen-Hoeksema 1995). The opposite of ruminate thinking is thought suppression, though the two ironically go hand in hand. Longer periods of thought suppression can imply later increased rates of this ruminate thinking as these coping mechanisms are used in attempt to control one-another (Wenzlaff and Bates 1998; Rude, Wenzlaff, Gibbs, Vane, and Whitney 2002). Identifying the manifestation of stress as depression allows for the further analysis of depressive development.

Using the Pearlin Stress Process Model, variables of interest can be investigated in relation to each other (Pearlin 1981). The stressor, mediator of stress, and manifestations of

stress have been specified to college breakups as the stressor, social support as a mediator of stress, and stress symptoms such as depression as the measurable manifestation of stress. This is done in an effort to further understand the process of romantic loss in college and social support's role on the mental health effects caused by such a stressor.

## METHODS

### *Participants*

All participants experienced a romantic separation during the pursuit of their undergraduate degree. The criteria of this study required that the past relationship exceed a minimum of 3 months, with the shortest relationship collected being 9 months, and no limit on the length of the past relationship, the longest here being 4.5 years. Some participants had experienced multiple breakups, whether they be in high school or college, and were asked to discuss the most recent one. The time since separation varied as well, with the most recent split happening just a week prior to the interview. One participant recalled a relationship that ended 3.5 years ago, though this study first aimed to keep the separation period to a maximum of 3 years for reputable recollection of events. Other relationship lengths fell in between this range.

### *Data Collection*

Data was collected using the process of in-depth interviews, collected using snowball sampling. An interview guide was created as an outline for interviews [see Appendix], though follow-up questions not specifically listed in the interview guide were asked based on the openness and content of participants' responses. Interviews were conducted in-person and via Zoom, all being recorded using the Voice Memos app. Transcriptions of interviews were completed both manually and using Otter.ai. Participants were generally aware of the context of this study prior to the conversation itself, but further description was provided towards the

beginning of the interview. Virtual evaluation required verbal consent to record and use the information provided in responses, though a physical consent form was created for in-person data collection. The duration of interviews ranged from 17 minutes to 32 minutes. The interview was divided into three sections reflecting the stress process model components of stressors, mediators, and stress outcomes. The first asked for an explanation of the previous relationship and the breakup process, with multiple questions specific to social support. The second section was entirely about social support. This was used in case there was not enough elaboration on the first section and for the additional questioning of present-day support. The final section pertained to mental health today, based loosely on the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Short Depression Scale questions (CES-D-R 10) and more directly to the symptoms of stress revealed in Pearlin's description of stress-manifestations (Pearlin 1981). All participants were allowed to elaborate on anything left unsaid at the end.

### *Data Analysis*

Interview transcriptions were open-coded, then focus-coded to identify hypothesized themes and any unpredicted themes. This thematic analysis allowed for isolation of variables as similarities and differences were found within transcriptions (Braun and Clarke 2006). Using the software Dedoose, the interview responses were able to be categorized following the intentions of the interview guide. Sectioning the interview itself into the three sections of the breakup, social support, and mental health allowed for a sense of openness between interviewer and respondent while allowing for more time to elaborate on similar variables during the discussion.

## RESULTS

There were situational and demographic differences found in this sample of 8. This sample contains 5 female-identifying participants, all referencing past straight relationships. Of



the 3 men, 1 experienced a gay relationship, with the other 2 only referring to relationships with women. Of the 8, 3 individuals were broken up with, 4 broke up with their partner, and 1 was a mutual split. The participants' ages varied from 21-24, most currently enrolled in undergraduate school with 1 participant in present pursuit of a master's degree. Only 2 participants were living with their partner at the time of separation, with 1 having lived with the significant other in the past but were living on separate campuses during the breakup period. The experiences of these individuals may have many similarities, but there are also key differences found in the review of the variables of interest [see Table].

Investigating the role of social support in the event of a college breakup in relation to mental health reveals the necessary nature of this support. Themes found in the analysis of interviews are categorized using the Pearlin Stress Process Model (1981). Sources of stress includes the initial variable of interest: college breakups. This is prefaced, however, by relationship distress, and strength of relationship, as this is indicative of the turmoil caused by the breakup, followed by current stressors. The mediators of stress include social support, of course, but differences are first brought to attention. Instances where the past relationship is more of a stressor than the breakup itself creates the category of negative reflection. Spike in support occurs in reference to quantity and quality of support, with other sub-categories of family support and best friend-related support to follow. Manifestations of stress exist in reported depression, present wellbeing, and individual rediscovery. Now, the source, mediators, and manifestations of stress can be applied to college breakups and the mental health of students today.

### *Sources of Stress*

The attitude of reflections can depend on the breakup terms, length of the relationship, time since the relationship, and many other potential variables. Most of the discussion of the past was targeted towards the past relationship dynamics and breakup period, though comparing stressors felt during the relationship to current stress seemed to aid respondents in comfortable answering this question.

*Relationship Distress.* Not all relationships are created equally. Some participants located stress in the past relationship itself instead of focusing on the distress of the breakup. Brooke finds relief in revealing a stressor from her past, stating, "... because he was so independent, I think I definitely would...like...self-sacrifice a lot. And I was more of a giver, and he was more of a taker." Here it is clear that Brooke felt she gained more from this relationship than her counterpart, a stressor also found in the reflection of another. Brooklyn shares, "...I'm a giver, right? But I also need, you know, I need a little bit in return too...I just felt like if I just kept giving more and more, he'd eventually give back, and he always made it seem like he would..." Disappointment in the level of perceived support from their partners caused stress in these situations, and is later tied to early detachment while still in past relationships.

*Strength of Relationship.* While not every college relationship is extremely serious, relationships are still taken seriously, especially if a dyadic relationship is created. Participants were not asked directly if they were in love with their previous partner, but some reflected on this in reference to the strength of the bond they had with their ex. Ben reveals he "convinced himself that [his partner] was like the love of my life." Ben's situation involved breaking up and getting back together several times over the course of 2 years, creating an addictive, but less desirable relationship circumstance. Lack of love was voluntarily reported as well. Brooklyn reflects on her detachment from this past relationship- "We broke up like... like 5 months ago-

ish, but I haven't been in love with him for like a year and a half." The distance created within the relationship typically makes room for improvement in mental health following. This trend is true in Brooke's case as well- "I've been thinking about breaking up with him for a while... So my goal was just to finally, like, say everything that I wanted to say. Like truly get closure from him and be like... 'you actively don't choose to be the person that I need you to be in the relationship... So it feels like I got that closure that I needed. And I kind of, like, let the breakup be my emotional release. So then afterwards, it wasn't very painful to like, deal with the aftermath of anything." By not being completely present in the relationship until the end, these two avoided potential escalations to their emotional distress following the event.

*Breakup Distress.* The source of stress this study is concerned with is that of a breakup. Loneliness is a common feeling after a breakup, even if you are the one initiating the separation. This was the case for Alex, revealing, "...so I think there is a new sense of loneliness that comes from not being physically in person with him," as it took her a longer period to come to terms with the separation. This feeling resonated with Brandon as well, having been broken up with suddenly, over text, this was expressed in the interview- "There was no closure for months...I was forced to face like, these feelings, and it was during the pandemic, so it was just weird." Pandemic loneliness paired with the gap of support from losing a partner is a lot, but not all experience this depressive symptom for long. Brooke, having disconnected from her relationship before its end, easily shared, "The loneliness lasted probably for a day. Like I was like, saddish. And would get sad for like a day." Distress from these breakups is felt in all circumstances, whether it be as brief as Brooke's relationship grief or longer, like Alex's, there is hope for improving mental health in all situations through social support.

*Current Stressors.* Being separated from past relationships can give one the tools to cope better in the present day or could simply make one more grateful. Either way these students had a lot of stress due to school at the time interviews were conducted. While Brooklyn replied to the question about her current stressor with a simple “school for sure,” Alex elaborates slightly, sharing, “I am so constantly stressed about school.” Each participant showcased their own way of reporting that school is stressing them out, while a few provided their mechanisms for handling such stress.

### *Mediators of Stress*

*Negative Reflection.* In answering social support’s effect on coping with a life event, it is important to first understand the individual’s support resources. Though the structure of college campuses may create an environment for social interaction, it is up to the individual to utilize these resources while determining where past social priorities exist. Participants reference friends, family, counselors, roommates, and partners as sources of support, but the mention of such agencies did not happen at the same rate. One interviewee in particular, Brooklyn, felt little support while in her past relationship. In her situation, she felt uncomfortable inviting female friends over after the trust in her relationship was broken. Brooklyn shared, “Yeah, I didn’t want to have people over anymore. He would go out, not invite me, and then get pissed at me if I invited people over [when he wasn’t home].” Before experiencing a breach of trust, Brooklyn “liked hanging out with [her] friends,” but felt so isolated in this situation, she went as far as to state, “I was so lonely.” Separation from social support was not just motivated by wanting to protect her friends, Brooklyn also felt socially limited because it created fights- “I definitely went through a period where I didn’t really talk to a lot of people because I couldn’t. It just wasn’t worth the argument.” Even Brooklyn found support after her breakup. “Luckily, I feel

like I just have really good friends,” Brooklyn states in explaining how she reconnected with past support. In instances where low levels of support were able to be felt during the relationship, participants find it easier to transition out of their past relationship, as they reflect on this time as something bad that happened to them. This changes the frame of the Stress Process Model, as the past relationship is the stressor, with the support coming from the termination of this poor partnership.

*Spike in Support.* A shift in quality and quantity of support is expected following a life event, though an increase in both was not expected to exist in every instance. All participants reported increased time spent with old friends, with some respondents even being motivated to make new friends. Brooke reports more general social interaction directly following her breakup, accrediting “my art and design friend group, and I think... just random people in my class. I just started talking to them more in general.” While Brooke feels the mediating effects of social support, Ben continues to report on more active perspectives, sharing, “...having more time to, um, be with friends and everything definitely strengthened a lot of relationships, so I feel like a lot more support.”

In the process of receiving higher levels of support, some respondents learned how to be a better friend along the way. Kaitlyn, who received much support from her best friend following her breakup, shares that she “feel[s] like I’ve been a better friend. And I’m more focused on [my friend] and her needs as well.” Kaitlyn was not the only individual who noticed self-improvement in this area. Wyatt shares his reflection after sharing gratefulness for his friend’s acceptance that he has reappeared in their lives- “...and I don’t know if that speaks to something, but I definitely want to be there for them as much as they were for me in this.” Gratitude for

social support during the breakup will help Kaitlyn and Wyatt help their friends through their next breakups.

*Family Support.* Support comes in a variety of forms. Family as a resource was coded in each interview, as familial closeness can change greatly during this time of life, however, family relationships between participants were not universal. Not all respondents had a traditional family structure, and there were some instances in which parents were not listed as being supportive. Brooklyn was a participant who found little help in her family. When asked if there was anything her supporters were lacking in their assistance to her breakup, Brooklyn stated, "...my family just really keeps disappointing me." While this was the only instance of specific disappointment from family support, Ben also revealed a lack of depth in this field- "My family was supportive, but also not." Elaboration of this statement was requested, with Ben explaining, "Up until this Christmas, honestly, I just had to talk to them and was like, 'You guys need to stop bringing him up,' and all that cause they'd think we were going to get back together, so that was annoying." Ben qualified this by emphasizing his family's attempt to be supportive, portraying a more neutral source of support altogether.

Family can still support some from a distance. With no participants living with their families, any support is indicative of a future familial relationship. Participants who emphasized the help of their parents are Alex, Wyatt, and Ashley, though one connection stood out. Wyatt revealed not taking the time to see his parents prior to his breakup. This life experience inspired Wyatt to text his dad- "I text my dad, I'm like 'Have you ever... you know... what is a bad breakup?'" The text received a response, "I just thought it was such a dumb text because... he's like, 'Well, I've been divorced.'" This series of vulnerable exchanges brought Wyatt home to have a discussion with his dad- "This is the first time I ever talked to my dad about like,

relationships, like ever.” It seems as though Wyatt found support in a place he forgot it existed. The opposite happened in Ashley’s case, with her familial support happening due to other supports falling short- “I hung out with my family a lot more because my best friend wasn’t there for me like I thought she would be.” A shift in support during this time is expected, though most shift from their partner as a primary supporter to a best friend, not from best friend to family.

*Best Friend, Best Supporter.* Of the 8 interviews, 6 respondents went to their best friends with news of the breakup first, with 1 respondent going to family and 1 unclear response. Three instances seemed as though convenience could have been a component, as their best friend was the closest person to them in terms of proximity, while the other three communicated to their best friend over the phone to share the news, telling their roommates afterward in these instances. Kaitlyn showed much appreciation for her friend’s help- “she told me she was there for me... she became over, and she just sat with me... and she just wanted to make sure I knew she was there for me.” Here, it is evident that supporters don’t always have to be actively supporting. The listening and availability portion of support is just as relevant, though Wyatt appreciates his friend for more active help. He sought out his best friend’s advice “because he’s like... he’s very pensive, and that sort of thing. Very thoughtful.” Admirable characteristics of other participants’ best friends were reported, some with more insight as to the reasoning for their friend’s helpfulness.

While best friends are clearly good support options, there are others to go to when trying to cope with a life experience like this one. Several participants shared sentiments from close friends who had also been through breakups and emphasized how helpful these relationships were. Ben goes into the most detail, sharing, “My best friend, Grace, met in college. Um, she actually was going through a breakup at like the same time as me, in like the same situation, like,

so, we both were like in long-term relationships at the same time. Hers was like from high school, so it was like, crazy longer, but... [she and I] both were going through the on-and-off thing with our boyfriends at like the same time so, I mean, we still talk about it all the time... It was really nice having someone go through a breakup at the same time.” Other participants referenced their best friends as being supportive but did not connect their supportiveness with past relationship experiences directly.

### *Manifestations of Stress*

*Depressive Symptoms.* Loneliness is a common feeling after a breakup, even if you are the one initiating the separation. This was the case for Alex, revealing, “...so I think there is a new sense of loneliness that comes from not being physically in person with him,” as it took her a longer period to come to terms with the separation. This feeling resonated with Brandon as well, having been broken up with suddenly, over text, this was expressed in the interview- “There was no closure for months...I was forced to face like, these feelings, and it was during the pandemic, so it was just weird.” Pandemic loneliness paired with the gap of support from losing a partner is a lot, but not all experience this depressive symptom for long. Brooke, having disconnected from her relationship before its end, easily shared, “The loneliness lasted probably for a day. Like I was like, saddish. And would get sad for like a day.” Distress from these breakups is felt in all circumstances, whether it be as brief as Brooke’s relationship grief or longer, like Alex’s, there is hope for improving mental health in all situations through social support.

Though many participants seem to have moved on smoothly, the breakup wound was fresh for 2. Kaitlyn, who had the longest relationship from this study, is having difficulty several months post-breakup- “I’m still working on, on loneliness and figuring out who I am, but I think



I'll be better after this." Seeing the positive is important for recovery from these depressive symptoms. Other reports of loneliness come from Ben, sharing he still feels lonely "2 or 3 times a week, at night," despite having many social opportunities. It seems that time is crucial in the healing process.

*Present Well-Being.* In reflecting on past stressors, it is no surprise college students listed schooling as a focal point. Alex and Brandon mention studying for intense exams, with Alex describing her studying as "the most isolating experience I've had in years... Like you will just be studying for 12 hours a day by yourself in a library. And even if there were other people there, it's like, you're just so independently involved in this intense intense testing and like, studying. So I feel very lonely in that." Here, it is shown that even in libraries, a place where many people go to study, there is no social interaction during intense academic times. Isolating oneself and focusing on the task at hand is an extremely active stress response, though not all responses were as individual.

Ben and Alex find themselves coping in the gym, Ben sharing his secrets are "working out, being with friends, [and] not trying to isolate in my room all of the time." These tools are different than what Ben relied on while in his past relationship, as he proudly reports, "definitely less relying on substance abuse." Though Alex sees the gym as something she has always used as a healthy coping mechanism, Wyatt has recently found time to exercise after his recent breakup. "I love rock climbing and, you know, working out a lot, and I try to, I kind of [had] to cut back on that," he sees positives in having more free time as the separation gets easier to bear.

Reflecting on past relationships can be emotional, especially if the situation was particularly intense. There was more gratitude for the experience, however than disdain for the situation existing in this sample. Ben shows appreciation for personal growth, stating, "It's given

me a lot of insight into relationships,” in reference to the breakup itself, and in the experience of going through it all with his best friend. Moving on can be hard, even with positive reflection. Brooke recognizes this, sharing her progress through both happiness and reality, sharing she is “pretty glad [to be] broken up now,” while recognizing she does not have the ability to fully move on now.

*Individual Rediscovery.* Naturally, reflecting on a crucial relationship during a formative time of life leaves elements of an improved self. Brooklyn found herself again after a less, supportive relationship, sharing, “I’m rediscovering the things that I’m passionate about.” Brooklyn’s current adventure of rediscovering the self was felt by Alex, with more time to reflect, pinning the “relationship with [herself]” as the most improved after her breakup. Not all participants are as far along in their process, but they know progress is happening. Kaitlyn shares her feelings- “I had such a big chunk of my life with him that I don’t know who I am without him. So, I’m trying to figure that out now.” After experiencing such a formative, dyadic relationship, these feelings can inspire individuals to find focus outside of their heartbreak.

Ultimately, social support does seem to play a role in the recovery period of a college breakup. Though this study was created with assumption that the strength of previous relationships had the most effect on mental health levels after a breakup, it seems that this was not the strongest finding. The best indicator of positive mental health outcomes because of romantic loss is the existence of someone who has experienced similar heartbreak. While increased levels of social support still mediate symptoms, as hypothesized, those with someone relatable to walk them through their breakup was associated with less intense stress-manifestations after the separation.

## DISCUSSION

In my research, the experience of a college breakup has a clear impact on students today. Each participant was able to provide reflective statements specific to this past, regardless of the difference in relationship strength. Discrepancies in the situations varied, though all followed the patterns predicted by Pearlin's Stress Model (1981). Looking specifically at the stressor itself, mediators of stress, and manifestations of stress, findings from this sample are applicable to previous sociological research and can be used to point future research in a better direction.

### *Sources of Stress*

The source of stress in this research was the experience of romantic loss. There was knowledge that this event would cause distress in most instances, as humans are intolerant of change (Cannon 1935; Selye 1956), though the quality of change has an impact on how much psychologic turmoil one will face (Pearlin 1981). This is why the categories of relationship distress, strength of relationship, breakup distress, and current stressors were created.

To identify the level of distress caused by the end of a relationship, the weight of such past relationship must be determined. Responses that first stood out here were those categorized under 'relationship distress,' as this is a clear indication of a weak past relationship, potentially making the period of adjustment less damaging (Pearlin 1981). These instances echoed the predictions of Sprecher (1986), showing that under-benefitting in relationships caused early emotional detachment in the cases of Brooke and Brooklyn.

Love is another indication of lasting or not-lasting couples (Felmlee, Sprecher, and Bassin 1990). Stronger relationships reported love for their past partners, also referencing loneliness and implying a more difficult transitional time (Pierce, Sarason, and Sarason 1991). It

cannot, however, be expected for all respondents who experienced love to report on it due to the time elapsed since the past relationship. The assessment of the transitional time, coming out of the relationship, was presented through the narratives of respondents, with some admitting to extremely short recovery times. It is clear that the instances with less attachment report less regret and distress in reference to the breakup process.

While the main stressor of concern is the breakup, there are other stressors that must be considered. The qualifications to participate in this study limits participants to a smaller age category, with all participants experiencing the pursuit of an undergraduate degree. Current stressors of students were almost always school in reference to present day. This commonality between responses is not strange due to the ages of respondents, with most being college seniors. Upperclassmen's sources of stress tend to be academic expectations, pressure to succeed, and post-graduation plans, a healthier focus than relationship distress (Beiter, Nash, McCrady, Rhoades, Linscomb, Clarahan, and Sammut 2015). While school is prioritized in the current lives of students, this stressor was not commonly referenced as an issue in the discussion of the breakup itself, creating the potential for breakup stress to be replaced by the stress of school.

### *Mediators of Stress*

Continuing with Pearlin's Model (1981), the role of social support was assessed. In the particular instance of Brooklyn, one of the relationships where distance was created before the breakup, there was a major difference in support during and after the relationship. The isolation of her relationship created a more direct role for social support when her past partner was no longer in control of her access to resources. There was no sense of dyadic identity in this

relationship, potentially creating less distress during the adjustment period, as it is easier for individuals to experience a split than a truly bonded dyad (Beckr and Useem 1942).

An increase in perceived support quantity and quality was found universally in this sample. More sources of companionship were found as respondents emerged as single, though much of the increased quantity of support is simply surface level. Students were able to reach out to a supporter in all instances and all received some sort of emotional validation with a level of depth more able to assist the needs of individuals. While relationships of depth are more important to improving the help of the distressed (Beckr and Useem 1942), it is through the shared experience of heartbreak where the most healing is done, as these people can offer validation of feelings, advice, and role modeling (Thoits 2011; Turner and Turner 2013). This sentiment was found in previous literature and in this sample, as students who reported a companion in heartbreak, who had been through what they had been through, found much more power in their social support than those with simply increased levels of support.

### *Manifestations of Stress*

Manifestations of stress were found as predicted after the eventful experience of interest. The undesirable nature of breakups, especially for those with less mastery, provided psychological distress in all participants with dyadic partnerships (Pearlin 1981; Howard and Useem 1942). With interview questions created in reference to the CESD-10, depressive symptoms inevitably emerged [see Appendix]. Loneliness was reported by multiple respondents within this study, though those with less control of the situation seemed to elaborate on their experience of psychological distress further than individuals who made the executive decision to terminate a relationship. While time since the relationship is sure to play a role, the strength of

the previous relationship and satisfaction of support after the breakup seems to influence participants' attitudes towards the variable of mental health.

The current mental health of respondents is not entirely positive, though this is expected with discrepancies in relationship strength, length, and time since separation. Present-day mental health was the lowest concern for this sample, with mental health during the breakup period being the worst and the previous relationship causing distress more than today. More conclusions were found when reviewing the positive reflections of participant experiences including positive remarks about past partners, proud self-evaluation, and individual rediscovery. Gratitude for the stressful experience seems to be tied to individual rediscover, as previous dyadic pairs are able to regain a sense of complete self as a result of going through a life event. Poor coping mechanisms and increased depression in these responses would show an indication of a ruminative thought process (Lyubomirsky, Caldwell, and Nolen-Hoeksema 1988; Lyubomirsky and Nolen-Hoeksema 1995). Only one participant has the potential to fall within this category, as their recollection of events was extremely negative and repetitive, though this is the same relationship lacking a strong bond prior to the breakup, making this the only example of rumination in this study.

Findings here show the validity of Pearlin's Stress Process (1981). The variables of stressor, mediators of stress, and manifestations of stress performed just as the model suggests. With little previous research done in reference to the way social support buffers mental health effects of college relationship loss, the strength of such relationships had to be drawn for connection to past studies. The determinant of a dyadic relationship shows the higher value of college relationships and is used to measure the ability of one to deal with this stressor and the resources needed to replace such a priority (Pierce, Sarason, and Sarason 1991). Social support is

shown to help with mental health effects both directly and indirectly, with stronger bonds leading to more direct emotional assistance. The mental health of students during the breakup period was poor in comparison to their health today, with the experience of this life event and additional present-day support allowing for positive reflection. Social support does influence the adverse mental health effects following a college breakup.

Practical implications of this study include knowledge of the importance of social support (Pearlin 1981). College campuses create an environment that encourages socialization during the last years of late adolescence, allowing for increased access to social support systems. The exposure to different types of people in a space that also notes students' similarities could instigate more than a simple increase in support; it also allows for increased access to different types of support. Depth allows for more effective, supportive mediation, though having a supporter who has experienced a similar stressor seems to be the most helpful in research and in this study (Thoits 2011; Turner and Turner 2013). While all participants had sources of support and exhibited increased levels of support after their breakup, it was in participants who had a companion with similar experience that got the most out of their support systems. These individuals were able to feel more validated in their experiences with the help of this specific type of support. Exposure to different people with experiences we are unfamiliar with could later mean having a key supporter with the means to help with breakup recovery.

#### *Limitations & Recommendation for Future Research*

Limitations of this study include the number of participants and the vulnerability of participants. The Interview Guide [see Appendix] was formatted in a way to encourage openness while following the Stress Process Model, with questions prepared for shy participants. A larger sample would allow for better analysis of the generalizability of this use of Pearlin's model. With

continued research, differences in outcomes based on gender, sexuality, race, and other variables could potentially be answered. Knowledge of dyadic pairs not known prior to the completion of this study could be applied to future research, as this is a type of relationship which has an impact of the breakup period and expected outcomes.

A continuation of this study would attempt a longitudinal course to adequately access the time it takes people to recover from their past relationships with the help of social support. Though these details were discussed in this study, interviews requiring recollection of emotional events cannot use these numbers as concrete data, but rather a guide for the intensity of a relationship. Following individuals with strong social support, as in those who have experienced similar heartbreak, could then be more accurately compared to those with regular increased social support at the time. Following participants in this way would also allow for the role of social support to be tracked over a period of time, testing its strength and duration following the breakup.

Future research could allow for further analysis of other unpredicted outcomes. While a spike in social support was generally expected, the consistency and rate of this increase was not. Longitudinal studies could track the rates of support and the longevity of satisfaction levels. If done with both those experiencing a college breakup and those experiencing other breakup instances, the role of college as a structure for social support could also be evaluated, revealing if college truly exposes individuals to a variety of support that better provides companions post-breakup. Application of these improvements with the continued use of Pearlin's Stress Process model could fill in the gaps sociologic research has yet to complete.



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## APPENDICES

### **APPENDIX: Initial Interview Guide**

My research focus centers on gaining a clearer understanding about the way in which social support buffers negative mental health effects of a breakup for undergraduate college students. In my interviews I will be focusing on three primary areas:

1. The social and mental satisfaction levels of previous relationships.
2. Social support attained from non-romantic areas during previous relationships.
3. Current support and depression levels.

#### Demographic Information

1. Age
2. Current year of college

#### Section 1

I am interested in breakup process following the separation from a partner during the college experience. In this section I will be asking you about topics related to your previous relationship/s.

1. I am interested in your previous relationship.
  - a. Tell me about your breakup.
    - i. Who wanted to breakup? Was it mutual? Tell me how it happened.
    - ii. What were the worst parts of the breakup? How long did this last?
    - iii. What were the good parts of the breakup?
    - iv. What grade were you during the relationship? How old were you?
    - v. Was your partner in the same grade? How old were they?
2. Tell me about the relationship itself.

- a. What did you like about them?
  - b. What did you not like about them? / What did you settle on?
  - c. What grade were you during the relationship? How old were you?
  - d. Was your partner in the same grade? How old were they?
  - e. Is there anything you would do differently if given the chance?
  - f. What activities did you and your partner typically do together?
    - i. Did you socialize with friends together?
    - ii. How often did you stay in instead of going out?
3. Was this your only breakup?
- a. How was it different than the other?
  - b. Have you moved on? How long did it take you to move on?

## Section 2

I am interested in what helped you deal with this breakup.

1. Who did you go to when you needed help while in this relationship? Was it your partner or someone else?
  - a. How many people could you count on?
  - b. Could you go to your friends during this time?
  - c. Could you go to your family?
  - d. Who wasn't there for you?
2. Who did you go to after the breakup?
  - a. Did you text or call this person? How helpful were they?
  - b. Is there anything this person did that really helped you during the breakup?  
How long did they do this/help for?

- c. Did you expect this person to be as helpful/unhelpful as they were?
  - d. Is there anything you wish someone did for you during this time?
3. How did you feel about the breakup? How do you feel about it now? Have any feelings changed with time?
- a. Was it sad, did it make you lonely?
  - b. Was it good, did it give you independence?
4. How did the breakup affect your other relationships?
- a. Which relationships were strengthened by the breakup?
  - b. Which relationships were hurt by the breakup?

### Section 3

In this final section I am interested in your experience transitioning from being in a relationship to being single in terms of social support and mental health.

In this final section I am interested in your current mental health.

1. Do you feel more supported or less supported now than when you were in the previous relationship?
- a. Who stayed in your life? Who left?
  - b. Has the way you support your friends changed? How?
  - c. How has your family relationship shifted?
2. How is your mental health now?
- a. Are you ever lonely?
  - b. Are you hopeful about the future? What about a romantic future?
  - c. How do you deal with stress now? Is it the same as it was before?
3. What are your biggest stressors now?

- a. How are you dealing with these?
- b. How does college fit into your list of stressors?
- c. Are you satisfied with how you are coping with stress?

#### Section 4

Is there anything that you feel was left unsaid/ anything you would like to elaborate on?



TABLES

**TABLE: Participant Background Information**

Pseudonym	Gender	Current Age	Gender of Partner	Role in Separation	Length of Relationship	Time Since Separation	Mode of Breakup	Cohabitation with Partner
Brooklyn	Woman	22	Man	Initiator	2 Years	5 Months	In-person	Yes
Ben	Man	22	Man	Respondent*	2 Years	7 Months	Text	No
Alex	Woman	22	Man	Mutual	3 Years	3.5 Years	In-person	No
Brooke	Woman	21	Man	Initiator	1.5 Years	1.5 Months	In-person	No
Wyatt	Man	24	Woman	Respondent	9 Months	2 Weeks	In-person	No
Kaitlyn	Woman	22	Man	Respondent	6 Years	9 Months	In-person	Yes
Ashley	Woman	21	Man	Initiator	4 Years	2 Years	Phone Call	Yes**
Brandon	Man	22	Woman	Respondent	9 Months	2 Years	Text	No

\*Respondent in last breakup

\*\*Not during time of separation