

Personal growth and psychological well-being after a romantic break

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The aim of the present study is twofold: (a) to assess the links between personal growth, psychological well-being and social support reported following a romantic relationship break-up among emerging adults; and (b) to investigate whether there are differences related to the level of personal growth and psychological wellbeing depending on personal variables such as status, reasons of the break-up, level of social support and prospect of a new romantic partner. Ninety-eight emerging adults ($M = 25.4$; $SD = 3.57$) filled out online the scales. The results showed negative significant correlations between depression, anxiety and personal growth reported following a romantic break-up. Additionally, the results also showed positive significant correlation between social support and personal growth following a romantic break-up. Related to differences, the results showed differences in terms of stress between the participants who did not know the reasons of their break-up and the ones who did know the reasons of break-up and between the participants who reported having a possible partner and the participants who reported having no prospective partner. Furthermore, we found significant differences in terms of depression, anxiety, stress and personal growth based on participants' status related to the ending of the relationship.

Keywords: emerging adult; personal growth; psychological well-being; romantic break-up; social support

Being involved in a romantic relationship influence individuals' psychological well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2002) and personal happiness (Demir, 2008; Diener & Seligman, 2002). Additionally, having a stable and harmonious romantic relationship leads to experiencing positive emotions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), defines emerging adults' social identity and it contributes to having a positive image of ourselves (Meier & Allen, 2008). Satisfying romantic relationships lead to high level of personal security (Hazan & Shaver, 1994), protect both partners from social isolation and provide partners with emotional support (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). However, even the most satisfying romantic relationships end because partners decide to break up or because one partner dies. Having this in mind, it is important to study not only the effects of being involved in a romantic relationship, but also the effects of a romantic relationship dissolution on partners' mental health. More precisely, it is important to identify the protective factors and the possible personal growth after experiencing such adverse event.

Studies on this matter suggest that break-ups can be devastating both emotionally and physically (Davis et al., 2003). Break-ups are one of the most stressful factors in people' life and unlike other traumatic events that either take place once or not at all (like the loss of someone close or being robbed), break-ups tend to happen in a higher number because people have various relationships during their lifespan. However, some studies suggest that there might be some positive effects of break-ups at individual and social level. Specifically, it has been suggested that ending a low quality relationship leads to a new perspective regarding self-perception, less self-loss feelings and more positive emotions post-relationship dissolution (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Furthermore, it has been suggested that there can be positive effects upon future relationships, meaning that partners can improve certain abilities that involve the proper functioning as a couple due to personal growth gained post relationship dissolution (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Therefore, the perspective of personal growth following a relationship is very important on an intrapersonal level as well as interpersonal level.

Romantic relationship during emerging adulthood: the age of exploring

Arnett (2000) proposed the notion of emerging adulthood that considers the emerging adult as being different to the adult. This developmental stage is referred to the period between 18/25 years old and 30 years old, specifically in developed countries. All throughout this period, people are seen to be too old to be considered adolescents and too young to be considered full grown adults. Arnett's theory is based on studies on young population that grew in an environment based on recent changes so it reflects the experience of the new age past, reflecting some aspects that the prior environment and system of beliefs did not reflect. Consequently, he proposed five characteristics of emerging adulthood period: (a) the age of exploring, (b) the age of instability, (c) the age centered on the self, (d) the age people feel caught "in-between" and (e) the age of possibilities (Arnett, 2004).

In regard to romantic relationships and emerging adulthood, it all seems to be on an exploratory level, emerging adults are getting involved in different types of romantic relationships. During these relationships, they try and build-up a perspective on what suits them, what they are looking for in a possible partner and what they would want out of a relationship (Arnett, 2004). The romantic experience as an emerging adult becomes the foundation for future successful relationships (Fincham & Cui, 2011). Thus, it can be said that there is a period in which they experience intense and multiple break-ups.

People's psychological well-being after a break-up can be an important indicator of the adaptation process. Some studies have suggested that romantic break-ups are associated with developing mood swings, a higher rate of suicide and substance abuse (Ogwuche et al., 2020; Price et al., 2016). However, other studies showed that ending a low quality relationship led to a new perspective regarding self-perception, less self-loss feelings and more positive emotions post relationship dissolution (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Relajo et al., 2015; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Negative experiences in life can bring changes on an individual level such as personal growth, exploring of new possibilities, more profound relationships, and even a better appreciation of life and a growth in the spiritual plane as well (Riffle et al., 2020). Sometimes when we face a traumatic or stressful event some of us may report a feeling of "growth" following that adverse experience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Some people show a remarkable capacity to face stressful or traumatic events, sometimes managing to find creative solutions or becoming more mature and self-confident. These people can develop new coping skills and can re-consolidate close relationships. Additionally, they are able to restructure their priorities in

a positive way and can take positive perspectives upon life. People have to redefine themselves in terms of their identity, especially if the self was a notion gained alongside the relationship that was formed, thus with the break-up they will be facing a re-construction of the self (Lewandowski et al., 2006).

The concept of personal growth can be defined as the product of an experience with a defining role that upgrades an individual. According to Ryff and colleagues (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2006), the concept of personal growth implies a continuous engagement in improving the self, constant awareness in the “new” and continuous expansion, all towards reaching the full potential of one’s self. Personal growth alongside the other components of psychological well-being takes into account the optimal functioning of an individual (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Protective factors of individuals’ mental health after a romantic relationship ends

Prior studies suggest that variables such as the individuals’ status, knowledge as to the reason of the break-up, the level of perceived social-support and the existence of a prospective romantic partner have an impact upon personal growth and individuals’ wellbeing following a romantic break-up.

Individuals’ status

The results of a study on divorced couples suggest that participants who initiated the dissolution reported a higher level of growth on the personal scale, which contributed to reaching emotional maturity (Buehler, 1988). Additionally, it was suggested that partners that initiate the break-up tend to report lower post-break-up stress levels than non-initiators (Sprecher, 1994; Sprecher et al., 1998). According to the results of the same study, the person that has the initiator status associates the break-up with the notion of happiness. Furthermore, people might have seen the break-up as an opportunity to give a new meaning to their lives (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003; Sbarra & Emery, 2005). One possible explanation is the fact that initiators gather the time to prepare for the break-up, having a better post-dissolution adaptation, therefore it can promote personal growth and wellbeing after a break-up.

Knowledge about the reasons of the dissolution

Another important variable that has an influence on personal growth and wellbeing following a break-up is knowing the reasons that led to the break-up. For example, when people are aware of the reasons responsible for the break-up they report lower levels of self-reported internalizing symptoms (Kansky & Allen, 2018). Additionally they can learn from the mistakes that they have made and got them to the break-up. As long as the reasons are known, individuals can make better decisions or find ways to solve the problems (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003).

Social support

Previous literature have shown that social support has an influence on personal growth after a break-up. It was shown that following a relationship dissolution, the concept of self needs a re-evaluation as the absence of the former partner created a social void. This is because the relationship was the first form of social identification. In general, people need advice and support when they are going through break-up (Vangelisti, 2006).

When people are away from their social support network, the consequences following a break-up are stronger. People reported low levels of well-being and a lower level of satisfaction because of the lack of social support. Additionally, there are no gender differences on the effects of social support, men as much as women indicated that social support was a key source in reaching a state of psychological wellbeing after a divorce (Kołodziej-Zaleska & Przybyła-Basista, 2016; Moller et al., 2003;).

In order to be able to cope in an optimal way with the stress that comes from the dissolution of a romantic relationship, most people need to self-regulate (Sbarra & Hazan, 2008), and one of the main ways to do this is by approaching their social support network, excluding the former partner.

Prospective of having a new partner

The existence of a possible new partner is a very important variable that could lead to personal growth following a break-up and better psychological wellbeing. Young adults that got involved in a new

romantic relationship after a break-up with a new partner reported a higher expansion of the self and that they re-discovered themselves (Lewadonsky & Bizzoco, 2007).

The prospect of getting involved in a new relationship with a new partner contributes to a lower level of depression and anxiety and it has a positive effect in regard to adapting to a new reality in the case of divorce (Locker et al., 2010; Symoens et al., 2014).

The present study

As we saw, research on positive and negative outcomes of break-ups among emerging adults are limited. Thus, the aim of the present study was to assess the relationships between personal growth, psychological wellbeing and social support reported following a romantic relationship break-up among emerging adults. Specifically, we expected: (a) negative correlations between depression, anxiety and stress and personal growth following a romantic break-up; and (b) positive correlations between social support and personal growth following a romantic break-up. Additionally, this study also investigated whether there are differences related to the level of personal growth and psychological wellbeing depending on personal variables such as participants' status in ending the relationship, the reasons of the break-up, the level of social support and the possible existence of a new romantic partner.

METHODS

Participants

The initial sample consisted of 128 emerging adults. Thirty individuals were excluded from the study because they were not respecting the including criteria. Thus, the final sample consists of 98 emerging adults aged between 18 and 30 years old ($M = 25.4$; $SD = 3.57$). More than half of participants (65.3%) were females, and the majority of them (76.5%) live at the moment of data collection in urban areas. In regards of the education level, five percent finished mandatory educational level (10th grade), 41.8% completed high school level, and 36.7% have a bachelor degree, while the rest (16.3%) have a master degree. The majority of participants reported that at the moment of the data collection they broke up 6 months ago (66.3%).

Procedure

An online questionnaire including the presentation of the main objective, the including criteria, the demographic questions and the scales assessing the main variables was created in Google forms. Emerging adults were invited to participate in this study via social media. Firstly, all participants signed an informed consent. Secondly, they filled in details regarding their demographic characteristics such as: age, gender, area of residence and education level. In the next section, information regarding different aspects of the previous relationship were required, such as: status, reasons as to why the relationship ended, and the possible existence of a new romantic partner. In the fourth section, participants were invited to fill in the main questionnaire. Finally, they were thanked for their participation and debriefed.

To be able to participate in this study, potential participants had to (a) be 18 years of age or more; (b) not be involved in any romantic relationship at the time of the study; (c) their previous romantic relationship had to be ended at least 6 months ago or more.

Measures

Social-demographic questions and questions related to the previous relationship. This section included questions related to demographic characteristics such as: age, gender, area of residence, education level, when their relationship ended with two possible answers (6 months, more than 6 months ago), and the length of their previous relationship. Next, information regarding different aspects of the previous relationship were required, such as: status (with three possible answers: initiator of the break-up; non-initiator; both initiated the break-up), knowledge of the reasons as to why the relationship ended (with two possible answers: Yes; No), the prospective of a new romantic partner (with two possible answers: Yes; No).

Depression and anxiety. A Romanian translation of Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-4) (Kroenke et al., 2009) was used to assess participants' level of depression and anxiety after their break-up. This

scale is made out of 4 items, organized in two dimensions – *depression* (e.g. “sad”, “depressed”, “and hopeless”) and *anxiety* (e.g. “nervous, anxious and tense”). Participants were invited to assess each item thinking of how they are feeling at the moment of filling in the questionnaire on a six Likert scale (0 = almost never; 5 = almost always). The Alpha Cronbach of depression was .92, while for anxiety was .86.

Perceived stress. A Romanian translation of Perceived Scale Stress-4 (PSS; Cohen et al., 1983). This scale contains 4 items which focus on feelings or thoughts, assessed on a six Likert scale (0 = almost never; 5 = almost always). An example of item “How often did you feel you were not able to control important events in your life” or “How often did you feel that things were not working out as you would wish”. The Alpha Cronbach of perceived stress was .88.

Social support. A Romanian version of Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988) was used to measure participants’ level of social support. This scale is made out of 12 items, organized in three dimensions: support received from family, friends, and significant other. Example of items are as it follows: “There is a person next to me when I need that”, “I can count on my friends when things take a wrong turn”. These items were assessed on a seven-point Likert scale 1 = totally disagree, 7 = totally agree. The Alpha Cronbach was a value of .89.

Personal growth following a break-up. A Romanian adapted version of personal growth dimension from Ryff’s Psychological WellBeing Scales (PWB) (Ryff, 1989) was used to measure participants’ perceptions related to their personal growth (defined as open to new experiences, gradual improvements in oneself) after their break-up. From the original scale, we adapted 6 items as follows: “As time has passed since my break-up, I do not think I have made improvements in regard to myself (reversed item)” “As time has passed since my break-up, I have the sense that I have developed a lot as a person (direct item)”. The Alpha Cronbach of this dimensions was .98.

RESULTS

The descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum) and the correlations between the main variables of the study are displayed in Table 1. As it can be seen, the means of depression, anxiety and perceived stress were moderate, while the means of social support and personal growth were rather high.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between study's variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Depression	2.68	1.32	0	5	–				
Anxiety	2.78	1.30	0	5	.90***	–			
Perceived stress	2.67	1.19	0	5	.48***	.51***	–		
Social support	5.83	.86	3.42	7	–.16	–.19	–.10	–	
Personal growth	4.94	.78	1.33	6	–.34***	–.28**	.06	.31**	–

** $p < .05$ *** $p < .001$

Results from the correlation analyses indicated negative significant correlations between depression, anxiety and personal growth reported following a romantic break-up. No significant correlation was found between stress and personal growth following a romantic break-up. Results also indicated a positive significant correlation between social support and personal growth following a romantic break-up.

Independent *t*-test was used to investigate whether there are differences in terms of the level of personal growth and psychological wellbeing reported following a break-up depending on personal variables such as the reasons of the break-up, the level of social support and the prospective of a new romantic partner. In order to test whether there are differences in terms of the level of personal growth and psychological wellbeing reported following a break-up depending on participants' status, One Way ANOVA was used.

The results of the independent *t*-test indicate that there are no significant differences between the participants who did not know the reasons of their break-up and the ones who did know the reasons of break-up in terms of depression $t(96) = -1.76, p = .08$, in terms of anxiety $t(96) = -1.90, p = .06$ and personal growth $t(96) = 1.44, p = .15$. However, the results of the independent *t*-test indicated that there are significant differences between the participants who did not know the reasons of their break-up and the ones who did know the reasons of break-up in terms of perceived stress $t(96) = -1.99, p = .05$. More precisely, participants who knew the reasons of their break-up reported a lower level of stress compared to the ones who did not know the reasons of their break-up (see Table 2). Related to social support, the results of independent *t*-test indicate that there are no significant difference between the participant with a high level of social support and the ones with a low level of support in terms of depression $t(96) = -.005, p = .99$; in terms of anxiety $t(96) = -1.17, p = .24$; in terms of stress $t(96) = -.77, p = .44$, either in terms of personal growth $t(96) = 1.57, p = .11$ (see Table 2). The results of the independent *t*-test indicate that there are no significant differences between the participants who reported that there is a possible partner in their live at the moment of the data collection and the ones who reported no possible partner in terms of depression $t(96) = .49, p = .62$; in terms of anxiety $t(96) = -.57, p = .56$ and in terms of personal growth $t(96) = -.18, p = .85$; while in terms of stress there is a significant difference $t(96) = -2.52, p = .013$, more precisely, the participants who reported to have a possible partner have a lower level of stress comparing to the participants who have no possible partner (see Table 2).

Table 2. The means and standard deviations for independent *t*-test

	Knowing the reasons of breaking up				Social support level				Existence of a new possible partner			
	Yes		No		Low level		High level		Yes		No	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Depression	2.58	1.36	3.25	.95	2.50	1.14	2.50	1.53	2.65	1.26	2.83	1.70
Anxiety	2.65	1.34	3.36	.88	2.90	1.09	2.59	1.50	2.72	1.23	2.93	1.68
Perceived stress	2.58	1.18	3.25	1.10	2.76	1.05	2.57	1.34	2.55	1.21	3.37	.79
Personal growth	4.99	.76	4.67	.83	4.83	.81	5.08	.72	4.94	.82	4.98	.68

The results of One-Way ANOVA show differences in terms of depression $F(2, 45.6) = 12.9, p < .001$; anxiety $F(2, 43.7) = 9.04, p < .001$; stress $F(2, 44.7) = 5.48, p = .007$ and personal growth $F(2, 36.3) = 4.75, p = .01$ depending on participants' status. The results of Tukey Post Hoc Tests indicate that there are significant differences in terms of *depression* between participants who both agree to break-up ($M = 2.63; SD = .89$) and participants who did not agree to break-up ($M = 3.84; SD = 1.08; p = .004$); and between partners who initiated the break-up/ ended the relationship ($M = 2.30; SD = 1.33$) and participants who did not agree to break-up ($M = 3.84; SD = 1.08; p < .001$); in terms of *anxiety* between participants who both agree to break-up ($M = 2.74; SD = .79$) and participants who did not agree to break-up ($M = 3.84; SD = 1.27; p = .01$); and between partners who initiated the break-up/ ended the relationship ($M = 2.39; SD = 1.25$) and participants who did not agree to break-up ($M = 3.84; SD = 1.27; p < .001$), in terms of *stress* between partners who initiated the break-up/ ended the relationship ($M = 2.39; SD = 1.25$) and participants who did not agree to break-up ($M = 3.41; SD = 1.12; p = .003$) and in terms of *personal growth* between partners who initiated the break-up/ ended the relationship ($M = 5.15; SD = .63$) and participants who did not agree to break-up ($M = 4.49; SD = 1.09; p = .003$).

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was twofold: (a) to assess the link between depression, anxiety, stress, social support and personal growth in response to a romantic relationship dissolution and (b) to investigate whether there are differences related to the level of personal growth in response to the romantic relationship dissolution and psychological wellbeing depending on personal variables such as the status, the reasons of the break-up, the level of social support and the existence of a new possible romantic partner. The results suggested negative correlations between depression, anxiety and personal growth following a romantic break-up. These results are consistent with previous literature on the personal growth after traumatic events. More precisely, it was shown that when people ended a low quality relationship, they reported less self-loss feelings and more positive emotions post-dissolution (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). This suggests a better adaptation post-dissolution and a better psychological wellbeing.

We expected positive correlations between social support and personal growth following a romantic break-up. The results showed positive significant association between social support level and personal growth. The results of previous studies assessing the link between social support, attachment style and adjustment after a break-up showed that social support received from family was negatively associated with indicators of adjustment after a romantic break-up, such as loneliness and hopelessness, while support from friends was negatively associated only with loneliness (Moller et al., 2003; Pilao et al., 2016).

Additionally, this study also investigated whether there are differences in terms of personal growth and psychological well-being (depression, anxiety and stress) depending on personal variables such as the participants' status, knowing the reasons of the break-up, the level of social support and the

existence of a new possible romantic partner. Related to participants' status, results showed significant differences in terms of depression and anxiety between participants who both agree to break-up and participants who did not agree to break-up; and between partners who initiated the break-up/ ended the relationship and participants who did not agree to break-up. Several studies also revealed negative outcomes for the non-initiators such as worst post-break-up adjustment (Barutçu Yıldırım & Demir, 2015) and positive outcomes for initiators such as happiness, feeling of freedom and feelings of relief (Sprecher et al., 1998).

Results also showed significant differences between who initiated the break-up and participants who did not agree to break-up in terms of stress and personal growth. These results are consistent with previous studies showing that the persons who initiated the break-up reported a lower level of stress compared to non-initiators and they gave a new meaning to their lives (Sprecher, 1994; Sprecher et al., 1998).

The results show that participants who did not know the reasons of the romantic relationship dissolution reported a higher level of stress compared to the participants who did know the reasons of their relationship dissolution. These results are consistent with other studies which showed that when people know the reasons of the dissolution have a better adaptation process by making better decisions related to future relationships or find ways to solve the problems (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003).

However, the results also showed no differences between the participants who knew the reasons and the ones who did not know the reasons of their relationship dissolution in terms of depression, anxiety, and personal growth. Additionally, no significant differences were found between the participants with a high level of social support and the participants with a low level of support in terms of all dimensions of psychological wellbeing (depression, anxiety and stress) and personal growth reported after a romantic relationship dissolution. One possible explanation can be related to the fact that this development stage, emerging adulthood, is characterized by being centered on one's self (Arnett, 2004). Thus, maybe the social support level does not have an effect on psychological wellbeing and personal growth as participants were centered on one's self and were open to explore new possibilities.

We also evaluated the possible differences between the participants who had a prospective partner and the ones who did not have a possible partner. Results showed significant differences only in terms of stress. More precisely, the participants who reported to have a possible partner have a lower level of stress comparing to the participants who had no possible partner. These results seem to be contrary to the results of previous studies who showed that being involved in a new relationship with a new partner contributes to a lower level of depression and anxiety (Symoens et. al., 2014). However, in that study participated divorced individuals, thus we can say that the present study brings new additional knowledge as in this study participated emerging adults who were involved in a non-marital relationship.

The present study extends the literature referring to romantic relationships in the period of time we call emerging adulthood by: (a) assessing the link between wellbeing, social support and personal growth, (b) testing the differences in terms of personal growth and wellbeing reported after a break-up and different characteristics of the participants such as the level of social support, knowing the reasons of the break-up, the existence of a possible romantic partner and the participants' status and (c) bringing new additional knowledge as in this study participated emerging adults from Romania, comparing to the previous studies which were conducted in other cultures from western countries such as SUA, China or India.

It is also worth to mention that previous studies focused on the differences related to the level of personal growth of adults that initiated the break-up and non-initiators (Sprecher, 1994; Sprecher et al., 1998). In order to cover the gap related to the group of individuals who both agree to break-up, this group was taken into consideration in this study.

Even if this study extends the literature on this specific matter, we must also mention its limitations. The most important one is related to the sample' characteristics. The majority of participants were females, thus the generalisation of results must be made with caution. Because the data are cross-sectional, we are unable to determine if the positive changes individuals experienced are indicative of long-lasting adjustments to behavior and wellbeing. Another limitation could be the number of participants. However, taking into account the inclusion criteria: (a) being aged between 18 and 30 years old; (b) broke-up at least six month ago; (c) being involved for at least six months in the previous

relationship, we consider an optimal number of participants. Another limitation lies in the fact that only one partner participated in the study. Future studies should be designed by inviting both partners to participate in this type of studies. Additionally, daily diary studies could bring additional knowledge on mental health and personal growth immediately after the break-up and in the following 2 weeks. In conclusion, the present study brings additional knowledge related to the (a) associations between stress, anxiety, depression, social support and personal growth reported after a romantic dissolution and (b) the differences in terms of stress, anxiety, depression, social support and personal growth based on participants' characteristics.

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