



# **Surviving a Broken Heart: Psychological and Demographic Factors**

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Variables that contribute to breakup distress.

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## **Declaration of integrity**

I, Océane Becue, affirm that I have acted with absolute integrity in the preparation of this work. I confirm that throughout the process, I have not engaged in any form of falsification of results nor resorted to plagiarism, defined as the appropriation, even by omission, of another person's intellectual work, in whole or in part. Furthermore, I certify that all quotations borrowed from other authors have been properly referenced or paraphrased, consistently citing the appropriate bibliographic source.

## **Abstract**

This study investigates the psychological factors influencing post-breakup distress among participants who recently experienced romantic relationship dissolution. The sample predominantly consisted of women, reflecting a common trend in relationship research, with diverse age groups ranging from 18 to 68 years. Key demographic factors, including age and marital status, were analyzed in relation to distress levels, revealing higher distress among older individuals and those not currently in relationships. Psychological variables such as self-expansion, attachment styles (anxiety and avoidance), attitudes towards infidelity, and the inclusion of the partner in the self-concept were examined. Findings indicated that self-expansion within the relationship was associated with increased post-breakup distress, contrary to previous research suggesting self-expansion generally promotes emotional resilience. Attachment styles, particularly anxiety and avoidance, were linked to higher levels of distress, while attitudes towards infidelity did not show significant correlations with distress levels. Additionally, individuals who perceived their partner as integral to their self-concept experienced greater emotional challenges post-breakup. The role of the breakup initiator also emerged as a significant factor, with those whose partner initiated the breakup reporting higher distress levels. These results highlight the complex interplay between psychological factors and emotional responses to breakup and suggest directions for future research.

*Keywords:* Breakup distress, relationship dissolution, emotional responses, self-expansion, attachment styles, inclusion of the other in the self, gender differences, relationship initiation, infidelity attitudes, psychological adjustment, breakup initiator.

## Table of Contents

Surviving a Broken Heart: Psychological and Demographic Factors .....	1
Acknowledgements .....	2
Declaration of integrity .....	2
Abstract .....	3
Introduction .....	5
Literature review .....	5
breakup distress.....	5
Self-expansion .....	7
Experience in Close Relationships .....	8
Attitude toward infidelity .....	10
Inclusion of other in the self .....	12
Links between concepts .....	14
Methodology .....	15
Participants .....	15
Measures.....	15
Procedure.....	17
Data Analysis .....	17
Results.....	18
Items description .....	19
Correlations .....	22
Discussion .....	29
Limitations.....	35
Conclusion.....	36
Bibliography .....	36

## **Introduction**

According to the research conducted by Low et al. (2012), Shulman et al. (2017), and Sprecher et al. (1998), breakups are considered to be one of the most stressful and traumatic experiences during early adulthood. After a breakup, individuals may go through different phases of grief due to the loss of a significant intimate relationship (Harvey & Miller, 2000; Aragón & Cruz, 2014; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Post-breakup distress, which refers to the emotional and psychological distress experienced after the dissolution of a romantic relationship, is characterized by intense feelings of loss and persistent intrusive thoughts (Field et al., 2009). The purpose of this study is to examine the possible factors in relation to distress after a breakup, Specifically, the attachment style, self-expansion in the other, attitude towards infidelity, and inclusion of the other in the self.

## **Literature review**

### ***breakup distress***

Post-breakup distress has been associated with adverse effects on mental health. Specifically, it increases the likelihood of developing mood disorders such as depression or anxiety (Bronfman et al., 2016; Field, 2011, 2017; Lukacs & Quan-Haase, 2015; Low et al., 2012; Rhoades et al., 2011; Sailor, 2013; Shulman et al., 2017). It is also linked to reduced self-esteem, decreased overall well-being, and physiological repercussions such as "broken heart syndrome," which manifests with symptoms similar to a heart attack (Coifman & Bonanno, 2010; del Palacio-González et al., 2016; Field, 2017; Mirsu-Paun & Oliver, 2017; Sailor, 2013).

Post-breakup distress is a type of unpleasant stress that has negative psychological and physiological repercussions. Stress is a natural psychophysiological response of human beings

to demanding or threatening situations, known as stressors. These authors distinguish between two types of stress: eustress, which is considered positive as it promotes adaptation and effective management of demands, and distress, which is an unpleasant type of stress due to its negative psychological and physiological effects (Myers, 2011; Oblitas, 2010). It is important to distinguish post-breakup distress from the grieving process that occurs after a loss. While grief is a natural process that involves different stages and can be experienced following various types of losses, post-breakup distress corresponds to complicated grief, characterized by intense feelings of loss and persistent intrusive thoughts (Field et al., 2009).

Several factors influence post-breakup distress, such as the duration and satisfaction of the relationship, the unexpectedness of the breakup, the time elapsed since the breakup, as well as personal characteristics like personality, attachment style, and self-esteem. The attributions made about the end of the relationship also have an impact on distress, with external attributions being associated with greater distress (Field, 2017; Rhoades et al., 2011; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Among these factors, the initiator status is particularly relevant. In the case of a breakup, non-initiators often experience higher levels of post-breakup distress, feeling rejected on an emotional level (Field, 2011, 2017; Field et al., 2009; Leary, 2001; Perilloux & Buss, 2008). Rejection can generate negative feelings, low self-esteem, and even activate threat-related brain responses (Rohner, 2016; Fisher et al., 2010). Rejection can also lead to increased hostility and aggression, while rejected individuals experience heightened distress and dissatisfaction in their lives (Mirsu-Paun & Oliver, 2017; Leary et al., 2006; Sinclair et al., 2011; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). The time elapsed since the breakup is a key variable in post-breakup distress and is examined from two perspectives. On one hand, studies show an inverse relationship between the time elapsed since the breakup and post-breakup distress, with higher distress observed when less time has passed since the breakup (Knox et al., 2000). On the other hand,

retrospective memories of post-breakup distress remain relatively accurate, even after a long period, suggesting the absence of memory biases (Brennan et al., 2006).

Research on gender differences in post-breakup distress is limited, but existing studies yield contradictory results. Some studies find no correlation between gender and post-breakup distress, while others suggest that women may experience greater distress than men, or vice versa. Women tend to be more prone to rumination and depression, particularly in interpersonal stress situations, while men's short-term reproductive strategy may facilitate their ability to move on (Field et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2013; Perilloux & Buss, 2008; Rhoades et al., 2011).

### ***Self-expansion***

Over the years, research on relationship well-being has identified various factors contributing to it, among which self-expansion has been extensively studied in the literature on couples (Caughlin & Huston, 2006; Fincham & Beach, 2010; Gordon & Baucom, 2009). According to the work of Arthur Aron and colleagues, self-expansion is a dyadic process that involves "the inclusion of the other in the self" (Aron & Aron, 1996; Aron et al., 1998; Aron et al., 2004). According to the theory of self-expansion, in the context of romantic relationships, self-expansion occurs when the partner offers new experiences, such as discovering new places, making new friends, engaging in new activities, and when they share their financial and social resources. These new experiences and resources become integrated into the individual's self-concept, thereby enhancing the sense of self-expansion (Aron et al., 2013).

In general, self-expansion refers to the acquisition of resources that help an individual achieve their future goals (Aron et al., 1998). At the beginning of a romantic relationship, each partner benefits from the resources of the other (such as financial resources, knowledge,

intellectual perspectives, etc.) and incorporates them into themselves. This initial phase is often perceived as exciting and is associated with a high level of relationship satisfaction. Laboratory studies have shown that engaging in self-expanding activities together leads to an immediate increase in relationship satisfaction (Aron et al., 2000; Reissman et al., 1993).

Previous research has conceptualized self-expansion as involving novelty and excitement. Studies on self-expansion initially started in the domain of romantic relationships and have since expanded to other relational contexts such as initial attraction, the beginning of a new relationship, the maintenance of an ongoing relationship, and relationship dissolution (Aron et al., 2013; Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2014). For instance, the experience of falling in love is considered to involve rapid self-expansion as it provides numerous opportunities to discover new experiences and broaden the self-concept. Studies have demonstrated that self-concept, self-esteem, and perceived self-efficacy increase rapidly after the onset of a romantic relationship (Aron, Paris & Aron, 1995).

### ***Experience in Close Relationships***

The attachment theory, developed by Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) as well as Bowlby (1969), proposes that early interactions between infants and their caregivers influence the development of an internal working model of attachment. According to Mikulincer and Shaver (2016), this internal working model consists of mental schemas that influence interpersonal relationships, self-concept, and emotion regulation. Hazan and Shaver (1987) and Shaver and Clark (1994) have emphasized the extension of this theory to adulthood and romantic relationships.



The quality of an individual's attachment internal working models (IWMs) is influenced by interactions with caregivers and genetic factors, according to Mikulincer and Shaver (2016). IWMs, which are relatively stable cognitive-affective schemas, influence how individuals interpret the present, evaluate new situations, plan future actions, and regulate their emotions (Waters et al., 2000). These IWMs also influence self-concept, stress coping strategies, and expectations regarding future attachment relationships, particularly in stressful or threatening situations (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Simpson & Rholes, 2017; Eisenman, 2006).

Mikulincer and Shaver (2016) explain that individuals who have experienced consistent and sensitive parental support during childhood will develop a secure attachment style. This attachment style is characterized by positive IWMs of both self and attachment figures, positive self-esteem, and good relational skills. On the other hand, individuals who have experienced harmful interactions with inconsistent and unresponsive caregivers will develop an insecure attachment. This type of attachment can be divided into two main dimensions: attachment avoidance and attachment anxiety (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan et al., 1998).

Individuals with an avoidant attachment tend to fear intimacy and prefer maintaining independence and emotional control. They suppress their emotions and limit their emotional experiences in romantic relationships and daily life. Individuals with an anxious attachment struggle to trust others and regulate their negative emotions. They feel anxiously entangled in their relationships, frequently fearing abandonment or rejection and seeking emotional closeness with their partners for security (Mikulincer, 1995).

Research indicates that both dimensions of insecure attachment are associated with issues such as psychological and marital distress, poor mental health and well-being, the use of

maladaptive coping strategies, disrupted physiological responses to stress, risky health behaviors, and increased vulnerability to physical illnesses (DiFilippo et al., 2000; Donarelli et al., 2016; Feeney et al., 2019; Karreman & Vingerhoets, 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012; Pietromonaco & Beck, 2019; Rosenstein & Horowitz, 1996; Simpson & Rholes, 2018).

### *Attitude toward infidelity*

Infidelity is a complex concept, and its definition does not rely on universally accepted criteria. According to Blow and Hartnett (2005), various behaviors can be considered unacceptable within the context of an intimate relationship, taking into account cultural and social factors. For example, some individuals may consider simply having lunch or coffee with someone other than their partner as a form of infidelity. Pittman (1989) defines infidelity as a behavior that results in the loss of the partner's trust in the relationship or the violation of an established agreement within the couple.

Infidelity can be classified into two distinct types: sexual infidelity and emotional infidelity. Sexual infidelity refers to behaviors involving physical contact with someone other than one's partner, while emotional infidelity concerns the development of emotional bonds with someone other than one's partner (Harris, 2004).

Currently, infidelity is regarded as harmful and a significant issue in couples therapy (Johnson, 2005). It is also a leading cause of many divorces (Brand et al., 2007; Wiederman, 1997). Attitudes toward extramarital sex play a significant role in predicting the likelihood of engaging in such relationships, as individual beliefs and values can either encourage or discourage infidelity (Treas & Giesen, 2000; Glass & Wright, 1992; Thompson, 1984; Buunk & Bakker, 1995).

Gender plays an essential role as a factor influencing beliefs and values regarding infidelity, in addition to acting as an initiating factor (Byers, 1996; Zilbergeld, 1999). Generally, men have a more positive attitude toward extramarital relationships and are more likely to engage in them than women (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). Moreover, men with a more favorable attitude toward infidelity are more prone to engaging in such relationships (Thompson, 1984; Lieberman, 1988). Therefore, men tend to view infidelity as normal or at least acceptable. From an evolutionary perspective, there are differences in concerns related to infidelity between men and women. According to Miller and Maner (2009), women are primarily concerned with the security of commitment and resources provided by their partner, as it contributes to the upbringing of their children. Consequently, they are particularly sensitive to emotional infidelity, which jeopardizes the stability of a long-term relationship (Wilson et al., 2011). They fear that their partner may develop intense emotional bonds with another person, compromising the relationship's stability and the available resources for them and their children.

On the other hand, sexual infidelity holds particular importance for men. According to Buss et al. (1992), this is because sexual infidelity can increase uncertainty about paternity. Men are biologically concerned with transmitting their own genes and ensuring that the resources they invest are directed toward their biological offspring. Thus, sexual infidelity poses a threat to their evolutionary goal of maximizing reproductive opportunities by raising their own biological child. The fear of sexual infidelity is linked to this paternal uncertainty and potential consequences such as allocating resources to a child who is not biologically theirs. Additionally, men are more inclined to engage in affairs of a sexual nature, while women tend to be more involved in affairs of an emotional nature (Silva et al., 2017).

In women as well, a more relaxed attitude toward sexuality is the best predictor of infidelity (Hansen, 1987). Education can also influence infidelity, although findings in this area are contradictory. Some studies indicate that infidelity is more prevalent among less educated individuals (Smith, 1994), while others report a higher prevalence of infidelity among educated individuals (Atkins et al., 2001). Forste and Tanfer (1996) also found that higher education can indicate more liberal sexual attitudes. For example, women with a higher level of education than their partner are 3.6 times more likely to engage in extramarital relationships (Forste & Tanfer, 1996). It is important to note that age alone is not sufficient to explain differences in attitudes toward infidelity. Instead, it can be considered a mediating factor, meaning it can indirectly influence attitudes toward infidelity by interacting with other variables (Habibi et al., 2019).

Research conducted by Atkins et al. (2001) as well as Previti and Amato revealed that individuals who are less satisfied with their marital relationship are more inclined to consider infidelity. Sexual satisfaction is one of the key factors in preserving and maintaining a marital relationship, and when these factors are compromised within a relationship, a person may feel less committed to it and thus be more inclined to seek infidelity (Whitty, 2003).

### ***Inclusion of other in the self***

The formation of enduring couples in romantic relationships relies on the psychological process of connecting with a specific partner, where the Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) plays a key role. IOS is manifested through the fusion of self and other's cognitive constructs, which expands the sense of personal efficacy. Several predictors of IOS have been identified,

such as progressive self-disclosure, engaging in exciting activities together, and inducing positive emotions.

Progressive self-disclosure with a stranger has been shown as a powerful mechanism to promote IOS, where gradual sharing of personal information leads to greater emotional closeness (Aron et al., 1997). Additionally, engaging in exciting activities in the early years of marriage predicts long-term satisfaction, with IOS playing a mediating role (Tsapelas et al., 2009). Inducing positive emotions has also been associated with increased IOS with close friends (Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006).

Other studies have examined the effects of including the other in the self using the "me/not-me" paradigm (Aron et al., 1991; Mashek & Aron, 2004). When the other person is included in the self, there is a tendency to slow down the processing of information related to a specific trait if the other person differs on that trait. Confusions between self and close others were more frequent than confusions between self and non-close individuals in adjective recall tasks (Aron et al., 1991; Mashek & Aron, 2004).

In couple relationships, the inclusion of the other in the self is manifested through the integration of the partner's physical attributes into the self-perception, reducing the perception of physical constraint (Aron et al., 1991; Mashek & Aron, 2004). Moreover, individuals process physical pain experienced by themselves and their partner in the same way but differently when it comes to a stranger (Aron et al., 1991; Mashek & Aron, 2004). The success of a close other is celebrated rather than perceived as a threat (Aron et al., 1991; Mashek & Aron, 2004). Optimal levels of relational well-being and mental health are observed when the discrepancy between the actual and ideal inclusion of the other in the self is minimal (Martire et al., 2013).

### *Links between concepts*

Attachment, according to Baucom et al. (2006), plays a crucial role in how individuals react after a breakup. Anxiously attached individuals tend to engage in ruminative thoughts about the breakup, which makes psychological adaptation after the separation more difficult (Davis et al., 2003; Marshall et al., 2013; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). Additionally, Gordon and Baucom (1998, 1999) highlighted that individuals with insecure attachment tend to experience more emotional distress, anger, sadness, and mistrust following the dissolution of a romantic relationship or the discovery of infidelity.

Self-expansion can also play a role in emotional distress after a breakup. According to Aron et al. (2004), self-expansion refers to the ability to find new sources of self-expansion, such as a new partner who can fulfill the desire for self-expansion. Studies have shown that when individuals move away from the breakup or find a new partner, they experience a weaker perceived interconnectedness and a reduced need to use the former partner as a source of self-expansion (Boelen et al., 2006). Thus, self-expansion can contribute to alleviating emotional distress after the breakup (Boelen & Van Den Hout, 2010).

Attitudes toward infidelity are another important factor. Lusterman (2005) emphasized that individuals involved in relationships marked by infidelity may exhibit symptoms of emotional distress, anxiety, and depression, which can be related to attachment issues. According to Baucom et al. (2006), individuals with insecure attachment, such as avoidant or anxious attachment types, are more likely to engage in infidelity behaviors to fulfill their unmet emotional needs.

Individuals experiencing high levels of emotional distress after a romantic breakup may exhibit compromising health behaviors, such as decreased academic performance, increased alcohol consumption, disorganized behaviors, etc. (Field et al., 2013). When someone becomes a victim of infidelity, it can also lead to behavioral consequences such as difficulties sleeping, decreased appetite, increased alcohol and marijuana consumption, as well as engaging in risky sexual behaviors (Shrout & Weigel, 2018).

Lastly, the inclusion of the other in the self is a crucial aspect to consider. A strong perceived interconnectedness between the self and the former partner is associated with more intense symptoms such as longing for the ex-partner and difficulties accepting the end of the relationship (Boelen, 2009; Maccallum & Bryant, 2008). Therefore, maintaining a strong psychological bond with the former partner, where the inclusion of the other in the self is significant, is associated with more severe distress after the breakup (Boelen & Van Den Hout, 2010).

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

The sample comprised 225 English-speaking individuals ( $N = 225$ ) aged 18 to 68 years ( $M = 34$ ,  $SD = 11.5$ ) who had experienced a romantic breakup within the past five years.

Participants were recruited via online advertisements, social media platforms, primarily Facebook, and other social networks. The majority of participants were women ( $n = 168$ , 74.7%).

### ***Measures***

Demographic Information: Participants reported their age, gender, marital status, and education level.

Breakup Distress: The Breakup Distress Scale (Field, Delgado, et al., 2009) was used to assess emotional distress following a breakup. This scale includes 16 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale, where higher scores indicate greater distress. The BDS has demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ ) and good construct validity in previous research (Field, Delgado, et al., 2009).

Self-Expansion: The Self-Expansion Questionnaire (Aron et al., 2002) measured the extent to which participants perceived their relationship as contributing to personal growth and new experiences. It consists of 7 items rated on a scale from 1 (least agreement) to 7 (most agreement), with an alpha reliability of 0.87, indicating strong internal consistency among the items. This instrument has been widely used in research to assess how individuals perceive their relationships in terms of enhancing personal development and experiencing new aspects of life (Paolini et al., 2016; Ketay et al., 2020).

Attachment Styles: Attachment anxiety and avoidance were assessed using the Experiences in Close Relationships-12 (Lafontaine et al., 2016) questionnaire. This scale includes 12 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale. The ECR-12 has demonstrated excellent reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$  for anxiety,  $.83$  for avoidance) and strong validity across different populations (Tasca et al., 2017).

Attitudes Towards Infidelity: Infidelity: The Attitudes towards Infidelity Scale (ATIS), developed by Whatley in 2006, explores individuals' thoughts and feelings regarding infidelity-related matters. This scale was utilized to assess personal attitudes and levels of acceptance toward infidelity. The questionnaire included 12 statements concerning infidelity. An example statement used is "Infidelity is morally wrong in all circumstances regardless of the situation."



Each item was ranked on a 7-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Somewhat Disagree, 4=Neutral, 5=Somewhat Agree, 6=Agree, 7=Strongly Agree). The ATIS has shown good internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ) and has been validated in various studies (Hackathorn et al., 2011; Jackman, 2014; Habibi et al., 2019)

Inclusion of the Other in the Self (IOS): The IOS scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) measured the degree to which participants included their partner in their self-concept. This is a single-item pictorial measure. The IOS has demonstrated good validity and reliability in previous research (Gächter et al., 2015).

### ***Procedure***

Participants completed an online survey hosted on Google Forms. They were provided with informed consent forms, assured anonymity, and stated that participation was voluntary. The survey included demographic variables (age, gender, marital status, education level) and the following questionnaires: BDS, SEQ, ECR-12, ATIS, and IOS. The completion of the survey took around 10 to 15 minutes.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 27). Descriptive statistics were calculated for demographic variables and primary measures. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine relationships between demographic variables (age, education level) and post-breakup distress, as well as between the psychological variables (IOS, SEQ, ECR, ATIS) and post-breakup distress.

To explore differences based on who initiated the breakup, participants were categorized into three groups: self-initiated, partner-initiated, and mutually initiated breakups. T-tests were

used to compare scores between men and women, while an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to assess differences in scores based on who ended the relationship.

## Results

This study included a total of 225 participants, with 168 women (74.7%) ranging in age from 16 to 68 years ( $M = 0.82$ ,  $SD = 0.16$ ). Most participants (178 or 79.1%) were not in a relationship, being single, separated, divorced, or widowed. Less than a quarter (47 or 20.9%) were in a romantic relationship, married, or cohabitating. Regarding sexual orientation, the majority identified as heterosexual (178 or 79.1%), while 29 (12.9%) identified as bisexual, 9 (4%) as homosexual, 1 (0.4%) with another orientation, and 8 (3.6%) preferred not to disclose their orientation (Table 1).

Concerning the end of their relationships, most participants (133 or 59.1%) reported they had made the decision to end it. In 56 cases (24%), the partner initiated the breakup, and in 36 cases (16%), the decision was mutual. For 66 participants (29.3%), the relationship ended less than 3 months ago, while for 55 participants (24.4%), it ended less than 3 years ago. Additionally, 36 participants each (16%) reported their relationship ended less than 6 months ago or more than 3 years ago. Only 32 participants (14.2%) stated their relationship ended less than a year ago. In terms of starting a new relationship after the breakup, 155 participants (68.9%) had not started another relationship. Among those who had, 19 participants (8.3%) started a new relationship within less than 3 months, 15 participants (6.7%) within less than 6 months, 16 participants (7.1%) within less than a year, 15 participants (6.7%) within less than 3 years, and 5 participants (2%) after more than 3 years (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Descriptive measures of the sample's sociodemographic variables.*

Variables		
Age (years; 18 – 59)	$M=34,02$	$SD=12,08$

Education (years; 5 – 22)	<i>M=14,79</i>	<i>SD=2,32</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Sex		
Male	57	25.3
Female	168	74.7
Marital status		
No Relationship/Single/Separated/Divorced/Widowed.	178	79.1
In a loving relationship/married/cohabitating	47	20.9
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	178	79.1
Bisexual	29	12,9
Homosexual	9	4
I do not want to reveal	8	3.6
Other	1	0.4
How long has the relationship been over		
Less than 3 months	66	29.3
Less than 6 months	36	16
Less than a year	32	14.2
Less than 3 years	55	24.4
More than 3 years	36	16
When did a new relationship start		
I did not start another relationship	155	68.9
Less than 3 months	19	8.3
Less than 6 months	15	6.7
Less than a year	16	7.1
Less than 3 years	15	6.7
More than 3 years	5	2.2

*Note: M = mean ; SD = standard deviation ; % = percentage*

### ***Items description***

Concerning the items of the instruments used in this study, the results obtained from the questionnaire showed that all variables exhibit a normal distribution, as confirmed by the kurtosis values (*SD* below 1) and Skewness (below 2). Except for all ATIS that presents higher values of kurtosis and skewness (Table 2).

For the BDS questionnaire, which employs a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4 (1 being the least agreement and 4 the most agreement), item 8, "Since the breakup, I feel like I have lost the ability to take care of others or to be separate from the people I take care of," has the highest mean ( $M = 2.91$ ;  $SD = 1.15$ ), indicating that participants most strongly agree with this

statement. Conversely, item 10, "I have been experiencing pain since the breakup," has the lowest mean ( $M = 2.17$ ;  $SD = 1.07$ ), suggesting that participants are least in agreement with this statement. Item 4, "I feel drawn to places and things associated with the person," has a mean of  $M = 2.50$  ( $SD = 1.10$ ), indicating that participants moderately agree with this statement (Table 2).

The SEQ questionnaire, using a Likert scale from 1 to 7 (1 being the least agreement and 7 the most agreement), presents different results. Item 1, "To what extent has being with this partner allowed you to experience new things?" has the highest mean ( $M = 4.75$ ;  $SD = 1.74$ ), indicating strong agreement among participants. In contrast, item 4, "How much did being with your partner make you more appealing to potential future mates?" has the lowest mean ( $M = 3.80$ ;  $SD = 1.79$ ), suggesting lower agreement among participants with this statement (Table 2).

Regarding the ECRQ-12 questionnaire, using a Likert scale from 1 to 7 (1 being the least agreement and 7 the most agreement), item 4, "I don't mind asking romantic partners for comfort, advice, or help", has the highest mean ( $M = 5.33$ ;  $SD = 1.62$ ), signaling strong agreement among participants, following item 2 "I am used to discussing my problems and concerns with my partner," ( $M = 5.32$ ;  $SD = 1.91$ ). Conversely, item 5, "I don't feel comfortable opening to romantic partners," has the lowest mean ( $M = 3.20$ ;  $SD = 1.83$ ), indicating lower agreement among participants with this statement (Table 2).

For the ATI questionnaire, using a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (1 being the least agreement and 5 the most agreement), item 1, "Cheating on my partner is morally wrong," has the highest mean ( $M = 4.68$ ;  $SD = 0.77$ ), indicating strong agreement among participants. In contrast, item 5, "I would cheat on my romantic partner if I had the opportunity," has the lowest mean ( $M = 1.32$ ;  $SD = 0.81$ ), signaling lower agreement among participants with this statement (Table 2).

As for the IOS questionnaire, with a Likert scale from 1 to 7 (1 representing less overlap and 7 the most overlap), the item with a mean of 3.63 indicates that most participants have an equal overlap with their partner (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Descriptive measures of psychological assessment instruments.*

Items' descriptives (N = 225)				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skewness (SD = 0.16)	Kurtosis (SD = 0.32)
<b>Breakup Distress Scale (1-4)</b>				
BDS1	2.50	1.15	0.01	-1.43
BDS2	2.89	1.05	-0.46	-1.05
BDS3	2.52	1.19	-0.06	-1.52
BDS4	2.17	1.07	0.38	-1.14
BDS5	2.60	1.11	-0.12	-1.32
BDS6	2.83	1.15	-0.39	-1.34
BDS7	2.74	1.17	-0.29	-1.42
BDS8	2.79	1.14	-0.38	-1.29
BDS9	2.28	1.15	-0.22	-1.41
BDS10	2.91	1.15	-0.56	-1.16
BDS11	2.49	1.12	0.10	-1.37
BDS12	2.40	1.19	0.12	-1.51
BDS13	2.53	1.15	-0.05	-1.44
BDS14	2.23	1.27	0.37	-1.57
BDS15	2.74	1.16	-0.29	-1.39
BDS16	2.58	1.20	-0.09	-1.54
<b>Self-Expansion Questionnaire (1 - 7)</b>				
SEQ1	4.75	1.74	-0.75	-0.21
SEQ2	4.60	1.63	-0.53	-0.37
SEQ3	4.23	1.82	-0.34	-0.93
SEQ4	3.80	1.79	0.03	-0.88
SEQ5	4.40	1.89	-0.36	-0.92
SEQ6	4.40	1.82	-0.25	-0.94
SEQ7	4.61	1.72	-0.56	-0.58
SEQ8	4.36	1.92	-0.30	-1.07
SEQ9	4.20	1.91	-0.14	-1.11
SEQ10	4.23	1.91	-0.19	-1.06
SEQ11	4.41	1.91	-0.29	-1.08
SEQ12	4.16	1.96	-0.18	-1.09
SEQ13	4.60	1.77	0.17	-0.86
SEQ14	4.16	1.91	-0.25	-1.09
<b>Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire (1-7)</b>				

ECR1	4.24	1.90	-0.30	-1.13
ECR2	5.32	1.91	-1.24	1.03
ECR3	5.28	1.56	-0.98	0.18
ECR4	5.33	1.62	-1.19	0.78
ECR5	3.20	1.83	0.49	-0.92
ECR6	5.15	1.73	-0.95	-0.03
ECR7	5.27	1.79	-0.94	-0.08
ECR8	5.12	1.83	-0.71	-0.60
ECR9	5.20	1.91	-0.93	-0.29
ECR10	5.06	1.97	-0.76	-0.67
ECR11	5.20	1.78	-0.87	-0.20
ECR12	4.65	1.83	-0.52	-0.75
Attitudes Toward Infidelity (1-5)				
ATI1	4.68	0.77	-3.04	9.93
ATI2	1.52	1.02	2.11	3.71
ATI3	4.67	0.76	-3.02	10.44
ATI4	1.34	0.87	2.79	7.34
ATI5	1.32	0.81	2.78	7.57
Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (1-7)				
IOS	3.63	1.79	0.19	-0.84

Note : *M* = mean ; *SD* = standard deviation

### Correlations

Concerning the correlation between variables, a positive and significant correlation was found between the variable "Age" and the BDS total scale ( $r(225) = .13, p = .047$ ). Conversely, a negative correlation was observed between the variable "Age" and the ECR total scale ( $r(225) = -.18, p = .007$ ). No significant correlations were found between age and the SEQ, ATIS, and IOS variables (Table 3).

**Table 3**

*Correlations between age and the variables*

	Age
BDS_Total	.133* ( $p = .047$ )
SEQ_Total	.004 ( $p = .950$ )
ECR_Total	-.179** ( $p = .007$ )

ATIS\_Total -0.005 ( $p = .942$ )

IOS\_Total IOS1 -.017( $p = .797$ )

---

\*\* The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level Sig. (2-tailed).

\* The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level Sig (2-tailed).

Furthermore, a negative correlation emerged between the variable "Education" and the BDS total scale ( $r(225) = -.175, p = .009$ ). No significant correlations were noted between "Education" and SEQ, ECR, ATIS, or IOS. Additionally, no significant correlations were observed between "Education" and SEQ ( $r(225) = .012, p = .862$ ), ECR ( $r(225) = -.021, p = .754$ ), ATIS ( $r(225) = .064, p = .342$ ), or IOS ( $r(225) = .036, p = .590$ ) (Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Correlations between education and the variables*

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	Education
BDS_Total	-.175**( $p = .009$ )
SEQ_Total	.012( $p = .862$ )
ECR_Total	-.021( $p = .754$ )
ATIS_Total	.064 ( $p = .342$ )
IOS_TOTAL IOS1	.036 ( $p = .590$ )

---

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In addition, a negative correlation was identified between the variable "New relationship" and BDS ( $r(225) = -.327, p = .000$ ). Negative correlations were also found between "New relationship" and ECR ( $r(225) = -.254, p = .000$ ), as well as between "New relationship" and IOS ( $r(225) = -.199, p = .003$ ). No significant correlation was found between "New relationship" and SEQ or ATIS (Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Correlations between new relationship and the variables*

	New relationship
BDS_Total	-.327**( $p = .000$ )
SEQ_Total	-.098( $p = .144$ )
ECR_Total	-.254**( $p = .000$ )
ATIS_Total	.102 ( $p = .127$ )
IOS_TOTAL IOS1	-.199** ( $p = .003$ )

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Additionally, a negative correlation was identified between the length of time since the breakup and BDS\_Total ( $r(225) = -.406, p < .001$ ). A negative correlation was also found between the length of time since the breakup and SEQ\_Total ( $r(225) = -.189, p = .004$ ), as well as between the length of time since the breakup and ECR\_Total ( $r(225) = -.220, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, a negative correlation was observed between the length of time since the breakup and IOS\_Total ( $r(225) = -.189, p = .004$ ). No significant correlation was found between the length of time since the breakup and ATIS\_Total ( $r(225) = .054, p = .417$ ) (Table 6).

**Table 6**

*Correlations between past relationship and the variables*

	Past relationship
BDS_Total	-.406**( $p = .000$ )
SEQ_Total	-.189**( $p = .004$ )
ECR_Total	-.220**( $p = .001$ )
ATIS_Total	.054 ( $p = .423$ )
IOS_TOTAL IOS1	-.189** ( $p = .004$ )



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*\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).*

*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).*

Table 7 present the correlation between the variables. Firstly moderate positive correlation was identified between breakup distress (BDS\_Total) and self-expansion (SEQ\_Total) ( $r(225) = .239, p < .001$ ). Additionally, a strong positive correlation was found between breakup distress and attachment (ECR\_Total) ( $r(225) = .361, p < .001$ ). Conversely, there was no significant correlation between breakup distress and attitude toward infidelity (ATIS\_Total) ( $r(225) = -.018, p = .791$ ). However, a moderate positive correlation was observed between breakup distress and inclusion of other in the self (IOS\_Total) ( $r(225) = .250, p < .001$ )(Table 7).

Regarding self-expansion (SEQ\_Total), a moderate positive correlation was found with attachment (ECR\_Total) ( $r(225) = .275, p < .001$ ). No significant correlation was detected between self-expansion and attitude toward infidelity (ATIS\_Total) ( $r(225) = -.092, p = .17$ ). Nevertheless, a moderate positive correlation was observed between self-expansion and inclusion of other in the self (IOS\_Total) ( $r(225) = .313, p < .001$ )(Table 7).

Concerning attachment (ECR\_Total), a significant negative correlation was identified with attitude toward infidelity (ATIS\_Total) ( $r(225) = -.187, p = .005$ ). Additionally, a moderate positive correlation was found between attachment and inclusion of other in the self (IOS\_Total) ( $r(225) = .165, p = .013$ )(Table 7).

Finally, no significant correlation was observed between attitude toward infidelity (ATIS\_Total) and inclusion of other in the self (IOS\_Total) ( $r(225) = .028, p = .673$ )(Table 7).

### **Table 7**

*Correlation between variables*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. BDS_total	1				
2. SEQ_Total	.239**	1			
3. ECR_Total	.361**	.275**	1		
4. ATIS_Total	-.018	-.092	-.187**	1	
5. IOS_Total	.250**	.313**	.165*	-.028	1

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In this study, we examined significant differences between men and women in levels of breakup distress (measured by the BDS scale), self-expansion (measured by the SEQ scale), experiences in close relationships (measured by the ECR scale), attitudes toward infidelity (measured by the ATIS scale), and inclusion of other in the self (measured by the IOS scale)(Table8).

For the BDS scale, no significant difference was found between men ( $M = 2.55$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) and women ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ),  $t(22) = -0.26$ ,  $p = .80$ ,  $d = -0.04$ . Similarly, no significant difference was observed for the SEQ scale between men ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ) and women ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ),  $t(22) = 0.91$ ,  $p = .37$ ,  $d = 0.14$ (Table 8).

However, significant differences were identified for the ECR scale, where women ( $M = 5.03$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ) scored significantly higher than men ( $M = 4.57$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ),  $t(22) = -2.86$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $d = -0.44$ . For the ATIS scale, no significant difference was found between men ( $M = 1.43$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ) and women ( $M = 1.35$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ),  $t(22) = 0.86$ ,  $p = .39$ ,  $d = 0.13$ . Similarly, no significant difference was observed for the IOS scale between men ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ) and women ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ),  $t(22) = 0.52$ ,  $p = .61$ ,  $d = 0.08$  (Table 8).

**Table 8***Differences according to gender*

	Sex	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
BDS Total	Male	57	2.55	0.78	-.26	22	.80	-.04
	Female	168	2.58	0.84				
SEQ Total	Male	57	4.41	1.49	.91	22	.37	.14
	Female	168	4.22	1.41				
ECR Total	Male	57	4.57	1.39	-2.86	22	.01	-.44
	Female	168	5.03	0.92				
ATIS Total	Male	57	1.43	0.62	.86	22	.39	.13
	Female	168	1.35	0.63				
IOS TOTAL	Male	57	3.74	1.71	.52	22	.61	.08
	Female	168	3.60	1.82				

*Note.* *N* = frequencies; *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *t* = t-test; *df* = degrees of freedom; *p* = p-value; *d* = Cohen's *d*

An ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there are statistically significant differences in the psychological measures (BDS\_Total, SEQ\_Total, ECR\_Total, ATIS\_Total, and IOS\_Total) based on who ended the relationship. The groups compared were those who had their partner end the relationship ("The other"), those who ended the relationship themselves ("Me"), and those who mutually decided to end the relationship ("Both"). This analysis helps to understand how the role in ending the relationship influences various psychological outcomes, allowing us to see if the distress, self-expansion, attachment

experiences, attitudes toward infidelity, and inclusion of the other in the self-differ significantly across these groups (Table 9).

**Table 9**  
*Anova for who Ended the Relationship*

<i>Measure</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Source</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>Etat Square</i>
BDS_Total	The other	133	2.83	.74	Between groups	2	19.84	.000	.15
	Me	56	2.08	.77	Within groups	222			
	Both	36	2.42	.85					
SEQ_Total	The other	133	4.42	1.47	Between groups	2	3.55	.030	.03
	Me	56	3.38	1.24	Within groups	222			
	Both	36	4.37	1.46					
ECR_Total	The other	133	5.07	.98	Between groups	2	4.12	.018	.04
	Me	56	4.60	1.06	Within groups	222			
	Both	36	4.84	1.33					
ATIS_Total	The other	133	1.29	.51	Between groups	2	3.03	.050	.03
	Me	56	1.52	.78	Within groups	222			
	Both	36	1.44	.70					
IOS_TOTAL	The other	133	3.92	1.77	Between groups	2	5.03	.007	.04
	Me	56	3.39	1.78	Within groups	222			
	Both	36	2.94	1.67					

*Note : Table X presents the results of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) for the variable "Who Ended the Relationship". The measures BDS\_Total, SEQ\_Total, ECR\_Total, ATIS\_Total, and IOS\_TOTAL are analyzed across the groups "The other", "Me", and "Both". For each measure, the data include the number of samples (N), mean scores (Mean), and standard deviations (SD) for each group. ANOVA results indicate between-groups sources of variation, degrees of freedom (df), F-values (Z), significance levels (Sig.), and effect sizes (Eta Square).*

For the analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the variable "Who Ended the Relationship," significant differences were found among groups across several psychological measures. For BDS\_Total, there was a significant difference among the groups "The other," "Me," and "Both"

( $F(2, 222) = 19.84, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.15$ ). Mean post-breakup distress scores (BDS) varied between 2.08 (Me) and 2.83 (The other), with a mean of 2.42 for the Both group. Regarding SEQ\_Total, there was also a significant difference among groups ( $F(2, 222) = 3.55, p = .030, \eta^2 = 0.03$ ). Means for self-expansion (SEQ) were 3.38 (Me), 4.42 (The other), and 4.37 (Both) (Table 9).

For ECR\_Total, significant differences among groups were found ( $F(2, 222) = 4.12, p = .018, \eta^2 = 0.04$ ). Mean scores for experiences in close relationships (ECR) ranged between 4.60 (Me), 5.07 (The other), and 4.84 (Both) (Table 9).

Regarding ATIS\_Total, no significant differences were observed among groups ( $F(2, 222) = 3.03, p = .050, \eta^2 = 0.03$ ). Mean scores for attitudes towards infidelity (ATIS) were 1.52 (Me), 1.29 (The other), and 1.44 (Both) (Table 9).

For IOS\_Total, significant differences were found among groups ( $F(2, 222) = 5.03, p = .007, \eta^2 = 0.04$ ). Mean scores for inclusion of the other in the self (IOS) were 3.39 (Me), 3.92 (The other), and 2.94 (Both) (Table 9).

## **Discussion**

The majority of study participants were women, which aligns with a common trend in relationship research where women are often overrepresented. This demographic distribution is consistent with findings reported by Fagundes et al. (2013) and Rosenthal et al. (2015), who also observed a higher proportion of women in their samples, reflecting a widespread trend in this field of research. Participants' ages varied widely, ranging from 18 to 68 years old, with a mean age of 34 years. This age diversity within the sample indicates a varied representation of different age cohorts. This diversity can influence study outcomes by allowing for a more

nuanced exploration of emotional and behavioral responses to breakup, taking into account varied perspectives and experiences based on age.

Marital status revealed that a significant majority were not in a relationship at the time of the study, including individuals who were single, separated, divorced, or widowed. This contrasts sharply with the lower percentage of participants currently in a romantic relationship, whether married or cohabiting.

Demographic variables such as age and education level showed significant but moderate correlations with post-breakup distress. Age was positively correlated with post-breakup distress, indicating that older participants tended to report slightly higher levels of distress following a breakup. A study by Sbarra et al. (2011) found that older adults reported greater emotional distress following a divorce compared to younger adults. The research suggested that as people age, they may have more entrenched social networks and rely more heavily on their partner for emotional support, making the breakup more distressing. Conversely, education level showed a negative correlation with post-breakup distress, suggesting that participants with higher education levels experienced less distress. Literature indicates shows that individuals with higher levels of education tend to manage separation more effectively (Amato, 2014 & Perrig-Chiello et al., 2014).

When examining the transition to new relationships after a breakup, a large majority of participants had not started a new relationship. Among those who did, the timing varied considerably. Participants who had not entered new relationships reported higher levels of post-breakup distress, less positive experiences in close relationships, and a lower sense of inclusion of the other in the self.

The study by Bühler et al. (2021) showed that individuals who are not in a relationship tend to score lower on the IOS scale, indicating a lesser integration of the partner into their self-concept. Lower IOS scores can mean a more autonomous identity, which can be beneficial for personal development and independent decision-making. The literature highlights the importance of initiating relationships to establish well-functioning communal bonds, including both friendships and romantic relationships (Clark et al., 2019). Lewandowski and Bizzoco (2007) also reported that starting a new relationship can help alleviate post-breakup distress by providing emotional support and a sense of belonging. The study by Shimek and Bello (2014) suggests that rebound relationships can offer some level of emotional respite or distraction, thereby reducing post-breakup distress.

The negative correlations found between the time elapsed since the breakup and certain key psychological variables provide valuable insights into the emotional recovery process after a breakup. Specifically, a strong negative correlation between the time elapsed since the breakup and breakup distress suggests that over time, individuals experience less emotional distress related to the separation. This supports the idea that the emotional impact of a breakup diminishes over time as individuals gradually adjust to life without their former partner (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Additionally, the negative correlation between the time elapsed since the breakup and self-expansion shows that over time, individuals perceive less self-expansion related to their past relationship. This could indicate that individuals begin to reintegrate their personal identity, becoming less dependent on their past relationship as a source of personal growth.

The negative correlation with attachment suggests that individuals who have had more time since the breakup also report less anxiety and avoidance related to attachment. This is consistent with attachment theory, which posits that over time, individuals become less

concerned with emotional intimacy or less avoidant as they move on from their past relationship (Bowlby, 2008; Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

It is also noteworthy that the negative correlation between the duration since the breakup and the inclusion of the other in the self suggests that individuals gradually disintegrate their ex-partner's identity from their own identity over time. This finding reinforces the idea that as time passes, the former partner is perceived less as an integral part of the individual's identity (Aron et al., 1992; Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Battaglia et al., 1998).

This study explored the impact of various psychological factors - self-expansion, attitudes towards infidelity, inclusion of the other in the self, and attachment styles - on distress following a romantic breakup. The findings provide valuable insights into how these factors contribute to individuals' emotional responses during post-breakup periods.

Firstly, the results reveal that relationships characterized by self-expansion (SEQ) are associated with higher levels of emotional distress following a breakup. This finding contrasts with previous research suggesting that self-expansion typically correlates with increased emotional resilience (Aron et al., 2000). These results suggest that perceiving a relationship as promoting personal growth can lead to increased emotional challenges during the breakup process, contrary to the initial idea that self-expansion might facilitate better emotional resilience. Additionally, the Literature suggest that individuals who perceive their relationship as fostering self-expansion also tend to integrate their partner more deeply into their self-concept (Aron & Aron, 1996; Aron et al., 1998; Aron et al., 2004).

Secondly, attachment styles (ECR) emerged as another critical factor influencing post-breakup distress. Higher levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance were associated with increased distress levels, supporting previous research linking insecure attachment styles to



difficulties in coping with relationship dissolution (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Individuals with higher attachment anxiety or avoidance may struggle more with feelings of loss and separation. Lafontaine et al. (2016)'s study corroborates previous findings indicating a link between separation anxiety and post-breakup emotional distress.

Thirdly, attitudes towards infidelity (ATIS) were examined in terms of their correlation with emotional distress after a breakup. The results showed that moral beliefs about infidelity were not significantly related to the distress experienced after a breakup, and they did not differ significantly. This suggests that while moral convictions may influence overall relationship dynamics, they may not directly impact immediate emotional adjustment after a separation. Nonetheless, a recent investigation conducted by Tran et al. (2023) revealed that serious issues with a former partner, such as infidelity or physical violence, were associated with more positive emotional states regarding the separation, increased relief, but also heightened anger. This suggests that specific experiences with a previous partner can significantly affect emotional responses post-breakup, regardless of moral attitudes towards infidelity.

On the other hand, Arezoo Haseli et al. (2019) provided a different perspective by showing that there was no clear consistency between microsystem variables (such as communication quality, relationship satisfaction, etc.) and actual engagement in infidelity. This observation implies that complex individual and relational factors may unexpectedly influence the decision to engage in infidelity, despite personal moral attitudes.

To deepen our understanding, further exploration into how these moral attitudes shape behaviors and decisions in relationships, especially regarding emotional experiences after a breakup, would be valuable.

Finally, the inclusion of the other in the self (IOS), a concept indicating the extent to which individuals perceive their partners as part of their own identity, exhibited notable correlations with levels of distress experienced post-breakup.

This finding underscores the profound emotional impact of relationship dissolution on individuals who view their partners as essential components of their identity. It suggests that the process of separating from someone deeply integrated into one's self-concept can be particularly challenging and emotionally taxing. These insights align closely with previous research conducted by Boelen, P. A., et al. (2010), which similarly highlighted the heightened vulnerability to distress among individuals who strongly intertwine their sense of self with their romantic partners.

Regarding the role of the breakup initiator, the results indicate that it is closely related to the distress experienced after the separation. Specifically, individuals whose partner initiated the breakup experience more marked emotional distress compared to those who initiated the breakup themselves or made a joint decision. This finding aligns with research indicating that non-initiators of a breakup often experience higher levels of post-breakup distress, feeling emotionally rejected (Field, 2011, 2017; Field et al., 2009; Leary, 2001; Perilloux & Buss, 2008).

Concerning the inclusion of the other in the self, as measured by the IOS scale, the results show that this factor is also affected by the role of the breakup initiator. People whose partner initiated the breakup exhibit higher levels of including the other in their own identity compared to those who initiated the breakup themselves or made a joint decision.

Furthermore, it is indicated that individuals whose partner initiated the breakup show higher levels of self-expansion compared to those who initiated the breakup themselves or those who made a mutual decision to end the relationship.

Finally, the results suggest that individuals whose partner initiated the breakup display higher levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance compared to those who initiated the breakup themselves or decided mutually. This suggests that individuals with more anxious or avoidant attachment styles may react more intensely to a breakup initiated by the other. This is consistent with previous research by Tran et al. (2023), confirmed that the initiator's role in the breakup is associated with more positive and less negative emotional outcomes after separation.

### *Limitations*

While this study offers important insights, it is crucial to recognize its various limitations. Firstly, the majority of participants were women, which reflects a common trend in relationship research but may limit the generalizability of findings to male populations. Future studies could benefit from more balanced gender representation to better understand potential differences in emotional responses to breakup between genders.

Secondly, the study's reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias. Participants may have underreported or overreported certain behaviors or emotions due to social desirability or memory biases. Utilizing multiple methods, such as behavioral observations or interviews, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of post-breakup experiences.

thirdly, while the study explored various psychological factors such as self-expansion, attachment styles, and attitudes towards infidelity, other potentially influential variables (e.g.,

cultural differences, personality traits) were not extensively examined. Future research could consider these factors to provide a more holistic understanding of post-breakup distress.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study has shed light on the intricate relationships between psychological factors and post-breakup distress. It has underscored the significance of variables such as self-expansion, attachment styles, and the integration of the partner into one's self-concept in shaping individuals' emotional responses following romantic relationship dissolution.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing targeted interventions aimed at supporting individuals during this challenging period. Encouraging strategies that reduce the integration of the other into the self and promote more secure attachment styles could help alleviate post-breakup distress and facilitate smoother emotional transitions.

Moreover, while this study provides valuable insights, there remains ample room for further exploration. Future research could delve deeper into cultural influences, personality factors, and longitudinal studies to capture the evolving nature of post-breakup experiences over time. By continuing to investigate these facets, researchers can better tailor interventions and support systems that promote resilience and emotional well-being in the aftermath of romantic relationship endings.

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