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# Understanding Young People's Relationship Breakups Using the Dual Processing Model of Coping and Bereavement

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study was to explore young people's experiences of and adjustment to romantic relationship breakup by reference to the Dual Processing Model of Coping and Bereavement (DPM; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Participants were 31 registered forum users and 10 forum moderators. Findings were based on thematic analyses of messages posted on an Internet-mediated discussion forum over a 12-month period. Coping responses include availing of emotional support, self-expression, distraction, and indulgence in substance use or changes in eating behaviors. There appeared to be a reprioritization of values and opportunities for personal development and engagement in new and fulfilling relationships. The themes identified in the analysis broadly map onto the main elements of the DPM.

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Break-up; coping; dual processing model; relationship dissolution; young people

Romantic relationships play a central role in young peoples' lives (Furman & Collins, 2008). They provide a context in which the maturation of intimacy, affiliation, sexuality, identity, and autonomy can take place (Collins, 2003). During their school years, the majority of young people report having had around four romantic relationships (Seiffge-Krenke, 2000; Zimmer-Gembeck, 1999). Adolescent relationships usually do not last beyond one year, with most enduring just a few months (Seiffge-Krenke, 2000; Shulman & Scharf, 2000; Zimmer-Gembeck, 1999). Almost all 20- to 25-year-olds report first-hand experience of romantic relationship dissolution or breakup (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). This suggests that breakups are a normative part of young people's lives. Despite the common nature of relationship breakups, for many individuals the experience is associated with severe distress (Davila, Steinberg, Kachadourian, Cobb, & Fincham, 2004; Meloy & Fisher, 2005).

In the early stages of development are theoretical frameworks for understanding the role of romantic relationships in young people's lives

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and, by extension, the potential implications of romantic relationship breakup for their psychosocial adjustment (Furman & Collins, 2008). However, three converging theoretical models are worthy of mention because they have guided much of the existing research in the field and because they highlight the importance of romantic relationships for young people's development. These are attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980), Sullivanian theory (1953), and behavior systems approach (Furman & Wehner, 1994).

Separately, parallels have been drawn between individuals' reactions to loss of an attachment figure following romantic relationship breakup and bereavement (Bowlby, 1973, 1980; Lagrand, 1988). More recently, data from neuroimaging studies show a neuropsychological link between the experiences of romantic relationship breakup and bereavement (Archer & Fischer, 2008; Gündel, O'Connor, Littrell, Fort, & Lane, 2003; Najib, Lorberbaum, Kose, Bohning, & George, 2004; O'Connor et al., 2008). In both cases the breaking of bonds triggers a deficit-driven reaction comprising two processes. One is expressed through active protest and includes anger, idealization, and separation anxiety. The other is a more passive-depressive reaction. The former involves activity of the dopaminergic reward system, whereas the latter involves subcortical dopaminergic pathways. For this reason, it is reasonable to conjecture that research in the field of bereavement may elucidate the internal processes underpinning romantic relationship dissolution.

The Dual Processing Model (DPM, Stroebe & Schut, 1999) was purposely chosen as a theoretical touchstone for the current study for conceptualizing the means by which young people cope with the specific stresses associated with the breaking of an affectionate bond following romantic relationship breakup. The rationale is that the model is theoretically robust, having been subject to extensive theoretical and empirical reviews (Bennett, Gibbons, & Mackenzie-Smith, 2010; Carr, 2010; Richardson, 2007; Richardson & Balaswamy, 2001). The framework departs from traditional models of bereavement by defining two categories of stressors associated with grieving. The stressors are loss and restoration orientation coping. Loss-orientation (LO) describes painful focus on, appraisal of, and processing of details of the actual loss experience. As such, loss-orientation involves grief work. Restoration-orientation (RO) refers to concentration on secondary stressors that are also consequences of bereavement and it involves coping with concurrent stressors, adjusting to changes in roles, routines, and identity, and revising future plans. RO is thought to be indicative of the effort to reorient oneself in a world without the deceased. In support of this theory is empirical evidence that shows that bereaved individuals focus on both types of stressor, and that each is associated with bereavement outcomes (Caserta & Lund, 2007; Wijngaards et al., 2008). The DPM postulates that grieving is a dynamic and fluctuating process involving movement between loss and restoration-orientation.

While significant gains have been made in respect of identifying the predictive factors in romantic relationship dissolution (e.g., Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010), much less is known about the effects of romantic relationship dissolution on psychological adjustment (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). Reactions following breaks in early attachment relationships, as described by Bowlby (1969), are similar to separation reactions following rejection from a romantic attachment figure (Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2000). In the period following relationship breakup, negative emotions such as anger, loneliness, and depression are more common than positive feelings such as relief and happiness (Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999). Other emotional responses include feelings of guilt, self-blame, anxiety, anger, preoccupation, and insecurity (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003). Adolescents and young adults may be particularly vulnerable to the intense emotions associated with breakup due to their inexperience and lack of impulse control (Fisher, 2006).

How young people appraise romantic dissolution can affect their adjustment to breakup. Tashiro and Frazier (2003) carried out a quantitative study with American undergraduate students, which reported that youth who attributed the breakup of their relationship to their partner's personal traits, physical characteristics, abilities and beliefs, or their social environment (for instance, alternative romantic partners or family disapproval) reported more distress, perhaps because those factors are outside of the individual's control. Attributions related to self and factors such as having dissimilar interests were not related to levels of distress. Presented in Table 1 below are the 24 distinct explanatory themes identified and examples of responses for each of the thematic explanations.

A shortcoming of extant literature is the paucity of studies of the potential for positive life changes following breakups (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003; Tashiro, Frazier, & Berman, 2006). Theories of stress-related growth contend that the most significant life changes occur during periods of crisis. Examples of types of stress-related growth include increased self-reliance, closeness with others, changes in life priorities, and empathy for others (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998).

In light of this, the aim of the current study was to explore young people's experiences of and adjustment to romantic relationship dissolution. It was driven by one overarching research question but was informed by five narrower questions (below). The study was the first of its kind to be carried out with adolescents and young adults and was designed to overcome some methodological shortcomings that have characterized past research in the field, which include limited theoretical account of the psychological processes underpinning young people's reactions to breakup or its emotional, behavioral, or social concomitants, a preponderance of North American undergraduate student samples, use of data collection procedures that are static

**Table 1.** Adolescents' explanations for romantic dissolution (Connolly and McIsaac, 2009a).

Explanation theme	Example response
Limited time together	"No time"
Boredom	"Kind of getting bored"
Disinterest	"Lack of interest"
Absence of love	"I didn't feel anything anymore"
Distrust/dishonesty	"No trust"
Poor communication	"Communication problems"
Poor treatment	"Careless about me"
Sexual dissatisfaction	"Not enough sex"
Lack of physical attraction	"Lost attraction"
Platonic relationship	"Wanted to be just friends"
Dissimilarity	"I was realizing we were very different people"
Personality change	"Persons' character changed"
Reduced personal space	"I felt crowded"
Other obligations	"Too busy for each other"
Geographic distance	"Lived far away from each other"
Infidelity	"Cheated on me"
Conflict	"Too many arguments over stupid things"
Negative labeling	"Person is evil"
Not a real relationship	"Wasn't a real relationship"
Confusion	"I still have no idea"
Substance use	"Drugs"
Parental interference	"Parents didn't approve"
Peer interference	"Gossip and rumor spreading"
Physical abuse	"Person beat me"

from the perspective of time and place, and limited attention to potential for positive life changes. In exploring young people's use of online discussion forums and their experiences of and adjustment to romantic dissolution, the following questions were addressed:

To what degree can DPM be used to understand youths' experience of relationship breakup?

1. What are young people's experiences of romantic relationships?
2. What kinds of stressors are involved in romantic relationship breakup?
3. In what ways does romantic relationship dissolution impact young people's psychosocial adjustment?
4. How do young people cope with romantic relationship breakup?
5. What are the outcomes of relationship dissolution for young people?

## Method

### *Research design*

The present study used a qualitative approach to examine the use of an online discussion forum for 16- to 25-year-olds coping with romantic relationship breakup and to explore young people's experiences of and adjustment to romantic relationship dissolution. This approach was chosen on account of the dearth of literature on the topic and in consideration of the exploratory

nature of the research questions. An Internet-mediated research approach was cost and time efficient and provided for ready access to a geographically diverse sample, which in turn facilitated access to the population under investigation, namely, young people affected by romantic relationship dissolution (Fielding, Lee, & Black, 2008).

Thematic analysis was utilized because it is a theoretically flexible, accessible and rigorous approach to data collection that enabled the investigator to derive a rich, detailed, and complex account of participants' qualitative reports (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Research context**

The study was conducted on an asynchronous online discussion forum known as *Project Breakup*. The forum was created especially for the current study and hosted by Spunout.ie, a youth-led online community for 16- to 25-year-olds in Ireland. Prior to posting messages on the discussion forums on Spunout.ie, visitors to the site were required to register online. Trained volunteers moderated the forum continuously. A nationwide recruitment campaign that targeted a wide range of Internet locations was undertaken for the present study.

### **Participants and data sampling**

Participants in the project were 31 registered users of Spunout.ie and 10 moderators. Registered users were predominantly young people in Ireland between the ages of 16 to 25 years inclusive who had experienced a romantic breakup. Moderators ranged in age from 25 to 31 years with a gender ratio of 4:1 (females: males). Moderators were either volunteers or part-time staff who received nonmanualized training in online forum moderation and informal supervision by experienced members of staff. The Internet-mediated approach taken in the current study meant that it was not possible to confirm the ages or gender of registered users. Further, the confidentiality clause outlined in the forum registration agreement precluded staff from disclosing information supplied by registered users to the study investigator. For these reasons, and because little is known about the precise characteristics of the Internet user population in Ireland (Fielding et al., 2008), making a determination on the representativeness of the sample in the present study proved difficult. In such an instance, Fielding et al. (2008) argue that it is preferable to access a sample that is diverse since differing perspectives create contention and hence, greater development of ideas. To this end, a nationwide recruitment campaign that targeted a wide range of Internet, print, and broadcast media outlets was undertaken for the present study.

## Procedure

The Health Service Executive Scientific Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for the present study. A number of ethical considerations of studying Web-based interactions were taken into account. Regarding informed consent, posted in plain view on the *Project Breakup* forum was a thread containing detailed written information pertaining to the aim of the study and the nature of participation, including issues such as the voluntary nature of participation, anonymity, and potential risks of participating. A short video recording in which the investigator outlined briefly the rationale for the study and the means by which young people could participate was uploaded to YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com); McKiernan, 2009). The video was also accessible via an electronic link on the *Project Breakup* forum on Spunout.ie. Regarding anonymity, no information that could lead to the identification of any individuals participating in or referred to in the course of the study was published or disclosed in the research report. Increased anonymity and privacy in the online environment may have reduced biases resulting from the perception of biosocial attributes of participants and moderators (Hewson, Laurent, & Vogel, 1996). Greater anonymity may also have reduced biases by helping to balance power relationships between moderators and registered users and between registered users themselves (Murray & Sixsmith, 1998). In the same way, social desirability effects may also have been reduced (e.g., Joinson, 1999). Though there was potential for ambiguities to arise on account of the lack of extralinguistic cues (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004), care was taken to note, within the data set, judgments made in respect of ambiguous posts. Data were stored on password-protected computer directories (Kraut et al., 2004). Contributors to the forum could not be identified by inserting dialogue extracts into a search engine. Acknowledged in writing in the study information thread on the *Project Breakup* forum was the potential for participants to experience upset on account of the emotive nature of the research topic. Forum moderators were designated as points of referral for support services outside of Spunout.ie (e.g., the Samaritans free and confidential support service) in the event that visitors to the forum felt that they would benefit from additional support. It should be noted that Internet-mediated research is not intrinsically more likely to harm participants than traditional research methods (Kraut et al., 2004), and that the potential risks to participants were deemed to be minimal. Data comprised all contributions to *Project Breakup* discussion forum by registered users of Spunout.ie and forum Moderators. Data collection was conducted over a 12-month period.

## Data analysis

The study used thematic analysis to theorize participants' motivations, experiences, and meanings in relation to romantic dissolution. The "unit of

analysis” in the thematic analysis were forum posts and messages. It should be noted that “keyness” of a given theme or subtheme was not determined by its prevalence in the data set but according to whether it represented something important in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Also, data were identified in the current study using a deductive approach (e.g., Hayes, 1997). That is, there was no pretense that data were or even could be coded in a theoretical or epistemological vacuum. To ensure an adequate level of consistency in the content and thematic analysis, interrater reliability was carried out by an independent researcher on no less than 10% of the data (Guerin & Hennessy, 2002). Interrater reliabilities above 70% were considered acceptable.

## Results

In all, 41 forum users posted 238 messages on the *Project Breakup* Internet discussion forum over 12 consecutive months. Messages varied in their complexity and length, ranging from short statements (“I just got dumped”) to involved accounts of the decline and termination of a romantic relationship that were in excess of 1,000 words in length. The messages were posted across 28 distinct discussion threads (a thread refers to a grouping of messages under on a common topic). Fourteen of the 28 threads were created by moderators; 14 by visitors to the forum. The subjects of certain threads were clearly denoted by their titles (for example, *Moving from no contact to contact, is it a good idea?*). Other threads were titled more ambiguously and, as such, contained messages on a range of subjects related to the topic of romantic relationship breakup.

Eight main themes and a larger number of subthemes (see Table 2), were identified. These are explored by reference to salient excerpts from the data set.

### *Going out*

The theme of “Going out” refers to the forum users’ experiences of initiating and being part of romantic relationships. Discussed were relationships borne out of professional relationships, chance encounters, and friendships. Setting romantic relationships apart from platonic relationships was the issue of attraction. Being attracted to a prospective partner was described by forum users as being an “obvious” prerequisite for any romantic relationship. Reported were key features of romantic relationships, which included love, bonding, and security.

### *Dumped*

This theme specifically refers to the dissolution of romantic relationships. In relating the circumstances just prior to the breakup of their relationships, participants referred to a sense of having become emotionally distant from



**Table 2.** Themes and subthemes identified in thematic analysis.

Theme and subthemes (in parentheses)	Description
<b>Going out</b> <i>Initiating relationships</i> <i>Relationship highlights</i> <i>Working on the relationship</i>	Experience of being in a romantic relationship
<b>Dumped</b> <i>Signs of trouble</i> <i>Reasons for Breakup</i> <i>Breaking the news</i>	Circumstances surrounding the breakup
<b>It hits hard</b> <i>Thoughts</i> <i>Feelings</i> <i>Physical Impact</i>	Impact of breakup
<b>The Ex</b> <i>Feelings remain</i> <i>Reconciling image of Ex</i> <i>Contact with Ex</i> <i>Giving it another go</i> <i>Behaving badly</i>	Relationship with former partner
<b>Dealing with the aftermath</b> <i>New routines</i> <i>Change of plans for the future</i> <i>New me</i> <i>Other problems</i>	Life change following a breakup
<b>Ways of thinking about breakup</b> <i>Lucky escape</i> <i>Challenging</i> <i>Loss</i> <i>Regret</i> <i>Not taken seriously</i>	Cognitive appraisals of the experience of breakup
<b>Tips for breakup survival</b> <i>Support</i> <i>Self-expression</i> <i>Distraction</i> <i>Indulgence-deprivation</i>	Strategies for coping with breakup
<b>Coming to terms</b> <i>Lessons learned</i> <i>Deciding what's important</i> <i>New opportunities</i> <i>Acceptance</i>	The process of adjustment

their partners and they reported increased tension in the relationship (“He was distant with me for a few weeks before this and we fought for a lot of the weekend”). Conversely, other forum users described how they were unaware of any problems or dissatisfaction in the relationship, explaining that the breakup was “sudden” and “out of the blue.” It is clear that a host of factors contribute to the dissolution of young people’s romantic relationships. For ease of reference, these and other factors are presented in [Table 3](#) below.

### ***It hits hard***

It is clear from an analysis of forum users’ accounts of relationship dissolution that the psychological impact can be severe. The experience is one that

**Table 3.** Sample reasons for romantic relationship breakup based on thematic analysis.

Reasons	Sample quote
Competing time demands	"With school commitments the following year we gave each other a break"
Going through a rough time	"He's going through a tough time at the min with other things happening"
Self-esteem issues	"If I was a tiny bit skinnier"
Fear of intimacy	"Fear of getting intimate"
Distance apart	"I broke up with him because I was finding the distance so, so tough"
Timing	"It wasn't our time"
Incompatibility	"We had different ideas on life and marriage and kids"
Pressurized partner	"I just smothered him"
Fallen out of love	"The simple fact is I don't love her anymore"
Sexuality issues	"I think he was just scared of what people would think if they found out"
Disapproving of company kept	"I got dumped because I was hanging around people she didn't like"
Not satisfied by relationship	"The spark just went"
Feeling misunderstood	"I just knew then that he didn't really understand me"
Taking a break	"He broke it to me that he wanted some time apart to think about things"
Infidelity	"He had slept with someone else a few months previous"

occupies young people's minds for some time after the event ("But almost a year on from my breakup with my ex and seven months into this new relationship and I still can't stop thinking about my ex"). There was agreement that breakup impacts negatively on self-confidence, as one forum user reported: "At this stage my self-confidence had taken a battering. My self-belief was nonexistent, and generally I was not in a good way." The prospect of making a fresh start, so to speak, is "scary" for young people. The three main somatic symptoms reported (shock, stress, and feeling "sick") represented responses that were distinct from other psychological reactions.

### **The Ex**

Clearly articulated on the Internet forum was the message that it is normal that feelings for a former partner would remain following the termination of a romantic relationship. Accompanying these residual feelings are young people's images or mental representations of their former partners. Just as some residual feelings have a negative quality so are certain thoughts in respect of former partners less than favorable: "crazy," "spastic," "horny, impatient little so-and-so," "a fu\*\*ing disgrace." In stark contrast to these negative images are the idealized pictures painted by some forum users: "No one else I've met even comes close to comparing to (the Ex)." The degree of contact between youth who had broken up ranges from none to occasional contact to still living with the former partner.

### ***Dealing with the aftermath***

Young people miss the routine of being in a relationship when it has been terminated. They miss the familiarity of the relationship (“Sometimes it’s easier to crave what we’ve lost ‘cos its safe ... better the devil you know and all that”). On the Internet forum, disappointed youth spoke about how the experience was at odds with their assumption that, for example, love was forever. In discussing their experiences of romantic breakup, forum users referenced numerous concurrent stressors in their lives (see [Table 4](#)).

### ***Ways of thinking about the breakup***

A salient example of a positive appraisal of relationship dissolution is that related by one contributor in the forum, who said, “Looking back on breakups, to me it’s a blessing. I mean, we learn so much and it really shapes who we’re constantly becoming.” For others, relationship breakup is seen as something more challenging. This was conveyed in numerous descriptions (“Never easy,” “Tough,” “Rough”). Those that framed their relationship in terms of loss or even defeat spoke of having “no enjoyment from life anymore.” Another interpretation that featured on the forum was the view that certain breakups are regrettable (“I think she just realized she made a mistake, but she realized a little late”). Findings from the analysis show that relationship dissolution has serious and varied connotations for young people.

### ***Tips for breakup survival***

Numerous sources of emotional support were cited on the Internet forum, including friends and family (“My family and friends were my rock, though. They were just unbelievable and stood by me when I was extremely

**Table 4.** Concurrent stresses.

Type of stressor
Financial worries
Expulsion from school
Pregnancy (unplanned)
Abortion
Miscarriage
Drug use
Restrictive work schedule
Unhappy with physical appearance
Health and lifestyle issues (Physical health problems, dietary issues)
Sleeping difficulties
Worry
Interpersonal problems (e.g., no contact with mother; living with parents who drink; conflict in peer group)
Stressful life events
Car trouble

depressed”). In an attempt to deal with stresses associated with breakup, some young people turn to alcohol and drugs (“Wakening up in the morning getting stoned and beginning my day stoned—for the whole day”), though there is an awareness of the potential consequences of engaging in such behaviors.

### **Coming to terms**

The analysis shows that young people consider that they learn from and are affected by the experience of breakup (“We learn so much and it really shapes who we’re constantly becoming”). Some youths develop self-insights and a greater understanding of others. Young people recognize that with the passage of time they adjust, as one young person related: “Funnily enough, I hated hearing it at the time, but time is certainly a healer. No doubt about it.” This is not to mistake adjustment to relationship dissolution as an entirely passive process. On the contrary, it is difficult for many young people to relinquish their bond with their former partner (“It was hard to let go. I still care about him so much”).

### **Discussion**

The results indicated that there were eight main themes that are mapped onto the DPM (see Table 5). Findings indicate that, with the exception of “Going out,” the themes identified in the analysis are broadly in line with the Dual Processing Model of Coping and Bereavement (DPM; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Hence findings are interpreted below by reference to this particular framework. Also discussed are aspects of young people’s experiences of relationship dissolution that are distinct from grieving as defined by the DPM.

Results support previous research by Furman and Collins (2008), which underscores the pivotal role of romantic relationships in young people’s development. The sense of devotion and the desire for sexual expression described by forum users is consistent with the work of Hazan and Shaver (1987), which hypothesized that, in contrast to parent–child attachments, romantic attachments are characterized by reciprocity and sexual behavior. In addition to considering young people’s emerging need for sex, Sullivanian theory (1953) highlights the importance of other potentially important factors identified in the analysis, including the young person’s increased need for acceptance.

The themes “Dumped,” “It hits hard,” and “The Ex” would appear to map closely onto a key feature of the DPM, namely *loss-orientation*. That is, they relate to concentration on, and dealing with, some aspect of the loss experience, particularly with regard to the former partner (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The findings related to the theme “Dumped” are broadly in line with previous research that focused on adolescents’ explanations for romantic

**Table 5.** Mapping on the findings to the DPM.

Main themes	DPM-type of coping	How it relates to the model	
Going out	Does not align with model	Refers to the forum users' experiences of initiating and being part of romantic relationships.	
Dumped	Loss-orientation.	Relates to concentration on, and dealing with, some aspect of the loss experience, particularly with regard to the former partner Stroebe and Schut (1999)	Broadly in line with previous research that focused on adolescents' explanations for romantic dissolution (see Connolly and McIsaac, 2009a)
It hits hard	Loss-orientation.		
The Ex	Loss-orientation.		
Dealing with the aftermath	Restoration-orientation	In the context of bereavement refers to what needs to be dealt with following the death of a loved one and how it is dealt with Stroebe and Schut (1999). A parallel process is the need to accommodate changes to assumptions and plans for the future	
Ways of thinking about the breakup	Restoration-orientation		
Tips for breakup survival	Restoration-orientation		
Coming to terms	Restoration-orientation		

dissolution (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009a). While there is no explicit reference within the DPM to the circumstances prior to bereavement, it seems reasonable to liken situations in which there is some prior warning of relationship loss and those where there is none to the circumstances preceding a death. Certainly, dying can be a protracted process or it can occur without notice. In either case, tension and bewilderment are likely to feature as they do in the case of relationship breakup.

It is clear from the thematic analysis of forum users' accounts of relationship dissolution that the psychological impact can be severe (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). Just as the breaking of an affectionate bond, in the context of bereavement, is achieved through a lengthy and painful process of disengagement known as *grief* (Bowlby, 1979), findings from the analysis show that the experience of relationship breakup is one that occupies young people's minds for some time after the event.

On an emotional level, young people on the forum expressed marked emotional distress following their breakups. Consistent with previous research, they referred to feelings of sadness and depression (Davila et al., 2004) and a sense of feeling alone (Sprecher, 1994). Other emotional responses include feelings of guilt, anger, bitterness, and a sense of vulnerability (Lagrand, 1988). A factor that perhaps sets the experience of breakup apart from bereavement is the issue of rejection by a romantic

partner. The analysis shows that rejected youth perceive an insult to the ego and consequent issues with self-confidence, though in some cases these issues precede the breakup experience.

The theme of “Dealing with the aftermath” relates to stressors involved in romantic relationship breakup and how young people cope with breakup, respectively. As such, the theme is akin to the component of the DPM known as *restoration-orientation*, which in the context of bereavement refers to what needs to be dealt with following the death of a loved one and how it is dealt with (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). A parallel process is the need to accommodate changes to assumptions and plans for the future. In discussing their experiences of romantic relationship breakup, forum users referenced numerous concurrent stressors in their lives, which included work-related and financial worries, expulsion from school, unplanned pregnancy, and drug use. Hence, there is a clear parallel between the kinds of adjustments and challenges that young people face following romantic relationship breakup and those that are more typically associated with bereavement, as described by Stroebe and Schut (1999, 2010).

Analysis shows there was a marked variability in respect of the way in which breakup is appraised by young people. These findings would suggest that some breakups are more difficult than others, depending on how they are interpreted. This proposition is central to the DPM (Stroebe & Schut, 2001). The developers of the model describe the cognitive processes related to coping by reference to the concept of positive meaning states (Folkman, 2001) and the work of Nolen-Hoeksema (2001) on negative appraisals. In doing so, they argue that positive emotions and finding positive meaning are integral to the adjustment process. It is perhaps for these reasons that young people report that breakups involving deception and infidelity are particularly difficult to deal with.

Separately, the theme of “Tips for breakup survival” focuses on specific coping strategies used or recommended for use by young people adjusting to relationship dissolution. In that regard, on the issue of self-expression some young people see great courage in emotional expression. While men may not express their emotions as readily as women, there is perceived potential for male-to-male support if young people are bold enough to elicit it. However, this may be difficult for men considering that, in early adulthood, romantic relationships are typically young men’s *most* supportive relationships, in slight contrast to young women who say that their romantic relationships are *among* their most supportive relationships (Furman, Ho and Low, 2007).

Forum users spoke of the value of establishing a healthy lifestyle through diet and exercise. Young people who cope with relationship dissolution by actively distracting themselves from the circumstances surrounding the breakup, and the stresses that are secondary to it, may be said to be taking “time off” from grieving. From the perspective of the DPM, this is an adaptive

means for young people to regulate their coping response to the relationship loss (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

It is apparent that in the context of romantic relationship breakup young people learn important life lessons. One such lesson relates to the question whether it is sensible to maintain contact with a former partner. That is, individuals with secure attachment styles generally follow an adaptive course of grieving and are likely to transform their bonds to the lost person in an adaptive way (Davis et al., 2003). Conversely, people with insecure attachment styles typically develop a pattern of retaining old ties in a maladaptive way and, as such, may benefit from loosening their bond and living more independently of their former partner (Davis et al., 2003; Sbarra & Emery, 2005). This is reflected in the analysis under “coming to terms” where some participants spoke about the need “to let go.” The work of Strobe, Schut, and Boerner (2010) also suggests that, at least in the context of bereavement, the extent to which it is adaptive to continue a bond with a lost loved one is dependent on the individual’s attachment style.

### ***Limitations***

Making a determination on the representativeness of the sample in the present study proved difficult for two reasons. The first relates to the Internet-mediated approach taken in the current study, which meant that it was impossible to confirm participants’ ages or gender. Given the accessible nature of Internet-mediated research, it was also possible that individuals outside of the specified age range contributed to the forum. The second reason relates to the lack of availability of data regarding the profile of young Irish people using the Internet and forums of the kind used in the present study (see Fielding et al., 2008). Separately, the data transcripts from the online forum did not contain nonverbal cues that could have been obtained only through face-to-face interviews. Therefore, there was no way to identify the emotional status of the participants or the contextual cues other than to make inferences based on the content of the posts. To achieve an acceptable degree of methodological rigor, transparency of decision making was maintained at every phase of the current study (Ratcliffe & Gonzalez-del-Valle, 1988). By acknowledging methodological constraints and providing a justification for the study design, the reader has an opportunity to participate in the ongoing, complex debate of what can and should constitute acceptable methodology in online research (Mann & Stewart, 2000).

### ***Clinical implications and future research***

Findings from this analysis show that an online discussion forum that is facilitated by trained moderators can provide valuable support for young

people following romantic relationship breakup, as outlined in participants' responses. Findings suggest that there is currently little evidence for a specific intervention for young people presenting with adjustment difficulties following relationship dissolution (Moller, Fouladi, McCarthy, & Hatch, 2003). It may be appropriate for clinicians to refer to aspects of evidence-based models of grieving such as the DPM in order to predict outcomes and tailor clinical interventions.

Future research should investigate the applicability of evidenced-based models of grieving to the experience of breakup to allow for prediction of outcomes based on coping processes. This supports recent research that highlights the importance of supporting adolescents seeking help for romantic relationship concerns and the need to develop early intervention resources aimed at increasing adolescents' ability to cope with romance, particularly at the dissolution stage (Price, Hides, Cockshaw, Staneva, & Stoyanov, 2016). Given the goodness of fit of the DPM to the data in the current study, particular emphasis should be placed on this model. Further empirical study using standardized measures and structural equation models, including mediating and moderating variables of adjustment, is also recommended.

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