



RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GRIEF AND SELF-ESTEEM AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

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Abstract

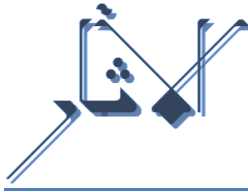
This study investigated the relationship between young adults' self-esteem and breakup grief. It examined if grieving following a breakup predicts self-esteem levels using Beck's cognitive theory. The Breakup Grief Scale (BGS) and State Self-Esteem Scale (SSES), which were administered to 264 university students between the ages of 18 and 25 using a correlational method, have both shown good internal consistency. The results revealed a strong negative correlation: grief was a major predictor of decreased self-esteem, and more grief was linked to lower self-esteem. Relationship status disparities were noted, but no gender differences were found. Overall, breakup grief was found to be a unique psychological risk factor, highlighting the necessity of grief-informed support in counseling and academic settings.

Keywords: *Grief, Self-esteem, Romantic Breakups, Young Adults*

1. Introduction

Arnett (2000) defined emerging adulthood as the stage of life from late adolescence to mid-twenties, which typically includes individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 and include investigating identity, relationships, and future directions. Young adults tackle important emotional and social issues at this phase, particularly developing close romantic relationships (Hawley et al., 2015).

Having a romantic partner tends to boost a person's overall life quality and emotional health. However, the end of that relationship triggers negative consequences (Asim et al., 2024). A breakup in a romantic relationship refers to a breakdown of mutual harmony between two people. Grieving over a broken romantic relationship is a universal reaction, making it hard to re-establish a routine after parting with a romantic partner. Moreover, an unsupportive environment can stimulate emotional and mental decline, exacerbating grief (Cantero, 2017). Grief is the process of dealing with emotional pain after losing a loved one (Tran et al., 2023). It is an interconnected process that includes physiological, behavioral, cognitive, and affective reactions to major loss (Shahzadi et al., 2025). Dealing with grief independently can be challenging, as non-marital breakups are generally left unsupported, intensifying poor interpersonal relationships, lowering social support, and making individuals socially maladjusted (Samios et al., 2014). There is a lot of literature on loss after a loved one passes away, but a lot less about loss that does not entail death. The degree of attachment and whether the loss was viewed as preventable were the two elements that Bugen (1977) examined as



influencing the intensity of the mourning response after non-death losses. As anticipated, a higher level of grief was linked to the loss of a significant relationship that was thought to be avoidable.

Kaczmarek, Backlund, and Biemer (1990) investigated to see how college students dealt with the loss of intimate relationships and found same results. Three relationship factors, the felt closeness of the relationship, its duration, and unexpected nature of the breakup, were found to have an impact on the intensity of depression after loss. The greatest grief response was caused by a stronger, longer relationship that ended unexpectedly.

Srivastava and Agarwal (2013) describe self-esteem as an understanding of one's quality as an object, how valuable, superior, or inferior one perceives oneself to be. Similarly, Donnellan, Trzesniewski, and Robins (2011) define it as "an individual's subjective evaluation of her or his worth as a person". The key components that influence the development of self-esteem, however, are surprisingly poorly understood (Javaid et al., 2025). Few studies have examined whether significant life events and life transitions have an impact on self-esteem, despite the fact that many researchers believe that certain life events, like starting a romantic relationship or getting promoted, may have an impact on an individual's degree of self-esteem (Orth & Luciano, 2015). Therefore, an in-depth understanding of factors that contribute to individual differences in the growth of self-esteem is required.

Our evaluations of ourselves constitute our self-esteem, and when we hold favorable judgments of our skills and traits, our self-esteem is high; when we doubt ourselves, our self-esteem is low (Javaid et al., 2024). Because people with high self-esteem are generally happier and more successful than those with low self-regard (Orth & Robins, 2014), it's widely assumed that it's good to feel good about yourself (Leary, 2019). The survey conducted by Leary and Baumeister (2000), indicate that young adult women experience low self-esteem following the end of their romantic relationships. Low self-esteem is identified as a contributing factor that hinders an individual's ability to accept the post-breakup condition.

People progressively grew to detest themselves as a result of others' disapproval or lack of interest in them, and self-esteem evolved into a psychological indicator that warned of dwindling acceptance by others (Kavanagh & Scrutton, 2015). Specifically, interpersonal rejection experiences harm our self-esteem more than other types of disappointments. In an effective study, Leary and his colleagues (1995) illustrated this point by making research participants think that they would be kicked out of an attractive group either because they were unlucky, because they were randomly chosen to be sent home, or because the other group members had voted them out. The individuals who experienced personal rejection felt far worse about themselves than those whose loss was impersonal, despite the fact that the same desirable opportunity was lost in both cases.

Beck's Cognitive Theory of Depression (Beck, 1967), which offers a convincing explanation of how traumatic emotional experiences like grieving affect a person's thoughts, feelings, and self-perception, serves as the theoretical foundation for this study. According to the theory, humans develop cognitive schemas, which are stable fundamental beliefs about the environment, other people, and themselves. Although these schemas remain largely stable, difficult or stressful situations, particularly losses, might set them off (Beck, 1976). Grief from the loss of a significant emotional connection or a loved one is a powerful catalyst for negative self-focused schemas. According to studies, individuals who are grieving often have negative automatic thoughts such as excessive self-blame, feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, and inadequacy (Boelen et al., 2003). Such ideas distort people's perceptions of their circumstances and lead them to harshly evaluate themselves (Dozois & Beck, 2008).



According to Beck's cognitive model, negative self-perceptions have a direct effect on self-esteem, which is a person's overall perception of their own worth and competence. Research shows a strong correlation between persistent negative thought patterns and depressive symptoms and low self-esteem (Sowislo & Orth, 2013). According to studies, individuals who are grieving often have negative automatic thoughts such as excessive self-blame, feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, and inadequacy (Boelen et al., 2003). Such ideas distort people's perceptions of their circumstances and lead them to harshly evaluate themselves (Dozois & Beck, 2008).

Young adulthood is a key vulnerable time for this dynamic. Self-esteem is still forming then and reacts strongly to relationships, emotional bonds, and big life changes (Orth & Robins, 2014). Findings indicate that stressful events in young adulthood can shake up self-image and value, particularly without good ways to cope mentally (Orth et al., 2012). Grief disrupts emotional balance and sense of self, so young adults might see the loss as proof of their own shortcomings, which strengthens negative self-views.

Rationale of the Study

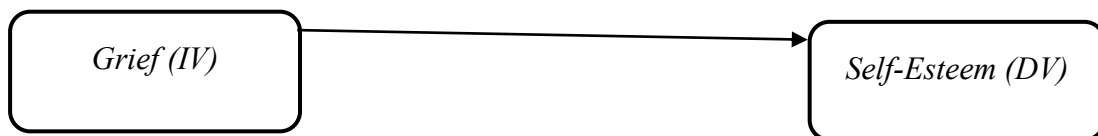
The present research draws on clinical findings and current literature on grief experiences in Pakistan, focusing on how breakup-related grief in young adults might lead to low self-esteem. The study's goal is to provide practical benefits by guiding targeted cognitive therapies and community-based activities that reduce vulnerability, enhance resilience, and promote better emotional recovery in at-risk adults.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this research was to investigate the relationship between grief and self-esteem in young adults. It also explored how grief influences self-esteem among young adults. It also seek to examine the effect of grief on young adults' self-esteem.

Conceptual Framework

The hypothesized model explains that grief impacts on self-esteem among young adults.



2. Methodology

Participants

This study used a correlational approach with 264 girls and boys aged 18–25, gathered via convenience sampling from various universities in Faisalabad. Sample size came from G Power calculation. Convenience sampling worked well for easy access and quick data gathering, but it limits how broadly results apply due to possible selection biases.

Inclusion Criteria/ Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria of the present research to minimize the confounding effect were as follows; Young adults aged ranging from 18 to 25 from educational institutions and universities in Faisalabad. The exclusion criteria of the present research were as follow; individuals who were enrolled in schools, as well as those who were currently suffering from severe mental health issues.

Instruments

A sheet for demographic variables was used to collect relevant information like age, gender, education, socioeconomic status, relationship status, and relationship duration. Grief was measured with the 13-item Breakup Grief Scale (BGS; Mahmood et al., 2025), rated on a 5-



point Likert scale. Total scores vary between 13 to 65, with higher scores indicating greater sorrow intensity. The scale showed high reliability ($\alpha = .84$).

Self-esteem was measured using the 20-item State Self-Esteem Scale (SSES; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991), which comprises appearance, social, and performance subscales. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 5 = highly), resulting in total scores ranging from 20 to 100. Stronger scores indicate stronger self-esteem. Reported reliability is high ($\alpha = .85-.91$).

Procedure

The current study used a correlational research approach to analyze at the relationship between attachment styles, grief, self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts. 264 young adults (ages 18 to 25) were recruited from educational institutions of Faisalabad using a convenience sampling method. After gaining authorization from the appropriate institutions, the study's goal was explained, and confidentiality was guaranteed. Participants gave their informed consent before completing the demographic sheet and questionnaire booklet. There were no time limits for completion, and researchers ensured that all volunteers were treated with dignity and equality.

Statistical Analysis

The data were analyzed with SPSS (version 25). The frequencies and percentages included all demographics. Pearson correlations examined the relationship between grief and self-esteem. Grief's relationship with self-esteem was investigated using regression analysis. t-tests for independent samples examined differences based on gender and relationship status.

Ethical Issues in Research

Prior to conducting the study, the supervisor provided formal approval for the research. Participants were given an explanation of the study's nature, purpose, and expectations. Before participating in the study, all individuals were required to provide informed permission. Participants were allowed to ask questions about the study. The limits of confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process. The study did not involve any form of deception, and all aspects and purposes of the research were clearly communicated to ensure participants' understanding.

3. Results

The sample comprised 36.4% men and 63.6% women. Nearly half (44.3%) reported having experienced a breakup, while 55.7% were currently in a relationship. More than half (54.5%) reported no breakup experience; among those with a breakup history, 24.2% had a breakup within the last six months, 11.7% about one year ago, and 6.9% two years or more ago. Socioeconomic status was primarily middle class (51.1%), followed by higher (26.5%) and lower (22.3%) groups (Table 1).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Study Sample (n = 264)

Variable	Groups	F (%)
Gender	Men	96(36.4)
	Women	168(63.6)
	Total	264(100)
Relationship Status	Breakup	117(44.3)
	In a relationship	147(55.7)
	Total	264(100)
Breakup Duration	No Breakup Experience	144(54.5)
	Up to 6 Months	64 (24.2)
	One Year	31(11.7)



Variables	Item no	Cronbach's Alpha
Breakup Grief Scale	13	.89
State Self-Esteem Scale	20	.74
Socioeconomic Status	Two Years or more	25(6.9)
	Total	264(100)
	Lower Class (PKR 0 to PKR 37K)	59(22.3)
	Middle Class (PKR 37K to PKR 250K)	135(51.1)
	Higher Class (PKR 250K +)	70(26.5)
	Total	264(100)

The internal consistency of the study instruments was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Table 4.6). The Breakup Grief Scale (BGS; $\alpha = .89$) demonstrated very good reliability, and State Self-Esteem Scale (SSES; $\alpha = .74$) exhibited good reliability. Overall, the measures showed sufficient psychometric robustness for subsequent analyses (Table 2).

Table 2

Reliability Analysis for Study Measures (Breakup Grief Scale and State Self-Esteem Scale): (n = 264)

The correlational analysis revealed significant relationships between breakup grief and self-esteem variables. Emotional numbness was strongly positively correlated with the total breakup grief score ($r = .91, p < .01$) and separation distress ($r = .56, p < .01$). Separation distress also showed a strong positive association with total breakup grief ($r = .79, p < .01$). Overall breakup grief was significantly and negatively related to total state self-esteem ($r = -.41, p < .01$).

Breakup grief and its subscales showed significant negative correlations with self-esteem dimensions, including performance self-esteem ($r = -.30, p < .01$), social self-esteem ($r = -.35, p < .01$), and appearance self-esteem ($r = -.26, p < .01$). In contrast, the self-esteem subscales were positively associated with total state self-esteem, with performance self-esteem showing the strongest relationship ($r = .81, p < .01$). Overall, higher levels of breakup grief were associated with lower levels of self-esteem among young adults (Table 3).

Table 3

Intercorrelation among scores on Breakup Grief Scale with Subscales and State Self-Esteem Scale with Subscales (n = 264)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Emotional Numbness	1							
2. Impulsive Reactions	.05	1						



Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
3. Separation Distress	.56**	.04	1					
4. Breakup Grief Scale (Total)	.91**	.31**	.79**	1				
5. Performance Self-Esteem	-.22**	-.15*	-.28**	-.30**	1			
6. Social Self-Esteem	-.31**	-.05	-.32**	-.35**	.46**	1		
7. Appearance Self-Esteem	-.21**	-.14*	-.22**	-.26**	.42**	.13*	1	
8. State Self-Esteem Scale (Total)	-.34**	-.14*	-.37**	-.41**	.81**	.80**	.61**	1

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine whether breakup grief predicted predictor of state self-esteem, $t(262) = -7.37, p < .001$. Breakup grief accounted for 17% of the variance in state self-esteem ($R^2 = .17$). Higher levels of breakup grief were associated with lower levels of self-esteem ($\beta = -.41$), indicating a significant negative relationship between the two variables (Table 4).

Table 4

Breakup Grief as a Predictor of State Self-Esteem among Young Adults (n = 264)

Variable	B	SE B	β	t	R ²
Breakup Grief Scale (X)	-0.52	0.07	-0.41***	-7.37	.17

4. Discussion

This study investigated how breakup grief affects self-esteem in young adults. It was assumed that grief would predict self-esteem, and that variables such as gender, relationship status, and breakup duration would influence outcomes. Data from 264 university participants revealed high intercorrelations among factors, grief's predictive role irrespective of attachment types and differences by relationship status but not gender (Bowlby, 1973; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Grief is best understood as a multimodal process rather than a single emotional state, involving affective, cognitive, behavioral, and physiological reactions to relationship loss, which frequently impair stability and autonomy (Stroebe et al., 2017). Breakups among adults disrupt identity and future ambitions, causing distress similar to mourning (Field, 2011).

SPSS was used to conduct statistical analyses that addressed the study objectives, including descriptive statistics and simple linear regression. Table 1 shows the sample's demographic characteristics, which comprised a greater number of women than men. In terms of relationship status, some participants had recently ended a relationship, while others were actively in one. In terms of breakup duration, more than half claimed no experience, while those who did reported different durations. The socioeconomic status ranged from lower to higher, with the majority falling into the middle class.

Table 2 shows a reliability analysis of the study measures. The scales had good internal consistency and were reliable for research purposes. Both the Breakup Grief Scale and the State Self-Esteem Scale had satisfactory reliability, indicating that the items accurately measured their respective variables.

The Breakup Grief Scale (independent variable) has a substantial negative relationship to the State Self-Esteem Scale among young adults, demonstrating that greater grief is related with poorer self-esteem. The Pearson correlation table uses ** to indicate significance at the 0.01 level, * to indicate significance at the 0.05 level, and no asterisks to indicate non-significant relationships. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that breakup-



related grief is associated with decreases in self-esteem, particularly in young adulthood when self-concept and emotion control are still evolving (Sowislo & Orth, 2013).

Simple linear regression findings showed that Breakup grief had a substantial correlation with state self-esteem, with higher levels of grieving indicating poorer self-esteem. This is consistent with research that relational loss distress impairs self-esteem and identity stability in young people (Field, 2011). A meta-analysis supports up this claim, associating unpleasant emotional experiences and psychological discomfort to lower self-esteem, particularly in vulnerable populations such as young adults (Sowislo & Orth, 2013).

A meta-analysis by Sowislo and Orth (2013) reported that negative emotional experiences and psychological distress are strongly associated with lower self-esteem, supporting the present result that grief-related distress contributes to diminished self-worth. Their findings emphasize that emotional difficulties play a central role in shaping self-esteem outcomes, particularly in vulnerable populations such as young adults.

A meta-analysis by Sowislo and Orth (2013) found that negative emotional experiences and psychological distress are strongly linked with reduced self-esteem, validating the current finding that grief-related discomfort contributes to diminished self-worth. Their findings underline the importance of emotional challenges in determining self-esteem outcomes, particularly among susceptible populations like young adults.

Overall, the findings show the significant influence of breakup grief on young adults' self-esteem, as well as the importance of interventions that address emotional pain in order to promote self-worth and psychological well-being following relationship loss.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study investigated the link between breakup sadness and self-esteem in young adults. Data from 264 participants were gathered using reliable standardized scales. The findings revealed a substantial negative association between breakup grief and self-esteem, implying that higher grief was related with poorer self-esteem. Regression research revealed that breakup grief is a strong predictor of state self-esteem. Overall, the findings indicate that breakups can weaken young people' self-evaluation processes, emphasizing the importance of grief-focused support and therapies aimed at protecting and strengthening self-esteem in this demographic.

Limitations of the Study

The study sample of 264 university students aged 18-25 years limits the findings' generalizability to other age groups or non-student populations. Data was gathered via self-report questionnaires, which may have been influenced by subjectivity, recall errors, or social desirability bias. The study concentrated exclusively on psychological characteristics, ignoring broader cultural or environmental effects that may potentially alter emotional responses. Data collection was confined to institutes, so it may not be representative of the entire population, and convenience sampling was employed rather than random sampling.

The study did not take into account individuals' socioeconomic status, which could influence emotional resources, coping methods, and psychological responses to love loss.

The study did not investigate the precise causes of relationship failure, which could impact grief, attachment-related behaviors, and psychiatric effects.

Practical Implications

The present study addresses a gap in the Pakistani context by providing a comprehensive examination of breakup grief and self-esteem among young adults. The findings can help to raise awareness in local communities about these interconnected difficulties, as well as advise educators and teachers about how to avoid and manage grief and low self worth. Furthermore,



it fosters further inquiry into these dynamics, creating opportunities for culturally relevant solutions and increased research.

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