
On the Rebound: Focusing on Someone New Helps Anxiously Attached Individuals Let Go of Ex-Partners

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The present research demonstrates that focusing on someone new may help anxiously attached individuals overcome attachment to an ex-romantic partner, suggesting one possible motive behind so-called rebound relationships. A correlational study revealed that the previously demonstrated link between anxious attachment and longing for an ex-partner was disrupted when anxiously attached individuals had new romantic partners. Two experiments demonstrated that this detachment from an ex can be induced by randomly assigning anxiously attached individuals to believe they will easily find a new partner (through bogus feedback in Study 2 and an ease of retrieval task in Study 3). This research suggests that for anxiously attached individuals, focusing on someone new can be an adaptive part of the breakup recovery process.

Keywords: *rebound effect; rebound relationships; breakup; continued emotional attachment; anxious attachment*

Before you consider entering another relationship, take a step back and ask yourself why you want to do so. Make sure that you are not entering a new relationship on a rebound. This will only leave you with unfinished emotions and you will never have closure from your former relationship.

Alina Ruigrok, 2007

When seeking advice on matters of the heart, self-help books, newspaper columns, parents, and friends will often tell you that you should *not* get into a new relationship unless you are completely over your ex-partner. The

new partner will just be a “rebound,” and that is obviously not a healthy way of resolving feelings for your ex. Or is it? The present research suggests that anxiously attached individuals’ beliefs about the availability of future relationships influence attachment to ex-partners. Specifically, anxiously attached individuals tend to be especially vulnerable to remaining emotionally attached to ex-partners. At the same time, they tend to be pessimistic about their future relationships. Could pessimistic beliefs about future relationships be, in part, what drives attachment to past partners? If, as we contend, this is the case, then adopting positive beliefs about their romantic future may help anxiously attached individuals let go of feelings for ex-partners. Our research suggests that, indeed, new relationships may help anxiously attached individuals move on from past partners. Furthermore, we suggest that for anxiously attached individuals, optimism about finding a new partner can spur the same detachment from an ex that may come from rebound relationships. That is, with an optimistic outlook, individuals higher in anxious attachment can get the benefits of the rebound without the relationship.

Authors’ Note: This research was supported by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. We thank Jason Plaks at the University of Toronto for his support and suggestions. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Stephanie S. Spielmann, Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, 100 St. George Street, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 3G3, Canada; e-mail: steph.spielmann@utoronto.ca.

PSPB, Vol. 35 No. 10, October 2009 1382-1394

DOI: 10.1177/0146167209341580

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The attachment system functions to promote safety by activating during times of threat or uncertainty and motivating individuals to seek out reliable others (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1969). If, however, these others are unavailable, the attachment system becomes hyperactivated to motivate attempts to gain proximity to safe others and to maintain hypervigilance to continuing threats (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Anxiously attached individuals experience a *chronic* hyperactivation of the attachment system, such that they continuously experience negative feelings, strong desire for reassurance from others, and hypervigilance to signs of threat. For example, anxiously attached individuals are particularly sensitive to the possibility of rejection (e.g., Feldman & Downey, 1994) and are constantly preoccupied with attachment figures, even in nonthreatening situations (Mikulincer, Gillath, & Shaver, 2002).

Previous research has shown that anxiously attached individuals have a particularly difficult time disconnecting emotionally from ex-partners following relationship dissolution. They seem to be particularly vulnerable to ongoing negative feelings, such as sadness and distress, following a breakup (e.g., Barbara & Dion, 2000; D. Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Sbarra, 2006; Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). Indeed, anxiously attached individuals are more likely to display maladaptive coping behaviors following a breakup such as rumination (e.g., Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007), proximity seeking (e.g., D. Davis et al., 2003; Sbarra & Emery, 2005), and even stalking the ex-partner (e.g., K. E. Davis, Ace, & Andra, 2000). Anxious attachment hinders adaptive acceptance of a breakup as evidenced by heightened desires and attempts to regain the lost partner (D. Davis et al., 2003) and beliefs that the breakup was a mistake that should be rectified (Barbara & Dion, 2000). These responses are linked to greater expressions of anger and hostility (D. Davis et al., 2003), prolonged feelings of love and sadness (Sbarra & Emery, 2005), and poor recovery and adjustment 6 months following the dissolution (Frazier & Cook, 1993). Therefore, although anxiously attached individuals may feel that “hanging on” to an ex-partner will make them feel better, they in fact contribute to their own misery.

Clinging to a past partner may serve a number of functions for anxiously attached individuals, including providing a source of relief from anxiety, a means to deny the fear of being alone, and a sense of validation and worth.¹ Arguably, the common thread among these motives may be the need for a safe haven in response to a hyperactivated attachment system. Although clearly not ideal, thoughts of ended relationships may provide some satisfaction as a safe haven because even though

the relationship is over, often there are still positive and affirming memories that can serve as an attachment resource. For instance, one could recall a time when a now ex-partner provided praise on a personal value or shared a particular moment of trust and intimacy. However, if anxiously attached individuals could confidently envision such connection elsewhere, perhaps by anticipating potential for intimate connection with future partners, there might be less need to maintain an emotional tie to an ex-partner. The difficulty for anxiously attached individuals is that they tend not to be optimistic about their future romantic prospects, anticipating relatively low success in future love relationships and marriage compared to more secure individuals (Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Because of this pessimistic outlook, anxiously attached individuals may feel their ex-partner is one of the few safe havens available to them.

We argue, therefore, that focusing on new partners—real or potential—can help alleviate anxiously attached individuals’ difficulties letting go of their emotional attachments to ex-partners. One common event that focuses individuals on a new partner following a breakup is the start of a new relationship. In this article, then, we refer to the emotional detachment from an ex that may result from focusing on new partners as the “rebound effect” because the first new relationship following a breakup is often colloquially called the “rebound relationship.” We argue in the present research, however, that it is confidence in the availability of new sources of connection that anxious individuals need, and not the rebound relationship itself. That is, being optimistic about finding someone new may be the key to helping anxiously attached people to let go of their ex-partners.

In summary, anxiously attached individuals tend to experience continued emotional attachment to ex-partners following relationship dissolution. We suggest that this continued attachment might be due to their need for a sense of security from others in the face of chronic perceptions of threat, coupled with a tendency to be pessimistic about their ability to find a rewarding new partner to serve as a safe haven. We propose, then, that conditions that foster increased optimism about future romantic prospects should help anxiously attached individuals rebound by letting go of feelings for an ex-partner. The promise of a new romantic partner should permit anxiously attached individuals to detach from their ex-partners, whereas fear of never finding another partner should induce them to cling to ex-partners all the more.

The present research explores this rebound effect with one correlational study and two experimental studies. Study 1 examines the relation between relationship status (i.e., single or partnered) and continued emotional

attachment to an ex-partner to explore whether being with a new romantic partner is associated with less emotional attachment to an ex-partner for those high in anxious attachment. Studies 2 and 3 explore the rebound effect experimentally with controlled manipulations of optimism for future relationships. Participants in Study 2 read magazine articles encouraging either optimism or pessimism for finding a new, rewarding partner. Participants in Study 3 completed an ease of retrieval task in which participants formed the impression that finding a new partner would be relatively easy or difficult. In all three studies, we hypothesized that single, anxiously attached individuals would be more emotionally attached to their ex-partners than more secure individuals. We further expected that this effect would be eliminated for those who were focused on someone new, either through a new relationship or through experimentally induced optimism about a finding new partner.

STUDY 1

The first study was designed to examine the role of involvement in a new relationship in continued longing for an ex-partner. We expected that, for individuals who remained single, higher levels of anxious attachment would be associated with greater emotional attachment to an ex-partner. However, we expected anxious attachment would not predict emotional attachment to an ex-partner when participants were involved in a new relationship.

Method

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the University of Toronto. To be eligible to participate, individuals were required to have experienced a breakup. A total of 162 individuals participated for course credit. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 34 years ($M = 19.65$). Four participants were excluded from analyses because they reported no prior relationship experience, 6 were excluded because they reported being back together with their ex-partner, 2 were excluded because they experienced their most recent breakup more than 10 years ago (which was greater than 3 SD from the sample mean), and 1 was excluded because he failed to respond appropriately to the questionnaire. There remained 69 participants (14 males, 55 females) currently involved in romantic relationships and 80 participants (22 males, 58 females) who were single at the time of the study.

Procedure

Participants were invited to participate in a study on students' experiences in romantic relationships. In groups of up to six people, each participant completed the measures described next.

Materials

Relationship characteristics. All participants first described the characteristics of their most recently ended romantic relationship, including the time since the breakup and their feelings at the time of the breakup. On a 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*) scale, participants indicated the extent to which they experienced a wide range of possible positive and negative emotional responses to relationship dissolution: sadness, anger, acceptance, anxiety, relief, contentment, frustration, confusion, happiness, and heartbreak. Positive emotions were reverse-coded to create a measure reflecting participants' negative feelings at the end of the relationship (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$). Although we could have asked participants simply who made the choice to end the relationship, this measure would likely not have captured the full dynamics of the breakup decision. For example, even if one chooses to end a relationship, that decision may be prompted by feelings of distancing or contempt from one's partner and thus may not reflect one's true wishes for the fate of the relationship. Thus, gauging participants' negativity surrounding the breakup would seem to provide a better indication of the degree to which they desired the breakup, regardless of whether they were the ones to make the final breakup decision. In addition, participants who were currently involved in a new romantic relationship reported characteristics of this relationship as well, such as length of the relationship and relationship satisfaction (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000).

Anxious attachment. Participants completed the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994), responding on a scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*). Higher scores on the Anxiety subscale (e.g., "I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like") indicate more anxious attachment (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$). The ASQ was selected for the present research because the items do not refer to specific romantic others. For instance, the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (e.g., Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) contains questions tapping into love and intimacy that may have different meanings for people in relationships and people who are single. As relationship status and feelings about ex-partners are key variables in our analyses, the ASQ, by not focusing so strongly on romantic relationships, provides a reliable and valid measure unconfounded by current relationship

status. Furthermore, because the ASQ is not so focused on romantic relationships, it can be especially useful for research involving those with little experience with dating (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), which may be relevant for our younger samples of undergraduate students

Continued emotional attachment. Continued feelings of attachment for an ex-partner were assessed using an adapted version of Wegner and Gold's (1995) hot- versus cold-flame questionnaire. Wegner and Gold's original measure taps into people's feelings of continued fond thinking about an ex-partner (e.g., "I still think about him/her a lot") as well as more intense longing for an ex (e.g., "Losing him/her was the worst thing that ever happened to me") on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In the present research, we selected only items that reflected continued longing for an ex (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$). Fond thinking about a past partner does not necessarily imply motivation for relationship renewal. In fact, focused thinking that is aimed at inward contemplation and problem solving can be an adaptive part of the process of distancing and detachment (Ray, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2008; Treynor, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003). The validity of the continued longing scale is attested to by work in our lab showing that when both the continued longing and fond thinking subscales are entered as simultaneous predictors of single individuals' behavioral intentions to pursue an ex-partner, only continued longing for the ex-partner emerges as a significant predictor (Spielmann & MacDonald, 2009). Therefore, the final scale in the present research consisted of four items: "Sometimes I still get sort of an aching feeling in my heart when I think about him/her"; "I am still in love with him/her"; "If s/he could come back into my life, I would immediately leave any current romantic relationship I was in"; and "Losing him/her was the worst thing that ever happened to me."

Results

Past Relationship Demographics

Retrospective reports of negative feelings experienced at the time of the breakup were positively correlated with anxious attachment, $r(147) = .33$, $p < .01$, but there was no difference in negative feelings between those who were single and those in relationships, $t(145) = -.31$, *ns*. Participants who remained single had experienced the end of their most recent relationship between 2 weeks and 24 months ($M = 7.5$ months, $SD = 5.5$) before participation in the study. Those who were involved in romantic relationships at the time of the study had a breakup that had occurred 1 to 66 months ago ($M = 19.5$

months ago, $SD = 15.7$). An independent-samples t test revealed that those in relationships had experienced their most recent breakup longer ago than those who remained single, $t(145) = -6.37$, $p < .01$.

Current Relationship Demographics

Of the 69 participants currently involved in romantic relationships, 12 reported casually dating one person, and 57 reported seriously dating one person. The length of current relationships ranged from 1 to 70 months ($M = 14.9$ months, $SD = 15.4$).

Continued Emotional Attachment

In all three studies, neither gender nor time since the breakup accounted for significant variance in attachment to an ex-partner either as main effects or in interaction with other variables in predicting emotional attachment. Similarly, participants' negative feelings at the time of breakup did not interact with the other variables included in the analyses. The inclusion of these variables as covariates also did not affect the pattern of results. As a result, analyses in all studies are reported collapsing across gender, time since breakup, and negative feelings at the time of the breakup. To address the possibility that our predicted pattern of results would emerge for any type of insecure attachment, a role for avoidant attachment was tested. Across all three studies, the results did not replicate when substituting avoidant attachment for anxious attachment as the individual difference variable of interest, nor did controlling for avoidant attachment eliminate any significant effects. Thus, results are reported collapsing across avoidant attachment.

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) was conducted to explore the hypothesis that relationship status is associated with anxiously attached individuals' emotional attachment to an ex-partner. In the present study and in all subsequent studies, outliers defined as $+3$ or -3 SD from the mean were excluded from analyses. Nine outliers (3 in relationships, 6 single) were excluded from analyses in the present study. In Step 1 of the regression equation, anxious attachment (centered) and relationship status (dummy coded with 0 = *single* and 1 = *relationship*) were entered. In Step 2, the interaction between relationship status and anxious attachment was entered. A main effect of anxious attachment was found in Step 1, such that higher levels of anxious attachment were associated with stronger emotional attachment to an ex-partner, $\beta = .23$, R^2 change = $.07$, $t(137) = 2.76$, $p < .01$. There was no main effect of relationship status. In Step 2 of the analysis, the Relationship Status \times Anxious Attachment interaction did not reach significance, $\beta = -.16$, R^2 change = $.01$,

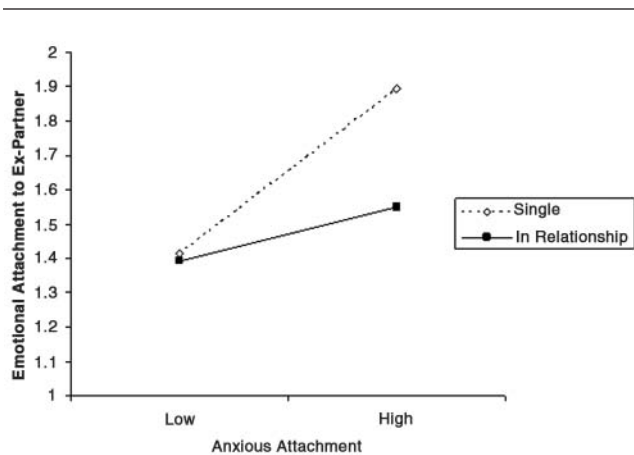


Figure 1 Continued emotional attachment to an ex-partner as a function of anxious attachment and current relationship status in Study 1.

$t(136) = -1.39, p = .17$ (see Figure 1). However, based on our a priori hypotheses, conditional regression equations were calculated separately for participants whose anxious attachment scores fell -1 and $+1$ SD from the mean (Aiken & West, 1991; this strategy is used to examine all interactions across studies). This analysis revealed that for currently single participants, those with higher levels of anxious attachment felt significantly more attached to ex-partners than did those with lower levels of anxious attachment, $\beta = .34, t(136) = 2.94, p < .01$. However, for participants who had begun a new relationship, anxious attachment did not predict emotional attachment to ex-partners, $\beta = .11, t(136) = .98, ns$. We also examined the difference in relationship status at each level of anxious attachment. Being involved in a new romantic relationship was associated with less emotional attachment to an ex-partner than remaining single for those with higher levels of anxious attachment, $\beta = -.24, t(136) = -2.06, p = .04$, whereas there was no effect of relationship status for those with lower levels of anxious attachment, $\beta = -.02, t(136) = -.13, ns$.

Discussion

Consistent with the previous literature on insecurity and relationship dissolution, the results of Study 1 revealed that anxious attachment is associated with higher levels of emotional attachment to an ex-partner, at least when individuals are still single. More novel to the literature, and consistent with our hypothesis, the results in Study 1 reveal that this effect does not hold for anxiously attached individuals in a new romantic relationship. That is, romantically involved, anxiously attached participants appear to have “gotten over” their past relationships

just as successfully as more secure individuals. This finding provides preliminary support for the rebound effect. Importantly, although time since the last breakup was longer for participants in relationships than for those who were still single, the rebound effect persisted controlling for time since breakup, and the effect was not moderated by time. Although the association between relationship status and attachment to an ex should still be interpreted with caution because of the nonsignificant interaction between relationship status and anxious attachment, the consistency of the simple effects results with a priori predictions provides some assurance that the finding is reliable.

The correlational nature of this study limits our ability to draw causal conclusions about a rebound effect for anxiously attached individuals. We cannot be sure at this point that entering a new relationship is the cause of letting go of an ex-partner. In fact, a reasonable alternative hypothesis is that it is those who have achieved emotional closure with their ex-partner who then pursue new romantic relationships. Studies 2 and 3 were thus designed to experimentally test our hypothesis that focusing on someone new helps anxiously attached individuals let go of an ex-partner. If the key to emotional detachment for anxiously attached individuals is finding another safe haven for their hyperactivated attachment system, then encouraging anxiously attached individuals to be optimistic about their future relationship prospects (and thus opportunities for intimate connection) should be enough to decrease attachment to an ex-partner. Conversely, inducing pessimism about future relationship prospects may lead those with anxious attachment to cling especially tightly to past romantic partners. Thus, Studies 2 and 3 were designed to manipulate single participants' feelings of optimism about finding a new romantic partner. If anxiously attached individuals' continued emotional attachment is alleviated by randomly assigning them to focus on someone new, this would help resolve the issue of causality from our correlational findings, as it would suggest that focusing on someone new may in fact contribute to emotional closure for anxiously attached individuals rather than vice versa.

STUDY 2

The first experimental study was designed to manipulate participants' perceptions of the ease of finding a new, rewarding relationship. The manipulation was a straightforward magazine article supporting or denying the relative ease of meeting someone new and developing a satisfying relationship. We hypothesized that reading an article promoting an optimistic romantic future

would encourage anxiously attached individuals to let go of their ex-partners, as they would be less apt to feel that their ex-partners are the only available intimate connections out there for them.

Method

Participants

Ninety undergraduate students from the University of Toronto who were not involved in a romantic relationship at the time of the study session participated for course credit. Seven participants were excluded from analyses because of inexperience with relationship dissolution or suspicion of the experimental task. There remained 23 males, 59 females, and 1 unidentified in the final analyses. Participants ranged from 17 to 40 years old ($M = 19.46$).

Procedure

Upon arrival in the lab, participants heard a cover story that the study was aimed at understanding how people process information presented in the media about romantic relationships. They were told they would read a randomly assigned magazine article (which contained the manipulation of optimism) and discuss how it related to their experiences. As in Study 1, participants completed the ASQ and the characteristics of their most recently ended relationship. Following this, participants read the magazine article then completed the continued emotional attachment to ex-partner scale. In addition, a measure of affect was included to rule out the possibility that changes in continued emotional attachment to an ex-partner could be attributed to more basic changes in positive and negative affect. Upon completion of the materials, students were probed for suspicion and fully debriefed.

Materials

Anxious attachment. The Cronbach's α of the Anxiety subscale of the ASQ was .79.

Manipulation of optimism for future relationships. To manipulate optimism for finding a new romantic partner, participants were asked to read one of two articles ostensibly published in a relationship magazine. Participants in the *optimism* condition read an article suggesting that after experiencing a breakup it is typically easier than people expect to find a new romantic partner. This article cited supposed facts such as, "The encouraging finding is that most people—a whopping 87%—reported being happier and more satisfied with their new partners than they did when with their past

partners" and "Even more exciting is that people tended to find these new rewarding relationships within only five months of their breakups!" Those in the *pessimism* condition read an article suggesting the opposite—that finding a new partner after a breakup tends to be quite difficult. This article cited facts such as, "The sad reality is that after breaking up most people tend to remain single for longer than they expect or want" and "Nearly 87% of the respondents said that there simply 'wasn't anyone good to date.'" As a manipulation check, and to support the cover story about processing media information, participants were asked to describe in an open-ended manner what they understood to be the main point of the magazine article. These responses were then coded, blind to condition, for whether participants mentioned that the article discussed an optimistic or pessimistic outlook for future relationships. Participants' responses were coded for mention of optimistic romantic outcomes, such as satisfaction in future relationships (e.g., "They are usually happier in the new relationship"), relative ease of finding a new partner (e.g., "People tend to find new partners fairly quickly"), and increased knowledge/efficiency when looking for a new partner (e.g., "We learn from our experiences from past relationships and, as a result, we develop more realistic expectations of current relationships and know how to find more suitable partners"). Participants' responses were also coded for mention of pessimistic relationship outcomes, such as future dissatisfaction (e.g., "If, and when, they do find a partner, they aren't as happy with it as they should be"), relative difficulty of finding a new partner (e.g., "Generally after a breakup people have a hard time finding a new partner"), and the fact that most people have to settle for less in subsequent relationships (e.g., "They realize that there aren't as many good people to date as before").

Continued emotional attachment. The Cronbach's α for the continued emotional attachment scale in Study 2 was .85.

Positive and negative affect. Participants responded on a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*) on four positive affect items such as "happy" and "joyful" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$) and five negative affect items such as "anxious" and "unhappy" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$; Diener & Emmons, 1985).

Results

Manipulation Check

Participants' open-ended summaries of the manipulation articles were coded for features describing optimistic

and pessimistic forecasts for future relationships. Of the 43 participants in the optimism condition, 32 explicitly mentioned one or more of the optimistic features described earlier. Similarly, of the 40 participants in the pessimism condition, 38 explicitly mentioned one or more of the pessimistic messages in that article.

Relationship Demographics

Once again, anxious attachment was positively correlated with reports of negative feelings at the time of the breakup, $r(83) = .25, p = .02$. Participants reported that their most recently ended relationships had lasted, on average, 9.91 months ($SD = 9.57$) and had ended between less than a week and 48 months ($M = 9.63$ months, $SD = 9.45$) before participation in the study.

Continued Emotional Attachment

Participants' reports of continued longing for an ex-partner were applied to a hierarchical regression analysis. One outlier (from the optimism condition) was excluded from this analysis. In Step 1, anxious attachment (centered) and optimism condition (dummy coded as 0 = *pessimism*, 1 = *optimism*) were entered. In Step 2, the interaction between anxious attachment and condition was entered. There were no significant main effects. However, there was a significant interaction between anxious attachment and optimism condition, $\beta = -.39, R^2 \text{ change} = .08, t(78) = -2.56, p = .01$ (see Figure 2). We first examined the difference between conditions at higher and lower levels of anxious attachment. This analysis suggested that individuals high in anxious attachment were significantly less emotionally attached to their ex-partner in the optimism condition than in the pessimism condition, $\beta = -.34, t(77) = -2.01, p = .05$. This was not the case, however, for those low in anxious attachment, who were marginally less attached to an ex-partner in the pessimism condition than in the optimism condition, $\beta = .26, t(77) = 1.68, p = .10$. Furthermore, we examined the difference between higher and lower levels of anxious attachment within each condition. Within the pessimism condition, anxiously attached individuals were significantly more attached to their ex-partners than were less anxiously attached individuals, $\beta = .33, t(78) = 2.17, p = .03$. However, individuals with higher and lower levels of anxious attachment did not significantly differ in their attachment to ex-partners in the optimism condition, $\beta = -.24, t(78) = -1.47, ns$.

Positive and Negative Affect

It is possible that individuals high in anxious attachment are simply happier when they anticipate being in a

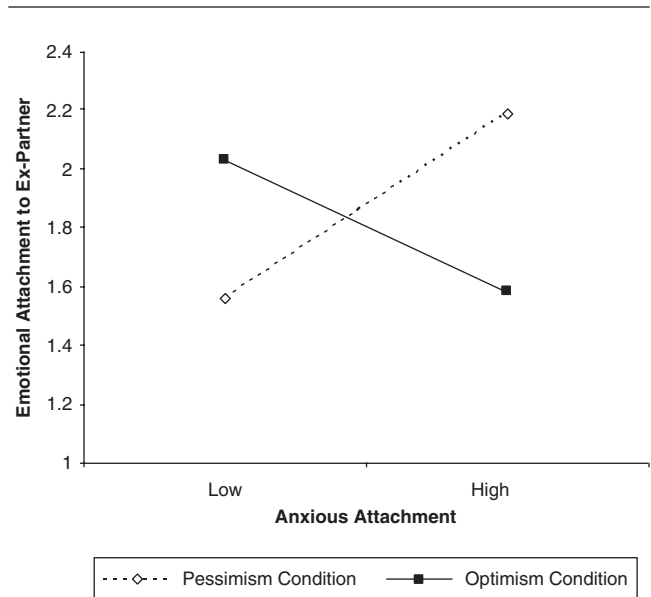


Figure 2 Continued emotional attachment to an ex-partner as a function of anxious attachment and optimism manipulation in Study 2.

relationship or are more distressed when considering their lack of relationship options. If this is the case, our measure of continued emotional attachment may be primarily a proxy for more diffuse affective states. To examine this possibility, we conducted the same linear regressions as above with positive and negative affect as dependent variables. When the dependent variable was negative affect, there was a significant main effect of anxious attachment, $\beta = .52, R^2 \text{ change} = .27, t(79) = 5.34, p < .01$, but no main effect of condition. Most important, the two-way interaction between condition and anxious attachment was not significant, $\beta = .06, R^2 \text{ change} < .01, t(78) = .47, ns$. A similar pattern emerged when the dependent variable was positive affect. There was a significant main effect of anxious attachment, $\beta = -.30, R^2 \text{ change} = .09, t(79) = -2.75, p < .01$, but no effect of condition. Furthermore, the interaction between anxious attachment and condition was not significant, $\beta = .06, R^2 \text{ change} < .01, t(78) = .37, ns$. To ensure that affect could not account for the results reported previously, the analyses of emotional attachment were conducted again controlling for the positive and negative affect variables. The two-way interaction between condition and anxious attachment predicting emotional attachment to an ex-partner remained significant when controlling for positive and negative affect in the first step, $\beta = -.32, R^2 \text{ change} = .05, t(77) = -2.36, p = .02$.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 reveal that inducing optimism about future romantic relationships helps alleviate anxiously attached individuals' continued longing for ex-partners. The results in the pessimism condition mirrored those of single participants in Study 1, with higher levels of anxious attachment associated with higher levels of attachment to an ex-partner. However, as with individuals in new romantic relationships in Study 1, the continued longing for an ex associated with anxious attachment was eliminated in the optimism condition. These findings support the notion that for anxiously attached individuals, finding new relationship potential (either an actual partner or the promise of a future relationship) leads to decreased attachment to an ex-partner. In the first study, we could not rule out the possibility of the reverse causal direction (that those who had let go of their ex-partner were better able to start new relationships), but Study 2 experimentally demonstrates that simply *thinking* optimistically about future relationships brought about these positive rebound effects for more anxiously attached individuals. Furthermore, these results cannot be attributed to changes in positive or negative affect.

Study 3 was designed to replicate the rebound effect using a different manipulation of optimism for finding a new partner. In Study 3, participants were led to believe that a new partner would either be easy or difficult to find by using a more subtle manipulation, an ease of retrieval task. As in Study 2, we expected that when individuals formed the impression that it would be difficult to find a new romantic partner, those with higher levels of anxious attachment would be more emotionally attached to their ex-partners than those with lower levels of anxious attachment. However, we expected this would not be the case when individuals were induced to feel optimistic about the likelihood of finding someone new.

STUDY 3

Method

Participants

Participants were 93 undergraduate students from the University of Toronto who were not involved in a romantic relationship at the time of the study session. Ten participants were excluded from analyses because they had not experienced a breakup or they expressed suspicion regarding the experimental manipulation. There remained 25 males and 58 females in the final analyses. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 29 years ($M = 18.89$).

Procedure

Participants were invited to participate in a study on experiences in romantic relationships. They first completed the same independent variable measures as in Study 1 (i.e., attachment style, relationship characteristics) and then completed an ease of retrieval task asking them to consider available romantic prospects (discussed next) as a manipulation of optimism for future relationships. Following this, participants reported their continued emotional attachment to their ex-partner, completed the affect scale, and were probed for their level of suspicion before debriefing.

Materials

Anxious attachment. The Cronbach's α of the Anxiety subscale of the ASQ was .82.

Manipulation of optimism for future relationships. The perceived ease of finding a new partner was manipulated using Schwarz et al.'s (1991) type ease of retrieval task. Related to Tversky and Kahneman's (1973) availability heuristic, which suggests that the more easily you can bring to mind or imagine an event, the more likely you think it is to happen, research using ease of retrieval tasks shows that the sense of ease or difficulty of retrieval is taken to reflect external reality about the subject of the task. For example, Haddock, Rothman, and Schwarz (1996) demonstrated that people felt more confident in their attitudes toward a social issue when asked to list three supporting arguments rather than seven. It is relatively easier to generate three good arguments and more challenging to generate seven. The authors argued that confidence in one's position was inspired by the ease with which supportive arguments came to mind. Similarly, Lerner and Gonzalez (2005) asked college students to think of two, or six, factors that could *hinder* their chances of obtaining their ideal job or graduate program. Even though they generated more potential barriers, those in the six-factor condition had more positive expectations for the future. In other words, the more difficult it was to think of potential barriers to success, the more optimistic people were about their future.

In the present study, we used an ease of retrieval task to manipulate participants' attitudes toward the ease of finding a new romantic partner. Participants were asked to consider either 2 people (*optimism* condition) or 10 people (*pessimism* condition) from within their social networks with whom they could imagine developing a romantic relationship. These numbers were selected based on pilot testing. The instructions for the task read as follows:

We are interested in the structure of people's social networks. Specifically, we are interested in whether there tend to be people within our social networks who are potential "dating material." Please take a moment to seriously consider the people you personally know, who are single and available, with whom you could hypothetically imagine developing a meaningful romantic relationship. If possible, list two [ten] people's initials (please no names) in the space provided.

As it is cognitively easier to think of 2 people rather than 10 people who fit these criteria, those who were asked to think of only 2 people should perceive greater opportunity for finding future relationships, whereas those who were asked to think of 10 people should perceive less opportunity. As a manipulation check, participants were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very*) how easy it was to generate the specific number of people.

Continued emotional attachment. The Cronbach's α for the continued emotional attachment scale in Study 3 was .85.

Positive and negative affect. The Cronbach's α for positive affect was .89 and for negative affect was .88.

Results

Manipulation Check

An independent samples *t* test revealed that participants who were asked to consider only 2 people (optimism condition; $M = 3.33$) found the task significantly easier to complete than those asked to consider 10 people (pessimism condition; $M = 2.21$), $t(79) = -3.66$, $p < .01$. Regression analyses indicated no interaction between condition and anxious attachment on the ease of the task.

Relationship Demographics

Anxious attachment was positively correlated with reports of negative feelings at the time of the breakup, $r(83) = .35$, $p < .01$. The average length of participants' most recently ended relationship was 10.07 months ($SD = 9.86$), and it had ended between 1 week and 64 months ($M = 8.13$ months, $SD = 9.27$) before participation in the study.

Continued Emotional Attachment

We conducted the same hierarchical regression analysis on participants' reports of longing for an ex-partner as in Study 2, excluding two outliers (both from the optimism condition). In Step 1, anxious attachment (centered) and optimism condition (dummy coded as

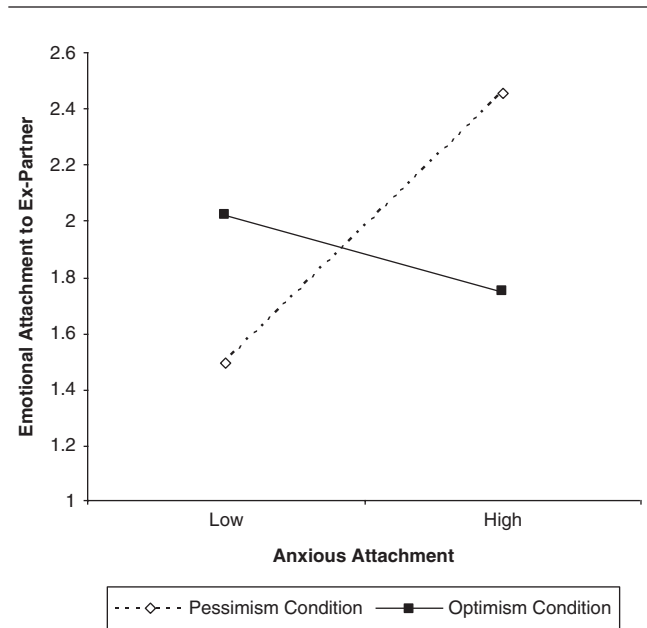


Figure 3 Continued emotional attachment to an ex-partner as a function of anxious attachment and optimism manipulation in Study 3.

0 = *pessimism*, 1 = *optimism*) were entered. In Step 2, the interaction between anxious attachment and condition was entered. There were no significant main effects. As can be seen in Figure 3, there was a significant interaction in Step 2 between anxious attachment and condition, $\beta = -.46$, R^2 change = .11, $t(77) = -3.14$, $p < .01$. We first examined the difference between conditions at higher and lower levels of anxious attachment. This analysis suggested that highly anxiously attached individuals were significantly less attached to their ex-partners in the optimism condition than in the pessimism condition, $\beta = -.39$, $t(77) = -2.56$, $p = .01$. Once again, those low in anxious attachment did not demonstrate this trend and were actually marginally less attached to their ex-partner in the pessimism condition than in the optimism condition, $\beta = .29$, $t(77) = 1.90$, $p = .06$. Furthermore, we examined the difference between higher and lower levels of anxious attachment at each condition. In the pessimism condition, higher anxious attachment was significantly related to higher levels of emotional attachment to an ex-partner, $\beta = .52$, $t(77) = 3.55$, $p < .01$. In the optimism condition, however, anxious attachment was not significantly related to emotional attachment to an ex, $\beta = -.15$, $t(77) = -.96$, *ns*.

Positive and Negative Affect

Once again, positive and negative affect were each included as dependent variables in the regression analysis.

When negative affect was included as the dependent variable, there was a main effect of anxious attachment, $\beta = .54$, R^2 change = .31, $t(80) = 5.72$, $p < .01$, but no effect of condition. Once again, the Anxious Attachment \times Condition interaction was not significant, $\beta = .11$, R^2 change $< .01$, $t(79) = .83$, *ns*. When positive affect was included as the dependent variable, there was again a significant main effect of anxious attachment, $\beta = -.24$, R^2 change = .06, $t(80) = -2.20$, $p = .03$, and no effect of condition. Furthermore, the interaction between anxious attachment and condition was not significant, $\beta = -.09$, R^2 change $< .01$, $t(79) = -.57$, *ns*. The two-way interaction between anxious attachment and condition also continued to predict emotional attachment to an ex-partner when controlling for positive and negative affect in the first step, $\beta = -.40$, R^2 change = .08, $t(76) = -2.75$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

The results of Study 3 revealed again that increasing optimism about future relationships was related to reduced emotional attachment to an ex-partner for anxiously attached individuals. In the pessimism condition, those with higher levels of anxious attachment felt more strongly for their ex-partners than did those with lower levels of anxious attachment. However, no such effect was found in the optimism condition, when participants found it easier to think of new potential partners. This suggests that the reassurance of a potential new partner may be the impetus needed to let go of an ex-partner for individuals who typically have difficulty doing so. These results were again not attributable to changes in positive or negative affect.

It is worth noting that in both Studies 2 and 3, individuals with lower levels of anxious attachment demonstrated a trend of detaching from ex-partners when they formed the impression that it would be difficult to find a new partner. This may be an adaptive response activated to avoid the inclination to return to potentially hurtful situations even (and especially) when few romantic prospects seem available. Although anxiously attached individuals cling to ex-partners when they feel they have few other options available to them, more secure individuals may avoid this maladaptive longing by actively distancing from ex-partners. However, this was an unexpected finding and its reliability is questionable given the marginal effects. Furthermore, this trend was not found in Study 1 among secure individuals in new relationships.

The experimental nature of Studies 2 and 3 suggests a causal relation between accessibility of a new romantic partner and continued attachment to an ex-partner. These findings support our hypothesis that the prospect that one can realistically expect to find a new partner is

helpful to anxiously attached individuals, allowing them to let go of their longing for ex-partners. Anxiously attached individuals seem to be better able to let go of ex-partners when they are reassured that someone else will be there for them, but they are less willing to let go when the future seems bleak. This is particularly informative as the findings by Carnelley and Janoff-Bulman (1992) suggest that a bleak outlook is essentially the norm for anxiously attached singles, supporting the notion that this lack of optimism is a vulnerability to remaining attached to an ex-partner.

When considered together with the correlational results from Study 1—that being in a new relationship is associated with less emotional attachment to an ex-partner for anxiously attached individuals—the experimental studies provide some evidence that entering a new relationship may contribute to letting go of an ex-partner, rather than vice versa. Randomly assigning anxiously attached individuals to focus on new partners led them to reduce their emotional attachment to ex-partners. This suggests that perhaps being in a new relationship satisfies certain motivations that commonly encourage anxiously attached individuals to remain emotionally attached to an ex-partner.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This series of studies strongly supports the rebound effect. The general conclusion from this line of research is that focusing on new relationship options—either a new partner or an optimistic outlook on relationships—decreases attachment to an ex-partner for anxiously attached individuals. Study 1 demonstrated that for participants with anxious attachment, being in a new romantic relationship following a breakup was associated with less emotional attachment to an ex-partner than remaining single. Studies 2 and 3 explored the causal direction of the rebound effect by manipulating participants' optimism for finding a new partner. These studies revealed that simply feeling optimistic about finding a new partner encouraged anxiously attached individuals to let go of an ex-partner. Taken together, this series of studies suggests that anxiously attached individuals' beliefs about their future relationships play a role in their continued attachment to ex-partners, such that either being in a new relationship or being confident about the prospects for one can attenuate anxiously attached individuals' feelings of longing for ex-partners.

As continued attachment to an ex-partner is problematic for postbreakup adjustment (e.g., Frazier & Cook, 1993) and recovery from sadness following a breakup (Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006), identifying the conditions under which continued attachment is attenuated or

exacerbated can help inform therapeutic approaches for recovery after relationship dissolution. This research suggests that hanging on to an ex-partner may appeal to anxiously attached individuals' need for soothing of attachment system hyperactivation, a need that may alternately be fulfilled by substituting a new partner for the ex. Anxiously attached individuals who are able to adopt more optimistic beliefs about their romantic prospects may cope more adaptively than they would otherwise.

To our knowledge, this is the first research to examine the influence of randomly assigned experimental manipulations on perceptions of past romantic relationships. This may be an important new paradigm for understanding responses to relationship dissolution. The experimental nature of our studies outlines methods with which those who typically cope relatively poorly with breakups can potentially be encouraged to take more adaptive perspectives on relationships. Importantly, these methods also highlight the relative ease of manipulating anxiously attached individuals' relationship beliefs. It required only reading a magazine article or thinking of two potential partners to reap the benefits of the rebound effect. If equivalent strategies could be incorporated into anxiously attached individuals' daily lives, their postbreakup recovery could potentially be dramatically improved.

In contrast, this research also highlights conditions that potentially aggravate anxiously attached relationship mourners' already vulnerable situation, causing them to maladaptively cling to ex-partners. Studies 2 and 3 revealed that pessimism for finding a new partner encouraged anxiously attached individuals to hang on to an ex-partner. It is possible that in such moments of pessimism or self-doubt, anxiously attached people may be particularly likely to desire closeness with an ex-partner. Hyperactivation of the attachment system motivates pursuit of a safe haven, and without optimism for alternative partners, an ex-partner may be one of the few perceived options available for anxiously attached individuals. Pessimism for future relationships may thus encourage them to "settle" for an ex-partner out of what they perceive as necessity.

According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), humans have a fundamental need to belong, which necessitates frequent, intimate connections with others. A corollary of this theory—known as the substitution hypothesis—suggests that because a minimum degree of social connection is necessary, social bonds are relatively interchangeable. That is, the elimination of one social bond can be remedied by forming connections with others. For instance, following relationship dissolution, individuals find it helpful to strengthen old friendships and begin new ones to feel loved and find a renewed sense of identity (Vaughan, 1986). This suggests that the removal

of a primary relationship calls for the recruitment of alternate social connections. The present study appears to provide clear evidence for substitution of one romantic relationship for another. Specifically, our data suggest that anxiously attached individuals substitute new romantic prospects for the role previously played by their ex-partners.

Our research suggests that rebound relationships may provide benefits that lay theories and self-help books either fail to recognize or underestimate. Given the significant negative consequences associated with pining for an ex-partner (from sadness to stalking), it appears that entering a new relationship may be a reasonable way to facilitate the process of letting go. However, this does not necessarily mean that the benefits provided by this path to detachment outweigh the costs. To this point, there is little empirical evidence of strong costs to rebound relationships. Indeed, Wolfinger (2007) argues that divorce and time-to-remarriage statistics provide no supportive evidence for rebound-related problems. However, research may yet demonstrate particularly acute costs of rebound relationships for anxiously attached individuals, whose stronger need for relational reassurance might encourage more indiscriminate selection of a new partner. For example, future research could investigate whether emotional attachment to past partners is linked to lowered standards in selecting new partners. Despite the benefit of detaching from an ex-partner, accepting a relatively undesirable, but available, new partner could create even worse problems. It is also possible that even *envisioning* potential future partners could backfire if anxiously attached individuals begin to focus their attention on potential new partners who do not return their interest. Carnelley and Janoff-Bulman (1992) report that people high in anxious attachment are especially likely to report instances of unrequited love: It could be that anxiously attached individuals develop new "crushes," enabling them to let go of an ex-partner only to replace that focus with a maladaptive fixation on a new, unavailable object of affection. Overall, because anxiously attached individuals' distorted models of self may make them more vulnerable to maladaptive tendencies with new real or imagined partners, such "rebounds" will not necessarily solve anxiously attached individuals' excessive need for reassurance, which we suggest is the root of the problem. Basing self-worth on unstable external factors such as day-to-day outcomes in relationships, which will naturally have emotional ups and downs, can be detrimental to self-esteem (Knee, Canevello, Bush, & Cook, 2008). Thus, a focus on healing damaged self-beliefs still seems the most stable route to recovery from relationship dissolution.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are some limitations to the generalizability of the present research. First, the participant samples consist exclusively of university students who may not have had a great deal of experience with the dissolution of romantic relationships. However, because we construe the rebound effect as resulting from a perceived dearth of alternative partners, a university student sample arguably provides a conservative test of the hypothesis, as university students are surrounded by available alternatives in a way that community members usually are not.

Another potential issue with the current research is that even the upper limit of continued emotional attachment scores tended to reflect rather low agreement with the items assessing continued longing for an ex-partner. This is perhaps not surprising considering that we asked people about their most *recent* relationships, and not necessarily their most meaningful ones. That we find the predicted effects for individuals' most recent relationships suggests these patterns may be quite pervasive and not necessarily an isolated case of one strong attachment in one's romantic history. It is also important to note that the items on the continued emotional attachment scale are rather extreme statements (e.g., "Losing him/her was the worst thing that ever happened to me"). Thus, responses falling at the *strongly agree* end of the scale seem to represent atypical and thus unrepresentative responses. Indeed, considering the dissonance and pain that must arise from admitting attachment to someone unattainable (e.g., Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993), it is quite an admission to move off the floor of this scale at all. Therefore, we feel that these low continued emotional attachment scores likely reflect people's typical experiences and in many ways highlight the strength of the effects reported in the present study.

Another caveat is that the lack of a clear control condition in the experimental studies limits any conclusions about which condition is most responsible for driving the effects. Is it that feeling optimistic about future relationships helps anxiously attached individuals let go of ex-partners, or does feeling pessimistic about future relationships encourage anxiously attached individuals to cling to ex-partners all the more? Based on the fact that anxiously attached individuals are typically pessimistic about future relationships (Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman, 1992), the pessimism conditions may represent a more common perspective among anxiously attached participants. However, without a control condition in which participants receive no messages about future relationship prospects, we cannot necessarily conclude that it is feeling optimistic that drives these effects.

The measurement of feelings for an ex-partner at one time point immediately following the manipulation

leaves unclear to what extent anxiously attached individuals can maintain optimistic perspectives of relationships or stave off pessimistic attitudes that might contribute to their feelings of longing for their ex-partner. Longitudinal studies exploring the process of transferring romantic feelings from an ex-partner to future partners would provide greater insight into the trajectory of breakup recovery for anxiously attached individuals than our studies are able to offer.

Finally, the retrospective nature of the present research is a limitation, as it requires that participants recall the dynamics of their past relationships, some of which ended years before participation in the study. However, although current feelings for an ex-partner may bias recall of details such as relationship satisfaction and commitment while the relationship was intact, it is participants' *current* feelings about the relationship that interest us most in the present studies. Therefore, any recall bias on the part of participants is in fact more informative than objective details of the past relationship. It should be considered, however, that such biases in recall of past relationships might contribute to continued feelings for an ex-partner (e.g., McFarland & Ross, 1987). To address this possibility, future research should longitudinally examine how recall of details of a past relationship changes over time and how such changes play a role in longing for an ex-partner. It is possible that as time goes by, anxiously attached individuals maintain emotional attachment to an ex-partner by idealizing details of the past relationship, such as the degree of emotional connection or satisfaction. If anything, our data suggest secure individuals may do the opposite, retrospectively devaluing the past relationship as a coping mechanism.

Conclusions

Although breakups can be extraordinarily difficult emotional events, particularly for anxiously attached individuals who lack adaptive coping skills, the present line of research sheds light on conditions that can hinder or improve the detachment from an ex-partner. We have demonstrated that for those with anxious attachment, entering a new romantic relationship is associated with less continued emotional attachment to an ex-partner. Moreover, our experimental results suggest that this rebound effect is due to optimism for one's romantic future, as anxiously attached individuals are less attached to ex-partners when they are optimistic about the availability of future partners. These findings demonstrate that changes to anxiously attached individuals' normally bleak relationship beliefs serve as a tool for moving on from ex-partners, which may be a starting point for more adaptive coping responses following relationship dissolution.

NOTE

1. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting a range of possible motivations.

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Received November 8, 2008

Revision accepted April 14, 2009