

THE ROLE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS AND COPING STRATEGIES  
FOLLOWING A NON-MARITAL RELATIONSHIP BREAKUP

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Psychology – Clinical (D Psych)  
The Australian National University.

August 2015

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## Declaration

This is to certify that:

- I. The work presented in this thesis submitted to the Australian National University in fulfilment of the Doctor of Psychology (Clinical) is, to the best of my knowledge, original except as acknowledged in the text.
- II. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.
- III. The development and writing up of the papers in this thesis were the principal responsibility of myself. The inclusion of co-authorship accurately reflects the input of my supervisors who provided advice on design, data analysis, proof reading and editing.
- IV. The thesis is less than 40,000 words in length, exclusive of tables and bibliographies.

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August 2015

## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my research supervisor Professor Don Byrne, for his open-minded, optimistic and trusting approach to supervision. His support, constructive feedback and significant wealth of experience have been invaluable throughout this research project. My sincere thanks to Dr Richard Burns, for his enthusiasm, depth of knowledge and willingness to step me through the statistical phases of my research. Thank you also to Dr Ross Wilkinson, for his contribution to developing and refining my research, particularly in the early stages. I would like to also sincerely thank all of the participants who brought this research to life, particularly those who gave their time and thoughtful energy to completing the research practicum component. I am deeply indebted to my family, for their endless encouragement, assistance and words of heartfelt wisdom along the way. Particular thanks to my father Dr John Franklin, for inspiring me with his great sense of purpose and vision, and assisting me in more ways than I could ever count. To my brother, Leon Franklin, thank you for your clear thinking guidance and your steadfast love and support throughout the many seasons of our lives. And to my mother, Sim Kit Eu, your strength, clarity and ambition have always and will always light the way. Thank you also to my partner, Francis: Your unyielding love, optimism and belief in me, have been the backbone of this adventure. Finally, I would like to express a most profound sense of gratitude to my classmates, colleagues and now life-long friends. This journey has been coloured by your brilliant minds, kind hearts and generous intentions. Thank you to Cassandra Gratwick-Sarll, Amanda Kenny, Claire White, Natasha Odou, Amanda Hale, Rosy Allen, John Shin, Kristy Zwickert, Zhen-Hui Chin and the rest of the 2011 cohort, the many moments of shared laughter, challenge, understanding and support, truly made this little city feel like home.

## **Abstract**

The development and maintenance of romantic relationships has been a central focus of psychological research over the past few decades, whilst the dissolution of such relationships has received significantly less attention. This is of growing concern, as sociological changes indicate that the number of individuals experiencing non-marital relationship breakups is on the rise. Whilst previous research suggests that the dissolution of such relationships is likely to end in heartache, recent studies indicate that some individuals bounce back and exhibit positive adjustment. To date, little is known about how and why some individuals fare better than others. Furthermore, available research has primarily focused on trait-like factors that predict post-breakup distress, offering little opportunity for intervention. This raises two important questions: What individual characteristics and coping strategies are related to positive post-breakup adjustment? And, can we identify trainable factors that offer opportunity for intervention? This thesis sought to explore these questions in two research studies and a research practicum.

Study one aimed to identify positive psychological factors (e.g. mindfulness, optimism, hope, self-esteem and self-compassion) associated with adjustment following the breakdown of a non-marital relationship. Findings indicated that positive psychological factors were strongly related on post-breakup adjustment, over and above the circumstances of a relationship breakup. Further, the factors related to poor adjustment (lower mindfulness, self-esteem and optimism) differed somewhat from those related to positive adjustment (greater mindfulness, hope and self-compassion). These findings suggest that clinicians could usefully focus on building dual pathways to post-breakup resilience.

Based on the findings of study one, an experimental single case design study was conducted to investigate the therapeutic benefits of a brief online self-compassion intervention designed to help people cope with relationship breakups. Findings indicated that a majority of

participants reported improvements in self-compassion, breakup distress, affect and wellbeing after the intervention. These findings offer preliminary evidence that self-compassion may be a useful clinical tool for supporting individuals after the breakdown of a romantic relationship.

Study two qualitatively explored the range and helpfulness of coping strategies employed by males and females after a relationship breakup. The main findings of the study indicated (i) a general consensus in the coping strategies reported most frequently by males and females, (ii) females tended to rate active forms of coping as more helpful, whilst males rated more avoidant forms of coping as more helpful, (iii) females and males who rated the helpfulness of coping strategies in this way, also tended to report greater wellbeing following the breakup. These surprising results are interpreted and discussed through the lens of role constraint theory.

Taken together, these studies indicate that clinical interventions developed to assist individuals in the aftermath of a relationship breakup should consider the role of individual characteristics, social roles and coping strategies, and should seek to not only reduce distress but also build wellbeing and positive adaptation.

## **Overview**

The general introduction to this thesis is divided into three chapters: A review of previous literature on adjustment to non-marital relationship breakups; an outline of positive psychological factors linked to post-breakup adjustment; and a literature review on the efficacy of various coping strategies in the context of relationship breakups. Chapter four presents study one, which aimed to investigate the relationship between a set of five positive psychological factors and post-breakup adjustment. Chapter five outlines an applied research practicum that utilised an experimental single case design to evaluate the efficacy of a brief online self-compassion intervention designed to help individuals after a relationship breakup. Chapter six presents the second major study of this thesis, which aimed to investigate the range and helpfulness of various coping strategies employed by males and females after a breakup. Lastly, chapter seven summarises the main conclusions and limitations of these studies and provides direction for future research and clinical practice.

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## **Chapter 1:**

### **Adjustment to Non-marital Relationship Breakups**

## **1.1 Non-Marital Relationship Breakups**

The formation and maintenance of close relationships is an important part of people's lives (Kan & Cares, 2006). Indeed, establishing romantic relationships is a key developmental task for young adults (Arnett, 2000), and individuals in satisfactory relationships tend to report greater happiness, wellbeing and life satisfaction (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). Thus, it is understandable that when such relationships come to an end, individuals commonly report significant psychological distress and emotional upheaval (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003).

To date, the vast majority of research on relationship breakdowns has focused on separation and divorce in marital relationships. This may largely reflect social trends, as in previous decades a vast majority of individuals married in their early twenties and had fewer romantic partners prior to marriage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Over time, the average age of marriage has steadily increased, whilst the overall rate of marriage has significantly declined (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). These social shifts have meant that young adults tend to engage in and breakup from many more non-marital relationships (Hebert & Popaduik, 2008). Despite not being marital, these relationships appear to be of significance, as studies indicate that difficulties in interpersonal relationships are the most common presenting concern of college students seeking counselling services (Benton et al., 2003; Gilbert & Sifers, 2011).

Unfortunately psychological research has not kept pace with such social changes, and gaps in our understanding of non-marital relationship breakups have emerged. Given the increasing incidence and apparent importance of non-marital relationship breakups, this dissertation sought to extend our understanding of, and in turn our capacity to assist individuals with, the breakdown of non-marital relationships. Consistent with previous research, the current thesis classified non-marital relationships as romantic partnerships that extended over a minimum period of 3-months, in which the couple did not marry.

## 1.2 Stages of Relationship Termination

Relationship breakups are often conceptualised as single isolated events, however research increasingly suggests that the dissolution of a relationship is an extended process involving many stages (Duck, 2007). Indeed, a range of stage theories have attempted to account for the process that unfolds as partners transition from a relationship to single life. Early theories suggested that the process of relationship dissolution was simply the reverse sequence of steps that build relationship growth (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Miller & Parks, 1982). Such theories provide a standard set of breakup stages that are relatively undifferentiated from one relationship breakup to another. Later theories provided more complex models of disengagement, allowing for unique accounts of how individual relationships came to an end (Baxter, 1984; Lee, 1984). For instance, Lee (1984) posited a 5-stage model of relationship breakups from dissatisfaction through to transformation. This model allowed for the specification of who was involved at each stage (one or both parties), the terms and issues discussed at each stage of the breakup, and the amount of time that elapsed between stages. Duck's widely accepted model of relational dissolution (1982) further extended our understanding of the psychological and social aspects involved in the breakup process. Rollie and Duck's (2006) updated version of this model outlines five processes that can co-occur, overlap and extend over variable time periods through the breakup process. The first Intrapyschic phase involves internal reflection on the state of the relationship by one or both partners. Next, the dyadic phase involves discussion between the two partners regarding concerns or reservations about the relationship, this phase extends until action is taken to repair, postpone or terminate the relationship. If a decision is made to terminate the relationship, partners provide their versions of the breakup to their social networks in the social phase, in order to have the dissolution recognized publicly. The grave dressing phase then involves tidying up accounts of the breakup, making sense of and putting the relationship to rest, through a process of reflection and attribution. Finally, individuals go through the resurrection

phase in which they learn from the previous relationship and emerge ready for future relationships. The current research intends to focus on the later stages of the breakup process, in order to develop our understanding of how individuals adjust following the decision to terminate a romantic relationship.

### **1.3 Post-Dissolution Grief**

Researchers have argued that stage models of grief may provide insight into the experiences of individuals following relationship dissolution (Boelen & Hout, 2010; Sbarra & Emery, 2005). According to Stroebe and Hansson (1993), grief is defined as the emotional response to loss. This broad definition of grief allows for the inclusion of non-death losses, such as relationship dissolution. Indeed, striking similarities have been identified between grief reactions following loss through bereavement and loss through relationship breakups (Robak & Weitman, 1998). For instance, Robak and Weitman (1998) administered the Grief Experiences Inventory to a sample of individuals who recently experienced a relationship breakup and found that the grief reactions of this sample were largely indistinguishable from those who had experienced a recent death. Sbarra and Emery (2005) identified a range of emotional responses to relationship dissolution, including sadness, anger and love that are largely consistent with contemporary models of bereavement. Over three decades ago, Wiseman adapted Kubler-Ross's (1969) stages of grief model for divorcees, beginning with denial of the separation, progressing through depression and anger toward reorientation of life and self, and eventually resulting in acceptance and return to functioning. In a similar manner, Gray and Shields (1992) found that the experiences of divorced individuals could be meaningfully clustered into Bowlby's (1961) three stages of mourning, including: 1) the urge to recover the lost object, in which the individual is preoccupied by thoughts of their ex-partner and hopes for reconciliation; 2) disorganization, when individuals experience despair, restlessness and depression; and 3) reorganization, in which the individual adapts to life without the lost partner. Whilst these theories provide helpful overviews of grief

reactions that people have in common, more recent research highlights marked individual variation in how people cope with interpersonal loss. Indeed, Mancini and Bonanno (2009) suggests that there are at least three distinct trajectories following loss, including chronic dysfunction (persistent levels of acute distress), recovery (moderate distress followed by gradual return to pre-loss functioning) and resilience (relatively stable pattern of low distress across time). Recently, relationship breakup studies have attempted to investigate a range of grief trajectories, as inventories designed to assess complicated grief and post-traumatic growth have been adapted for research in the area. However, the vast majority of relationship breakup research focuses primarily on poor post-breakup trajectories, with comparatively little attention paid to the possibility of resilience in the face of relational loss. Thereby, the current paper seeks to extend our understanding of both negative and positive reactions to the loss of a non-marital relationship.

#### **1.4 Poor Post-Breakup Adjustment**

Non-marital relationship breakups are commonly cited among life's most distressing events (Kendler, Hettema, Butera, Gardner, & Prescott, 2003). Thus, it is not surprising that when a dating relationship ends, individuals commonly experience increases in psychological distress and a decline in wellbeing and life-satisfaction (Davis et al., 2003; Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999). Further, such individuals tend to report greater emotional volatility and intense negative affective reactions such as anger, sadness, guilt, shame, rejection, loneliness and regret (Sbarra & Emery, 2005; Waller & MacDonald, 2010). The breakdown of a romantic relationship has also been shown to predict a range of poor mental health outcomes, including the onset of major depressive disorder, heightened anxiety, admission to psychiatric services, increased substance use, and suicidal ideation (Boelen & Reijntjes, 2009; Davis et al., 2003; Donald, Dower, Correa-Velez, & Jones, 2006; Mastekaasa, 1997; Monroe et al., 1999; Overbeek, Vollerbergh, Engels, & Meeus, 2003; Rhoades, Dush, Atkins, Stanley, & Markman,

2012). Recent investigations have further linked relationship breakups to post-traumatic stress symptoms and complicated grief reactions such as insomnia, avoidance behaviour and difficulty controlling intrusive thoughts about the breakup (Chung et al., 2003; Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2009).

The end of a close romantic relationship also has a bearing on an individual's physiology and health. Indeed, Field (2011) proposed that over the course of a relationship, partners come to regulate each other's stimulation and arousal systems through repeatedly providing pleasure and intimacy, and alleviating one another's distress. From this perspective, psychological and physiological homeostasis is maintained in the context of a relationship by the proximity and availability of one's partner (Field, 2011). Thus when partnerships end the homeostasis-maintaining function of the relationship partner is lost, which may lead to the dysregulation of one's sleep, appetite and mood (Field, 2011). The distress of separation has also been shown to activate the autonomic and neuroendocrine systems associated with physiological stress reactions such as increased heart rate, blood pressure and cortisol levels (Field, 2011; Powers, Pietromonaco, Gunlicks, & Sayer, 2006). Prolonged activation of these systems, as may be the case in ongoing relationship separations, can inhibit immune function, which may help to explain the greater incidence of physical illness, hospital admissions, and increased mortality rates among this population (Hemstroem, 1996; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Stack, 1990). Together these findings clearly indicate that relationship breakups place people at heightened risk of experiencing poor emotional, psychological and physical health outcomes.

### **1.5 Predictors of Poor Post-Breakup Adjustment**

Certain characteristics of the relationship, the breakup, and the individual, have been linked to the level of distress experienced when a relationship comes to an end. Indeed, research suggests that adaptation after a breakup is at least partially dependent on the characteristics of the relationship (Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). One characteristic that has

received significant attention in the literature is relationship investment. Based on the investment model of relationships (Rusbult, 1980) researchers suggest that greater investment in a relationship tends to predict greater distress when the relationship is terminated (Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). This assertion has received empirical support as various indicators of relationship investment have been linked with poorer post-breakup adjustment. For instance, longer-term relationships, characterised by greater sharing of friends, assets, activities and memories, have been linked to greater distress upon dissolution (Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995; Sprecher et al., 1998). Indicators of emotional investment such as efforts in initiating or maintaining the relationship, having cohabited, had children together or plans to marry, are also predictive of worse post-breakup adjustment (Fine & Sacher, 1997; Rhoades et al., 2011; Robak & Weitzman, 1998; Stanley et al., 2006). Further, individuals who describe their relationship as close, satisfying and difficult to replace, tend to have more trouble adjusting when the relationship comes to an end (Frazier & Cook, 1993; Simpson, 1987).

Characteristics of the breakup also influence the recovery process. For instance, individuals who perceive little control over the decision to end the relationship tend to report greater distress than those who initiated the breakup (Field et al., 2009; Fine & Sacher, 1997; Peterson, Rosenbaum, & Conn, 1985; Robak & Weitzman, 1998; Sprecher, 1994). Further, engaging in greater ongoing contact with one's ex-partner after the relationship has ended is predictive of greater post-breakup sadness and distress (Mason, Sbarra, Bryan, & Lee, 2012; Sbarra & Emery, 2005). In contrast, focusing on other people appears to aid the recovery process, as research indicates that entering into a new relationship or interacting more with one's social support network is associated with lower distress after a breakup (Berman & Turk, 1981; Field et al., 2011; Frazier & Cook, 1993; Locker, McIntosh, Hackney, Wilson, Wiegand., 2010; Sansom & Farnill, 1997). In general however, there appears to be some truth to the expression "time heals all wounds", as individuals tend to show a decline in distress as more time since the breakup

passes (Field et al., 2011).

Individual characteristics that are related to post-breakup distress have received considerably less attention in the literature. Those individual characteristics that have been studied tend to be fixed or trait-like, offering little opportunity for intervention. For instance, previous studies have investigated the role of gender. Whilst some studies have found no difference between males and females (Chung et al., 2003; Davis et al., 2003; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003), a couple of studies indicate that males exhibit greater post-breakup distress than females (Helgeson, 1994; Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976). Personality traits have also been shown to play a role in how people respond to a breakup; neuroticism has been linked to greater post-breakup distress, whilst agreeableness has been associated with better adjustment (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003; Watson & Hubbard, 1996). Finally, attachment styles have been shown to influence an individual's recovery from a breakup. Securely attached individuals tend to enact more adaptive strategies for managing emotional distress and report faster emotional recovery (Sbarra & Emery, 2005; Sbarra, 2006). In contrast, attachment anxiety has been linked to more extreme distress reactions, greater preoccupation with the ex-partner, exaggerated attempts to re-establish the relationship and maladaptive coping following the breakdown of a relationship (Barbara & Dion, 2000; Davis et al., 2003; Fagundes, 2012; Gilbert & Sifers, 2011; Sbarra, 2006; Sprecher et al., 1998). It is valuable to note that the body of literature evaluating the role of various attachment styles on post-breakup adjustment is significant. However, attachment styles have received considerable attention in previous studies and do not provide clear opportunity for clinical intervention due to their enduring and stable nature (Daniel, 2006). Whilst extensive clinical efforts have focused on assisting young children in developing secure attachment styles, little research is available suggesting that attachment styles can be meaningfully shifted through adult intervention. As flexibility and adaptation are considered central to the development of resilience (Fredrickson, Manusco, Branigan, & Tugade, 2000), it appears crucial to focus clinical research efforts on

factors that are trainable and offer individuals an avenue for developing and growing through stressful life events. Thus, fixed trait-like factors such as attachment style and personality traits were excluded from this thesis

In sum, the vast majority of research on non-marital relationship breakups has sought to identify variables that predict post-breakup distress. Indeed, this body of work has successfully shown that certain characteristics of the relationship, the breakup and the individual influence one's level of distress after a breakup. However this research provides little insight into the factors that may support positive adjustment following a breakup. Further, the majority of these variables are fixed and offer little opportunity for intervention.

### **1.6 Positive Post-Breakup Adjustment**

Given the intense focus on negative post-breakup outcomes, it may be easily assumed that positive outcomes are uncommon. However, this is more likely a reflection of the lack of assessment of such outcomes in extant research, as individuals commonly report positive outcomes when asked about them specifically (Tashiro, Frazier, & Bermen, 2006). In fact, research suggests that many individuals fare well, and adjust relatively quickly after a breakup (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). More recently, research has started to consider the possibility of positive and resilient adaptation following relationship dissolution. From a theoretical perspective, at least two pathways leading to positive post-breakup adjustment have been proposed. Firstly, the stress-relief pathway suggests that individuals experience positive outcomes, such as relief or catharsis when leaving a stressful or unhappy relationship (Tashiro et al., 2006). Indeed, alongside emotional distress, people commonly experience an array of positive emotions such as relief, empowerment, comfort, joy and freedom in the wake of a breakup (Choo et al., 1996; Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Tashiro et al. 2006). Further, such emotions may play more of a role in post-breakup experiences than previously thought, as

Lewandowski and Bizzoco (2007) found that more than half of their sample reported higher than average levels of positive affect after the breakdown of a relationship.

The crisis-growth pathway offers an alternate explanation for positive post-breakup adjustment, conceptualising breakups as potential growth experiences, in which individuals develop, improve and expand as they navigate their way through the stressors involved in such an event (Tashiro, et al., 2006). In line with this assertion, studies have repeatedly found that individuals report multiple benefits and positive changes that stem directly from their breakup experiences (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). The most commonly reported changes reflect improvements in personal characteristics, traits and beliefs (e.g. “Through breaking up I learned I can handle more on my own”) (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Regardless of whether conceptualised as relief or growth, the existing literature clearly indicates that individuals commonly experience positive post-breakup outcomes alongside negative ones. This raises a couple of important questions: 1) what factors promote positive adjustment after a relationship breakup? and 2) can these factors be cultivated to help people cope more resiliently when a relationship ends?

### **1.7 Predicting Positive Post-Breakup Adjustment**

“This set me wondering, what sources of strength were these people drawing on?”

(Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 4)

The positive psychology movement has highlighted the importance of moving beyond the study of psychological distress, in order to develop our understanding of human strength and resilience. In their seminal paper, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) suggest that psychology has been based on a disease model of human functioning, in which research and practice has concentrated on understanding and repairing damage and distress. The authors call for greater research into the positive traits and factors that enable humans to thrive, and for

techniques to be developed in order to build these positive capacities (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As previously mentioned, extant research on relationship breakups has primarily focused on how to predict varying degrees of post-breakup distress. In line with the Csikszentmihalyi quote above and the guidelines set out by the positive psychology movement, this thesis sought to develop our understanding of the factors that enable some individuals to deal more resiliently with relationship breakups, with particular attention paid to modifiable factors that offer opportunity for intervention. As research on such positive factors is relatively limited in the area of relationship breakups, this thesis draws on literature from related areas of interpersonal loss including bereavement and divorce. Two promising areas of enquiry that have been shown to explain why some individuals fare better than others when encountering a stressful event, are *1) positive psychological factors; and 2) coping strategies*. The following two chapters review literature linking positive psychological factors and coping strategies to positive adjustment following interpersonal loss. From this review, the two studies and research practicum composing this dissertation are developed and reported.

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Positive Psychological Factors and Post-Breakup Adjustment**

## **2.1 Positive Psychological Factors**

The impact of a stressful event is heavily influenced by the aspects of the individual, rather than situational factors alone (Mancini & Bonano, 2009). Individual psychological factors, including personal beliefs, attitudes and skills, have been shown to play an integral role in how individuals cope with the loss of a relationship (Mancini & Bonano, 2009). Whilst a large number of variables potentially contribute to post-breakup adjustment, the primary focus of this thesis was to identify factors that promote wellbeing, alleviate suffering and offer opportunity to improve post-breakup adaptation via intervention. Thus, the psychological factors selected for the purpose of this thesis were based on two criteria: *1) The variable has been linked to wellbeing or positive outcomes in related literature on interpersonal loss; and 2) Research indicates that the variable is modifiable or trainable.* Based on these criteria, a non-exhaustive list of positive psychological factors was selected, including: mindfulness, optimism, hope, self-esteem and self-compassion. An overview of these variables is provided below.

### **2.1.1 Mindfulness.**

Mindfulness has received considerable attention over the past decade in clinical research and practice (Didonna, 2009; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). Originally a Buddhist practice, mindfulness stems from the Pali word *sati*, which translates to awareness, attention, and remembering (Bodhi, 2000). Over time, mindfulness has become a mainstream concept in psychology that is more commonly defined as a non-judgmental, moment-to-moment awareness of one's experience (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness involves the direct observation of thoughts, emotions, sensations and external stimuli, with an attitude of openness and acceptance, without automatic or impulsive attempts to change or avoid them (Baer, 2009). Mindfulness is a naturally occurring attribute that has been linked to a range of wellbeing outcomes including greater positive affect, life-satisfaction, optimism and physical wellbeing (Baer & Huss, 2008; Brown & Kasser, 2005;

Brown & Ryan, 2003). Further, mindfulness has been linked to lower levels of negative affect, neuroticism, anxiety and depression (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Shapiro, Oman, Thoresen, Plante & Flinders, 2008). Whilst mindfulness has not been studied specifically within the context of relationship breakups, related research indicates that people higher in trait mindfulness tend to report less emotional stress and respond more constructively to relationship conflict (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007). These findings suggest that mindfulness may facilitate effective conflict management whilst a relationship is intact, however further research is required in order to evaluate whether this pattern holds when a relationship ends.

The underlying mechanisms of mindfulness further indicate that this capacity may be particularly beneficial when a relationship ends. To date, at least three such mechanisms have been identified including increased behavioural self-regulation, improved emotion regulation and decreased emotional reactivity (Baer, 2009). Behavioural self-regulation, defined as the ability to act in an adaptive manner whilst distressed (Gratz & Roemer, 2004), has been identified as a pathway through which mindfulness cultivates wellbeing. Mindfulness facilitates an awareness of one's internal states and the consequences of responding to them in various ways (Linehan, 1993). Such awareness enables individuals to disengage from automatic or maladaptive patterns of behaviour (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006) and in turn engage in behaviour that is better aligned with personal needs and values (Hayes et al., 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This may be particularly helpful in the aftermath of a relationship breakup, as individuals are required to disengage from previously held habits and routines, in order to adapt to life without their partner. Indeed, individuals who are able to discontinue old habits such as regularly contacting their ex-partner, have been found to fare better than those who maintain habitual patterns of communication after a breakup (Mason et al., 2012; Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Mindfulness may also support adaptation after a breakup by enhancing one's ability to regulate emotions. Specifically, mindfulness undermines ruminative elaboration of difficult experiences,

by enabling individuals to view painful thoughts and emotions as passing events and flexibly redirect attention to other concerns (Baer, 2009; Heeren & Philippot, 2011; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). These capacities may be particularly helpful after a relationship breakup, as the inability to control ruminative or intrusive thoughts about one's breakup has been linked to poor post-breakup adjustment (Field et al., 2009; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). Finally, mindfulness may help to support wellbeing after a breakup by reducing emotional reactivity (Baer, 2009). As mindfulness practice involves prolonged, non-judgemental exposure to one's difficult emotions without attempting to change or avoid them, individuals are likely to become less sensitive and reactive to emotional experiences (Coffey & Hartman, 2008; Davis & Hayes, 2011; Goldin & Gross, 2010). Such desensitisation may be helpful in the aftermath of a breakup, as individuals who are able to tolerate multiple emotions, rather than being swept away by waves of anger, sadness and love, tend to exhibit superior adjustment when a relationship ends (Emery, 1994; Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Further, lower emotional reactivity may undermine the impetus to engage in maladaptive forms of avoidant coping, which have been linked to poor adjustment following relationship breakups (Chung et al., 2003; Mearns, 1991; Linehan, 1993). Together, these findings suggest that the mindful capacity to tolerate difficult experiences and regulate one's behaviour and emotions may help to support healthy adaptation following a relationship breakup.

Research indicates that mindfulness can be cultivated through a range of practices and formal interventions including Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Dialectical Behaviour therapy (Segal et al., 2002; Kabat-Zinn, 1982; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999; Linehan, 1993). There is growing recognition that the enhancement of mindfulness through such training interventions assists in alleviating mental health problems and improving psychological functioning (Baer, 2003; Davis & Hayes, 2011; Carmody & Baer, 2008; Coffey & Hartman, 2008; Shapiro et al.,

2008; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Recent studies indicate that mindfulness-based training may be beneficial for those who have experienced the loss of a loved one. For instance, recently divorced women reported significantly lower levels of anxiety and depression after completing an eight-week mindfulness-based cognitive therapy intervention (Ghasemian, Kuzehkanan, & Hassanzadeh, 2014). Further, recent advances in bereavement counselling have found that mindfulness-based therapy reduces post-loss distress by strengthening emotional tolerance and self-regulation (Cacciatore & Flint, 2012; Cacciatore et al., 2014). Taken together these findings suggest that mindfulness is a trainable skill that may play a beneficial role in adaptation to interpersonal loss.

### **2.1.2 Optimism.**

Optimism is a positive psychological factor that is commonly referred to as a tendency to expect positive outcomes and look on the bright side of life (Schueller & Seligman, 2008). Within the research literature there are two dominant ways of defining this construct: Dispositional optimism and attributional optimism (Schueller & Seligman, 2008). The former defines optimism as a general expectation that one will experience positive life outcomes, and pessimism as a general expectation that future hopes and goals will not be realised (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). An alternate conceptualisation is based on the way that an individual makes causal attributions about past, current or hypothetical events (Seligman, 1998). In particular, it is proposed that optimists interpret negative events as unstable, specific and external, whilst pessimists may interpret a similar event as stable, global and internal (Seligman, 1998). For instance, optimists may be more likely to interpret a negative experience such as having difficulty making friends at a new school, as something that will change, that is specific to their current circumstances and is not a reflection of them personally. In contrast, pessimists may be more likely to interpret this experience as something that will continue to be a problem over time, which always seems to happen to them and is in some way their fault. Research

suggests that dispositional optimism and optimistic attribution styles are moderately related, and both conceptualisations have been linked with an array of positive life outcomes such as greater life-satisfaction, wellbeing, socioeconomic status and physical health (Carver, Scheier & Segerstrom, 2010; Gillham et al., 1998). Further, optimism appears to confer resilience in the face of adversity, as optimistic individuals report lower rates of depression and distress in response to an array of stressors, including coronary bypass surgery (Fitzgerald et al., 1993), ischemic heart disease (Shnek, Irvine, Stewart, & Abbey, 2001), cancer diagnosis (Carver et al., 1993), caregivers of cancer and Alzheimer's patients (Given et al., 1993; Shifren & Hooker, 1995), failed in-vitro fertilisation (Litt et al., 1992), first year of college (Brisette et al., 2002) and late life ageing (Giltay, Zitman, & Kromhout, 2006). Within the context of relational loss, optimism has been linked to superior adjustment following marital disruption and the loss of a loved one through bereavement (Everson et al., 2006; Minton et al., 2009; Noelen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999; Risengard & Folkman, 1997; Thuen & Rise, 2006). A single study conducted by Hegelson and colleagues (1994) found that optimists describe relationship breakups as less stressful and report greater post-breakup adjustment than pessimists. Further, recent research indicates that anxiously attached individuals who are more optimistic about finding a new partner are better able to let go of their ex-partner (Speilman, McDonald, & Wilson, 2009). Together these findings suggest that optimism is a positive individual difference variable that may function to support wellbeing in the face of relational loss.

A number of the pathways linking optimism to wellbeing appear to be particularly relevant to the recovery process after a relationship breakup. Specifically, optimism has been linked to the generation of greater social support, positive affect and active coping, which may function to support an individual's post-breakup wellbeing. Indeed, optimism has been identified as an interpersonally attractive attribute that facilitates the development of supportive and extensive social networks (Brisette, Carver, & Scheier, 2002). As relationship breakups often involve the

loss of one's main source of support, the ability to cultivate and rely on alternate sources of social support is particularly beneficial when an intimate relationship ends (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; McCarthy et al., 1997; Richmond & Christensen, 2001). Optimistic attributes may further help to support the wellbeing of individuals after a relationship breakup by generating positive emotions (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Indeed, in the midst of a relationship breakup the generalised expectation that 'things will be okay' may help to generate hopeful and positive emotions, which in turn may facilitate positive behaviours, creating a positive feedback loop (Fredrickson et al., 2000). Further, the tendency of optimists to view negative experiences such as a breakup, as unstable (i.e. a passing event rather than an indication that I will always be alone), specific (i.e. This relationship didn't work out, rather than an indication that all relationships won't work out) and external (i.e. Due to bad timing, rather than an indication that there is something wrong with me), may protect them from feelings of hopelessness, depression, shame and rejection (Seligman, 1998). Optimistic expectations also have apparent implications for coping behaviour, as optimists tend to believe that coping efforts will be successful, they are more inclined to select active rather than avoidance-based coping strategies (Carver et al., 2010). This may be particularly adaptive in the face of a relationship breakup, as active problem-focused coping has been linked to better post-breakup adjustment, whilst avoidant coping has been linked to greater general disturbance (Chung et al, 2003; Mearns, 1991; Sbarra & Emery, 2005). These findings suggest that the mechanisms linking optimism to wellbeing may be functional in the aftermath of a relationship breakup.

Whilst optimism has traditionally been referred to as a trait-like disposition, a growing body of literature suggests that optimism is a trainable skill that can be cultivated via a range of interventions (Seegerstrom, 2006). For instance cognitive-behavioural therapies commonly challenge pessimistic cognitions, and foster more constructive or optimistic ways of thinking, in order to reduce hopelessness and facilitate goal-directed behaviour (Seligman et al., 2007).

Indeed, a number of studies have found evidence that such cognitive exercises increase optimism and wellbeing and in turn reduce levels of depression and anxiety (Seligman et al., 1999; Seligman et al., 2007). Shorter-term interventions designed to focus participants on their best-imagined selves or futures, have also been found to cultivate an optimistic outlook and in turn improve positive emotions, wellbeing and levels of depression (Dickerhoof et al., 2009; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). Together these findings suggest that optimism is a positive psychological factor that offers an avenue for potential intervention, thus the current thesis sought to investigate the role of this construct in post-breakup adjustment.

### **2.1.3 Hope.**

Hope is a positive psychological factor that reflects one's subjective appraisals of goal related capabilities (Snyder, 2000). Hope is comprised of two components: Firstly the belief that one can generate workable routes to one's goals (pathways); and secondly the perception that one has the motivation and ability to achieve those goals (agency) (Snyder, Michael, & Cheavens, 1999). High-hope individuals typically have clear personal goals, are able to think flexibly about how they might progress towards those goals and believe that they are capable of achieving them. Snyder and colleagues (2002) suggest that the ability to plan, work towards and achieve one's goals elicits positive emotions and is a major driving force of an individual's wellbeing (Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002). Over the past decade a growing number of studies have linked high hope with positive outcomes, including greater self-esteem (Curry, Snyder, Cook, Ruby, & Rehm, 1997), positive affect (Ciarocchi, Heaven, & Davies, 2007; Ciarrochi, Parker, Kashdan, Heaven, & Barkus, 2015), life-satisfaction (Valle, Huebner, & Suldo, 2006), physical health (Cheavens, Michael, & Snyder, 2005), academic performance (Chang, 1998) and laughter (Westburg, 2003). In contrast low hope has been associated with indicators of maladjustment such as depression, dysphoria, internalising behaviours and externalising behaviours (Snyder et al., 2003; Valle et al., 2006). Research suggests that hope may also

moderate the relationship between stressful life events and wellbeing (Valle et al., 2006). Indeed, high-hope individuals have been found to cope more effectively with a range of life stressors including breast cancer diagnosis (Stanton, Danoffburg, & Huggins, 2002) chronic illness (Billington, Simpson, Unwin, Bray, & Giles, 2008; Elliott, Witty, Herrick, & Hoffman, 1991), caring for children with chronic illnesses (Horton & Wallander, 2001) and race-related stress (Danoff-Burg, Prelow, & Swenson, 2004).

Despite evidence that hope promotes wellbeing in the face of adversity, very little research has investigated this construct within the context of relationship loss. To our knowledge, only one such study has been conducted, evaluating the role of hope following the loss of a loved one through bereavement. In this study Michael and Snyder (2005) found that high-hope was directly related to greater wellbeing and adjustment following the death of a loved one. The authors suggest that hopeful thinking may facilitate the resolution of the grieving process by focusing individuals on present and future life goals, rather than ruminating on the lost relationship. This is in line with Stroebe and Schut's (1999) dual process model, which suggests that coping with the loss of a loved one necessarily involves re-orienting to present and future-based concerns in order to fulfil ones' roles and attend to the demands of life. Further, high-hope individuals may be better able to let go of goals that are no longer tenable due to changing life circumstances, and in turn adaptively revise goals, redefine their identity and rebuild new roles without their lost partner (Folkman, 2010; Michael & Snyder, 2005). This process of rebuilding after loss may be further supported by the tendency of high-hopers to engage in encouraging self-talk and view stressors as obstacles that can be overcome e.g. "I will get through this"; "I will find a way"; "I can cope" (Snyder, Lapointe, Crowson, & Early, 1998). As high-hope individuals believe that they will get through difficult times, they are also more likely to utilise active forms of coping, which have been linked to adaptive outcomes following the breakdown of a relationship (Chang, 1998; Chang & DeSimone, 2001). These findings suggest that the ability of high hope

individuals to let go of untenable goals, refocus on the future and rebuild one's sense of identity, may support healthy adaptation in the aftermath of a relationship breakup.

As a growing number of studies have demonstrated a link between high-hope and positive outcomes, a range of interventions have been designed to assess whether inducing hope can confer such benefits. Snyder suggests that hope therapy should be designed to “help clients in conceptualising clearer goals, producing numerous pathways to attainment, summoning the mental energy to maintain the goal pursuit and reframing insurmountable obstacles as challenges to be overcome” (Snyder, 2000, p. 123). Solution-focused and cognitive-behavioural interventions based on the therapeutic components outlined by Snyder (2000) have demonstrated improvements in hope, goal striving and subjective wellbeing (Green, Oades, & Grant, 2006). Further, results from a number of group-based interventions designed to assist distressed adults in a range of contexts, suggest that such interventions are effective in increasing hope and decreasing depression and anxiety (Cheavens, Gum, Feldman, Michael, & Snyder, 2007; Green et al., 2006; Klausner et al, 1998). Encouragingly, interventions as brief as single 90-minute goal-directed sessions have been shown to increase levels of hope and life meaning in college students (Feldman & Dreher, 2012). These findings suggest that hope is a positive psychological factor that could potentially be enhanced via intervention to promote wellbeing following the loss of a relationship.

#### **2.1.4 Self-esteem.**

An intuitive candidate for a psychological factor that may predict adjustment after a relationship breakup is self-esteem. Self-esteem is commonly defined as the tendency to positively evaluate one's personal sense of value and worth (Rosenberg, 1965). High self-esteem is often referred to as a cornerstone of mental health and has repeatedly been linked to a range of wellbeing indicators, including happiness, life-satisfaction, personal growth, purpose in

life, autonomy, stress-resilience, and positive social relations (Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Paradise & Kernis, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000). In contrast, low self-esteem is predictive of a range of poor psychological outcomes such as depressive disorders, hopelessness, suicidal tendencies, anxiety and psychological distress (Beck, Brown, Steer, Kuyken, & Grisham, 2001; Dori and Overholser, 1999; Kernis & Goldman, 2003; Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000). Whilst self-esteem is commonly regarded as a key determinant of wellbeing, this characteristic is not without its drawbacks. Indeed it has been suggested that rigidly held beliefs about one's self-esteem may interrupt an individual's ability to take on other people's feedback, in an attempt to protect their personal sense of self-worth (Crocker & Park, 2004). Further, if one's self-esteem is contingent upon certain outcomes, such as being in a relationship, an individual may be more susceptible to distress if that outcome is not met (Kernis, 2005). Whilst speculation exists about whether the implication of self-esteem are solely positive, within the context of relationship termination belief in ones' self-worth appears to support adjustment. A limited number of studies conducted in this area have linked high self-esteem with lower emotional distress and better post-breakup adjustment (Frazier & Cook, 1993; Helgeson, 1994; Weller, 2007). Further, low self-esteem and negative beliefs about oneself have been associated with symptoms of complicated grief and traumatic distress following a breakup (Boelen & Reijtenies, 2009; Chung et al., 2002). Together these findings suggest that high self-esteem is a positive psychological factor that may protect one's wellbeing in the wake of a relationship breakup.

A number of theoretical links further support the role that self-esteem may play in post-breakup adjustment. The process of negotiating a relationship breakup commonly involves the confrontation of negative self-relevant information in the form of rejection, blaming, criticism or disapproval (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). A number of theories suggest that exposure to such negative self-relevant information may have a more negative impact on individuals with low

self-esteem than those with higher self-esteem (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). One possible explanation for this is that individuals with high self-esteem cognitively attend less to rejection cues than those with lower self-esteem, and thus become less distressed when a relationship ends (Dandeneau & Baldwin, 2004). Alternatively, the sociometer theory suggests that individuals with high self-esteem have more experiences of feeling socially valued in the past, thus protecting them from one-off experiences in which they feel rejected or criticised (Leary & MacDonald, 2003; Waller, 2007). Along similar lines, individuals high in self-esteem may be better able to offset negative self-referential information by calling upon a rich backdrop of information about their abilities, strengths, and past successes (Waller, 2007). Indeed, numerous studies indicate that individuals with high self-esteem respond to threatening self-relevant situations by using self-affirmations, suggesting that they are able to access favourable self-relevant information in such situations (Dodgson & Wood, 1998; Nail, Misak, & Davis, 2003). Furthermore, when faced with a relationship breakup, individuals with high self-esteem may be less distressed, as they tend to make specific, external attributions about negative event (Blaine & Crocker, 1991). For example, people with high self-esteem may be more likely to view a breakup as a result of surrounding circumstances rather than an indication of broader personal failings (Brown & Smart, 1991; Epstein, 1992; Fitch, 1970; Tennen & Herzberger, 1987). Together these findings suggest that individuals with high self-esteem may be protected during a relationship breakup, as they pay less attention to rejection cues, are better able to call upon positive self-relevant information and less likely to attribute the breakup to personal fault.

Encouragingly, a growing number of studies indicate that self-esteem can be enhanced via psychological intervention, and that such interventions produce behavioural, psychological and social improvements in children and adolescents (Haney & Durlak, 1998; Taylor & Montgomery, 2007). Furthermore, cognitive-behavioural based interventions designed to elicit and reinforce positive self-attributes, have been shown to improve psychological functioning in a

range of adult populations (Chen et al., 2006; Fairburn, 2002; Hall & Tarrrier, 2003). This collection of relevant theory and research suggests that self-esteem is a trainable positive psychological factor, which warrants further investigation in the context of relationship breakups.

### **2.1.5 Self-compassion.**

Self-compassion provides an alternative to the better-known construct of self-esteem. Whilst self-esteem is based primarily on self-evaluation, self-compassion is based on non-judgmental self-acceptance (Harter, 1999). Neff (2003) proposes that self-compassion is comprised of three related components: Firstly it involves being kind and understanding towards oneself, rather than harsh and critical; Secondly, it entails a sense of common humanity, perceiving pain and failure as an experience shared by all, rather than an isolating event; and finally, mindful awareness, rather than over-identification or avoidance of one's painful internal experiences. This multifaceted construct has been referred to as a key human strength, as self-compassion cultivates kindness, balance and interconnectedness, and has consistently been linked to positive aspects of wellbeing (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Several studies have linked self-compassion with greater happiness, positive affect, optimism, wisdom, emotional intelligence, extraversion, conscientiousness and personal initiative (Neff et al., 2007). Further, self-compassion is negatively associated with markers of poor adjustment, including depression, self-criticism, rumination, anxiety, stress reactivity and neurotic perfectionism (Neff, 2003; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterrat, 2005). Self-compassionate individuals also exhibit greater adaptation to a range of life stressors including, childhood maltreatment (Vettese, Dyer, Li, & Wekerle, 2011), academic failure (Neff, Hsieh, & Dejithirat, 2005), entering college (Neely, Schallert, Mohammed, Roberts & Chen, 2009), breast cancer diagnosis (Przedziecki et al., 2013), chronic pain (Wren et al., 2012) and living with HIV (Brion, Leary, & Drabkin, 2014). To our knowledge only one study has investigated the role of this construct in the context of relationship

dissolution. Drawing from the divorce literature Sbarra and colleagues (2012) found that individuals who exhibited greater self-compassion when discussing their divorce, reported less divorce-related emotional intrusion in daily life and 9-months later (Sbarra et al., 2012). The results of this preliminary study provide a case for further investigation into the role of self-compassion following relationship dissolution.

The mechanisms of change underlying self-compassion suggest that this construct may play a positive role in post-breakup adjustment. According to attachment theory, intimate relationships typically provide individuals with a sense of felt safety and security (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). On a physiological level relationship partners further serve to co-regulate each other's homeostasis by repeatedly alleviating distress and inducing pleasure (Shaver & Hazan, 2008). When a relationship ends, an individual's sense of security is threatened, in turn triggering a cascade of physiological dysregulation, commonly characterised by sleeplessness, appetite disruption and dysphoria (Shaver & Hazan, 2008). Self-compassionate individuals may be better equipped to restore physiological regulation, as the propensity to engage in self-soothing practices has been found to generate feelings of security and safety, and deactivate one's threat system (Gilbert, 2005). Self-compassion may further serve to protect an individual from the pain of self-criticism after a relationship breakup. Indeed, individuals who engage in self-recrimination and attribute the cause of a breakup to personal failings or faults (e.g. "What's wrong with me"; "I'm not good enough"; "I should have tried harder"), tend to report greater distress after a breakup (Boelen & Reijntjes, 2009; Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Self-compassionate individuals may be protected in such circumstances, as they are less likely to endorse self-critical thoughts and better able to take a supportive non-judgmental stance towards themselves (Allen & Leary, 2010). Further, as self-compassionate individuals are able to hold such painful thoughts and emotions in mindful awareness, they may be less overwhelmed and in turn less likely to engage in unhealthy forms of avoidance, such as drug or alcohol use, that have been linked to

poor post-breakup adjustment (Neff et al., 2005). Finally, the ability to view the pain of one's relationship breakup within the context of the struggles that all humans face, may help to build a sense of interconnectedness rather than isolation and withdrawal (Sbarra et al., 2012). In summary, self-compassionate individuals may be particularly well equipped to deal with a relationship breakup due to their ability to self-soothe, rebuff self-criticism and respond to painful emotions with a mindful and inclusive attitude.

Encouragingly, a growing number of studies indicate that self-compassion can be enhanced via a range of interventions, and that such interventions foster psychological health (Gilbert, 2010; Neff et al., 2007). Brief interventions designed to challenge self-critical internal dialogues have been found to increase self-compassion and improve wellbeing (Neff et al., 2007). More extensive therapeutic interventions designed specifically to enhance self-compassion, such as mindful self-compassion and compassion-focused therapy, have demonstrated lasting improvements in levels of depression, anxiety, negative affect, life-satisfaction and wellbeing (Gilbert, 2010; Neff & Germer, 2013). Together, these studies suggest that self-compassion is a trainable positive psychological factor that has the potential to promote wellbeing following a relationship breakup.

## **2.2 Overview of Study 1**

The theoretical links and empirical findings outlined above indicate that mindfulness, optimism, hope, self-esteem and self-compassion have been linked to wellbeing and positive adjustment following interpersonal loss, and can be deliberately cultivated via intervention. Thus an exploratory research study was conducted to investigate the role of these positive psychological factors following a non-marital relationship breakup. Specifically, study one evaluated the role of these five constructs in positive and negative post-breakup adjustment, after controlling for the circumstances of the relationship and breakup. The findings of this study are

outlined in detail, in chapter four of the thesis.

### **2.3 Overview of Research Practicum**

A strong finding that emerged from study one indicated that self-compassion and mindfulness may play an important role in positive post-breakup adjustment. Thus a brief clinical study was undertaken to examine the efficacy of a brief self-compassion intervention designed specifically for individuals who have experienced a non-marital relationship breakup. The self-compassion intervention covered the three components of self-compassion over three consecutive weeks: self-kindness, mindfulness and common humanity. See section 2.1.5 for a review of the efficacy of self-compassion interventions in improving wellbeing. To evaluate this intervention briefly with small numbers, a single case methodology was selected. Further, as research suggests that internet-based interventions are efficacious, economical and have broad reach, this study was run online (Barak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, & Shapira, 2008). The study thus examined whether an online 3-week self-compassion intervention could improve levels of self-compassion, wellbeing and breakup distress. Findings of this research practicum are provided in detail in chapter five.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **Coping and Post-Breakup Adjustment**

### **3.1 Coping after a Relationship Breakup**

As previously discussed, research indicates that a significant proportion of individuals experience positive outcomes following a relationship breakup, in the absence of psychological intervention (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). This finding suggests that there are certain approaches, strategies or skills that individuals frequently employ, that enable them to bounce back after a breakup. Surprisingly little is understood about the array of strategies that individuals employ after a breakup and their relative efficacy. Given that research consistently suggests that the strategies individuals employ to deal with a stressor have significant bearing on an individual's adjustment, further investigation into the role of coping strategies after a breakup is warranted (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Further, as coping lends itself to intervention, such research would provide useful guidelines for clinicians working to enhance the adjustment of individuals after a relationship breakup. The following section provides an overview of the coping literature and the limited findings linking coping to post-breakup adjustment. These findings then provide the basis for study two, outlined at the conclusion of this chapter.

### **3.2 Overview of Coping Literature**

In general, coping research provides insight into why some individuals fare better than others when faced with life stressors (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The coping literature is largely organised around two processes: appraisal and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Appraisal refers to the evaluation an individual makes regarding the potential of an event to impact on their wellbeing and the adequacy of their coping resources. Coping refers to the thoughts and behaviours utilised by an individual to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Coping is thought to influence the short-term resolution of a stressor and have longer-term implications for one's physical and psychological wellbeing (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The last three decades has

seen a proliferation in the coping literature and a large-scale review identified over four hundred labels for various coping strategies (Skinner, Edge, Alter, & Sherwood, 2003). In order to make sense of this vast literature, researchers have attempted to cluster coping responses into various categories. One of the earliest categories proposed by Folkman and Lazarus (1980) distinguished between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping. Problem-focused coping strategies seek to address the problem at hand, whilst emotion-focused coping strategies are designed to ameliorate the distress created by a problem (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). An alternate distinction used to classify ways of coping is approach versus avoidance coping. These categories distinguish between coping strategies that orient an individual towards (approach) or away (avoidance) from a stressor (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Whilst these distinctions help to synthesise the literature, it is increasingly acknowledged that the categories are overly simplistic, as they are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive (Skinner et al., 2003). For instance, some coping strategies such as planning, may assist an individual in dealing directly with the problem whilst also alleviating emotional distress.

In response to such concerns, Skinner and colleagues (2003) conducted a large-scale review of the coping literature in order to construct a comprehensive list of mutually exclusive ‘coping families’ that could be used to categorise the vast array of lower order coping strategies. After reviewing and critiquing 100 coping assessments, the authors identified 13 core coping families, including: problem-solving, support seeking, avoidance, distraction, positive-cognitive restructuring, rumination, helplessness, social withdrawal, emotional regulation, information seeking, negotiation, opposition and delegation. These categories provide a helpful framework for organising and building upon past coping research. Research evaluating the efficacy of coping within the context of relationship breakups is relatively limited, however an overview of the seven coping families that have been linked to post-breakup adjustment is provided below.

### **3.2.1 Problem-solving.**

Problem solving refers to an active, constructive attempt to manage or alter a stressful situation (Skinner et al., 2003). According to Skinner et al. (2003) this coping family encompasses planning, strategising, problem-solving, instrumental action and persistence. Several researchers have proposed that problem-focused coping is adaptive as it enables individuals to deal directly with the problem at hand (Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). Results from a number of studies suggest that problem-focused strategies may also play an adaptive role in the wake of a relationship breakup. Indeed, Studley and Chung (2014) found that participants who engaged in problem solving and actively sought to confront their current situation, exhibited fewer post-traumatic stress symptoms after a relationship breakup. Along similar lines, earlier studies have found that problem solving is negatively linked with psychological problems and traumatic reactions following a relationship breakup (Chung et al., 2003; Richmond & Christensen, 2001). The few studies available, suggest that problem-solving may be an adaptive response to relationship breakups, however further research is required to test these findings.

### **3.2.2 Social support.**

Seeking social support is commonly defined as any attempt to elicit instrumental, emotional, informational or spiritual support from one's formal and informal social network (Skinner et al., 2003). In general, seeking social support is thought to protect wellbeing in the face of adversity, by diminishing initial appraisals of stress, and reducing negative emotional, physical and behavioural reactions to the event (Cohen & Wills, 1985). At first glance, research findings investigating the efficacy of seeking social support after a relationship breakup appear contradictory. An early study by Berman and Turk (1981) found that social involvement was related to lower mood disturbance and greater life satisfaction after a breakup. In contrast, Chung

and colleagues (2003) suggest that seeking social support is linked to more traumatic stress reactions after a relationship breakup. These inconsistencies may be partially explained by gender differences, the amount of time since the breakup and specific forms of seeking social support. Indeed, Richmond and Christensen (2001) demonstrated that seeking informal social support from friends, family and those within one's network, predict better psychological and physical health after a breakup for females, but not for males. Further, females appear to benefit from seeking formal support (i.e. counselling or religion) up to a point, however ongoing use of these strategies across time is associated with poor health outcomes (Richmond & Christensen, 2001). Similarly, Lewandowski and Bizzoco (2007) found that seeking emotional support was linked to post-breakup growth, however instrumental support was associated with greater negative affect. These findings highlight the need to consider gender, timing and specific types of coping, in order to develop our understanding of which individuals may benefit from certain coping strategies.

### **3.2.3 Avoidance and distraction.**

Escape-avoidance coping refers to an individual's attempts to disengage or stay away from a stressful situation (Skinner et al., 2003). Traditionally, avoidance-based coping has been considered maladaptive as it inhibits one's ability to directly process and deal with the situation at hand (Moos & Schaefer, 1993). Limited research within the context of relationship dissolution appears to support this view as avoidance has been linked to poor health outcomes and traumatic stress reactions following relationship breakups (Chung et al., 2003). Further, individuals who avoid dealing with their relationship breakups, tend to report greater general disturbance, as indicated by symptoms of anxiety and depression (Mearns, 1991; Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Cognitive forms of avoidance, such as disengagement or denial have also been linked to greater loss of self and negative affect following a relationship breakup (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). These findings suggest that cognitive or behavioural avoidance when dealing with a

relationship breakup may lead to poor adjustment. In contrast, preliminary research suggests that distraction techniques designed to focus one's attention on alternate activities, may be helpful in the wake of a relationship breakup. Indeed, Fagundes (2008) found that individuals who distract themselves from a breakup by focusing on other things, tend to report a greater reduction in depressive symptoms and less resistance to the breakup. These preliminary findings suggest that the widespread notion that failure to deal directly with stressful situations is maladaptive, may be overly simplistic, and further research is required to investigate the role that various avoidance based strategies play in the context of a breakup.

### **3.2.4 Rumination.**

In contrast to more avoidant forms of coping, ruminative coping orients an individual towards rather than away from a stressor. Rumination involves a passive and repetitive focus on a past event (Skinner et al., 2003). In the related field of bereavement, it has been presumed that reflection on one's loss enables an individual to process and adjust to life without one's loved one (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2005). However, it has also been suggested that excessive processing of one's thoughts and emotions may reinforce negative feelings associated with loss (Nolen-Hoeksema, McBridge, & Larson, 1997; Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 1999). Findings from a recent study suggest that these somewhat contradictory perspectives may partially reflect the different types of rumination an individual engages in. Indeed, Saffrey and Erehnberg (2007) found that rumination over the negative aspects of a breakup (i.e. brooding and regret) is related to poor adjustment, whilst more balanced reflection is associated with positive post-breakup adjustment. The amount of time that has elapsed after a breakup and an individual's attachment style may also have a bearing on the role that rumination plays in post-breakup adjustment. Indeed, Fagundes (2012) found that individuals who reported high-levels of rumination about their breakup, exhibited poorer adjustment shortly after the breakup. At 1-month follow-up greater rumination continued to predict poorer emotional adjustment, particularly for individuals

who reported an anxious attachment style (Fagundes, 2012). Furthermore, findings from a recent study looking at anxiously attached individuals, suggest that whilst rumination may generate emotional distress in the early stages of a breakup, with the passage of time rumination may assist an individual in processing and growing through their loss (Marshall, Bejanyan, & Fereczi, 2013). Together, these findings highlight the need to look underneath the umbrella of coping families, in order to understand the nuances of individual coping strategies within the context of a breakup.

### **3.2.5 Cognitive-restructuring.**

In contrast to passive rumination, cognitive-restructuring involves active attempts to view a stressful situation in a more positive light (Skinner et al., 2003). This form of coping involves strategies such as positive thinking, finding meaning, reframing and the minimisation of negative consequences. Cognitive restructuring is generally considered an adaptive form of coping as the ability to view stressful situations positively, may serve to undermine unhelpful perceptions and psychological distress (Richmond & Christensen, 2001). Indeed, the tendency to positively reinterpret a relationship breakup has been linked to lower negative affect and greater positive affect when a relationship ends (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). Further, positive reinterpretation has been found to predict post-breakup growth (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). In line with these findings, Richmond and Christensen (2001) found that individuals who were able to reframe their divorces into more manageable terms, tended to report fewer psychological health outcomes following separation. Similarly, Samios, Henson and Simpson (2014) found that individuals who were able to construe greater benefit from the experience of their relationship breakup tended to report greater adjustment following dissolution. These findings suggest that the ability to positively restructure the way an individual views a relationship breakup may support healthy adaptation.

### **3.2.6 Helplessness.**

Helplessness refers to a set of strategies designed to relinquish control and minimise reactivity to a stressor (Skinner et al., 2003). According to Nakamura and Orth (2005) there are at least two main ways in which individuals relinquish control: Active acceptance and resignation. Active acceptance involves acknowledging the reality of one's situation and letting go of fruitless attempts to control the uncontrollable, whilst maintaining attempts to pursue attainable goals (Nakamura & Orth, 2002). Within the context of relationship breakups, Lewandowski and Bizocco (2007) assessed the role of a construct similar to active acceptance, measured by items such as "I learn to live with it" and "I accept that it has happened and that it cannot be changed". Results of this study indicated that active acceptance was linked to positive affect and post-breakup growth (Lewandowski & Bizocco, 2007). In contrast to active acceptance, Nakamura and Orth (2002) define resignation as giving in to one's circumstances more generally, with little hope for the future. This definition of resignation is similar to Seligman's (1975) helplessness theory, which posits that individuals who do not believe in their ability to effect change in future outcomes, are vulnerable to motivational deficits, loss of self-esteem and depression. Indeed, Richmond and Christensen (2001) evaluated the role of passive appraisal following non-marital relationship breakups. Passive appraisal is similar to the construct of resignation and is measured by items such as "Feeling that no matter what we do to prepare, we will have difficulty handling problems" and "Believing that if we wait long enough the problem will go away". Findings of this study indicated that passive appraisal was associated with better health outcomes up to a point in time for both males and females. However as time progressed, females reported poorer health outcomes with ongoing use of passive appraisal. Together these findings suggest that active acceptance may be more adaptive than resignation after a relationship breakup. Furthermore, whilst resignation may protect individuals shortly after a breakup, ongoing passivity may interfere with post-breakup recovery for females. These

assertions are based on limited research, thus further research is required to assess how different ways of relinquishing control may influence post-breakup adjustment, across time and gender.

### **3.2.7 Emotion regulation.**

Emotion regulation refers to active attempts to effectively express or modulate emotional distress (Skinner et al., 2003). Emotional regulation as a coping family includes such strategies as emotional expression, relaxation, self-control and comforting. Given the strong feelings of hurt, anger, sadness and rejection often associated with a breakup (Sbarra, 2006), it is reasonable to expect that the way individuals deal with these emotions will have a bearing on their recovery. To date, the limited research in the area has focused more on the role of emotional expression than emotion modulation. For instance, Berman and Turk (1981) found that expressing emotions by allowing oneself to get angry, blow-up or cry was associated with greater mood disturbance following divorce. Similarly, the process of venting one's emotions has been linked to greater negative affect and lower growth and positive affect after a breakup (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). In contrast, more structured attempts at expressing emotions through writing have been linked to better emotional and physiological adjustment (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002). These findings suggest that the form of emotional expression may play an important role in determining the impact of such strategies on post-breakup adjustment. Whilst it has been suggested that attempts to control or modulate one's emotions in the wake of a breakup may be adaptive, research is yet to clearly demonstrate this effect (Chung et al., 2003; McCarthy et al., 1997). Together, these findings suggest that emotion-regulation is likely to influence post-breakup adjustment, however further research is needed to clarify the nuances of these relationships.

### **3.3 Limitations of Post-Breakup Coping Literature**

The literature outlined above provides preliminary evidence that the ways in which

individuals cope with relationship breakups is likely to have a bearing upon their level of adjustment. In order for clinicians to support individuals after a relationship breakup, a more in depth understanding is required of the specific coping strategies individuals employ after a breakup and for whom these strategies may be beneficial. To date, the literature in this area has been limited by a number of factors. Firstly, previous research has almost exclusively relied upon standardised measures of coping. These measures offer broad, generic categories of coping that are not specific to the context of relationship breakups. Therefore, it remains unclear whether there are strategies that people use to deal specifically with relationship breakups that are not included in standard coping inventories, and thus overlooked in previous research. Indeed, the contextual approach to coping suggests that the adaptive qualities of coping processes should be evaluated in the specific stressful context in which they occur (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Our understanding of coping within the context of a breakup is further limited by research studies that focus on specific scales within coping inventories. Whilst these studies provide in-depth analysis of one or two types of coping, our understanding of the array of coping strategies used after a breakup and their relative efficacy is limited. Further, some studies have used factor loadings to create higher-order coping categories, thus losing a significant amount of information about the efficacy of individual coping strategies (McCarthy, 1997).

### **3.4 Overview of Study 2**

In order to overcome these limitations, study two used a content analysis to derive a detailed list of coping strategies that individuals intuitively use to deal specifically with non-marital relationship breakups. Further study two sought to evaluate the efficacy of these strategies by assessing participant wellbeing and asking participants to provide helpfulness ratings for each strategy. Throughout the literature review, gender and the amount of time since the breakup, surfaced as two factors that appeared to influence the efficacy of various coping strategies (McCarthy et al., 1997; Richmond & Christensen, 2001). Thus, study two controlled for time

since the breakup and sought to analyse gender differences in the frequency and efficacy of various coping strategies.

The following chapters will present the results of study 1, the research practicum and study 2 in detail before discussing their relevance for future theory, research and clinical practice.

**Chapter 4:**

**The Role of Positive Psychological Factors in Adjustment to Non-Marital  
Relationship Breakups.**

**(Reprint of submitted manuscript)**

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to identify positive psychological factors associated with adjustment following the breakdown of a non-marital relationship. Specifically, the study examined the unique contribution of mindfulness, optimism, hope, self-esteem, and self-compassion, on positive and negative post-breakup adjustment, after controlling for circumstances of the relationship and breakup. Participants were 364 females and 92 males who had experienced a non-marital relationship breakup in the last year. When all variables were accounted for simultaneously, lower mindfulness, self-esteem and optimism were most significantly associated with poor post-breakup adjustment. In contrast, greater mindfulness, hope and self-compassion were most strongly related to positive post-breakup adjustment. Implications for future research and clinical practice are discussed.

*Keywords:* Relationship breakup; Relationship dissolution; Adjustment; Wellbeing; Distress; Positive psychology

The loss of a romantic relationship is commonly identified as one of the most distressing life events people experience (Frazier & Hurliman, 2001). Whilst a significant body of research has examined interpersonal loss within the context of bereavement and divorce, there is a relative dearth of research into the breakdown of non-marital relationships, despite the rise in unmarried couples over the previous decade (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004). The breakdown of a relationship is commonly associated with emotional, social and psychological upheaval (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999), however research suggests that there is significant variation in how people cope with loss (Bonanno, Papa, & O'Neill, 2001). It remains unclear why some individuals become mired in debilitating levels of distress, whilst others are able to adapt and function effectively (Mancini, & Bonanno, 2009).

### **Circumstances of the Relationship and Breakup**

Prior research has largely focused on the circumstances of the relationship and breakup that are associated with post-separation distress (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007). As suggested by the investment model of relationships (Rusbult, 1980) individuals who are more committed to the relationship, stay together for a longer-term and cohabit, have been found to report greater distress upon separation (Fine & Sacher, 1997; Rhoades, Kamp Dush, Atkins, Stanley, & Markman, 2011; Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). In contrast, those individuals who experience less distress after the breakup are more likely to have initiated the breakup, found a new partner, have access to greater social support, or have been separated for a longer period (Sansom & Farnill, 1997; Sprecher, et al., 1998; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Unfortunately, the explanatory power of these factors is generally modest and as they are largely contextual, these factors offer little opportunity for intervention. Further, previous studies have almost exclusively focused on those factors associated with post-breakup distress, with little consideration for those factors that protect or promote wellbeing when a relationship ends (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003).

## Positive Psychological Factors

Consistent with the positive psychology movement there is a need to extend the focus from ‘recovery from distress’ to include investigation of ‘resilience factors’ that promote flourishing and wellbeing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Within the context of relationship dissolution, the identification of such resilience factors may assist clinicians in shifting individuals’ post-breakup trajectories from states of emotional distress, to recovery and positive adaptation. The current study thereby sought to identify positive psychological factors that relate to both distress and positive adjustment following a non-marital relationship breakdown. Whilst a variety of variables are potentially related to post-breakup adjustment, this study identified factors based on two criteria. Firstly, the variables had to have been linked to wellbeing and positive outcomes following interpersonal loss. Secondly, the variables had to be trainable and have been shown to enhance wellbeing via intervention. Based on these criteria a set of five positive psychological factors (i.e. mindfulness, optimism, hope, self-esteem and self-compassion) were identified for inclusion in the current study.

*Mindfulness* is commonly defined as the awareness that arises when paying attention to one’s moment-to-moment experience in a nonjudgmental and accepting way (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness has repeatedly been linked to greater wellbeing, life-satisfaction and positive psychological functioning, and recent studies indicate that mindfulness training can effectively improve wellbeing (Baer & Huss, 2008; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Shapiro, Oman, & Thoresen, 2008). Self-determination theory, suggests that mindful attention improves wellbeing as it enables individuals to practice effective self-regulation by disengaging from automatic habits and overriding impulsive or maladaptive patterns of behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Further, it has been suggested that mindfulness enables one to tolerate strong emotions and view thoughts, sensations and feelings as transitory events (Fresco et al., 2007; Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). These mindful capacities may be particularly helpful

when navigating the aftermath of a relationship breakup, as rumination, low-emotion tolerance, and avoidant coping have been linked to poor post-breakup adjustment (Field et al., 2009; Saffrey, 2001). Indeed, Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell and Rogge (2007) found that mindful individuals respond more constructively and report lower levels of anxiety, anger and stress following relationship conflict. Further, recent studies indicate that mindfulness-based training improves emotional adjustment following divorce and bereavement (Cacciatore & Flint, 2012; Ghasemian, Kuzehkanan, & Hassanzadeh, 2014; Thieleman, Cacciatore, & Wonch Hill, 2014). Together these findings suggest that mindfulness is a trainable skill that may support healthy adjustment following interpersonal loss.

A second positive factor that has commonly been linked to psychological health and subjective wellbeing is *optimism*, defined as the general expectation that one will experience positive life outcomes (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrome, 2010; Chang, 1998; Gallagher & Lopez, 2009). Whilst traditionally referred to as a trait-like disposition, a growing number of studies indicate that optimism is a trainable skill that can be cultivated via intervention to improve wellbeing and psychological functioning (Dickerhoof et al., 2009; Segerstrom, 2006; Seligman et al., 2007; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). A number of mechanisms linking optimism to wellbeing indicate that this capacity may be particularly relevant to the recovery process after a relationship breakup. For instance, optimists tend to maintain a larger social network, which has been shown to confer advantage when coping with the loss of a central support figure (Brisette, Carver, & Scheier, 2002). Further, as optimists tend to view negative experiences, such as relationship breakups, as passing isolated events, they may be protected from feelings of hopelessness that stem from generalising such experiences to broader notions of the world, future and self (Seligman, 1998). The optimistic expectation that discrepancies will be resolved between current life circumstances and goals, may sustain active coping efforts, which have been linked to superior adjustment following relationship dissolution (Chung et al, 2003; Mearns,

1991; Scheier & Carver, 1985). Whilst the role of optimism has scarcely been studied in relation to non-marital breakups, a study conducted by Hegelson and colleagues (1994) found that optimists describe relationship breakups as less distressing and report greater post-breakup adaptation than pessimists. Optimistic beliefs about the likelihood of finding a new partner have also been shown to encourage anxiously attached individuals to let go of their ex-partners (Spielman, McDonald, & Wilson, 1999). Further, related research indicates that optimists fare better after divorce and bereavement (Everson et al., 2006; Fry, 2001; Minton et al., 2009; Noelen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999; Thuen & Rise, 2006). Together these findings suggest that optimism is a positive and trainable psychological factor that may function to support wellbeing in the face of relational loss.

*Hope* is a positive goal-directed construct made up of two components: Pathways thinking (the perceived capacity to plan for desired goals) and agency (the motivation to work towards meeting those goals) (Snyder, 2002). Hope has consistently been linked to better overall psychological adjustment and has been identified as a key ingredient in building resilience after interpersonal loss (Kwon, 2002; Werner & Smith, 1992). Over the last decade, a number of interventions designed to clarify goals and support goal pursuit, have demonstrated improvements in hope and psychological wellbeing (Cheavens, Gum, Feldman, Michael, & Snyder, 2007; Green, Oades, & Grant, 2006). Whilst hope has not been studied in relation to non-marital breakups, bereavement research indicates that high-hope individuals exhibit lower emotional reactivity and better adaptation following the loss of loved one (Michael & Snyder, 2005). Michael and Snyder (2005) suggest that high-hope individuals cope more effectively with loss as they are able to reformulate pathways and goals, enabling them to refocus on the present and future rather than ruminating about the lost relationship (Michael & Snyder, 2005). Further, the ability of high-hope individuals to adaptively revise goals based on changing life-circumstances, may assist in redefining one's sense of identity without their lost partner

(Folkman, 2010; Michael & Snyder, 2005). A sense of agency may further assist in activating goal-directed behaviour and positive self-talk such as “I can cope, I will get through this”, enabling high-hoppers to move on toward desired life goals (Michael & Snyder, 2005; Snyder, 2002). Whilst research from the bereavement literature is encouraging, further research is required in order to investigate the potential benefits of hope following relationship dissolution.

*Self-esteem*, defined as one’s overall evaluation of personal worth and value (Rosenberg, 1965), is generally considered a central component of mental health and has repeatedly been linked to greater happiness, life-satisfaction, personal growth and stress-resilience (Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Paradise & Kernis, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000). It has been suggested that high self-esteem may protect one from the rejection and negative self-relevant information that individuals are often subject to when romantic relationships come to an end (Drew et al, 2004; Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010; Sommer & Baumeister, 2002). Indeed, research suggests that individuals with high-self-esteem attend less to rejection cues and are better able to offset such experiences by calling upon positive self-relevant information and a history of experiences in which they have felt socially valued (Dandeneau & Baldwin, 2004; Waller, 2007). Furthermore, individuals with high self-esteem may fare better as they tend to attribute negative experiences, such as relationship breakups to external circumstances rather than broader personal failings (Brown & Smart, 1991; Epstein, 1992; Fitch, 1970; Kernis et al., 1989; Tennen & Herzberger, 1987). Indeed, a number of studies indicate that individuals with high self-esteem report lower stress and greater adjustment following relationship dissolution, whilst individuals with negative self-beliefs tend to have more difficulty adjusting to divorce, and report greater avoidance and traumatic distress after non-marital relationship dissolution (Boelen & Reijntjes, 2009; Chung et al., 2000; Frazier & Cook, 1993; Helgeson, 1994; Waller & Macdonald, 2010). These findings are encouraging as, research indicates that self-esteem can be enhanced via clinical intervention, and that such interventions improve psychological functioning (Chen et al., 2006; Fairburn,

2002; Hall & Tarrrier, 2003). Together these findings suggest that high self-esteem is a positive psychological factor that may be cultivated to protect one's wellbeing in the wake of a relationship breakup.

The final positive psychological factor of interest is *self-compassion*, consisting of three main components: self-kindness (i.e. the tendency to be warm and accepting towards oneself rather than being critical and judgmental); common humanity (i.e. recognising that imperfection, failures and mistakes are part of the shared human experience); and mindfulness (i.e. emotional equanimity as opposed to over-identification with one's negative experiences) (Neff, 2003). Individuals high in self-compassion report greater life satisfaction, wellbeing and social connectedness, and lower rates of anxiety, depression and self-criticism (Neff, 2003; Neff, Kirkpatrick & Rude, 2007). Encouragingly, numerous studies indicate that self-compassion can be enhanced via psychological intervention, leading to improved wellbeing and positive affect (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Gilbert, 2010; Neff & Germer, 2013). Drawing from the divorce literature, Sbarra, Smith and Mehl (2012) suggest that the ability to be warm and accepting towards oneself, to view one's breakup as part of the challenges all people face, and to experience the pain of separation without becoming overwhelmed, may be key in recovering from relationship dissolution. Indeed, self-compassionate individuals are less likely to endorse self-critical thoughts that have been linked to poorer emotional adjustment after a relationship breakup (Sbarra et al., 2012). Further, it has been suggested that the self-compassionate practice of self-soothing may assist in regulating ones emotional and physiological state, when attachment relationships are disrupted (Gilbert, 2005). In line with these assertions, Sbarra et al. (2012) found that individuals who display greater self-compassion when discussing their divorce report less divorce-related emotional intrusion up to 9-months later. These preliminary findings suggest that an attitude of self-compassion may facilitate adjustment to the loss of a relationship, and further research of this construct within the context of relationship breakups is warranted.

## **The Current Study**

The current study adopted the relatively novel approach of examining post-breakup adaptation using a positive functioning framework. The study sought to extend prior research by developing our understanding beyond static factors that are linked to post-breakup distress, to trainable factors that enhance wellbeing and positive adaptation. Accordingly, this study investigated which positive psychological factors (i.e. mindfulness, optimism, hope, self-compassion and self-esteem) were most influential and whether they accounted for unique variance in post-breakup adaptation, after controlling for relationship and breakup variables.

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedures**

Participants were recruited to complete an online survey via social media sites. In addition, first-year psychology students were recruited from an Australian university and awarded course credit for participation. Non-university participants were not provided with an incentive or reward for their participation. Participants were required to have experienced a non-marital relationship breakup within the last year in which the relationship had lasted for a minimum of 3 months. The average length of participant's previous relationship was  $M = 27.38$  months ( $SD = 13.57$ ) and the average time that had passed since the breakup was  $M = 7.62$  months ( $SD = 4.92$ ). Descriptive characteristics of the 456 participants are indicated in Table 1. Intercorrelations between predictor and outcome variables are presented in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

### **Demographics**

Data was collected on gender, age and ex-partner's gender.

## **Dependent Variables**

### **Positive and negative affect.**

The 16-item Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE: Diener et al., 2010) assessed positive experience ( $\alpha = .94$ ) and negative experiences ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Participants were asked to rate items such as “positive”, “negative”, “happy”, “sad” on a 5-point scale (1 = very rarely, to 5 = very often or always). The positive and negative scales were scored separately because of the partial independence of the two types of positive negative (SPANE P) and negative feelings (SPANE N) (Diener et al. 2010).

### **Breakup distress.**

The 15-item Impact of Event scale (IES: Horowitz, Wilner, & Alvarez, 1979) measured intrusive recollection and avoidance behaviour related to the dissolution of a previous relationship. Participants rated items such as “I thought about it when I didn't mean to” or “I stayed away from reminders of it” on a 4-point scale (1 = Not at all, to 4 = Often). The IES scale has demonstrated good reliability (Horowitz et al., 1979) which was corroborated in this study ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

### **Wellbeing.**

The 14-item Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing scale (WE-MWBS: Tennant et al., 2007) measured affective-emotional, cognitive-evaluative and psychological functioning dimensions of mental health over the past 4-weeks. Participants rated items such as “I've been

dealing with problems well” and “I’ve been thinking clearly” on a five-point scale (1 = None of the time, to 5 = All of the time). The scale demonstrated high internal consistency in the present sample ( $\alpha = .97$ ).

## **Independent Variables**

### **Circumstances of the relationship and breakup.**

Several items assessed circumstances of the previous relationship and breakup, including: Length of relationship and time since the breakup (measured in months), who initiated the breakup (self, ex-partner or mutual agreement), level of commitment (not very committed, moderately committed or seriously committed), cohabitation status, intentions for marriage and their new relationship status (yes or no answer format). The Oslo Social Support Scale (Dalgard, 1996) measured level of perceived social support. This brief 3-item measure has demonstrated acceptable internal reliability that was replicated in the current study ( $\alpha = .70$ ).

### **Mindfulness.**

The 12-item Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale Revised (CAMS-R: Feldman, Hayes, Kumar, Greeson, & Laurenceau, 2007) measured attention regulation; present moment orientation; awareness and non-judgemental acceptance of experience. Participants rated items such as “It is easy for me to concentrate on what I am doing” and “I can tolerate emotional pain” on a four-point scale (1 = Rarely/not at all, to 4 =Almost always). The scale demonstrated good reliability in this study ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

### **Self-compassion.**

The 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (SCS: Neff, 2003) assessed self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness and over-identification, with participants rating items such as “I try to be loving towards myself when I’m feeling emotional pain” and “When I see aspects of myself that I don’t like, I get down on myself” on a 5 point scale (1 = Almost Never, to 5 = Almost Always). The scale demonstrated good reliability in this study ( $\alpha = .93$ )

### **Optimism.**

The 10-item Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R: Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) measured generalised expectancies for positive outcomes. Participants rated items such as “In uncertain times, I usually expect the best” and “I’m always optimistic about my future” on a 5-point Likert scale (1= I disagree a lot, to 5 = I agree a lot). The LOT-R demonstrated good reliability in this study ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

### **Hope.**

The 6-item State Hope scale (SHS: Snyder et al., 1996) assessed agency (goal-directed determination) and pathways (the ability to develop pathways to desired goals). Participants rated items on an 8-point Likert scale (1= Definitely false, to 8= Definitely true. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency in the present study ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

### **Self-esteem.**

The Rosenberg Self Esteem scale (RSE: Rosenberg, 1965) is a 10-item measure of overall evaluation of one’s worth or value. Participants rated items on a 4-point Likert scale (1 =

Strongly agree, to 4= Strongly disagree). The scale demonstrated good reliability in this study ( $\alpha = .89$ )

## **Statistical Analysis**

Using SPSS v.21, a series of Generalised Linear Regression Models (GZLM) utilised maximum likelihood estimation to examine the effect of the relationship and breakup characteristics and positive psychological factors on four outcome variables: Breakup distress, negative affect, wellbeing and positive affect. Two models tested each set of covariates in turn on each dependent variable. Model 1 tested the effects of relationship and breakup variables, and Model 2 added positive psychological factors to the model. This ensured that 'time since the breakup' was controlled for in all analyses. As this study employed a cross sectional design, controlling for time since the breakup was necessary in order to determine whether the relationship between predictor and outcome variables was significant over and above the influence of time. Continuous predictor variables were mean-centred and outcome variables were T scored ( $M = 50$ ,  $SD = 10$ ). Models were compared using Goodness of Fit indices (GFI) and the variance explained ( $R^2$ ) values, which was estimated by squaring the correlation between predicted model estimates and the unadjusted dependent variable scores.

## Results

### Negative Post-Breakup Adjustment

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

#### **Breakup distress.**

Results of the two regression models predicting breakup distress are detailed in Table 3. Relationship breakup variables (Model 1) accounted for a limited amount of variance in breakup distress ( $R^2 = 11\%$ ). The addition of positive variables (Model 2) increased explained variance slightly to 20%. The factors most strongly associated with breakup distress in Model 2 were initiator status, new relationship, social support, mindfulness, optimism, hope and self-esteem.

#### **Negative affect.**

Table 3 outlines the results of the two regression models predicting negative affect. Relationship breakup variables (Model 1) accounted for 20% of the variance in negative affect. The variance explained increased to 39% with the inclusion of positive variables (Model 2), which indicated that time since breakup, social support, mindfulness, optimism and self-esteem were most significantly associated with negative affect.

### Positive Post-Breakup Adjustment

[INSERT TABLE 4 HERE]

#### **Wellbeing.**

Results of the two regression models predicting wellbeing are detailed in Table 4. Relationship breakup variables (Model 1) accounted for 31% of the variance in wellbeing. The addition of positive variables (Model 2) accounted for 59 % of the variance and those variables

most strongly associated with wellbeing included social support, mindfulness, self-compassion and hope.

### **Positive affect.**

Table 4 outlines the results of the two regression models predicting positive affect. Relationship breakup variables (Model 1) accounted for a moderate amount of the variance in positive affect ( $R^2 = 31\%$ ). The inclusion of positive variables (Model 2) significantly increased variance explained to 57%. Those variables significantly related to positive affect were time since the breakup, the presence of a new relationship, social support, mindfulness, self-compassion, optimism, hope and self-esteem.

## Discussion

This study sought to examine the unique contribution of positive psychological factors in post-breakup adjustment, after controlling for circumstances of the relationship and breakup. In support of previous research, findings suggest that the length of the relationship, the initiation of and time since the breakup, the presence of a new relationship, and social support were related to adjustment following the breakup (Sansom & Farnill, 1997; Sprecher, et al., 1998; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). After controlling for these variables, results suggest that positive psychological factors added significantly to the prediction of post-breakup distress and psychological wellbeing. The factors most strongly linked to the combination of post-breakup distress and negative affect were low levels of mindfulness, optimism and self-esteem. Whilst greater mindfulness, self-compassion and hope were most strongly related to post-breakup wellbeing and positive affect. These findings add significantly to our understanding of why some people may be more vulnerable to prolonged distress whilst others are able to bounce back and regain a sense of wellbeing after a breakup.

Results of the current study indicate that mindfulness may play a valuable role in recovery from relationship dissolution, as greater mindfulness was linked to both lower post-breakup distress and greater wellbeing. Whilst mindfulness has been linked to greater psychological adjustment in a range of domains, this is the first study to our knowledge that has identified this link within the context of non-marital relationship dissolution (Baer & Huss, 2008; Brown & Kasser, 2005; Shapiro, Oman, & Thoresen, 2008). When faced with the breakdown of a relationship individuals are often subject to a range of distressing emotional reactions, such as hurt, sadness, shame, anger and regret (Sbarra & Emery, 2005; Waller & MacDonald, 2010). Individuals who ruminate, avoid or over-identify with such strong negative emotions are at risk of prolonging or exacerbating their distress (Chung et al., 2003; Richmond & Christensen, 2001; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007; Sbarra, 2006). Mindfulness may protect individuals from such

distress by enabling them to decentre from internal experiences and disengage from automatic patterns of maladaptive behaviour (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Beyond the alleviation of distress, mindfulness may also directly enhance wellbeing as optimal present-moment awareness and engagement yields considerable joy and vitality (Baer & Lykins, 2011). Multiple studies indicate that mindfulness is a trainable skill and further research should investigate the potential benefits of mindfulness interventions in reducing distress and building wellbeing after the breakdown of a romantic relationship.

Results of the current study further indicate that poor post-breakup adjustment is linked to low levels of optimism and self-esteem. These findings are consistent with research suggesting that negative perceptions about self-worth and future life outcomes increase one's vulnerability following the loss of a romantic relationship (Boelen & Reijntjes, 2009; Chung et al., 2002; Thuen & Rise, 2006). Less optimistic people tend to overgeneralise negative experiences and perceive larger discrepancies between their goals and current circumstances, thus increasing the experience of helplessness and hopelessness when faced with adverse circumstances (Thuen & Rise, 2006). Further, individuals with low self-esteem may be more vulnerable to the criticism and negative self-relevant information that is commonly raised in the process of ending a relationship (Blaine & Crocker, 1993). Results of the current study suggest that self-esteem and optimism are linked to post-breakup adjustment, however the directionality of this relationship requires further investigation in order to determine whether increases in optimism and self-esteem may diminish levels of post-breakup distress. Encouragingly, a number of interventions have been found to effectively cultivate optimism and self-esteem (King, 2001; Shapira & Mongrain, 2010; Ventegodt et al., 2007) and investigation of the utility of such interventions in mitigating post-breakup distress is warranted. The potential of such interventions to bolster post-breakup adjustment is further supported by results from the current study indicating that optimism and self-esteem are related to greater positive affect.

Recent assertions within the positive psychology literature suggest that reductions in distress are not equivalent to improvements in wellbeing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Such assertions are somewhat reflected in the results of the current study, as in contrast to negative adjustment, the factors uniquely associated with positive post-breakup adjustment were greater hope and self-compassion. These results are supported by prior research linking hope and self-compassion to adaptive coping and lower levels of emotional intrusion following the loss of a loved one (Michael & Snyder, 2005; Sbarra et al., 2012). Indeed, high-hope individuals are skilled at formulating and working towards personally relevant goals and this ability is likely to provide such individuals with a renewed sense of identity and future direction following a loss (Michael & Snyder, 2005). Similarly, self-compassionate individuals may cope more effectively when a relationship comes to an end as they tend to avoid ruminating, or punishing themselves for past regrets and are more inclined to treat themselves kindly (Sbarra et al., 2012). One of the benefits of researching positive psychological factors is that they offer potential for positive intervention. Indeed, multiple interventions have been designed specifically to enhance self-compassion and hope (Cheavens et al., 2006; Feldman & Dreher, 2012; Gilbert, 2010; Neff & Germer, 2013) and further investigation may evaluate the efficacy of such interventions in generating wellbeing after a breakup. Indeed, hope was also linked to lower breakup distress, which may infer that efforts to increase hope may serve the dual function of promoting positive adjustment and alleviating distress in the aftermath of breakup.

Whilst the current paper focused on investigating individual positive psychological factors it is worth noting that social support was linked to lower distress and greater positive adjustment, even after taking into account all other variables. This result is not entirely surprising given the wealth of literature highlighting the significant role that social support plays in buffering individuals from the negative effects of stressful life events and contributing to positive psychological health (Sansom & Farnill, 1997). Given the consistency of such results,

interventions designed to assist individuals in the aftermath of a relationship breakup may be well placed to encourage social engagement and support seeking from one's social network in order to alleviate distress and support wellbeing.

Findings of this study should be considered in light of a number of limitations. Firstly, the direction of relationships amongst variables is ambiguous due to the cross-sectional design. For instance, it is unclear from the results whether greater hope leads to better post-breakup adjustment or whether individuals are more hopeful because they adapted more successfully to the breakup. Whilst controlling for 'time since the breakup' enabled us to partial out some of the effect of time, future research should utilise empirical and longitudinal research designs in order to clarify the direction and strength of these relationships. Secondly, whilst variables such as positive and negative affect provide an indication of one's current level of general adjustment (Fredrickson, 2004), emotional recovery from a relationship breakup is a dynamic process that varies on a daily basis (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Thus, future research should seek to investigate the relationship between positive psychological factors and patterns of emotional experience over time, in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of post-breakup recovery. Thirdly, there are many variables covered in this study and whilst results offer an indication of higher-level relationships between variables, more work needs to be done exploring the specific and complex relationships between such variables. For instance some positive psychological factors such as mindfulness may be more helpful in the early often emotionally charged stages of a breakup whilst future oriented factors such as hope and optimism may be more helpful later on in the process of recovery. Fourthly, as this study was interested in positive psychological factors that offered opportunity for intervention, less malleable variables such as attachment style were not included. Previous research indicates that attachment styles play a significant role in how individuals respond to the loss of a relationship and in order to generate a fuller understanding of post-breakup adjustment, future studies should seek to investigate the interactive role of positive

psychological factors and attachment styles (Davis et al., 2003; Sprecher et al., 1998). Fifthly, the measures utilised in the current study were subject to self-report biases, this issue could be addressed by collecting third-party data in the future. Finally, participants largely consisted of young, heterosexual females suggesting that these findings need to be replicated with a more representative sample.

Despite these limitations, the current study makes several contributions to our understanding of post-breakup adjustment. To our knowledge, this is the first study to investigate the role of positive psychological factors, such as hope and self-compassion, within the context of non-marital relationship breakups. Promisingly, results suggest that positive psychological factors are strongly related to post-breakup adjustment, over and above the circumstances of one's relationship and breakup. This is encouraging, as the positive psychological factors selected in the current study are largely trainable and thereby provide direction for clinical intervention. Further, as factors related to negative and positive post-breakup adjustment differed somewhat, clinicians may be able to focus on building dual pathways to resilience. Specifically, future research should investigate the potential for reducing post-breakup distress by increasing mindfulness, self-esteem and optimism, and further enhancing positive post-breakup adjustment by promoting hope and self-compassion. The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of the factors related to post-breakup adjustment, and provide potential clinical pathways for promoting resilience in the face of increasingly common non marital relationship dissolution.

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**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics of the sample

	<i>N</i>	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	364	80.0
Male	92	20.0
<i>Ex-Partner Gender</i>		
Female	92	20.0
Male	364	80.0
<i>Age</i>		
Under 20	179	39.3
20-24	154	33.8
25-29	74	16.2
30-34	22	4.8
35-39	11	2.4
40-44	7	1.5
45-49	5	1.1
50 years and over	4	0.8
<i>Initiator status</i>		
Ex-partner	193	42.3
Self	181	39.7
Mutual	82	18.0
<i>Commitment</i>		
Not seriously	11	2.4
Moderately	133	29.2
Seriously	312	68.4
<i>Cohabiting</i>		
No	343	75.2
Yes	113	24.8
<i>Plans to Marry</i>		
No	263	57.7
Yes	193	42.3

**Tables 2.** Intercorrelations between predictor and outcome variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Social Support	-	.35***	.33***	.41***	.37***	.33***	.40***	-.18***	.36***	-.33***
2. Mindfulness		-	.55***	.46***	.54***	.43***	.51***	-.20***	.50***	-.45***
3. Self-compassion			-	.52***	.58***	.52***	.58***	-.09*	.55***	-.40***
4. Optimism				-	.54***	.52***	.50***	-.20***	.50***	-.49***
5. Hope					-	.57***	.65***	.01	.61***	-.41***
6. Self esteem						-	.51***	-.16***	.50***	-.43***
7. Wellbeing							-	-.20***	.83***	-.55***
8. Brekaup distress								-	-.20***	.42***
9. PA									-	-.52***
10. NA										-

**Tables 3.** GZLM – Negative post-breakup adjustment

Parameter	Breakup Distress		Negative Affect	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
	R <sup>2</sup> =0.11	R <sup>2</sup> =0.20	R <sup>2</sup> =0.20	R <sup>2</sup> =0.39
	B(SE <sup>a</sup> )	B(SE <sup>a</sup> )	B(SE <sup>a</sup> )	B(SE <sup>a</sup> )
Intercept	53.59 (1.01)***	53.23 (0.98)***	51.56 (1.02)***	50.07 (0.91)***
Step1 (Relationship variables)				
Time since breakup	-0.08 (0.19)	-0.11 (0.12)	-0.43 (0.12)***	-0.28 (0.11)**
Length relationship	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.17)	0.01 (0.02)
Initiator status – Ex-partner				
Self	-3.81 (0.96)***	-3.38 (0.95)***	-2.93 (0.97)*	-0.70 (0.88)
Mutual	-4.27 (1.23)***	-3.78 (1.19)**	-2.24 (1.23)	-0.46 (1.10)
Commitment - Serious				
Moderate	-1.60 (1.00)	-1.33 (0.96)	-1.16 (1.01)	-0.68 (0.65)
Not serious	-5.37 (2.84)	-5.36 (2.73)	-0.07 (2.86)	-1.49 (1.83)
Cohabitation - No				
Yes	0.26 (1.11)	0.03 (1.07)	0.70 (1.11)	1.04 (0.98)
Marriage plans - No				
Yes	1.45 (0.94)	1.39 (1.00)	-0.13 (0.94)	0.25 (0.83)
New relationship - No				
Yes	-0.09 (0.07)	-2.16 (0.99)	-0.74 (1.03)	-0.29 (0.91)
Social Support	-0.73 (0.18)***	-0.41 (0.20)*	-1.44 (0.12)***	-0.40 (0.18)*
Step 2 (Positive variables)				
Mindfulness		-0.40 (0.09)***		-0.35 (0.09)***
Self-compassion		-0.25 (0.05)		-0.03 (0.5)
Optimism		-0.32 (0.12)**		-0.58 (0.11)***
Hope		-0.26 (0.07)**		-0.11 (0.06)
Self esteem		-0.18 (0.08)*		-0.22 (0.07)**
<b>Model Fit Indices</b>				
AIC	3319.66	3291.75	3326.78	2929.24
BIC	3377.31	3374.11	3384.43	3011.60
LL	-1645.83	-1625.87	-1649.39	-1444.62

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

\*\* The B(SE<sup>a</sup>) are equivalent to standardised betas as continuous predictor variables were mean-centred and outcome variables were T scored prior to analysis.

**Tables 4.** GZLM – Positive post-breakup adjustment

Parameter	Wellbeing		Positive Affect	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
	R <sup>2</sup> =0.31	R <sup>2</sup> =0.59	R <sup>2</sup> =0.31	R <sup>2</sup> =0.57
	B(SE <sup>a</sup> )	B(SE <sup>a</sup> )	B(SE <sup>a</sup> )	B(SE <sup>a</sup> )
Intercept	46.63 (0.93)***	48.81 (0.73)***	46.11 (0.95)***	48.16 (0.76)***
<b>Step1 (Relationship variables)</b>				
Time since breakup	0.31 (0.11)**	0.14 (0.09)	0.35 (0.11)**	0.18 (0.09)*
Length relationship	-0.04 (0.02)**	-0.02 (0.01)	-0.03 (0.02)*	-0.01 (0.01)
<b>Initiator status – Ex-partner</b>				
Self	4.11 (0.88)***	1.07 (0.71)	4.14 (0.89)***	1.23 (0.74)
Mutual	3.27 (1.13)**	1.16 (0.89)	4.05 (1.15)***	1.96 (0.92)
<b>Commitment - Serious</b>				
Moderate	1.07 (0.92)	0.57 (0.72)	0.98 (0.93)	0.39 (0.75)
Not serious	0.54 (2.61)	3.13 (2.04)	2.45 (2.65)	1.13 (0.11)
<b>Cohabitation - No</b>				
Yes	1.58 (1.01)	0.30 (0.80)	1.56 (1.03)	0.49 (0.83)
<b>Marriage plans - No</b>				
Yes	1.43 (0.86)	0.80 (0.67)	1.28 (0.66)	1.16 (0.70)
<b>New relationship - No</b>				
Yes	2.31 (0.94)*	1.30 (0.74)	3.30 (0.96)***	2.34 (0.77)**
Social Support	1.66 (0.17)***	0.51 (0.14)**	1.48 (0.17)***	0.23 (0.01)*
<b>Step 2 (Positive variables)</b>				
Mindfulness		0.25 (0.07)***		0.25 (0.08)***
Self-compassion		0.12 (0.04)***		0.14 (0.04)***
Optimism		0.16 (0.09)		0.27 (0.10)**
Hope		0.27 (0.05)***		0.26 (0.05)***
Self esteem		0.10 (0.06)		0.15 (0.06)*
<b>Model Fit Indices</b>				
AIC	3243.99	3024.63	3269.60	3060.79
BIC	3301.65	3107.00	3317.25	3143.15
LL	-1607.10	-1492.32	-1615.80	-1510.39

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

\*\* The B(SE<sup>a</sup>) are equivalent to standardised betas as continuous predictor variables were mean-centred and outcome variables were T scored prior to analysis.

**Chapter 5:**  
**Research Practicum. A Brief Online Self-Compassion Intervention for Individuals**  
**following a Relationship Breakup**

## **Abstract**

The current study utilised an experimental single case study design to investigate the therapeutic benefits of a brief online self-compassion intervention designed to help people cope with a relationship breakup. Participants included five females who had experienced the breakdown of a non-marital relationship in the previous 6 months. The intervention was delivered via email over a three-week period and covered the three main components of self-compassion: self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness. The majority of participants reported an increase in self-compassion and a reduction in breakup distress after the intervention. Further, three of the five participants reported an improvement in affect and wellbeing following the intervention. These findings offer preliminary evidence that a brief online self-compassion intervention may benefit individuals after the breakdown of a romantic relationship.

The average age of marriage in Australia has risen significantly over the past three decades (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). As a result, individuals are likely to be involved in more non-marital relationships and in turn experience multiple relationship breakups (Hebert & Popadiuk, 2008). Non-marital relationship breakups are commonly associated with elevated emotional distress and a variety of negative psychological and physical health outcomes (Fagundes, 2012; 2004; Sbarra, 2006). Individuals who have recently experienced a breakup commonly report lower levels of wellbeing than those who are in relationships (Sbarra & Emery, 2005; Simon & Barrett, 2010) and are at greater risk of developing depression, anxiety, psychopathology, loneliness and suicidality (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Monroe et al., 1999). Despite the high incidence and impact of relationship breakups, limited resources and interventions are available for those struggling with the breakdown of a relationship. Whilst various blogs, self-help books and popularised articles provide advice on how to ‘bounce back after a breakup’, few of these have an empirical or theoretical basis.

An important preliminary task in understanding how to help people cope with a breakup is to identify variables that predict positive outcomes following relationship dissolution. One such variable recently highlighted by Sbarra, Smith and Mehl (2012) is the construct of self-compassion. Self-compassion has been defined as the capacity to be touched by one’s own suffering, to seek to alleviate one’s suffering and to treat oneself with understanding and concern (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion is an integrative construct comprised of three related components: self-kindness (i.e. the tendency to be caring and compassionate towards oneself rather than being harsh and critical); common humanity (i.e. acknowledging that imperfection, failures and disappointments are part of the human condition and shared by all); and mindfulness (i.e. emotional equanimity as opposed to over-identification with painful thoughts and emotions) (Neff, 2003).

Self-compassion is associated with a range of benefits including higher wellbeing, optimism, emotional intelligence, happiness and positive psychological health (Neff, Kirkpatrick, & Rude, 2007). Further, individuals high in self-compassion tend to report lower rates of anxiety, depression, rumination, perfectionism and stress reactivity (Neff, 2003; Neff, Hsieh, & Dejitterat, 2005). Gilbert (2005) posits that self-compassion improves wellbeing as it generates a sense of feeling cared for, connected, and emotionally calm in the face of adversity. Further, Gilbert (2005) suggests that self-compassion functions to deactivate the threat system (linked to feelings of insecurity, anxiety and defensiveness) and activate the self-soothing system (associated with feelings of security and safety). Self-compassionate individuals may also cope more effectively with stressful events because they are less likely to endorse negative thoughts and are better able to engage in positive cognitive restructuring (Allen & Leary, 2010). Further, such individuals are able to experience negative emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them and thus may be less inclined to employ avoidant coping strategies that are commonly associated with poor outcomes (Neff et al., 2005).

Recent research indicates that self-compassion may be particularly helpful for individuals dealing with a relationship breakup (Sbarra et al., 2012). Sbarra et al (2012) suggest that the ability to be kind to oneself, to view one's relationship separation within the context of challenges that all humans face, and to experience separation-related emotions without becoming overwhelmed, may be vital in recovering from the loss of a romantic relationship. These assertions are supported by findings indicating that divorced individuals who exhibit greater self-compassion when discussing their separation experience, tend to report lower divorce-related emotional intrusion in daily life and at 9 month follow-up (Sbarra et al., 2012). Self-compassion has also been linked to greater positive affect and wellbeing following the breakdown of a non-marital relationship, after controlling for a wide array of related factors (study 1 of current thesis). In contrast, individuals who blame and

criticise themselves for the breakdown of a relationship have been shown to exhibit greater post-breakup anxiety, depression and complicated grief symptoms (Boelen & Reijntjes, 2009). Although the small amount of research conducted in this area is encouraging, further research is required to assess whether self-compassion interventions may be utilised to assist individuals after a relationship breakup.

A growing body of literature suggests that self-compassion is a teachable skill and that associated benefits can be conferred via a range of compassion-based interventions. Neff and colleagues (2007) recently demonstrated that a brief “Gestalt two-chair” intervention, designed to assist clients in challenging maladaptive, self-critical beliefs in order to promote a more empathic stance towards themselves, led to improved self-compassion and reductions in self-criticism, depression and anxiety (Neff et al., 2007). More extended forms of therapy, such as compassion-focused therapy (Gilbert, 2010) have been designed to help patients develop a sense of warmth and emotional responsiveness toward themselves via a range of techniques including visualisation, the use of supportive self-talk, and the development of self-kind practices. Compassion-focused therapy has been shown to decrease self-criticism, depression and feelings of shame or inadequacy, and is currently utilised in the treatment of a range of eating and mood disorders (Gilbert & Procter, 2006; Gilbert, 2010; Goss & Allan, 2010; Kelly, Zuroff, & Shapira, 2009; Lowens, 2010). Similarly, an 8-week Mindful Self-Compassion intervention, recently demonstrated significant increases in self-compassion and mindfulness after treatment, and at 6-month follow-up (Neff & Germer, 2013). Program participants also reported improved psychological wellbeing, as indicated by increased levels of life satisfaction and happiness, and lower levels of negative affect after completing treatment (Neff & Germer, 2013). Whilst this body of literature indicates that self-compassion interventions are able to generate a range of positive outcomes, this body of literature tends to be conducted using brief experimental studies or extended treatment within

acute care settings. Many brief self-compassion intervention studies ask participants to generate an imagined or recalled threat and in turn assess the efficacy of a single exercise on their level of self-compassion. Whilst informative, these studies are somewhat removed from the reality of people's day-to-day struggles and often do not follow-up on the longer term implications of such exercises. At the other end of the spectrum, self-compassion interventions have been evaluated with acute populations such as individuals with eating disorders, reoccurring mood disorders or psychosis. The findings from such studies are clearly informative and encouraging; however such studies provide little indication of the benefits that such interventions might offer non-clinical populations. To date no study has tested the efficacy of such a program in assisting those struggling with the relatively common experience of a relationship breakup.

The present study therefore sought to investigate the therapeutic benefits of a brief self-compassion intervention designed to assist individuals following the breakdown of a romantic relationship. In response to some of the limitations previously outlined in the literature, the present study sought to assess the efficacy of a self-compassion intervention with a non-clinical population, in the context of a real life stressor. An internet-based format was selected given recent support for the efficacy of online psychological interventions and the suitability of this delivery method for the largely young demographic experiencing non-marital relationship breakups (Barak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, & Shapira, 2008). It is predicted that during and after the intervention, participants will report an improvement in self-compassion, affect and wellbeing, and a reduction in breakup distress compared to baseline measures.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited through referrals made by psychologists and flyers displayed in multiple university counselling clinics. In addition, first-year psychology students were recruited from an Australian University and awarded course credit for their participation. Non-university participants were not provided with an incentive or reward for their participation. A total of five female participants took part in the study (aged 19-38 years) and descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. One person was referred on externally for therapeutic support as a result of the screening phase of the project. All five participants completed the intervention and provided responses to follow-up measures.

### **Design**

A brief, online intervention was selected as results from brief survey conducted during the development phase of this project indicated that 70% of respondents would be more likely to engage in an online program than a face-to-face intervention and 80% of respondents indicated that they would be reluctant to engage in an intervention that extended any longer than 10 weeks in total (including screening, intervention and follow-up).

An experimental single subject design was utilised comprising of three short phases. Phase 1 (weeks 1-3) represented baseline, phase 2 (weeks 4-6) involved treatment in which participants completed online weekly intervention modules, and phase 3 (weeks 7-9) represented a 3-week follow-up period. Prior to participating in the study participants completed a telephone-screening interview in which participants answered questions regarding their relationship breakup and completed the Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI: Lecubrier et al., 1997) and the Kessler-6 scale (K6: Kessler et al., 2002). In order to participate in the study participants needed to have experienced a romantic

relationship breakup within the previous 6 months, in which the relationship was terminated after having lasted for a minimum of 3 months. Exclusion criteria included scoring over 13 on the K6 (indicating severe mental illness) or indication of psychiatric disorder as determined by the MINI. Participants who were not eligible for the study were provided with referral information to suitable services. Eligible participants were given detailed information regarding the study in order to provide informed consent. At the end of week 3 (baseline), 6 (post-treatment) and 9 (3-week follow-up) participants filled out a full battery of measures assessing self-compassion (SCS), breakup distress (BDS), wellbeing (WHO-5) and positive and negative affect (SPAN). In order to minimise the onus on participants and potential dropout rates, abbreviated versions of these measures were completed twice weekly throughout the 9-week study, in order to allow for the identification of trends within each phase. The K6 scale was completed at every data collection point throughout the study in order to monitor levels of distress and allow for appropriate referral if necessary. An overview of the experimental design is provided in Table 2.

## **Intervention**

The 'Breakup Project' consisted of 3-weekly modules that took approximately 30-minutes per module to complete. The intervention content was based on self-compassion exercises from Neff (2011) and modified by the researcher in order to relate the material specifically to relationship breakups in a condensed format. A copy of the intervention materials is provided in Appendix B. All modules and surveys were emailed to participants and completed online. Each module focused on one of the three components of self-compassion in turn: self-kindness, common humanity and mindfulness.

The first module was designed to build awareness of self-criticism and encourage the development of kinder self-directed dialogue and practices. The second module involved

building awareness of one's sense of isolation and cultivating connection and compassion by reflecting on a shared sense of human suffering. The final module discussed the tendency of the mind to generate distress during difficult times and introduced participants to basic mindfulness skills. Each module followed a standard format: 1) An introduction to the topic, 2) Exercises designed to prompt participants to reflect on how the topic was relevant to their personal experience of a relationship breakup, 3) Examples provided by 'characters' in the program (based on previous client feedback) outlining how the material had been helpful or relevant to them, and 4) A space to write down personal reflections and learning from the module. Following each module participants were sent a follow-up email including 1) A summary of the module content, 2) An activity to complete during the week designed to develop and apply new skills and knowledge, and 3) A 20-minute self-compassion based meditation for participants to listen to three times during the following week. Following each module participants engaged in a scheduled phone coaching session with the research psychologist in order to answer any questions, assess level of participant distress, review the material and set goals for the following week.

## **Measures**

### **Screening interview.**

The Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview (MINI: Lecubrier et al., 1997) is a standardised clinical diagnostic schedule for Axis I disorders in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition. It can be reliably administered by clinicians and administration time is approximately 15–20 minutes. The MINI was utilised as a screening tool and individuals were only included in the study if there was no diagnosis indicated. The MINI has demonstrated acceptably high validity and reliability scores (Lecubrier et al., 1997).

### **Psychological distress.**

Participants rated symptoms of psychological distress on the 6-item such as “I’ve felt so sad nothing could cheer me up” and “I’ve felt that everything was an effort” from the Kessler-6 scale (K6: Kessler et al., 2002). Participants provided responses twice weekly on a 10-point scale (1= Never, to 10 = Always). The scale has demonstrated strong psychometric properties and is able to consistently discriminate DSM-IV cases from non-cases (Furukawa et al., 2003). Participant responses were monitored using this scale throughout the intervention in order to alert the researcher to serious psychological distress as indicated by scores of 26 or above. Kessler et al. (2002) recommends a cut off score of 13, for the purposes of this study the cut off score was multiplied by two as the response scale was doubled. The response scales for all measures (except the brief breakup distress scale) were standardised at 10-points in order to ease the process of completing the survey for participants and enhance sensitivity to change over time.

### **Self-compassion.**

The 26-item Self-Compassion Scale (SCS: Neff, 2003) assessed self-kindness, self-judgment, common humanity, isolation, mindfulness and over-identification. Participants rated items such as ““I try to be loving towards myself when I’m feeling emotional pain” and “When I see aspects of myself that I don’t like, I get down on myself” on a 10-point scale (1= Never, to 10 = Always). Research indicates the SCS has factorial validity, convergent validity with therapist ratings, discriminant validity and test–retest reliability ( $\alpha = .93$ ) (Neff 2003). Total scores were calculated after reverse scoring negative items.

Abbreviated measure: In order to briefly assess self-compassion participants were asked to respond to a single item selected from each of the six self-compassion subscales. Individual items were selected on the basis that they exhibited the highest factor loadings for each of the six subscales (Neff, 2003): Self kindness “When I’m going through a very hard

time, I give myself the caring and tenderness I need”; Self-judgment “When I see aspects of myself that I don’t like, I get down on myself”; Common humanity: “When I feel inadequate in some way, I try to remind myself that feelings of inadequacy are shared by most people”; Isolation “When I fail at something that’s important to me I tend to feel alone in my failure”; Mindfulness “When I fail at something important to me I try to keep things in perspective”; Over-identification “When I’m feeling down I tend to obsess and fixate on everything that’s wrong”. Participants responded on a 10-point Likert scale (1= Never, to 10 = Always) on a bi-weekly basis. After reverse scoring negative items, responses to the six items were aggregated in order to calculate an abbreviated measure of self-compassion.

### **Breakup distress.**

The Breakup Distress scale (BDS: Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2010) measures symptoms of separation distress and traumatic distress. The 16-item scale was adapted from the Inventory of Complicated Grief, however in this study the subject of loss was specified as a relationship breakup rather than bereavement. Sample items include “Memories of the person upset me” and “I feel that life is empty without the person”. Participants responded to each item on a 10-point scale (1= Never, to 10 = Always). The BDS demonstrated high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .91$ ). and convergent validity with measures of anxiety, depression and intrusive thoughts (Field, 2010).

Abbreviated measure: Breakup distress was measured on a weekly basis via a single item: “On a scale of 0 to 100, how distressed have you been about the breakup in the last 3-4 days?” Participants rated their level of distress using a sliding 100-point scale (0 = Not at all, to 100 = Highly distressed).

### **Affect.**

The 16-item Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE: Diener et al., 2010) assessed positive experience and negative experiences. Participants were asked to rate items such as “positive”, “negative”, “happy”, “sad” on a 10-point scale (1 = very rarely, to 10 = very often or always). The SPANE has demonstrated good reliability in previous studies, with internal consistency estimates for positive experience ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ) and negative experience ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ) (Diener et al., 2009, Soffer, Wolf, & Ben-Ezra, 2011).

Abbreviated version: Affect was assessed on a bi-weekly basis by asking participants to rate how they felt on a 10-point Likert scale (1= negative/very low, to 10 = positive/very happy).

### **Wellbeing.**

The World Health Organisation’s 5 Wellbeing index (WHO-5: Bech, Olsen, & Rasmussen, 2003) measured emotional wellbeing over the past week. Participants 5 items such as “I have felt cheerful and in good spirits” and “I woke up feeling fresh and rested” on a modified 10-point scale (1= Never, to 10 = Always) and percentage scores were calculated by multiplying scores by two. The scale has demonstrated good reliability, validity and sensitivity to change (Newnham, Hooke, & Page, 2010).

Abbreviated measure: Participants were asked to rate how often they had “felt cheerful and in good spirits” on a 10-point scale (1= Never, to 10 = Always) twice weekly. This question was selected from the WHO-5 as it represents the most powerful item on the scale (Huen, Bonsignore, Barkow, Jessen, & Huen, 2001).

## Results

Two sets of data were collected including: 1) time series data (self-compassion, breakup distress, affect and wellbeing) taken twice weekly, spanning the period from 3 weeks before treatment to 3 weeks following treatment; 2) full-scale measures (self-compassion, breakup distress, affective balance and wellbeing) taken before treatment, after treatment and at 3-week follow-up.

### Time series data

Time-series phase-effect analyses were conducted using Simulation Modeling Analysis (SMA; Borckardt, et al., 2008). This form of analysis is a relatively new bootstrapping approach designed to assess shorter data streams that are commonly derived from case study research (Borckardt, et al., 2008). Phase-effect analysis compares the mean scores of two treatment phases from a data stream and calculates an effect size (Pearson's  $r$ ) along with the probability of obtaining that effect, given the length of the data stream and its level of autocorrelation. Significant effect sizes indicate significant increase or decrease in the level of the reported variable across treatment phases.

### Self-compassion.

Four of the five participants indicated a statistically significant increase in self-compassion from baseline to treatment, including participant 1 ( $r = 0.702, p = 0.0074$ ), participant 3 ( $r = 0.532, p = 0.022$ ), participant 4 ( $r = 0.670, p = 0.011$ ) and participant 5 ( $r = 0.63, p = 0.038$ ). The same participants reported no significant change from treatment to follow-up: participant 1 ( $r = 0.402, p = 0.080$ ), participant 3 ( $r = -0.090, p = 0.653$ ), participant 4 ( $r = -0.314, p = 0.090$ ), participant 5 ( $r = 0.505, p = 0.188$ ). Participant 2 did not indicate a statistically significant increase in self-compassion from baseline to treatment

( $r = 0.464$ ,  $p = 0.083$ ) or treatment to follow-up ( $r = -0.209$ ,  $p = 0.637$ ). Individual results can be seen in Figure 1.

### **Break-up distress.**

Four of the five participants indicated a statistically significant decrease in breakup distress from baseline to treatment, including participant 1 ( $r = -0.662$ ,  $p = 0.036$ ), participant 3 ( $r = -0.798$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), participant 4 ( $r = -0.798$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) and participant 5 ( $r = -0.690$ ,  $p = 0.038$ ). Two of these participants reported significant decline in breakup distress from treatment to follow-up, including participant 1 ( $r = -0.729$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ) and participant 4 ( $r = -0.567$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ), whilst participant 3 ( $r = 0.167$ ,  $p = 0.525$ ) and participant 5 ( $r = -0.070$ ,  $p = 0.868$ ) reported no significant change from treatment to follow-up. Participant 2 did not indicate a statistically significant decrease in breakup distress from baseline to treatment ( $r = -0.584$ ,  $p = 0.069$ ), however breakup distress appeared to increase significantly from treatment to follow-up ( $r = 0.559$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ). Individual results can be seen in Figure 2.

### **Affect.**

Three of the participants reported a statistically significant increase in affect from baseline to treatment, including participant 1 ( $r = 0.612$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ), participant 3 ( $r = 0.755$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ) and participant 4 ( $r = 0.562$ ,  $p = 0.023$ ). Two of the participants did not indicate a significant change in affect from baseline to treatment, including participant 2 ( $r = -0.424$ ,  $p = 0.145$ ) and participant 5 ( $r = 0.376$ ,  $p = 0.328$ ). Four of the participants reported no significant change from treatment to follow-up: participant 1 ( $r = 0.075$ ,  $p = 0.792$ ), participant 2 ( $r = 0.402$ ,  $p = 0.383$ ), participant 4 ( $r = 0.302$ ,  $p = 0.161$ ) and participant 5 ( $r = 0.112$ ,  $p = 0.707$ ), however affect significantly improved from treatment to follow-up for participant 3 ( $r = 0.597$ ,  $p = 0.025$ ). Individual results can be seen in Figure 3.

### **Wellbeing.**

Two of the participants reported a statistically significant increase in wellbeing from baseline to treatment, including participant 1 ( $r = 0.675, p = 0.016$ ) and participant 3 ( $r = 0.696, p = 0.002$ ). Three of the participants did not indicate a significant improvement in wellbeing from baseline to treatment, including participant 2 ( $r = 0.447, p = 0.317$ ) participant 4 ( $r = -0.127, p = 0.750$ ) and participant 5 ( $r = -0.229, p = 0.573$ ). Four of the participants reported no significant change from treatment to follow-up: participant 1 ( $r = 0.283, p = 0.245$ ), participant 2 ( $r = 0.402, p = 0.374$ ), participant 3 ( $r = -0.581, p = 0.052$ ) and participant 5 ( $r = 0.127, p = 0.756$ ), however wellbeing significantly improved from treatment to follow-up for participant 4 ( $r = 0.663, p = 0.009$ ). Individual results can be seen in Figure 4.

### **Full-Scale Measures**

The Self-Compassion Scale (SCS), the Breakup Distress Scale (BDS), the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE) and the WHO-5 Wellbeing index were measured before treatment, after treatment and at 3-week follow-up. Clinical significance of treatment-related change was assessed using the methods outlined by Jacobson and colleagues (Jacobson, Roberts, Berns, & McGlinchey, 1999). This method requires the fulfillment of two criteria: 1) The magnitude of change from baseline to post-treatment in each individual exceeds measurement error and is therefore a statistically reliable change, as calculated by the Reliable Change Index (RCI); 2) Post-treatment scores must fall within the range of a well-functioning group. To determine a cut-off score for establishing clinical significance, we used Jacobson et al.'s (1999) method B that requires the individual to fall within two standard deviations of the mean for the "normal" population after treatment.

#### **Self-compassion.**

The RCI for the self-compassion scale was calculated to be 2.94 based on a Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha = .92$  and normative data from Neff (2003). As can be seen in Figure

5, four of the five participants (participants 1, 3, 4 and 5) reported an increase in self-compassion from baseline to treatment that exceeded the RCI, and maintained a level of change that exceeded the RCI from baseline to follow-up. The scores of these four participants were deemed to be clinically significant as their treatment and follow-up scores fell within two standard deviations of the normative mean ( $M = 18.25$ ,  $SD = 3.75$ ). Participant 2 showed no significant change in self-compassion across all periods.

### **Breakup distress.**

The RCI for breakup distress was calculated to be 5.61 based on a Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha = .94$  and normative data from Field et al. (2010). As can be seen in Figure 6, four participants (participants 1, 3, 4 and 5) reported a decrease in breakup distress from baseline to treatment and baseline to follow-up that exceeded the RCI. The scores of these four participants were deemed to be clinically significant as their treatment and follow-up scores fell within two standard deviations of the normative mean ( $M = 8.83$ ,  $SD = 8.26$ ) (Field et al., 2010). Participant 2 showed no notable change in breakup distress across all periods.

### **Affect.**

Affect balance scores were calculated by deducting an individual's total negative affect score from the total positive affect score. The RCI for affect balance was calculated to be 6.32 based on a Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha = .89$  normative data from Diener et al. (2010). As can be seen in Figure 7, three participants (participants 1, 3 and 4) reported an increase in affect balance from baseline to treatment and baseline to follow-up that exceeded the RCI. The scores of these three participants were deemed to be clinically significant as their treatment and follow-up scores fell within two standard deviations of the normative mean ( $M = 6.69$ ,  $SD = 6.88$ ) (Diener et al., 2010). Participants 2 and 5 did not show significant changes in their affect balance scores across any periods.

### **Wellbeing.**

The RCI for wellbeing was calculated to be 21.6 based on a Cronbach's alpha of  $\alpha = .84$  and normative data from Bech et al. (2003). As can be seen in Figure 8, two of the participants (participants 1 and 3) reported an increase in wellbeing from baseline to treatment and baseline to follow-up that exceeded the RCI. The scores of these two participants were deemed to be clinically significant as their treatment and follow-up scores fell within two standard deviations of the normative mean ( $M = 66.9, SD = 19.5$ ) (Bech et al., 2003). Participants 2, 4 and 5 did not show significant changes in their wellbeing scores across any periods.

## Discussion

This study sought to examine the therapeutic outcomes of a brief online self-compassion intervention designed to help individuals cope with non-marital relationship breakups. Results largely support the hypothesis that self-compassion would improve from baseline to after treatment. Full-scale and time series data indicated that four of the five participants reported significant increases in self-compassion from baseline to treatment and this was maintained at 3-week follow-up. The current study suggests that in the aftermath of a relationship breakup, individuals are able to learn how to treat themselves with greater kindness and less criticism, view their breakup as a part of common humanity rather than an isolating experience, and to be more mindful rather than getting swept up by distressing thoughts and emotions. These results support previous research indicating that self-compassion is teachable and can be improved via psychological intervention (Gilbert, 2010; Neff & Germer, 2013; Neff et al., 2007). Further, results demonstrate that self-compassion can be improved over a relatively short period of time via internet delivery. This is encouraging as internet based interventions ease the process of standardised treatment delivery, are cost effective, increase treatment accessibility and may be particularly suitable given the age range of this group (Pelling, 2009).

The current study hypothesised that breakup distress would decline after the completion of the self-compassion intervention. Results largely support this hypothesis, as the same four participants that reported an improvement in self-compassion, also reported decreases in their level of breakup distress at the end of treatment and at 3-week follow-up. It is noteworthy that the participant who did not experience an increase in self-compassion also did not report a decline in breakup distress. This pattern of findings may be a reflection of this participant's ongoing contact with their ex-partner and wavering engagement with the intervention material. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that an increase in self-compassion may assist

in reducing levels of distress following a relationship breakup. Indeed, these findings support assertions that the ability to be kind to oneself, to see their breakup within the context of common human struggles, and to not become overwhelmed by the emotional distress of losing a partner, may assist in healthy adaptation following the dissolution of romantic relationship (Sbarra et al., 2012). It is important to note that whilst the current findings are suggestive of a causal link, the analyses conducted do not confirm that self-compassion leads to a reduction in breakup distress. Nevertheless, these findings suggest that brief self-compassion interventions delivered online may have the potential to reduce the distress experienced by individuals after a relationship breakup.

The study predicted that affect would improve after the self-compassion intervention. This hypothesis was partially supported as full-scale measures and time series data both indicated that three of the five participants reported improved affect from baseline to treatment and maintained this improvement at follow-up. These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that brief engagement with self-compassionate tasks can significantly improve one's mood (Leary, et al., 2007; Shapira & Mongrain, 2010). Further, these results align with the proposition that self-compassion disengages one's threat system and associated negative affective states, and in turn engages one's self-soothing system eliciting positive affective states such as security, safety and contentment (Gilbert, 2005). The utility of self-compassion in generating positive affect and undoing the effects of negative mood states may be particularly beneficial in the aftermath of a relationship breakup, as this experience is commonly fraught with painful emotions such as regret, self-blame, rejection and grief (Fredrickson, 2001; Sbarra et al., 2012). These results indicate that the completion of a brief self-compassion intervention coincides with improved post-breakup affect, however further research is required to determine whether engagement in such a program causes this effect.

Results of the current study partially supported the hypothesis that wellbeing would increase after treatment. Two of the five participants reported an increase in wellbeing from baseline to end of treatment, and a further participant reported improvement in wellbeing from the end of treatment to 3-week follow up. These findings partially support previous research suggesting that self-compassion can lead to a greater sense of wellbeing in the face of adversity through the activation of one's self-soothing system (Gilbert, 2005; Neff & Germer, 2013). However, two of the participants did not show any significant change in their level of wellbeing after treatment. Whilst, previous research has convincingly illustrated that self-compassion interventions can improve wellbeing, these studies have typically employed more extensive interventions (8 weeks) with longer follow-up periods (6-months). It is unclear whether these results may have been replicated in the current study if a more extensive treatment program was delivered or if participant wellbeing was monitored over a longer period or with a more sensitive outcome measure. Whilst results of the study suggest that completing a brief online self-compassion intervention is associated with improvements in wellbeing for some individuals, further research is required to clarify the direction and strength of this relationship.

Whilst this study offers promising findings, it is important to mention a number of limitations and their implications. Firstly, the study design does not allow for cause-effect analyses and it is unclear whether increases in self-compassion cause improvements in breakup distress, affect and wellbeing or vice versa. Randomised control studies may thereby assist in evaluating the proposed directionality of these relationships. Further, results of the current study were somewhat mixed as only approximately half of participants showed some improvement in affect and wellbeing after completing the 3-week self-compassion intervention. Future research should assess the potential to improve both the consistency and strength of these results, by experimenting with longer and more in-depth treatment programs

or extending monitoring periods. Further, future studies should seek to monitor potentially confounding factors such as level of contact with ex-partner or whether the participant has entered into a new relationship (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). The generalisability of this study's finding may be somewhat limited as none of the participants initiated the breakup. Whilst this may be understandable, as individuals who initiated the breakup may be less distressed and thus less motivated to engage in such a program, future research should seek to evaluate whether such interventions are of value to those who initiate a relationship breakup. More generally, future research should seek to run such interventions with larger sample sizes in order to replicate findings and allow for more in depth statistical analysis. Finally, future research should seek to examine the subcomponents of self-compassion in order to determine how they differentially influence clinical outcomes. From a clinical perspective, it would be valuable to gather more detailed information on which aspects of self-compassion and related treatment techniques are most effective in helping those who have experienced a relationship breakup.

Despite these limitations, the current study provides a number of useful insights into the role of self-compassion interventions following relationship breakups. Firstly, results indicate that individuals can learn to be more self-compassionate in a relatively brief period, following a breakup. Results also suggest that a self-compassion intervention designed specifically for those dealing with a relationship breakup may assist in reducing breakup distress and improving affect balance and wellbeing. Further, findings support the delivery of such an intervention online, suggesting that the benefits of self-compassion may be accessible to a broad range of people at relatively low cost. In conclusion, this study provides preliminary evidence that a brief online self-compassion intervention may assist those who are dealing with the pain and upheaval of a non-marital relationship breakup.

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10.1177/0022146510372343

Table 1

*Descriptive statistics*

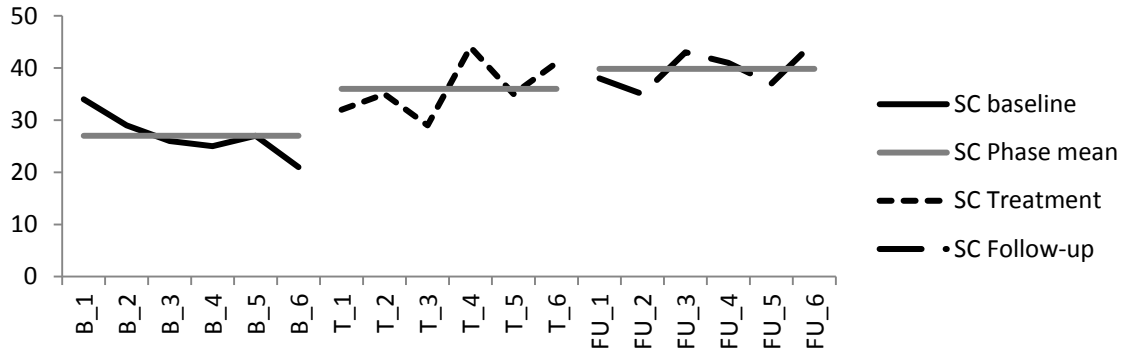
	Age	Relationship length	Time since breakup	Commitment level	Initiation of breakup
Participant 1	37	18 months	1 month	Serious	Mutual
Participant 2	19	24 months	4 months	Moderate	Mutual
Participant 3	22	6 months	2 weeks	Serious	Ex-partner
Participant 4	18	6 months	1 month	Serious	Ex-partner
Participant 5	18	18 months	5 months	Serious	Mutual

Table 2

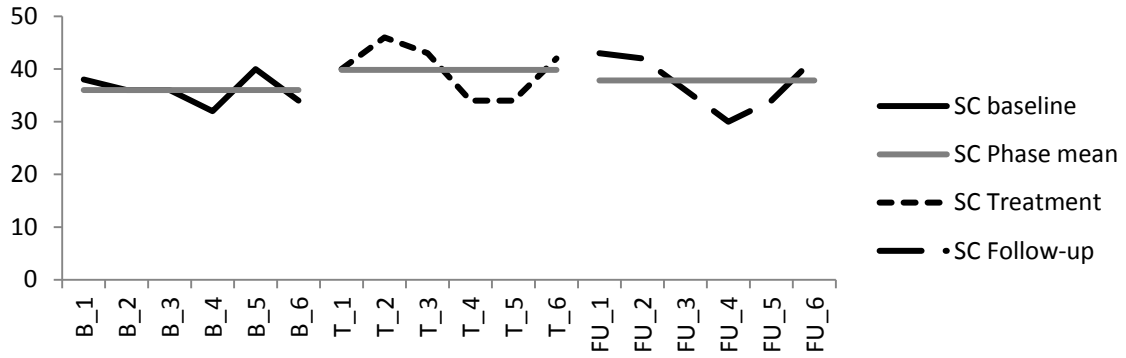
*Schedule of assessment measures*

Week	No.	Assessment	Questionnaire
1	1	Baseline	MINI; K6; Abbreviated questionnaire
	2	Baseline	Abbreviated questionnaire; K6
2	3	Baseline	Abbreviated questionnaire; K6
	4	Baseline	Abbreviated questionnaire; K6
3	5	Baseline	Abbreviated questionnaire; K6
	6	Baseline	Full versions: SCS; K6; BDS; WHO-5; SPANE
4	7	Treatment	Abbreviated questionnaire; K6
	8	Treatment	Abbreviated questionnaire; K6
5	9	Treatment	Abbreviated questionnaire; K6
	10	Treatment	Abbreviated questionnaire; K6
6	11	Treatment	Abbreviated questionnaire; K6
	12	Treatment	Full versions: SCS; K6; BDS; WHO-5; SPANE
7	13	Follow-up	Abbreviated questionnaire; K6
	14	Follow-up	Abbreviated questionnaire; K6
8	15	Follow-up	Abbreviated questionnaire; K6
	16	Follow-up	Abbreviated questionnaire; K6
9	17	Follow-up	Abbreviated questionnaire; K6
	18	Follow-up	Full versions: SCS; K6; BDS; WHO-5; SPANE

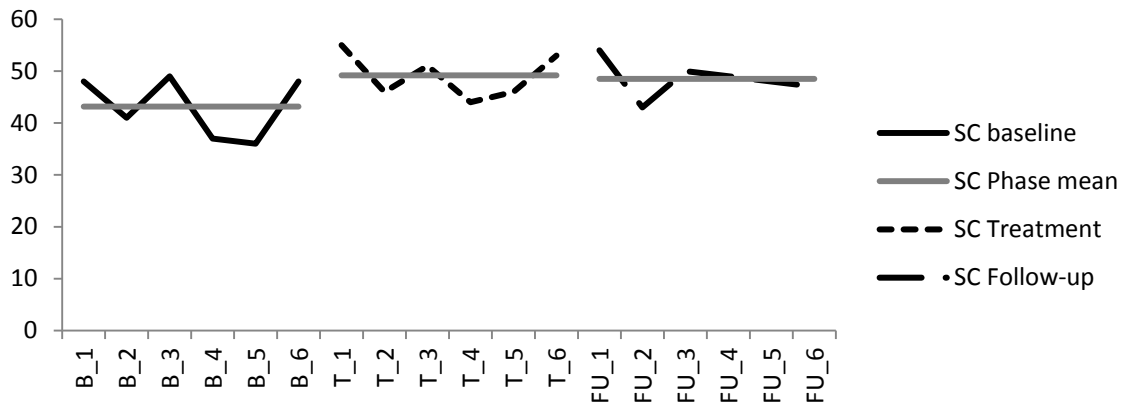
### Self-compassion – participant 1



### Self-compassion – participant 2



### Self-compassion – participant 3



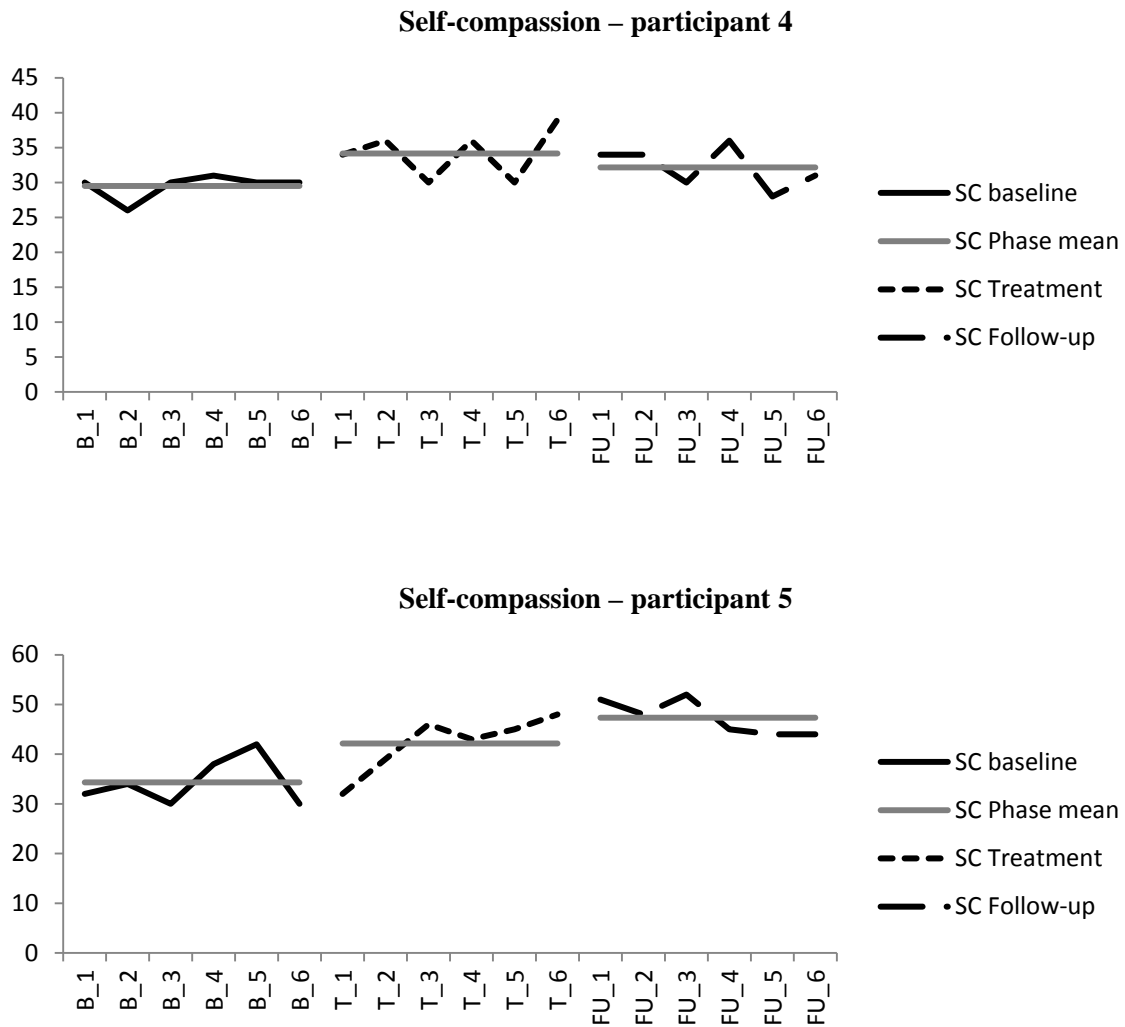
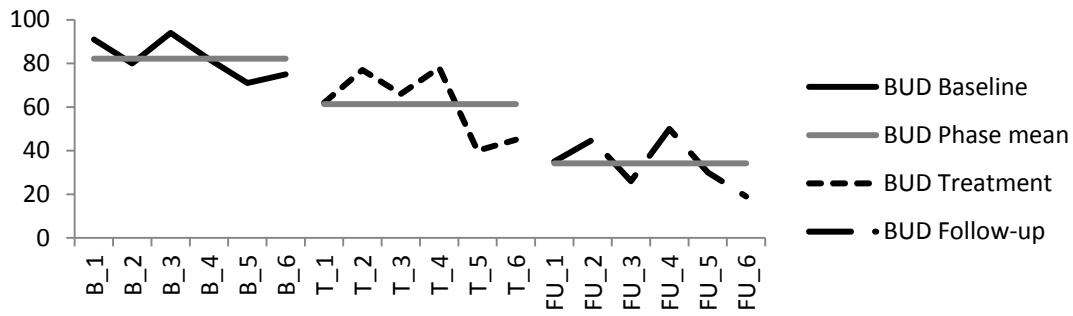
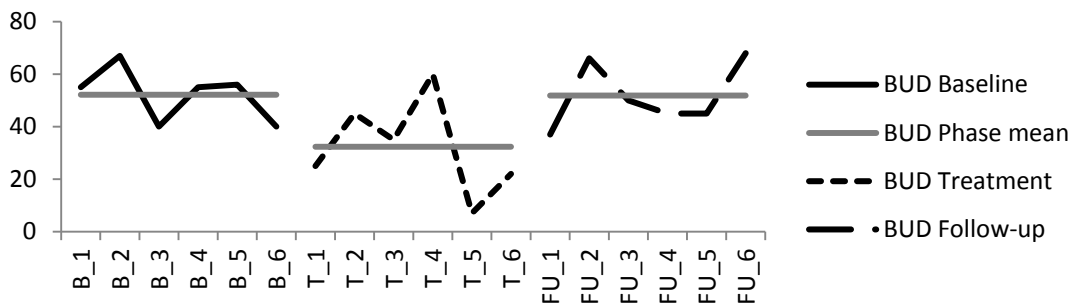


Figure 1. Bi-weekly self-compassion ratings for the five participants. SC represents the self-compassion scores. B represents the time periods during baseline, T represents the time periods during treatments, FU represents the time periods during follow-up.

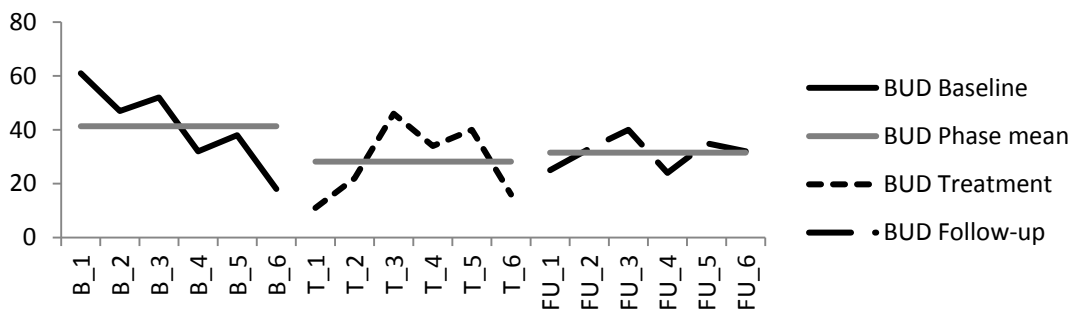
**Breakup Distress – participant 1**



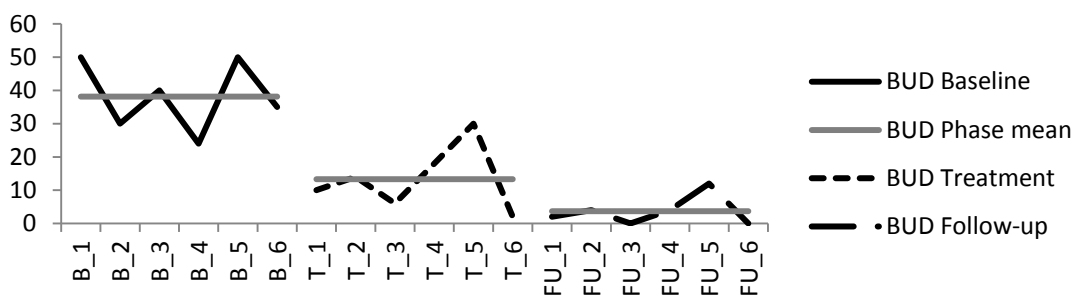
**Breakup Distress – participant 2**



**Breakup Distress – participant 3**



**Breakup Distress – participant 4**



### Breakup Distress – participant 5

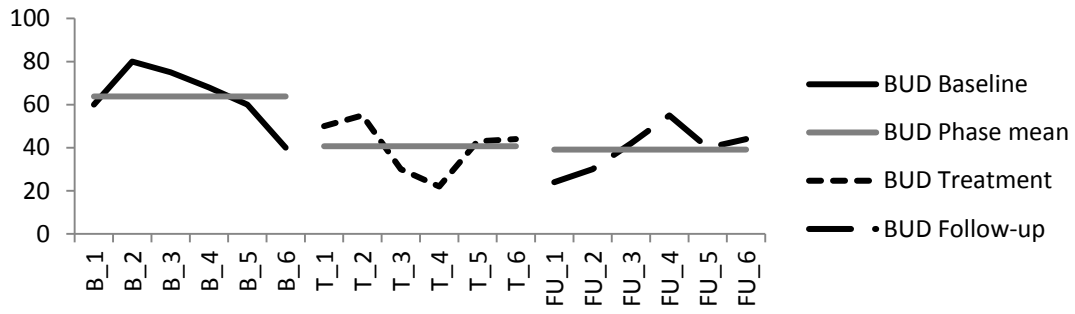
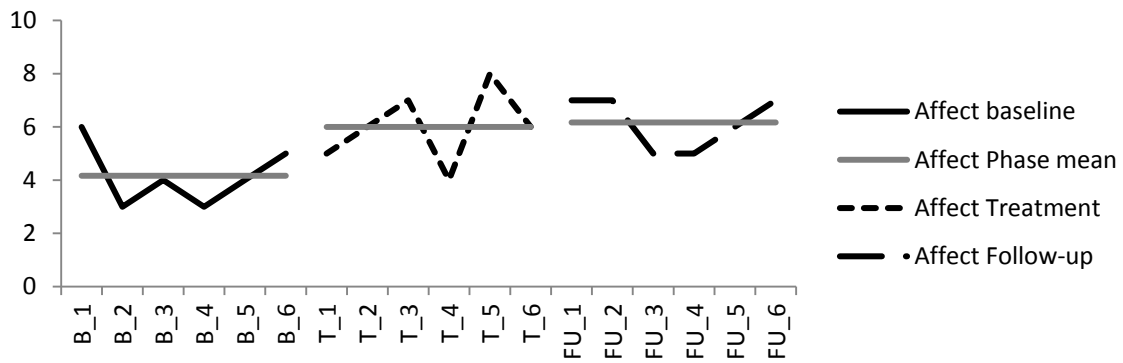
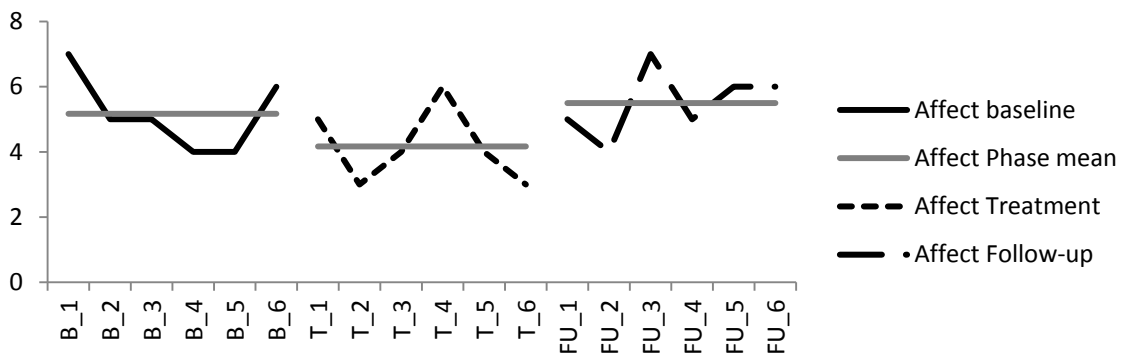


Figure 2. Bi-weekly breakup distress ratings for the five participants. BUD represents the breakup distress scores. B represents the time periods during baseline, T represents the time periods during treatments, FU represents the time periods during follow-up.

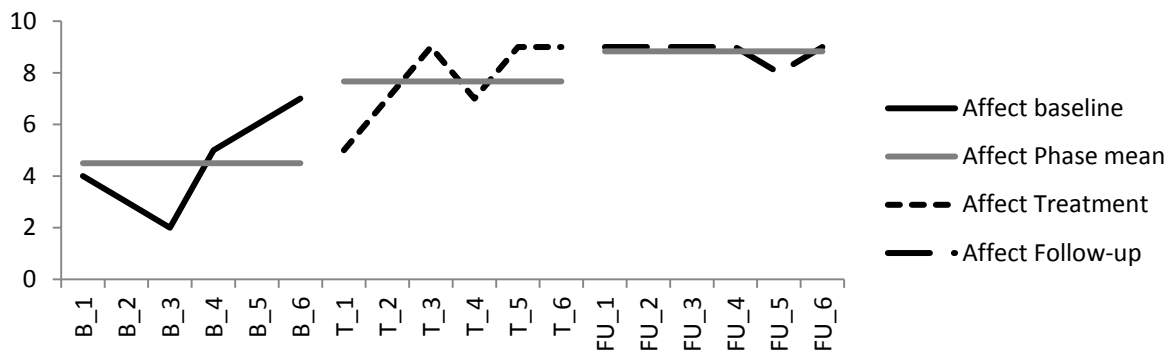
**Affect – participant 1**



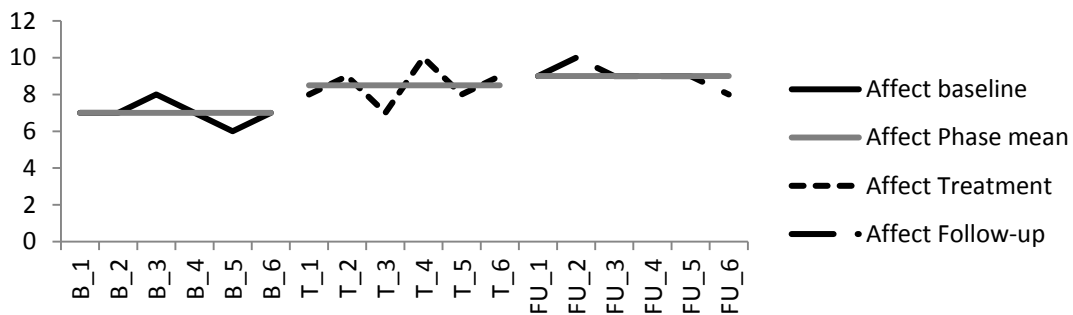
**Affect – participant 2**



**Affect – participant 3**



**Affect – participant 4**



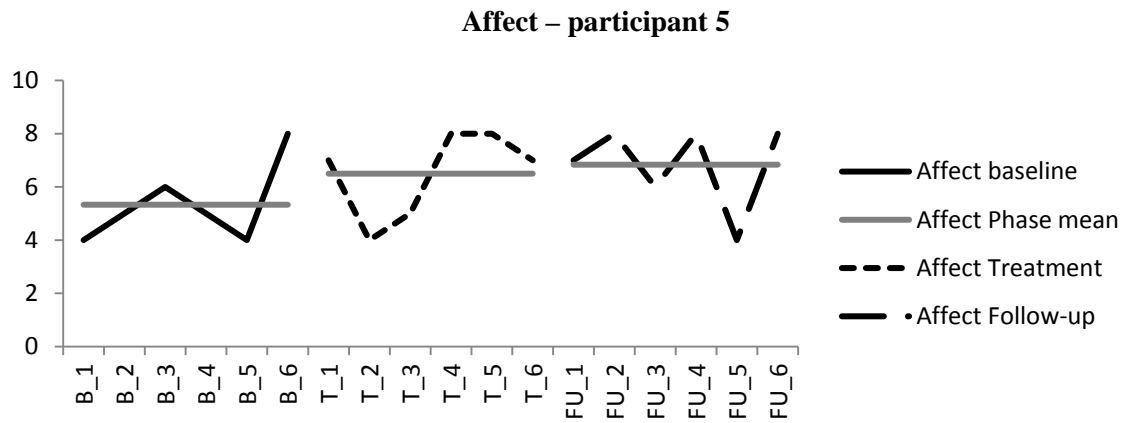
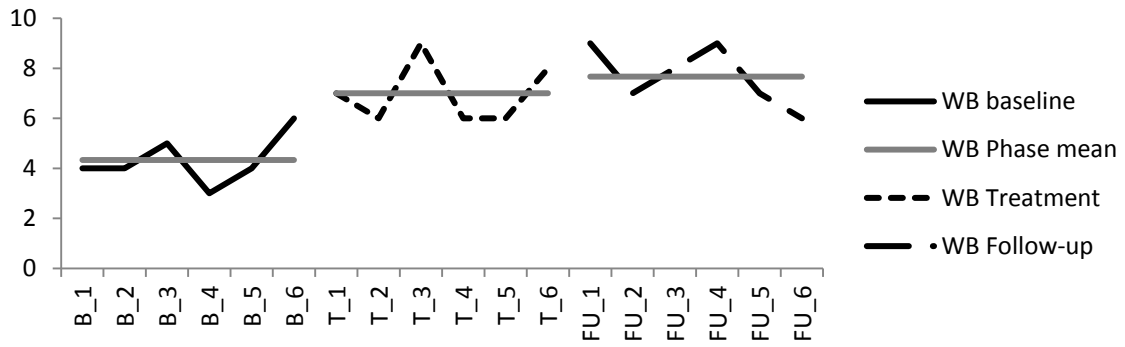
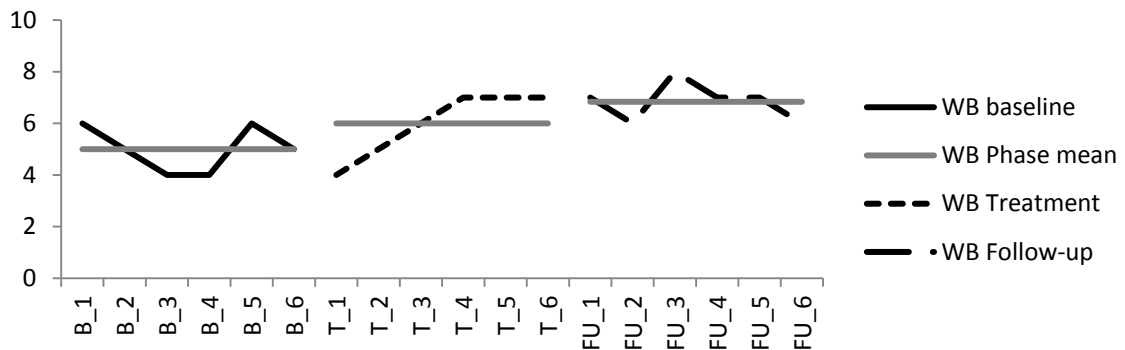


Figure 3. Bi-weekly affect ratings for the five participants. B represents the time periods during baseline, T represents the time periods during treatments, FU represents the time periods during follow-up.

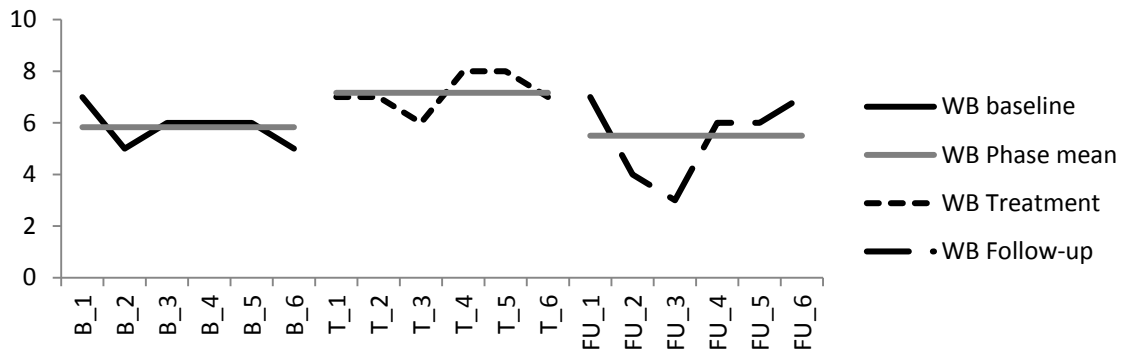
Wellbeing – participant 1



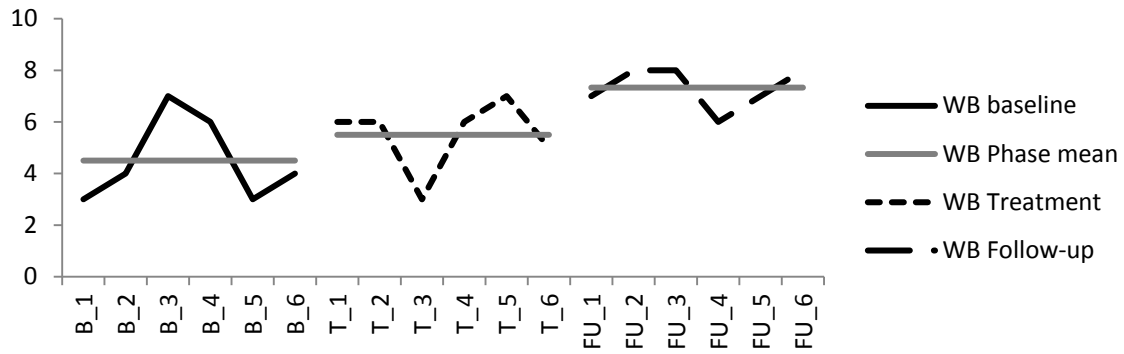
Wellbeing – participant 2



Wellbeing – participant 3



Wellbeing – participant 4



**Wellbeing – participant 5**

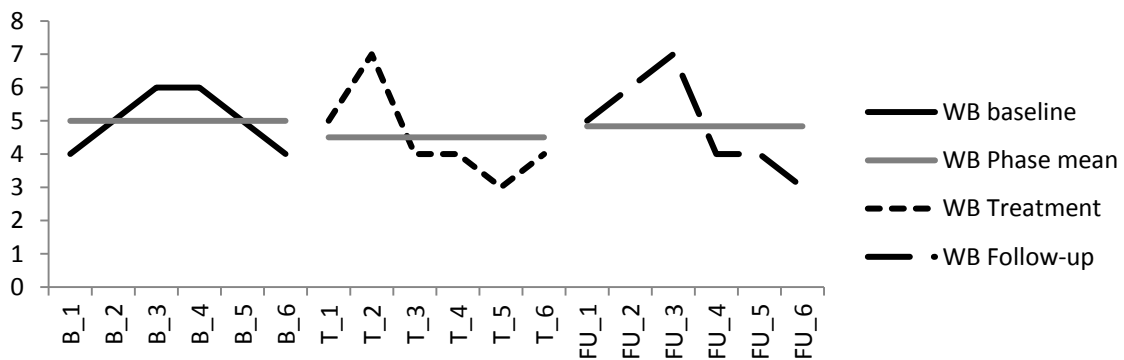


Figure 4. Bi-weekly wellbeing ratings for the five participants. WB represents the wellbeing scores. B represents the time periods during baseline, T represents the time periods during treatments, FU represents the time periods during follow-up.

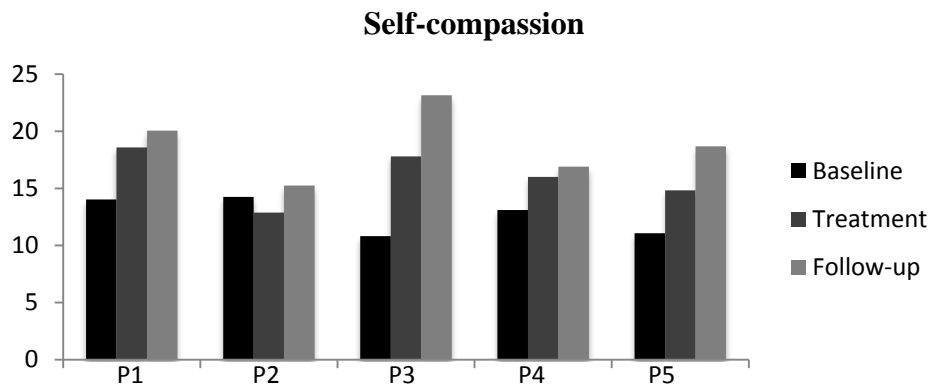


Figure 5. Full-scale measures of breakup distress at baseline, treatment and follow-up, for each of the five participants. P represents the numbered participant.

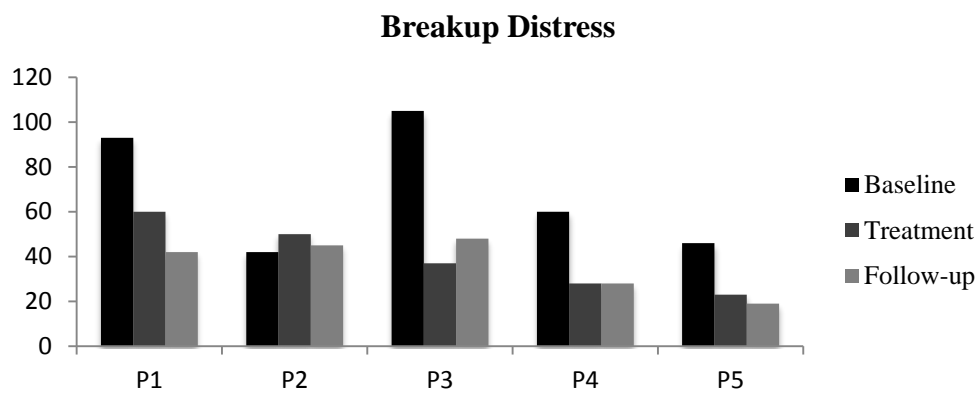


Figure 6. Full-scale measures of breakup distress at baseline, treatment and follow-up, for each of the five participants. P represents the numbered participant.

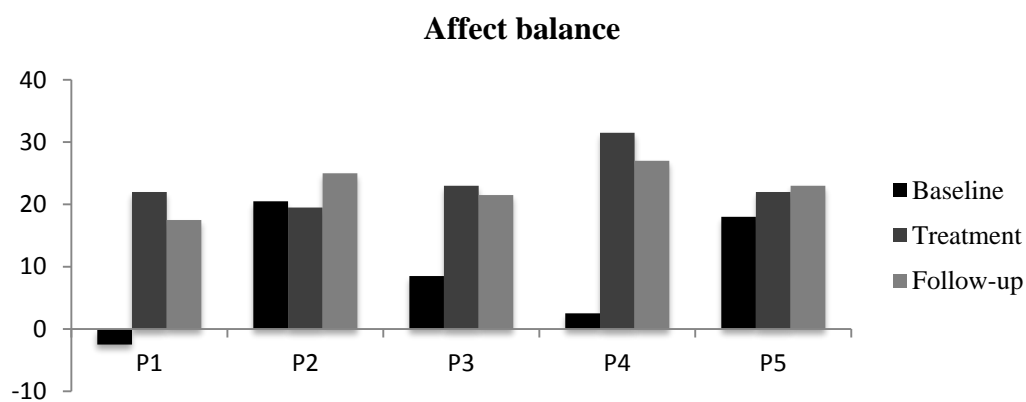


Figure 7. Full-scale measures of affect balance at baseline, treatment and follow-up, for each of the five participants. P represents the numbered participant.

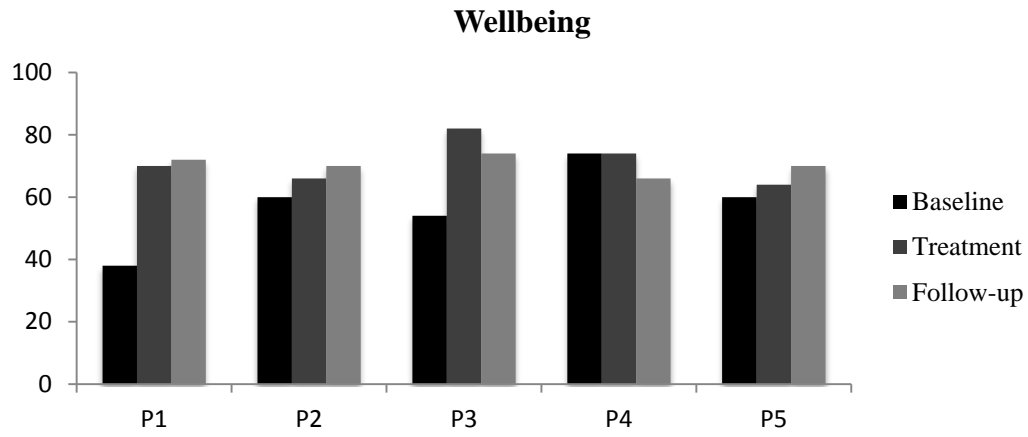


Figure 8. Full-scale measures of wellbeing at baseline, treatment and follow-up, for each of the five participants. P represents the numbered participant.

**Chapter 6:**

**Study 2. A Content Analysis of the Use and Helpfulness of Coping Strategies Following**

**Non-Marital Relationship Dissolution**

**(Reprint of submitted manuscript)**

## **Abstract**

This study sought to investigate the range and helpfulness of various coping strategies utilised specifically to deal with non-marital relationship breakups for males and females. Participants were 135 males and 625 females who had experienced a non-marital relationship breakup in the past 12 months. A content analysis coded 760 descriptions of post-breakup coping strategies into 27 categories, which were organised into 9 distinct coping families (i.e. problem solving, seeking support, social relations, escape/avoidance, alternate activities, cognitive strategies, emotion regulation, withdrawal, and other categories). Results indicate a general consensus in the coping strategies reported most frequently by males and females, including: Alternate activities, social support, social relations and escape/avoidance. In support of role-constraint theory, females tended to rate active forms of coping as more helpful, whilst males rated more avoidant forms of coping as more helpful. Further, females who rated more active forms of coping (i.e. seeking social support, cognitive and emotion regulation strategies) and males who rated more avoidant forms of coping (i.e. escape/avoidance and alternate activities) as more helpful, reported greater wellbeing following the breakup. The implications of these findings for future research and clinical intervention are discussed.

Relationship breakups are commonly acknowledged as stressful life events that affect a significant proportion of the population each year (Hebert & Popaduic, 2008). Previous research on non-marital relationship breakups has primarily focused on distress and suffering following dissolution (Frazier & Cook, 1993; Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni 1998). However, research increasingly indicates that there is significant variation in how people react to the breakdown of a relationship. Recent studies show that relationship dissolution can also be associated with positive outcomes such as wellbeing, growth and positive affect (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Sprecher et al., 1998; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). From these findings, a key question arises: Why are some individuals able to bounce back from a breakup, whilst others remain entangled in distress?

## **Coping**

Coping strategies are generally thought to play an important role in determining the short-term and long-term implications of distressing events on physical and mental health (Billings & Moos, 1984; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988; Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003). To date, research investigating coping strategies within the context of relationship dissolution has been limited and remains largely fragmented. A lack of consensus about how to measure, define and conceptualise coping has undermined the capacity to compare and accumulate such research. It has been proposed that various higher order coping categories commonly utilised by researchers (e.g. emotion-focused vs. problem-focused; approach vs. avoidance; behavioural vs cognitive) do not provide clarity or cover the complexity in the coping field (Skinner et al, 2003). For the purposes of this study coping will be defined as the physical, social, and psychological assets utilised to deal with situations that are appraised as stressful (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988). In order to avoid further confusion in the field, the current study has chosen to categorise coping based on the results of a large scale review, in which the coping literature was distilled into a comprehensive list of 13 categories, including:

problem solving, support seeking, escape, distraction, cognitive restructuring, ruminating, helplessness, social withdrawal, emotional regulation, information seeking, negotiation, opposition and delegation (Skinner et al., 2003). Previous research has investigated a selection of these coping strategies within the context of relationship dissolution and a brief overview of these results is provided below.

### **Problem solving and seeking social support.**

Active coping strategies including problem solving and seeking social support, are generally considered adaptive responses to stressful events (Tamres, Janicki, & Hegelson, 2002). Problem solving, defined as any instrumental, planful or strategic effort to manage or alter a source of stress (Skinner et al., 2003), has been associated with fewer psychological health issues and traumatic distress reactions following relationship dissolution (Chung et al., 2003; Studley & Chung, 2014). Whilst, seeking social support is commonly identified as an adaptive coping response, research from the relationship breakup literature provides mixed findings. For instance, seeking social support has been linked to lower mood disturbance (Berman & Turk, 1981) and in contrast, greater traumatic reactions after a breakup (Chung et al., 2003). These inconsistencies may reflect the influence of confounding variables such as the specific forms of social support used, the amount of time since the breakup and gender differences. Indeed, emotional forms of social support have been linked to post-breakup growth, whilst instrumental support has been associated with poorer post-breakup adjustment (Lewandowski & Bizocco, 2007). Further, Richmond and Christensen (2001) found that informal support was only adaptive for females, and that formal and spiritual support were only linked to better adjustment up to a point for females, beyond which such strategies predicted poor health outcomes. These findings suggest that problem solving and seeking social support may play an important role in determining post-breakup coping outcomes, and that such outcomes may vary as a function of gender, time and specific forms of coping.

### **Avoidance and distraction.**

In contrast to active forms of coping, it is commonly held that avoidance of the emotion or reality of a stressful situation is maladaptive (Moos & Schaefer, 1993). Within the context of relationship dissolution, it has been suggested that the rigid use of avoidance may interfere with one's ability to take direct action, process or make sense of a breakup (Richmond & Christensen, 2001). Indeed, individuals who avoid dealing with a relationship breakup have been found to exhibit greater psychological disturbance and traumatic stress reactions (Chung et al, 2003; Mearns, 1991; Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Similarly, individuals who deny or avoid thinking about a breakup tend to show more pronounced negative emotional reactions (Lewandowski & Bizocco, 2007). In contrast, distraction techniques designed to keep one busy or engaged in alternate activities have been linked with fewer depressive symptoms and less resistance following a relationship breakup (Fagundes, 2008). Clearly, further research is required in order to elucidate the role of various avoidant-based coping strategies within the context of relationship dissolution.

### **Cognitive strategies.**

Cognitive restructuring, defined as an active attempt to change one's perspective in order to see a stressful situation more positively, encompasses strategies such as positive thinking, optimism and reframing (Skinner et al., 2003). It has been suggested that such strategies may protect an individual from feelings of guilt and loss, and enable them to generate a positive attitude towards stressful situations (Walters-Chapman et al., 1995). Indeed, individuals who seek to positively reinterpret or reframe their experience of a breakup, tend to report greater growth and wellbeing following relationship dissolution (Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Richmond & Christensen, 2001). Further, individuals who perceive greater benefit from the experience of their relationship breakup (e.g. This event has

taught me I can handle anything) report greater post-breakup adjustment (Samios, Henson, & Simpson, 2014).

More passive cognitive processes have also been linked to post-breakup adjustment. Bereavement literature suggests that reflection on the loss of a loved one enables us to make sense of and process the event (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2005). Indeed, results of a recent study found that balanced reflection about a relationship breakup is linked to positive adjustment (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). However, more repetitive rumination about the negative aspects of a relationship breakup has been shown to predict poor adjustment, particularly for individuals with anxious attachment styles (Fagundes, 2012; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). Interestingly, for such individuals, continued rumination over time appears to support the process of personal growth (Marshall, Bejanyan, & Fereczi, 2013). Such findings may be explained as anxiously attached individuals, who tend to have more negative self-views may initially blame themselves and scrutinise personal shortcomings whilst ruminating about the relationship breakup. Overtime however such reflections may assist such individuals in constructing meaningful narratives about the breakup and motivating a course of self-improvement that leads to personal growth (Marshall et al., 2013). Together these findings suggest that different forms of cognitive processes may alter one's understanding of a relationship breakup and in turn one's level of adjustment over time.

### **Helplessness.**

Helplessness refers to a set of strategies designed to relinquish one's control over a stressful situation (Skinner et al., 2008). Nakamura and Orth (2005) outline an important distinction between active acceptance and passivity. The authors suggest that active acceptance involves acknowledging reality, letting go of attempts to control the uncontrollable, whilst continuing to pursue attainable goals (Nakamura & Orth, 2005). In contrast, passivity is defined as giving in to one's circumstances and relinquishing control

and hope more generally (Nakamura & Orth, 2005). The scarce literature available on this topic suggests that the process of actively accepting ones experience is associated with growth and emotional adjustment when an intimate relationship ends (Lewandowski & Buzzoco, 2007). Research further suggests that passive forms of coping may be adaptive in the short-term, however ongoing use is likely to lead to poor health outcomes for females (Richmond & Christenen, 2001). Again these findings highlights the role that time and gender may play in defining coping outcomes after a relationship breakup.

### **Emotional regulation.**

Emotion regulation refers to active attempts to constructively regulate distress through expression or modulation of one's emotions (Skinner et al., 2003). Within the context of relationship dissolution, emotional expression through means of venting has been associated with high mood disturbance, whilst the process of expressive writing has been linked to psychological and physical health benefits (Berman & Turk, 1981; Lepore & Greenberg, 2002; Lewandowski & Buzzoco, 2007). It has been suggested that attempts to modulate one's emotional reactions to a breakup may be adaptive, however research is yet to clearly illustrate this effect (Chung et al., 2003; McCarthy et al., 1997). These studies broadly suggest that attempts to regulate post-breakup emotions may have an impact on one's ability to bounce back, however further research is required to provide a more detailed understanding of how adaptive specific strategies are in this context.

### **The Current Study**

Whilst previous research provides some indication of the coping strategies used by individuals following a relationship breakup, this list is far from comprehensive. Many studies have relied on coping inventories that were not designed specifically for research in this area and have in turn potentially excluded strategies that are unique to the experience of a relationship breakup, or that have been identified since these inventories were developed (e.g.

blocking an ex-partner on social media). Further, prior studies have often investigated specific subscales from coping inventories, which may restrict our understanding of the array of strategies used after a breakup. A more comprehensive understanding of the coping strategies utilised specifically to deal with relationship dissolution is needed in order to assist individuals who are struggling to bounce back after a breakup. Two variables that appear to add to the complexity of this task are time and gender. Indeed, previous research indicates that the amount of time since a relationship breakup has significant bearing on the level of one's adjustment (Sbarra, 2006). Further, the coping literature increasingly acknowledges the role that gender plays in determining the differential use and value of various coping strategies (Tamres et al., 2002). Thus the present study sought to develop our understanding of the range and effectiveness of various post-breakup coping strategies, taking gender and time since the breakup into account. Specifically the current study utilised an exploratory content analysis to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1: What coping strategies do individuals utilise most frequently when dealing with a relationship breakup and does this vary by gender?

RQ2: Which coping strategies are rated as most helpful and does this vary by gender?

RQ3: Do the helpfulness ratings of certain coping strategies correspond with better post-breakup wellbeing for males and females?

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedures**

Seven hundred and sixty participants were recruited through Facebook and a range of websites commonly used to recruit participants for relationships research. In addition, first-year psychology students were recruited from an Australian University and awarded course credit for their participation. Non-university student participants were not provided with

compensation or a reward for participating in the study. All participants were required to have experienced a non-marital relationship breakup within the last year in which the relationship lasted for a minimum of 3 months. Participants completed an online survey, providing demographics, information regarding their relationship breakup, and responses to self-report measures and an open-ended question.

### **Demographics**

Participants were asked to provide their gender, age and the gender of their ex-partner.

### **Relationship breakup Variables**

Several items assessed characteristics of the previous relationship and breakup, including: Length of relationship and time since the breakup (measured in months), who initiated the breakup (self, ex-partner or mutual agreement), level of commitment (not very committed, moderately committed or seriously committed), cohabitation status, intentions for marriage and their new relationship status (yes or no answer format).

### **Open-Ended Question**

Following the demographic and relationship breakup measures, participants were asked the following question:

Q1: Please write down any strategies that you used to cope with the breakdown of your relationship. In the space to the right, please use the drop down box to indicate how helpful or unhelpful each of these strategies was for you (on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = very unhelpful to 6 = very helpful).

### **Wellbeing**

The 14-item Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing scale (WE-MWBS: Tennant et al., 2007) measured affective-emotional, cognitive-evaluative and psychological functioning

dimensions of mental health over the past 4-weeks. Participants rated items such as “I’ve been feeling optimistic about the future” and “I’ve been dealing with problems well” on a five-point scale (1 = None of the time, to 5 = All of the time). The scale demonstrated high internal consistency in our sample ( $\alpha = .97$ ).

### **Content Analysis**

The content analysis adhered to the eight-step process proposed by Weber (1990).

#### **Define text and recording units.**

In the current study a basic text unit was defined as one participant’s response to the open-ended question. Each text unit was then divided into recording units, defined as the writing in one text box (the spaces provided to record various coping strategies). Each recording unit was separately coded (Weber, 1990). In the case that a single text box referred to multiple coping strategies, responses were split into separate recording units prior to coding.

#### **Defining categories.**

Two coders reviewed data from a random sample of 100 responses in order to develop a coding scheme (available on request). The starting point for the coding scheme consisted of fifteen a priori categories derived from previous research (see Table 1) that were organised into the framework of coping outlined by Skinner et al. (2003). The coding scheme provided labels, definitions and synonyms for each category. For example, distraction was defined as “an active attempt to deal with a stressful situation by engaging in an alternative pleasurable activity” (Skinner et al., 2003) and synonyms such as “keeping busy” and “staying occupied” were provided as examples of responses that would be coded within this category.

Empirical categories were derived from the sample data and new categories were created in cases when a recording unit did not fit within an a priori category. Categories were

then expanded or collapsed in order to increase their clarity. In order to ensure that categories were representative and descriptive, empirical categories were removed if they occurred in less than 5% of participants' text units. Eighteen new categories arose from the sample data and definitions and synonyms were added to the coding scheme.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

**Test coding on a sample of text, assess reliabilities, revise coding rules if required.**

The two coders independently used the coding scheme to code the sample of 100 responses against the 15 a priori and 18 empirical categories. The coding scheme was revised until adequate reliabilities ( $\kappa > 0.70$ ) were reached. The final coding scheme comprised 34 categories as a result of the following revisions: 1) Due to the large number of responses falling under informal support, this category was split into two categories (talking with family and friends, and spending time with family and friends); 2) Four additional categories were created to capture varying degrees of social relations (i.e. contacting ex-partner, socialising, casual dating and new relationship). Social relations categories were differentiated from the social support categories; 3) The escape-avoidance coping family was divided into four separate categories in order to represent important nuances in participant responses (Cognitive suppression, behavioural avoidance, termination of contact and blocking social media); 4) The Distraction category was then separated into six categories including intentional distraction, work & studies, health & fitness, leisure, new experiences and comfort eating; 5) Distraction was renamed 'alternate activities' as the intentions behind engaging in such activities was not always clear; 6) Cognitive strategies were split into a number of different categories including positive thinking, cognitive restructuring and finding meaning/learning; 7) Rumination and reflection were combined under the 'reflection' category, as it was unclear whether reflection about the relationship and breakup were

necessarily of a negative nature; 8) Passivity was renamed ‘passive withdrawal’ as this more closely resembled the content of participant responses; 9) Additional categories that did not fit under the coping families outlined by Skinner et al. (2003) included: Medication; self-harm; revenge; self-care; self-blame; other-blame; drinking/drugs.

### **Code final text.**

The two raters then coded the complete sample of 760 responses for mentioning (=1) or not mentioning (=0) each of the mutually exclusive 34 categories included in the final coding scheme. Each coping family (e.g. avoidance) was also coded if a coping strategy within that family was mentioned.

### **Assessed reliabilities.**

Acceptable inter-rater reliability was set at *kappa* .70. Two categories (*Self-blame and Other-blame*) were removed as insufficient reliabilities were reached. Five categories were removed as they did not reach the 5% minimum reporting rate (*acceptance, finding meaning/learning, reflection, medication and self-harm*). Twenty-seven categories remained after removing excluded categories. *Kappas* for the final categories ranged from .70 to .95. Final results were based on the coding of the primary researcher. Table 2 outlines the final categories and examples of participant responses from each category.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

### **Frequencies, Helpfulness Ratings and Statistical Analysis**

Logistic regression analyses were run in order to assess if gender was a significant predictor of whether participants mentioned a coping family “1” or did not mention a coping family “0”. Due to the small number of responses for some individual coping strategies, helpfulness ratings were averaged at the coping family level. Independent t-tests were run to assess for significant gender differences in the average helpfulness ratings of each coping

family. General linear models assessed the relationship between average helpfulness ratings for each of the coping families and wellbeing, controlling for time since the breakup. As this study employed a cross-sectional design it was important to control for ‘time since the breakup’, in order to determine whether the relationship between coping strategies and post-breakup adjustment was significant over and above the influence of time. As previous research suggests that males and females benefit differentially from various coping strategies (Tamres et al., 2002), the current study was particularly interested in finding out which strategies were related to wellbeing for males and females separately. Thus, instead of adding gender as a predictor, responses for males and females were analysed separately.

## Results

### Sample Characteristics

Participants were aged 16 to 66 years with a mean of 22.9 (SD = 7.48). The sample consisted of more females (625) than males (135). The average length of relationship was 2 years and 4 months, and the mean time since the breakup was 6 months. Seventy-six percent of participants had not cohabitated with their ex-partner and 68% reported being seriously committed to the relationship (3% not very committed; 29% moderately committed). Thirty-eight percent of the sample indicated that they had initiated the breakup (42% initiated by ex-partner; 20% mutual agreement) and 59% had entered into a new relationship since the breakup.

### Frequency of Coping Strategies

Overall, the coping families reported most frequently by male and female participants were alternate activities, seeking social support, social relationships and escape/avoidance. Within the alternate activities coping family, both genders reported intentional distraction, health and fitness, and leisure activities most frequently. Within the seeking social support coping family, males and females reported talking to family and friends, and spending time with family and friends most frequently. Both genders reported socialising and casual dating relationships most frequently from the social relationships coping family, and behavioural and cognitive avoidance from the escape/avoidance coping family. Table 3 provides an overview of the frequencies for each coping family and coping strategy in descending order.

Logistic regression analyses indicated that gender was not a significant predictor of whether participants reported using a coping family or not. Due to the small sample size of male participants, analysis at the individual coping strategy level was not possible.

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

## Helpfulness of Coping Strategies

Males and females both rated social withdrawal and drugs/alcohol as slightly unhelpful to slightly helpful. Both genders rated seeking social support, cognitive strategies, self-care and alternative activities as slightly helpful to fairly helpful. Problem solving was the only coping family rated within the fairly helpful to very helpful range, by females. Independent t-tests indicate that females rated problem solving ( $t(41) = 2.08, p = .043$ ) and emotion regulation ( $t(183) = 2.85, p = .005$ ) as significantly more helpful than males. Males rated social relationships ( $t(382) = 2.21, p = .027$ ) and avoidance/escape ( $t(357) = 2.94, p = .004$ ) as significantly more helpful than females. No significant differences were identified between male and female helpfulness ratings for any of the other coping families. Average helpfulness ratings for each coping family are provided in descending order for males and females in Table 4.

[INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

## Helpfulness Ratings and Wellbeing

General linear models indicated that males who rated avoidance ( $F(1,48) = 4.93, p = .050$ ) and alternate activities ( $F(1,48) = 4.07, p = .050$ ) as more helpful reported greater wellbeing, after controlling for time since the breakup. Females who rated seeking support ( $F(1,333) = 13.56, p = .000$ ), emotion regulation ( $F(1,123) = 3.80, p = .050$ ) and cognitive strategies ( $F(1,370) = 6.25, p = .013$ ) as more helpful reported greater wellbeing, after controlling for time since the breakup. Analyses were run to assess for links between the helpfulness rating of each coping strategy and wellbeing. Results of the significant models are presented above, no other models were found to be significant.

## Discussion

Navigating the aftermath of a romantic relationship breakup can be a highly distressing and disorienting experience that may be amplified or eased by an individual's coping strategies. This content analysis sought to examine the range, frequency and helpfulness of various coping strategies employed by males and females in response to the breakdown of a romantic relationship. Twenty-seven coping strategies were organised into 9 distinct coping families, providing a detailed account of the array of strategies employed to deal specifically with non-marital relationship breakups. A significant number of empirical categories were identified from the data which were not covered by the broad categories set out by Skinner's framework of coping categories. Further, a number of coping strategies were identified that have been largely overlooked in the relationship breakup literature, including the use of social media as a form of avoidance, comfort eating and self-care. These findings highlight the benefit of investigating coping strategies in relation to a specific stressful event and call into question the utility of using standardised coping inventories across varying contexts. Nevertheless, the coping strategies identified specifically within the context of a relationship breakup in this study may be utilised to assist individuals in broadening their coping repertoire when faced with a breakup.

Results of the study suggest that there is significant overlap between males and females in their selection of coping strategies, as both genders reported utilising socially oriented coping strategies and avoidant based coping strategies most frequently. A high proportion of males and females sought social interaction following a breakup through talking and spending time with family and friends, as well as socialising and dating. A significant number of individuals also sought to distract themselves after the breakup or avoid seeing, thinking about or contacting their ex-partners. Previous research supports these findings as the loss of a central support figure following a relationship breakup has been

found to motivate individuals to seek companionship and comfort from their social networks (Sansom & Farnill, 1997). Despite assumptions that failure to attend to one's emotions is maladaptive, a growing body of literature suggests that avoidance and distraction-based coping may be an essential component of letting go and moving forward after a breakup (Fagundes, 2008; Hebert & Popadiuk, 2008).

Results also indicate that males and females largely agree on the helpfulness of most coping strategies. Both genders rated seeking social support, cognitive strategies, self-care and alternate activities as slightly to fairly helpful. Further, males and females appeared to agree that passive withdrawal and drugs/alcohol were less helpful in coping with a relationship breakup. Despite the general consensus, males rated social relations and avoidance/escape as significantly more helpful than females, whilst females rated problem-solving and emotion regulation as more helpful than males. These findings conflict somewhat with commonly held ideas about gender and coping, in which it is presumed that males generally favour active, problem-focused strategies whilst females lean toward avoidant and socially oriented strategies (Matud, 2004). The apparent reversal of male and female coping strategies in our results may in part be accounted for by role constraint theory, suggesting that opportunities and constraints in dealing with different stressors may vary as a function of one's social role rather than gender (Tamres et al., 2002). In line with this theory, it can be argued that as females typically fulfil the role of managing relationships, they may perceive greater control in this domain and more aptly navigate breakups utilising active, problem-solving and emotion regulation strategies (Hochschild, 1975). In contrast, males tend to have fewer individuals they can turn to for emotional support and may perceive less control in the relationship domain, thus benefitting more from strategies that enable them to escape or avoid reminders of the breakup (Tamres et al., 2002). In a similar manner, males may benefit more

from socialising or engaging in casual dating relationships as such engagements may function to distract them from the breakup or substitute the lost relationship (Shimek & Bello, 2014).

Interestingly, a similar pattern of active vs avoidant coping was evident when assessing the relationship between coping strategies and post-breakup wellbeing for females and males. Results suggest that females who rated more active forms of coping, such as seeking social support, cognitive strategies and emotional regulation as more helpful, tended to report greater wellbeing following the breakup. Again, role constraint theory may shed some light on these findings, as the focus on social-emotional issues in women's socialisation may lead females to be more adept than males at cognitively managing their feelings (Hochschild, 1975). Indeed, research has found that women tend to more actively manage their emotions and are more likely to exert control over relational events than men (Ruben, Peplau & Hill, 1981). Females are also typically socialised to seek out others when dealing with relationship stressors and such attempts tend to be met by greater emotional responsiveness, thereby providing greater benefit to females (Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2010). Biological underpinnings may further account for this finding, as the “Tend and Befriend” theory suggests that the female sex hormone oestrogen enhances the stress-attenuating effects of oxytocin that is released in response to perceived social support (Taylor, 2006). Together these findings suggest females may derive greater benefit from the implementation of social, emotional and cognitive coping strategies as they are socialised to take a more active role in the relationship domain and receive greater support when utilising such strategies.

In contrast to females, males who rated escape/avoidance and alternate activities as more helpful tended to report greater wellbeing. Again, social roles may assist in explaining these findings, as males may perceive less control in the relationship domain and are generally socialised to practice emotional control and autonomy in order to avoid exhibiting

signs of weakness or vulnerability (Matud, 2004). Thus social forces may encourage men to conceal emotions by actively suppressing thoughts, avoiding reminders or cutting-off contact with their ex-partners (Shimek & Bello, 2014). Further, males may seek to avoid negative emotions related to the relationship breakup by distracting themselves with alternate activities such as fitness, work or recreation or redirecting their attention towards forming a new relationship (Choo et al., 1996; Shimek & Bello, 2014). The results of the current study suggest that males may benefit more from engaging in strategies that enable them to avoid or distract themselves from the breakup as they may perceive less control and thereby feel less able to deal directly with relationship issues than women in this domain. These findings somewhat contradict the common assumption that avoiding problems leads to poor adjustment outcomes. Indeed, such assumptions often drive support providers to encourage people to talk about their problems and explore their emotions. The results of this study suggest that such strategies may not be helpful for males following a relationship breakup, instead indicating that males may benefit more from being encouraged to engage in activities that redirect their energy towards other things or take their mind off the breakup.

### **Limitations and Implications**

The current study utilised a cross-sectional design and thus it is not possible to draw causal links between coping strategies and coping outcomes. Future studies should seek to replicate findings utilising a longitudinal design in order to evaluate the directionality of such relationships. Due to the limited number of male participants, analysis at the individual coping strategy level was not possible. Future research would benefit from looking at the relationship between specific coping strategies and post-breakup adaptation as such analyses may provide more detailed guidance on suitable coping strategies and clinical interventions. Indeed, males and females may exhibit more or less of certain coping strategies within a coping family that are overlooked when analysing data at the family level. It is also important

to note that the final coping framework provides an overview of the most commonly mentioned strategies and is not an exhaustive list or indicative of the most effective coping strategies. Follow-up studies may serve to assess the efficacy of less frequently mentioned strategies such as acceptance and rumination that were removed from the analysis due to low reporting rates. Future studies may also benefit from assessing levels of perceived control in the relationship domain in order to further assess the basis for role-constraint theory and observed gender differences. The results of this study were derived from a relatively youthful, female, English-speaking sample and a range of factors such as religiosity, ethnicity and socio-economic status were not assessed. Future studies may seek to measure such factors and assess whether the findings of the current study are generalisable to such populations.

Despite the limitations of this study, these findings provide valuable insights into the range, frequency and helpfulness of coping strategies employed following a relationship breakup. Results of the content analysis provide a detailed list of coping strategies utilised specifically to deal with non-marital relationship breakups that may be used to assist individuals in broadening their coping repertoire following a relationship breakup. Whilst our findings suggest that seeking social support, practicing self-care, attempting to view the breakup in a positive light and getting involved in alternate activities may be considered helpful by both genders, results suggest that some coping strategies and related clinical interventions may be more beneficial for males or females following a relationship breakup. Behavioural interventions that provide distraction from the relationship loss, such as focusing on health and fitness, creating new experiences or engaging in work and studies, may be particularly helpful for males. In contrast, current findings suggest that encouraging females to seek formal or informal support may harness their wellbeing when faced with a breakup. Clinical interventions designed to assist in expressing and regulating emotions, or positively

restructuring cognitions may serve to further support females in the aftermath of a relationship breakdown. Interestingly, results suggest a discrepancy, particularly for females, between the strategies that appear to be most helpful and their reported rate of use. Specifically, whilst females appear to benefit from strategies such as problem solving, emotion regulation and cognitive strategies, these were some of the strategies reported least frequently by females. Clinically, these findings highlight the possible benefit of implementing interventions that bolster such underutilised, yet potentially helpful coping strategies. It is important to preface these clinical implications with the recommendation that clinicians assess the appropriateness of such strategies based on the time and level of distress exhibited upon presentation. Overall, the results of the current study may assist clinicians and researchers in understanding and in turn assisting individuals who have experienced a relationship breakup.

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**Table 1.**

A priori families and categories, and definitions from the literature

<b>Dimension and category names</b>	<b>Category definitions from the literature</b>	<b>Author (s)</b>
<b>Problem solving</b>		
<i>Problem solving</i>	Instrumental, planful or strategic efforts to manage a source of stress	Chung et al., 2003 Studley & Chung, 2014
<b>Seeking support</b>		
<i>Informal social support</i>	Use of informal support networks as resources when faced with a stressful situation, including friends, family, colleagues and neighbours	Berman & Turk (1981) Chung et al. (2003) Lewandowski and Bizzoco (2007) Richmond and Christensen (2001)
<i>Formal social support</i>	Seeking support from community resources such as doctors, psychologists and agencies	Richmond and Christensen (2001)
<i>Spiritual support</i>	Seeking support from spiritual or religious rituals, beliefs or groups	Richmond and Christensen (2001)
<b>Escape-avoidance</b>		
<i>Avoidance</i>	Efforts to avoid a stressful situation or experience	Chung et al. (2003) Mearns (1991) Sbarra and Emery (2005)
<i>Cognitive suppression</i>	Efforts to disengage, deny or stop thinking about a stressful situation or experience	Lewandowski & Bizocco (2007)
<b>Distraction</b>		
<i>Distraction</i>	Active attempts to deal with a stressful situation by engaging in alternative activity	Fagundes (2008)
<b>Cognitive strategies</b>		
<i>Cognitive restructuring</i>	Attempts to change one's view of a situation in order to see it in a more positive light	Lewandowski and Bizzoco (2007) Richmond and Christensen (2001) Samios, Henson & Simpson (2014)

## **Rumination**

*Rumination*                      Passive and repetitive focus on the negative aspects of a stressful situation                      Fagundes (2012)  
Marshall et al., 2013)  
Saffrey and Ehrenberg (2007)

*Reflection*                      Balanced consideration and reflection on various aspects of a stressful situation                      Saffrey and Ehrenberg (2007)

## **Helplessness**

*Passivity*                      Relinquishment of control, relying on luck, or feeling helpless about the problem                      Richmond and Chirstensen (2001)

*Acceptance*                      Thoughts of accepting ones' experience and resigning oneself to what has happened                      Lewandowski and Bizzoco (2007)

## **Emotion Regulation**

*Venting*                      Expressing or releasing upset or distress related to a stressful event                      Berman and Turk (1981)  
Lewandowski & Bizzoco (2007)

*Expressive writing*                      Written expression of thoughts and feelings associated with stressful life events                      Lepore and Greenberg (2002)

*Emotion modulation*                      Attempts to modulate ones' experience of distressing emotions                      Chung et al. (2003)  
McCarthy et al. (1997)

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**Table 2.** Final coping categories and families, and examples of coded responses

<b>Family and category names</b>	<b>Examples from coded responses</b>
<b>Problem solving</b>	
<i>Problem solving</i>	“Set goals and reach for them”, “planning for the future”, “Think what went wrong and try to fix it”, “Look forward to what I want in a man”
<b>Seeking support</b>	
<i>Talking with friends/family</i>	“Talked with friends”, “Talked to my best friends about it”, “Confiding in friends”, “Talking about it with close family”
<i>Spending time with friends/family</i>	“Spending time with family”, “Surrounding myself with friends and family”, “Hanging out with friends”
<i>Formal social support</i>	“Therapy”, “Individual counselling”, “Seeing a doctor and psychologist for help”, “Group therapy”
<i>Spiritual support</i>	“Keep in faith”, “Prayer”, “Bible study”, “Go to church”
<b>Social Relations</b>	
<i>Contacting ex-partner</i>	“Calling me ex”, “Spending time with ex-partner”, “Trying to contact her”
<i>Socialising</i>	“Expand my social life”, “Partying”, “Going out with friends”, “Meeting new people”
<i>Casual/dating relationship</i>	“Seeing other people”, “Rebounding”, “Casual sex”, “Kissing other boys”
<i>New relationship</i>	“Find someone else that showed they loved me”, “I started a new relationship”, “Found a new boyfriend”, “Jumped into a relationship with someone new”
<b>Escape-avoidance</b>	
<i>Behavioural avoidance</i>	“Staying away from reminders of the relationship”, “Keep distance from ex”, “Deleted all pictures of him”, “Not talking about it”, “Avoiding mutual friends and hang out places”
<i>Social media avoidance</i>	“Blocked ex from all social media sites”, “avoiding facebook”, “not looking at him on social media”
<i>Cognitive suppression</i>	“Try not to think about them”, “Block it out of my mind”, “Try to forget about it”, “erase the ex from my mind”
<i>Termination of contact</i>	“Not having any form of contact with him”, “Cut off contact”, “Deleting his number out of my phone”, “Not answering his

calls”

## **Distraction**

- Intentional distraction* “Keep myself busy”, “Keep myself occupied with other things, “Staying busy”, “Make a big busy list. The more I do distracts me from the sadness of loss”
- Work/study* “Throw myself into work”, “Focused more on school work”, “Dedicate myself fully to school”, “Working extra hours”
- Health and fitness* “Use physical exercise to ease stress”, “Going on walks”, “Played sports”, “Yoga, Pilates, hikes”, “Exercise. I know that exercise releases endorphins. Even if I am not in the mood I still do it”, “working out to make myself look/feel better“
- Leisure activities* “Watching movies, making cookies, eating pizza”, “Chocolate therapy”, “Sleeping”, “Watch TV or play games”, “Movies and ice cream”
- New activities/hobbies* “Try new things”, “Engaging in hobbies”, “Booked a holiday”, “Plan exciting new adventures”, “New activities and hobbies”
- Comfort eating* “Ate ice cream”, “eat a lot of chocolate”, “chocolate therapy”. “eating comfort food”

## **Cognitive strategies**

- Positive thinking* “Maintained a positive attitude”, “Focusing on happier memories”, “Trying to think positively about the future”, “There will be opportunities in life for love if I am patient”
- Cognitive restructuring* “Exaggerating the negative in order to 'get over it.'”, “stepping back and trying to look at it from the outside”, “Rationalisation”, “List of pros and cons about the break-up”

## **Emotion Regulation**

- Venting* “Crying”, “Cried to relieve the stress”, “Venting my emotions”. “Crying and letting everything out”
- Expressive writing* “Writing in my journal”, “Writing down feelings”, “writing about the good, bad and ugly”, “Writing down what I want to say to him”, “Writing feelings in poems”
- Emotion modulation* “Meditation”, “Breathing exercises”, “Laughing”, “Giving myself time to be upset – but setting limits”, “Allowing myself to feel all the emotions and choosing to let them go”

## **Withdrawal**

*Passive withdrawal* “I stayed to myself for a while”, “Stayed at home”, “Shutting myself out from the world”, “Sleeping”

**Other categories**

*Drugs/alcohol* “Get drunk”, “Drugs and alcohol”, “Marijuana”, “Smoking cigarettes”, “Drank lots of alcohol”

*Self-care* “Pampering myself”, “Reminding myself that the breakup was not a result of my inadequacies”, “Treat myself well, look after and spoil myself”, “Do what felt good and right for me”

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**Table 3.** Frequencies of coping families and coping strategies

<b>Family and category names</b>	Frequency (%)		
	Overall	Male	Female
<b>Alternate activities</b>	<b>660</b>	<b>132</b>	<b>524</b>
<i>Intentional distraction</i>	191 (25.1)	27 (10.0)	164 (26.2)
<i>Leisure activities</i>	144 (18.9)	26 (19.3)	118 (18.9)
<i>Health and fitness</i>	137 (18.0)	41 (30.4)	96 (15.3)
<i>Work/study</i>	79 (10.4)	14 (10.4)	65 (10.4)
<i>New activities/hobbies</i>	70 (9.2)	20 (14.8)	50 (7.3)
<i>Comfort eating</i>	35 (4.6)	4 (3.0)	31 (4.9)
<b>Seeking support</b>	<b>546</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>465</b>
<i>Talking with friends/family</i>	271 (35.7)	38 (28.1)	233 (37.2)
<i>Spending time with friends/family</i>	200 (26.3)	36 (26.7)	164 (26.2)
<i>Formal social support</i>	39 (5.1)	4 (3.0)	35 (5.6)
<i>Spiritual support</i>	36 (4.7)	3(2.2)	33 (5.3)
<b>Social Relations</b>	<b>409</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>327</b>
<i>Socialising</i>	161 (21.2)	25 (18.5)	136 (21.7)
<i>Casual/dating relationship</i>	110 (14.5)	27 (20.0)	83 (13.3)
<i>Contact with ex-partner</i>	97 (12.8)	21 (15.6)	76 (12.1)
<i>New relationship</i>	41 (5.4)	9 (6.7)	32 (5.1)
<b>Escape-avoidance</b>	<b>403</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>359</b>
<i>Behavioural avoidance</i>	175 (23.0)	17 (12.6)	158 (25.2)
<i>Termination of contact</i>	97 (12.8)	7 (5.2)	90 (14.4)
<i>Cognitive suppression</i>	96 (12.6)	20 (14.8)	76 (12.1)
<i>Social media avoidance</i>	35 (4.6)	0 (0)	35 (5.6)
<b>Emotion Regulation</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>179</b>
<i>Venting</i>	102 (13.4)	5 (3.7)	97 (15.5)
<i>Expressive writing</i>	51 (6.7)	8 (5.9)	43 (6.9)
<i>Emotion modulation</i>	49 (6.4)	10 (7.4)	39 (6.2)
<b>Cognitive strategies</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>129</b>
<i>Cognitive restructuring</i>	102 (13.4)	19 (14.1)	83 (13.3)
<i>Positive thinking</i>	55 (7.2)	9 (6.7)	46 (7.3)

**Other categories**

<i>Drugs/alcohol</i>	93 (12.2)	25 (18.5)	68 (10.9)
<i>Self-care</i>	82 (10.8)	7 (5.2)	74 (11.8)
<b>Withdrawal</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>47</b>
<i>Passive withdrawal</i>	60 (7.9)	13 (9.6)	47 (7.5)
<b>Problem solving</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>35</b>
<i>Problem solving</i>	47 (6.2)	11(8.1)	35 (5.6)

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Presented in descending order of overall frequencies for coping families and coping strategies within each family. Brackets indicate number of responses as a percentage of all respondents, of males and of females.

**Table 4.**

Average helpfulness ratings of coping families – presented in descending order for males and females.

Helpfulness range	Males		Females	
	Coping family	M ( <i>SD</i> ) Helpfulness rating	Coping family	M ( <i>SD</i> ) Helpfulness rating
5-6			Problem solving*	5.21 (1.52)
4-5	Social support	4.96 (1.48)	Social support	4.88 (1.40)
	Self-care	4.83 (1.94)	Cognitive strategies	4.68 (1.61)
	Cognitive strategies	4.78 (1.36)	Self-care	4.63 (1.75)
	Alternate activities	4.58 (1.57)	Alternate activities	4.56 (1.56)
	Social Relations*	4.26 (1.76)	Emotion Regulation*	4.47 (1.51)
	Avoidance/escape*	4.08 (1.72)		
	Problem solving	4.01 (1.62)		
3-4	Passive withdrawal	3.46 (1.90)	Social relations	3.76 (1.78)
	Emotion Regulation	3.43 (2.01)	Passive withdrawal	3.28 (1.72)
	Drugs/alcohol	3.10 (1.81)	Avoidance/escape	3.25 (1.72)
			Drugs/alcohol	3.19 (1.70)

\* T-test suggests that the average helpfulness rating of this coping family was significantly greater for indicated gender. Helpfulness range refers to the following categories: 5-6: Slightly helpful – Very helpful; 4-5: Slightly helpful – Very helpful, 3 – 4: Fairly unhelpful – Slightly unhelpful.

**Chapter 7:**  
**General Discussion**

This thesis sought to explore two overarching research questions: 1) what individual characteristics and coping strategies enable some individuals to adjust positively to a non-marital relationship breakup? And 2) is it possible to identify trainable factors that provide opportunities for intervention? The first study aimed to investigate the unique contribution of five positive psychological factors (mindfulness, optimism, hope, self-esteem and self-compassion) on post-breakup adjustment. Based on the findings of this study, a research practicum was conducted to assess the therapeutic benefits of a brief online self-compassion intervention designed for individuals after a relationship breakup. The second study, then sought to explore the range of coping strategies employed by individuals to deal specifically with relationship breakups, and assess the relative efficacy of these strategies for males and females. Seven general findings and conclusions can be drawn from this research: 1) Many individuals report positive outcomes after a relationship breakup; 2) Positive psychological factors are strongly related to post-breakup adjustment; 3) Different psychological factors are associated with positive and negative post-breakup adjustment; 4) Self-compassion provides a promising avenue for post-breakup intervention; 5) Individuals utilise a broad range of post-breakup coping strategies; 6) There appears to be a discrepancy between the helpfulness and utilisation rate of certain post-breakup coping strategies; 7) Males and females appear to benefit differentially from active vs avoidant forms of post-breakup coping strategies. These findings are discussed in line with previous research, research limitations, clinical implications and directions for future research.

## **7.1 General Findings**

### **7.1.1 Positive post-breakup adjustment.**

The first general finding from this set of studies is that many individuals report positive adjustment following relationship breakups. In all three studies participants reported experiencing positive emotions and positive aspects of mental wellbeing. These findings

indicate that despite experiencing a non-marital relationship breakup, when asked specifically, individuals report the presence of positive experiences. These findings are in line with assertions that when faced with a stressful situation, individuals are able to experience positive emotions and wellbeing alongside distress and negative affect (Tashiro et al., 2006). Indeed, studies increasingly indicate that individuals commonly experience growth, empowerment, relief or even joy after a relationship breakup (Choo et al., 1996; Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Tashiro et al. 2006). These findings suggest that previous research may have disproportionately focused on one side of the post-breakup experience. Whilst it is useful to understand what contributes to greater distress after a breakup, it is at least equally important to develop our understanding of the factors that lead to resilient adaptation. Thus the findings of this research suggest that there is more to be learnt about those who bounce back after a relationship breakup, and that research should continue to investigate and apply findings from the positive end of post-breakup adaptation.

### **7.1.2 Psychological factors strongly relate to post-breakup adjustment.**

The second general finding of this research project indicates that positive psychological factors are strongly related to how one adjusts to a relationship breakup. This finding aligns with assertions from the bereavement literature, proposing that individual beliefs, attitudes and skills play an important role in shaping one's reaction to the loss of a relationship (Mancini & Bonanno, 2009). The findings from study 1 suggest that even after accounting for the circumstances of the relationship and the breakup (i.e. length of a relationship, who initiated the breakup, whether a couple cohabited, had plans to marry, committed to the relationship, or had access to social support after the relationship ended), characteristics of the individual are likely to influence how an individual fares when a relationship ends. This finding is important as the positive psychological factors selected in study 1 are largely trainable and offer opportunity for potential intervention. Thus, these findings suggest that

even if an individual is faced with a contextually difficult relationship breakup, positive psychological factors may offer a range of avenues for enhancing one's level of adjustment. Whilst these findings require replication and refinement, the pattern of results suggest that clinicians may be able to identify key psychological strengths and vulnerabilities after a relationship breakup, and in turn select certain strategies to bolster an individual's post-breakup adjustment.

### **7.1.3 Different factors linked to positive and negative post-breakup adjustment.**

Interestingly, results from study 1 indicate that some positive psychological factors are differentially related to positive and negative post-breakup adjustment. Mindfulness was powerfully related to all outcomes variables, indicating that this capacity may be particularly beneficial in the aftermath of a relationship breakup. Self-esteem and optimism were most strongly linked to lower negative post-breakup adjustment, and to a lesser extent greater positive affect. In contrast, hope and self-compassion were most strongly associated with greater positive adjustment, and to a lesser extent hope was linked to lower breakup distress.

These findings align with recent assertions within the positive psychology literature suggesting that alleviation of distress should not be confused with the enhancement of wellbeing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Specifically, the results suggest that clinicians should be mindful in selecting interventions that target desired therapeutic outcome. Whilst the findings of this research require further substantiation, an issue addressed in more detail in later sections, a number of implications arise from these findings. Firstly, in order to provide a comprehensive response to relationship breakups, clinicians may need to build dual pathways to resilience in order to alleviate distress and enhance positive wellbeing. A clear candidate for building such pathways is mindfulness. Thus, further investigation into the benefits of mindfulness-based interventions in the context of non-marital relationship breakups is indicated. Results further provide a case for investigating the

efficacy of interventions designed to cultivate optimism and self-esteem, in reducing post-breakup distress and generating the experience of greater positive affect. Finally, future research could usefully investigate the role that self-compassion and hope-based interventions play in promoting positive post-breakup adaptation, and easing breakup distress in the case of hope. Such investigations would assist in highlighting the value of matching clinical interventions to the different therapeutic goals of distress alleviation and wellbeing enhancement.

#### **7.1.4 Self-compassion: A potential post-breakup intervention.**

Based on the aforementioned findings of study 1, a brief online self-compassion intervention was delivered to assist individuals following a relationship breakup. Results suggest that self-compassion can be enhanced via a relatively brief intervention delivered online. This is encouraging as internet-based interventions are economical and provide the opportunity to reach individuals who may be reluctant or unable to engage in face-to-face therapy (Barak, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, & Shapira, 2008). In addition to enhancing self-compassion, results indicate that a majority of participants showed improvements in their level of breakup distress, wellbeing and affective balance, after completing the online intervention. These results align with more general findings that relatively brief self-compassion interventions can function to improve wellbeing and alleviate distress (Neff et al., 2007). To our knowledge this is the first study investigating the role of a self-compassion intervention within this context, and whilst it was a small-scale study, results provide preliminary evidence that self-compassion may be a valuable tool for assisting individuals after a relationship breakup.

#### **7.1.5 Broad range of post-breakup coping strategies.**

The content analysis conducted in study 2 uncovered a broad range of coping responses utilised specifically to deal with non-marital relationship breakups. The results of this content

analysis are significant, as previous research in this area has focused on one or two key coping strategies or relied on standard coping inventories. Results of study 2 identified coping strategies such as ‘avoiding an ex-partner on social media’ that are unique to the context of a relationship breakup and not included in standard coping inventories. Thus results from study 2 provide a detailed and up-to-date list of coping strategies that individuals intuitively use to deal specifically with non-marital relationship breakups. Research increasingly suggests that an individual’s coping flexibility, defined as the capacity to use a broad variety of strategies rather than the rigid application of a few coping strategies, is related to resilience and wellbeing (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2003). Thus, a detailed list of post-breakup coping strategies along with average helpfulness ratings may function as a helpful reference tool for clinicians seeking to broaden the coping repertoire of clients struggling with relationship breakups. Further, clinicians and researchers may seek to assess whether individual who utilise more coping strategies or a broader range of coping strategies are better able to adjust to a relationship breakup than those who have a narrower coping repertoire.

#### **7.1.6 Discrepancy between the helpfulness and utilisation rate of certain coping strategies.**

Results from study two suggest a discrepancy between the coping strategies that are likely to be beneficial in the wake of a relationship breakup and the frequency with which they are employed. Particularly for females, it appears that that whilst strategies such as problem solving, emotion regulation and cognitive strategies were rated as most helpful, these strategies were among the least commonly reported. The reason for this apparent discrepancy is unclear, however it is worthy of further investigation. It is possible that strategies such as problem solving, emotion regulation or cognitive strategies are strategies that individuals engage in as part of therapy or counselling, and thus the low rate of uptake

and the level of effectiveness is a reflection of the uptake and success of formal support. Alternatively, it is possible that females less readily utilise more ‘masculine’ forms of coping such as problem solving, however those who do engage in such strategies find them effective. This unexplained discrepancy suggests that such coping strategies may be underutilised resources in the aftermath of a relationship breakup. Thus, interventions designed to promote an individual’s ability to problem solve, regulate emotions or cognitively reframe a situation, may be particularly beneficial for females. As such interventions may offer substantial benefit and provide individuals with skills that they are not frequently utilising.

#### **7.1.7 Gender differences in active vs avoidance-based coping outcomes.**

The fifth general finding of this research is that males appear to benefit more from avoidant-based coping strategies, whilst females appear to benefit more from active forms of coping. It was found that males rated social relations and escape/avoidance as significantly more helpful than females, and males who rated escape/avoidance and alternate activities as more helpful tended to report greater post-breakup wellbeing. In contrast, females tended to rate problem-solving and emotion regulation as more helpful, and females who rated more active forms of coping, such as seeking social support, cognitive strategies and emotional regulation as more helpful, tended to report greater wellbeing following the breakup. These findings align with assertions from role-constraint theory (Tamres et al., 2002), as females tend to take a more active role in managing socio-emotional issues, they may in turn perceive greater control and reinforcement in dealing directly with issues in this domain. In contrast, as males tend to take less of an active role in this domain, they may perceive less control and support in dealing with relationship breakups and thus benefit more from avoiding such issues (Tamres et al., 2002). These findings support assertions that coping strategies are not inherently good or bad, but rather that coping strategies may be more or less adaptive depending on the specific context in which they are used (Lazarus & Folkman 1984). From a

clinical perspective, these findings suggest that traditional ideas about reducing avoidance behaviour and increasing more active forms of coping may be overly simplistic. Further, if the assertions of role constraint theory hold, clinicians may benefit from assessing an individual's perceived role and level of control in dealing with relationship issues, as such information may assist clinicians in assessing whether active or avoidant-based coping strategies may be more or less beneficial for an individual dealing with a relationship breakup.

## **7.2 Limitations**

The findings of this thesis should be considered in light of a number of key limitations. Firstly, study 1 and study 2 were cross sectional in design, thus cause and effect relationships could not be ascertained. Whilst both studies attempted to account for this by controlling for 'time since the breakup', it remains unclear whether positive psychological factors such as higher hope, led to greater wellbeing after the breakup, or if greater wellbeing enhanced one's level of hope for the future. Similarly, in study 2 it is unclear whether certain coping strategies, such as engaging in alternative activities enhanced adjustment to the breakup, or if greater adjustment allowed individuals to engage in other activities. Due to the methodological design of the research practicum, it was also not possible to evaluate cause-and-effect relationships between variables. Specifically, it is not clear whether enhanced self-compassion led to improved post-breakup adjustment or vice versa. Due to these limitations the findings of this thesis should be interpreted with some caution and suggestions for addressing such issues in future research are outlined in the following section.

Secondly, this research was somewhat limited by the measures selected to assess post-breakup adjustment. Study 1 utilised the Impact of Event scale to assess breakup distress;

this scale was originally designed to measure reactions to traumatic events (Horowitz, Wilner, & Alvarez, 1979). As a result this scale may be better able to detect more traumatic levels of distress, and less sensitive to moderate levels of breakup distress. Thus, as in the research practicum, future research may benefit from including the Breakup Distress scale (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2010) in order to assess a fuller range of breakup distress. The remaining outcome measures assessing wellbeing and positive and negative affect were more general and thus did not assess specific reactions to the relationship breakup per se. Future research may benefit from including or developing measures that evaluate positive adjustment or emotional reactions that are specific to relationship breakups, as such measures may provide more detailed insight into the post-breakup recovery process. For example, the negative affect scale used in all studies, assesses common emotions such as sadness, anger and negativity, however scales that incorporate specific post-breakup reactions such as rejection, hurt, longing or heartache may more accurately assess post-breakup adjustment. Further, as relationship breakups are emotionally dysregulating experiences, future research may benefit from tracking fluctuations and variability in emotional experiences over time in order to further develop our understanding of the process of post-breakup emotional recovery (Emery, 1994).

Given that one of the primary aims of this thesis was to identify trainable factors that offer opportunity for intervention, less malleable variables such as personality and attachment style were not included in the research studies. Nevertheless previous research indicates that individual attachment styles and certain personality traits influence one's adjustment to a relationship breakup (Davis et al., 2003; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Watson & Hubbard, 1996). Therefore, the results of this thesis are somewhat limited as it is unclear how different attachment styles or personality traits may have influenced the current findings. Thus, in order to generate a more comprehensive understanding of post-breakup

adjustment, future studies should seek to evaluate the interactive role of positive psychological factors, coping strategies, personality traits and attachment styles. For instance it might be expected that anxiously attached individuals ruminate more about a relationship breakup than avoidant individuals, and thus may benefit more from mindfulness-based or hope-based interventions that assist individuals in reorienting to present and future concerns. Similarly, individuals who score more highly on measures of neuroticism or anxious attachment may experience greater distress in the aftermath of the breakup and benefit more from the use of coping strategies that regulate emotions or interventions such as mindfulness or self-compassion that promote emotional equanimity.

Finally, participants in all three studies largely consisted of young, heterosexual females. Whilst the internet-based design of the research studies diversified sample characteristics somewhat, findings need to be replicated with a more representative sample. Specifically, it would be important to gather more in depth information from males and individuals in same-gender relationships.

### **7.3 Future Research**

The findings, implications and limitations of this thesis provide direction for future research. Thus, an integrated program for future research studies within the area of non-marital relationship-breakups is outlined below. Firstly, the findings of studies 1 and 3 require replication, preferably with more male-representative samples. Longitudinal methodology would assist in evaluating the directionality of relationships between key variables. Specifically, future studies should assess positive psychological factors prior to a relationship breakup, and assess the influence of these factors on positive and negative adjustment once the relationship has ended. It may be possible to gather such information by collecting data from first year university students at the beginning and end of the year, as a

significant proportion of first year university students experience a relationships breakup over the first year of undergraduate study (Gall, Evans & Bellerosa, 2000). Similarly, assessing coping strategies at a set time point after a relationship breakup and evaluating adjustment at later time points would help to clarify the cause-effect relationship of specific coping strategies and related outcomes. As mentioned previously, these studies may benefit from including personality and attachment variables, in order to better understand more complex interactions between influential factors. These studies may provide more comprehensive insight into post-breakup adjustment if measures were also included or developed to assess moderate and more specific reactions to relationship breakups. Given that previous research highlights the impact of relationship breakups on physiological outcomes, future research could also usefully assess links between positive psychological factors and indicators of physiological wellbeing, such as cortisol levels, in order to corroborate and extend upon findings of the current thesis. Finally, it would be valuable to assess whether links between positive psychological factors, coping strategies and post-breakup outcomes hold across different types of relationships. It is worthwhile determining whether marital and non-marital relationships differ simply as a result of having been married or not, or whether such relationships can in fact be studied together along sliding scales of relationship variables such as level of commitment, investment or time spent together.

Results from this set of studies would more clearly and comprehensively identify the positive psychological factors and coping strategies that lead to greater adjustment following non-marital relationship breakups. These variables could then inform the design of specific interventions for individuals struggling with relationship breakups. For instance, if the findings of follow-on studies support the results of the current research thesis, variables such as mindfulness, self-esteem, optimism and hope along with coping strategies such as seeking social support or engaging in alternate activities, may be utilised to develop post-breakup

interventions. Preliminary studies, similar to that conducted in the research practicum, should then be run to economically evaluate whether such interventions are likely to confer benefit in the aftermath of a relationship breakup. Along with the brief self-compassion intervention outlined in the research practicum, interventions that provide promising preliminary results should then be evaluated more rigorously, utilising randomised-control studies. Mediation analyses should also be run in order to identify the mechanisms of change underlying therapeutic interventions and thus. For instance, within self-compassion interventions it would be useful to identify the extent to which different facets of self-compassion, such as self-soothing, mindful awareness or the reduction in self-criticism influence post-breakup outcomes. Similarly, in evaluating mindfulness-based interventions it would be crucial to assess whether such interventions affect change through increasing self-regulation or decreasing emotional reactivity. Such studies would assist in honing in on the most powerful and effective aspects of clinical intervention following relationship dissolution. The long-term goal of this research program would be to develop evidence-based interventions, that enable clinicians to make informed decisions regarding the most suitable and effective treatment for individuals faced with the breakdown of a non-marital relationship.

#### **7.4 Conclusion**

Non-marital relationship breakups are increasingly common and linked to a range of poor mental health outcomes. Despite the incidence and impact of such events, little is understood about why some individuals bounce back more resiliently after a relationship breakup, and how we can assist those who struggle. This thesis has taken important preliminary steps towards identifying a range of trainable factors that are associated with post-breakup adaptation. Study 1 identified a range of key positive psychological factors that were differentially related to positive and negative post-breakup adjustment. Namely, lower mindfulness, self-esteem and optimism corresponded with poorer post-breakup distress,

whilst mindfulness, hope and self-compassion corresponded with positive adaptation following a relationship breakup. Results further suggest that active coping strategies such as seeking social support, cognitive restructuring and emotional regulation may support healthy post-breakup adaptation for females. Whilst males may benefit more from strategies designed to avoid or distract themselves from a relationship breakup. Due to the infancy of this area of enquiry and limitations of this set of research studies, further research is required to replicate and extend upon the findings of these studies. It is hoped that such research will lead to a greater understanding of the factors that support healthy post-breakup adjustment, and in turn create a foundation for clinical interventions that promote adaptation to a problem that the vast majority of young people will encounter.

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**Appendix A:**  
**Materials for Study 1 and Study 2**

Dear Ms Alicia Franklin,

Protocol: 2012/397

Intrapersonal factors associated with adjustment to the breakdown of a romantic relationship

I am pleased to advise you that your Human Ethics protocol received approval by the Chair of the HREC on 21 August 2012.

For your information:

1. Under the NHMRC/AVCC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research we are required to follow up research that we have approved. Once a year (or sooner for short projects) we shall request a brief report on any ethical issues which may have arisen during your research or whether it proceeded according to the plan outlined in the above protocol.
2. Please notify the committee of any changes to your protocol in the course of your research, and when you complete or cease working on the project.
3. Please notify the Committee immediately if any unforeseen events occur that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the research work.
4. Please advise the HREC if you receive any complaints about the research work.
5. The validity of the current approval is five years' maximum from the date shown approved. For longer projects you are required to seek renewed approval from the Committee.

All the best with your research,

Kim

Ms Kim Tiffen  
Ethics Manager  
Office of Research Integrity,  
Research Services,  
Ground Floor, Chancelry 10B  
Ellery Crescent,  
The Australian National University  
ACTON ACT 0200  
T: +61 6125 3427  
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[Kim.Tiffen@anu.edu.au](mailto:Kim.Tiffen@anu.edu.au) or  
[human.ethics.officer@anu.edu.au](mailto:human.ethics.officer@anu.edu.au)



If you....

1. Broke up with your boyfriend/girlfriend within the last YEAR

AND

2. The duration of that relationship was at least 3 months

**PLEASE participate in this study!!**

Our study is interested in how people cope with the breakdown of a romantic relationship (non-marital).

Participation involves filling out a few simple questionnaires online. The study only takes a total of 30 minutes to complete and you will be awarded:

**30 minutes course credit**

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact Alicia Franklin via email: [alicia.franklin85@gmail.com](mailto:alicia.franklin85@gmail.com)

The Break-up Study  
Email: [alicia.franklin85@gmail.com](mailto:alicia.franklin85@gmail.com)

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**THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY  
CONSENT FORM**

You are invited to participate in a study that aims to investigate how people respond to the breakdown of a romantic relationship. Participation in this study involves completing a number of survey questionnaires investigating your reactions to the breakdown of a previous relationship, your use of coping strategies and your current level of wellbeing and psychological distress.

It is expected that the study will take about 30 minutes to complete. If you are a first year psychology student at the ANU you will be awarded 30 minutes course credit for your participation. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary - you are free to withdraw from further participation in the research at any time without penalty.

**Any information or personal details gathered in the course of the study are confidential. The data collected will be stored in a secure place and only the investigators on this project will have access to this data. The results of this study may be published in a journal or discussed with others but not in any way that would identify you.**

It is possible that some questions in this study may concern or upset you. If this is the case, and you would like to discuss anything further you may like to contact one of the following free services:

- The ANU Counselling Centre  
Located above the health service on North road at the ANU  
Phone 6125 2442
- Lifeline telephone counselling services  
Phone 131 114 (24 hours)

**After reading the information above, please provide your consent as indicated below if you would like to participate in this study.**

I give my consent for participation in this study, on the understanding that I am free to stop participating at any time for any reason (in which case my responses will be destroyed) and my responses will remain anonymous:

- Yes
- No

This study is being conducted by Alicia Franklin towards the awarding of a Doctorate of Clinical Psychology under the supervision of Professor Don Byrne, of the Department of Psychology, ANU. If you have any questions about this research please contact either:

Alicia Franklin, Department of Psychology, ANU  
Ph: 02 6125 4100; Email: Alicia.Franklin@anu.edu.au  
Professor Don Byrne, Department of Psychology, ANU  
Ph: 02 6125 3094; Email: Don.Byrne@anu.edu.au

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints or reservations about any ethical aspect of your participation in this research, you may contact:

- Human Ethics Officer, Research Services Office, ANU  
Ph: 6125 7945; Email: Human.Ethics.Officer@anu.edu.au



## THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

### SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

#### INFORMATION FORM

Thank you for taking time to complete this study. Your participation is very much appreciated.

In this study we are aiming to investigate factors which enable some people to cope more effectively with the breakdown of a romantic relationship. Previous research indicates that a number of personal characteristics are related to greater adjustment following loss, such as divorce or bereavement. In the current study we wish to examine whether these variables also relate to people's adjustment following non-marital relationship break-ups. The findings of this study will enable health care professionals to better assist people who are experiencing prolonged distress following the breakdown of a romantic relationship.

It is common for people to feel distressed when experiencing a relationship breakup. If you feel upset or distressed, you may like to contact one of the following free services:

- The ANU Counselling Centre. Ph: 6125 2442  
Located above the health service on North road at the ANU
- Lifeline telephone counselling services. Ph: 131 114 (24 hours)
- Relationships Australia. Ph: 1300 364 277
- Kids Helpline, if you are under 25 years old. Ph: 1800 55 1800

This study is being conducted by Alicia Franklin towards the awarding of a Doctorate of Clinical Psychology under the supervision of Professor Don Byrne, of the Department of Psychology, ANU.

If you have any questions about this research please contact either:

Alicia Franklin, Department of Psychology, ANU  
Ph: 02 6125 4100; Email: [Alicia.Franklin@anu.edu.au](mailto:Alicia.Franklin@anu.edu.au)

Professor Don Byrne, Department of Psychology, ANU  
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**Appendix B:**  
**Materials for Research Practicum**

Dear Ms Alicia Franklin,

Protocol: 2013/553

Self-compassion training following the breakdown of a romantic relationship

I am pleased to advise you that your Human Ethics application received approval by the Chair of the Science and Medical DERC on 4 November 2013.

For your information:

1. Under the NHMRC/AVCC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research we are required to follow up research that we have approved. Once a year (or sooner for short projects) we shall request a brief report on any ethical issues which may have arisen during your research or whether it proceeded according to the plan outlined in the above protocol.
2. Please notify the committee of any changes to your protocol in the course of your research, and when you complete or cease working on the project.
3. Please notify the Committee immediately if any unforeseen events occur that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the research work.
4. Please advise the HREC if you receive any complaints about the research work.
5. The validity of the current approval is five years' maximum from the date shown approved. For longer projects you are required to seek renewed approval from the Committee.

All the best with your research,

Kim

Ms Kim Tiffen  
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# COPING WITH A BREAK-UP?

We are offering a

## 3-WEEK ONLINE PROGRAM

designed to help you deal with the difficulties of a break-up

The program involves completing a number of questionnaires and three 20-minute online workshops over 3 weeks.

The aim of the program is to help you:

Be kinder to yourself



Feel more connected



Balance your emotions



The program is **FREE** and available to people who:

- Have experienced a relationship breakup in the last 6 months
- AND the duration of that relationship was over 3 months

If you participate you will be awarded **2 HOURS COURSE CREDIT**

There are limited spots available so please get in touch asap.

If you are interested in participating please contact Alicia Franklin to discuss your eligibility

The Online Break-up Program  
Email: Alicia.franklin85@gmail.com

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Email: Alicia.franklin85@gmail.com

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## INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

You have been invited to participate in the “The Breakup program”. This program aims to enhance your ability to cope with the breakdown of a romantic relationship by promoting self-compassion via 3 weekly online workshops.

**What does the program involve?** The program involves three phases:

- 1. Before the program begins.** You will complete a brief online surveys twice a week that will take 10-minutes to complete (over the next 2 weeks).
- 2. During the program.** You will be emailed an online workshop once a week that will take approximately 20-minutes to complete. There are a total of 3 workshops, each will include: educational information, brief exercises to practice and a set of questions to monitor your progress. At the completion of each module you will be given the option to schedule a phone session with the researcher/psychologist to discuss the module content and answer any questions.
- 3. After you complete the program.** You will complete a brief online surveys twice a week that will take 10-minutes to complete (over a 3 week period).

### **What are the benefits?**

Taking part in this program will assist you in developing the skills to treat yourself kindly, connect with others, and manage your emotions in a balanced manner. It is expected that these skills will enhance your ability to cope with your relationship breakup. If you are 1<sup>st</sup> year psychology student at the ANU you will also be awarded 2 hours of course credit for your participation.

### **Are there any risks involved?**

It is possible that some individuals may experience some distress when addressing the topic of their relationship breakup. If this is the case for you, you may like to contact one of the following free services:

The ANU Counselling Centre, North road at the ANU Phone 6125 2442

Lifeline telephone counselling services Phone 131 114 (24 hours)

### **Will anyone see my answers?**

All information or personal details gathered in the course of the study are confidential. The researcher will monitor your responses to surveys and seek to make contact if concerns arise regarding your level of distress. The data collected will be stored in a secure place and only the investigators on this project will have access to this data. Results of this study may be published in a journal or discussed with others but not in any way that would identify you.

### **Do I have to take part in the study?**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw for any reason throughout the study without penalty.

### **Want more information?**

This research is being conducted by Alicia Franklin towards the awarding of a Doctorate of Clinical Psychology under the supervision of Prof. Don Byrne, of the Department of Psychology, ANU. If you have any questions or would like further information please contact:

Alicia Franklin, Department of Psychology, ANU  
Ph: 02 6125 4100; Email: Alicia.Franklin@anu.edu.au

Professor Don Byrne, Department of Psychology, ANU  
Ph: 02 6125 3094; Email: Don.Byrne@anu.edu.au

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee. If you have any complaints about this research, you may contact:

Human Ethics Officer, Research Services Office, ANU  
Ph: 6125 7945; Email: Human.Ethics.Officer@anu.edu.au

**Based on the information provided above, I give my consent to participate in the study**

- YES
- NO



**If you would like to keep a copy of this information please print this form**

## Online Self-compassion Program

### Module 1: Self-Kindness

Thank you for completing this survey!



We can now get started on the program.

This program is designed to increase your level of self-compassion in order to help you cope with your relationship breakup.

Self-compassion is made up of 3 components, that we will focus on in each of the workshops over the next 3 weeks, these include:

- Session 1: Self-kindness*
- Session 2: Connection with others*
- Session 3: Balancing emotions*

Throughout the program you will get to know Sophie, Jess and Ben. Along the way they will discuss their recent relationship breakups and share how the program has helped them.



Sophie



Jess



Ben

Let's get started on workshop 1...

## Workshop 1: Being My Own Bestfriend



"I have come to believe that caring for myself is not an act of self-indulgence but an act of survival"

- Audre LordW

In today's session we are going to:

1. Get to know our **self-critical voice**
2. Reflect on: How helpful my self-critical voice is?
3. Learn how to be **kinder to ourselves**

Let's get started.....

When someone close to us experiences something painful or distressing we tend to respond with care and compassion.



Unfortunately, when we are struck by the same difficulties we rarely take time to be kind to ourselves. When things go wrong many of us respond by criticising ourselves or beating ourselves up. For many of us, our **self-critical voice** is so common that we don't even notice it.



When we speak to ourselves like this, we often use a harsh, unyielding tone that can leave us feeling bullied and battered.

Take a moment now to think about some of your own struggles and difficulties - such as your relationship breakup. Notice what sort of thoughts pop up...

Please look at the list below and tick any of the **self-critical thoughts** that come up for you:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> There is something wrong with me                   | <input type="checkbox"/> I don't think I can get through this        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Why doesn't he/she love me anymore?                | <input type="checkbox"/> If only I had....done something differently |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I should be over it                                | <input type="checkbox"/> I wasn't the best person I could have been  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Why can't I move on?                               | <input type="checkbox"/> I wasn't good enough                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'll never find someone to love me like that again | <input type="checkbox"/> I'm not attractive enough                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I'm not coping                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> I didn't try hard enough                    |



If you can think of any other self-critical thoughts that come to mind, add to the list in the space below:

Now.... choose one of the self critical thoughts from above (one that you repeat often in your mind).

In the space below, make a note of **how this self-critical thought makes you feel...**

E.g. Ashamed, rejected, upset, worthless...



Since my ex and I broke up, I haven't been able to stop thinking that:  
"I should have tried harder or done something differently, what is wrong with me?"

I can see now that these harsh, self-critical thoughts leave me feeling lonely, inadequate and rejected

Many of us believe that bullying or criticising ourselves, is a way of motivating ourselves - a way of learning from our mistakes or helping us to be better.

But let's take a closer look at this idea...

Try to think of a teacher, boss or parent who was supportive, encouraging or warm (if you can't think of an example, just imagine one).



Now, try to remember a teacher, boss or parent who was harsh, critical and consistently reminded you of your mistakes and flaws.



Which of these people left you feeling:  
more motivated?  
more confident?  
more capable of dealing with difficult situations?

Even though self-criticism is very common, it isn't particularly helpful. In fact self-criticism usually leaves us feeling deflated, anxious, discouraged and inadequate.

Research also indicates that self-criticism is related to depression, anxiety and dissatisfaction with life.

## SO WHAT IS THE ALTERNATIVE?

To...*STOP* judging, evaluating and criticising ourselves

and instead

START treating ourselves with the kindness and compassion that we would show a dear friend or a loved one.



Take a moment to imagine that someone close to you (a dear friend, a loved one or a family member) has experienced a painful and upsetting relationship breakup

How might you respond to them?

Perhaps you would:

- Give them a hug
- Go for a walk with them
- Offer to help in some way
- Support them through the difficult times
- Reassure them that they are worthwhile and loveable
- Give them hope for the future
- Remind them of their strengths

Care and compassion is within all of us, but unfortunately we tend to reserve such kindness for others.

Everyone is deserving of compassion during difficult times - including ourselves.

How can we learn to use our **supportive voice** rather than our critical voice, in order to be kinder to ourselves?



From the list below, select 5 supportive phrases that soothe and support you:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> May I be kind to myself at this difficult time | <input type="checkbox"/> I am going to be ok |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I have strength                                | <input type="checkbox"/> I am supported      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> There are many people who care about me        | <input type="checkbox"/> I am loved          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I am enough, just as I am                      | <input type="checkbox"/> I am worthwhile     |

If you can think of other phrases that suit you better, please type these into the box below:

Make a note of your supportive phrases now - somewhere that is easily accessible (on your phone, in your diary).

---

## YOUR TASKS FOR THIS WEEK

A copy of these tasks will be sent to you in an email once you have completed today's workshop

### Task 1: Being your own bestfriend

1. Try to notice when you are being self-critical
2. Make an effort to soften the critical voice and repeat one of the 5 supportive phrases that you listed in the last section
3. Add to this list as you think of new ways to to treat yourself kindly.

### Task 2: Listening to a self-kindness audio recording twice over the next week (this recording will be emailed to you)



Once I tuned into my self-critical voice, I was surprised by how harsh and tough I was on myself.

When thoughts like "What's wrong with me" would pop up, I started to respond in a kinder voice, reminding myself...

"This is a tough time and I am looking for reasons why things have turned out this way. But these harsh judgements are creating more pain. Of course there are things I can improve on, but I will support myself on this journey with warmth and acceptance."

Please make a note in the space below of what you have learnt in today's workshop. At the end of the program you will be sent a summary of the program content along with any notes that you have made along the way.

Online Self-compassion Program

Module 2: Mindfulness

Thank you for completing this survey!



Let's get started on workshop 3...

### Workshop 3: No time like the present



"Mindfulness is simply being aware of what is happening right now without wishing it were different; enjoying the pleasant without holding on when it changes; being with the unpleasant without fearing it will always be this way"

- James Baraz

When we are faced with difficult experiences (like a relationship breakup) it can feel like our minds have a life of their own....

Many of us get swept up by painful thoughts and unwanted emotions.

HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED THAT...



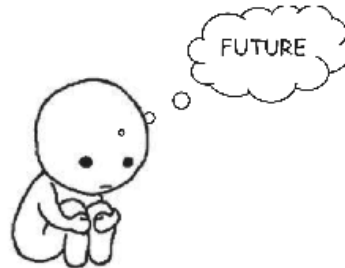
Your mind wanders back to thoughts of your ex-partner or breakup....even when you don't want it to?  
And then...you find yourself re-living the pain, loss or hurt associated with things that happened in the past?

...OR...

You get lost in your worries about the future?

"What if....I don't find someone else.....I can't move on.... or I never get over it"

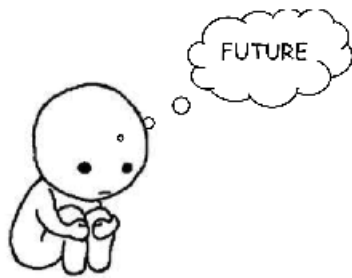
And then... you start pre-living the fear and anxiety of things that haven't even happened yet?





Take a moment to reflect on the thoughts about the PAST that come to mind when you are reminded of your ex-partner or breakup. Make a note of some of these thoughts in the space below...

e.g. "I should have been a better partner", "Did she really love me?", "I still miss waking up next to him"



Now take a moment to reflect on the thoughts about the FUTURE that tend to grab your attention when you are reminded of your ex-partner or breakup. Make a note of some of these thoughts in the space below...

e.g. "She will probably move on and forget about me", "I will never find someone who I love that much again", "I will never get over this"...

When we are not paying attention, our minds often drift onto autopilot.

When we are on autopilot our minds tend to take us back to our most painful memories... or project us forward into our worst imagined futures.

Before we know it we can be a million miles away.... feeling sad or hurt about the past, or worried and fearful about the future.



### WHEN THIS HAPPENS.....

we are no longer in charge of our minds...  
we have lost touch with what is happening here and now...  
we can get distracted and have difficulty concentrating.... and  
we can get caught up with unwanted emotions

SO....WHAT IS THE ALTERNATIVE???

## TO BE MORE MINDFUL



Mindfulness allows us to:

Take charge of our minds..... (so that we don't feel scattered and out of control)

Enjoy each moment in the **here** and **now**.... (instead of worrying about the past or future)

Choose where to **focus** our attention.... (so that we aren't so easily distracted)

Remain **calm** and centred..... (rather than getting swept up by unwanted emotions)

There are 2 simple steps to mindfulness:

**FIRSTLY:** Mindfulness involves being aware and **TUNING-IN** to what is happening right here, right now, in an open and non-judgemental way

and.....

**SECONDLY:** Once we are tuned-in, we can do something **NOW** to help ourselves feel better.

BUT HOW DO YOU DO THIS??

Let's go through a couple of mindfulness exercises together and take a look at how Jess, Ben and Sophie have used these in their daily lives

Exercise: STOP, TAKE A BREATH, OBSERVE, PROCEED



This simple exercise can be done anywhere at any time.

Let's have a go now.....

The first step is to:

### STOP

whatever you are doing right now

It may help to say "STOP" to yourself

...then....

### TAKE A BREATH

Just breathe in and out ....slowly....

Noticing the rise and fall of your breath....

It may help to think "Breathing in" as you inhale.... and think "breathing out" as you exhale...

keep doing this for a few moments...

...then....

### OBSERVE

Observe what is going on in your body - Gently scan your body for any emotions... any tension or discomfort...

.Observe what is running through your mind... thoughts... images...

Observe what is happening around you.....

### PROCEED

Now that you have taken a moment to notice what is happening inside and around you - right here, right now.

Make a decision about what you could do today that is helpful or useful for you...

(Make a note of this in your diary)



JESS, 25 YEARS OLD

"Since we broke up, I always come across little reminders of my ex-boyfriend. The other day I was driving to uni and saw a guy wearing a jumper that my ex-boyfriend used to wear. Straight away my mind started skipping....

"I used to love cuddling up to him in that jumper"....  
"I'll never get to cuddle him like that again"....  
"I miss him so much"....  
"I can't believe he left"....

I noticed that I had gotten caught up in these horrible thoughts about the past... and by the time I arrived at uni I was feeling really miserable and heartbroken....

.... So I decided to practice the STOP technique.

I told myself to "STOP" and focused my attention on breathing...

When I scanned my body, my thoughts and my environment - I felt much more in-tune with myself and could refocus more clearly on the day ahead, without getting so bogged down with thoughts of my ex.

I realised that..the past was behind me...

I was then able to take charge of the present moment

I asked myself.... WHAT WOULD BE MOST HELPFUL FOR ME TO DO RIGHT NOW?

I made a decision to go to the library at uni and put together a plan for the year ahead... This helped me to feel hopeful and excited.

It sounds simple - but this little exercise really helped me to break my cycle of painful thoughts!"

#### Exercise: COMING TO MY SENSES



Here is a beautifully simple exercise to help you TUNE-IN to what is happening right now..

Take a few deep breaths and when you are ready, fill out the boxes below...

1. Look around the room and note down 5 **BLUE** objects that you can **SEE**.



e.g. Shirt, rug, flower

2. Now note down (and describe) 5 things that you can **FEEL** against your skin



e.g. warm socks, back against the chair, finger tips on keyboard...

3. Close your eyes for a moment, and listen carefully until you can list 5 things that you can **HEAR**:



e.g. birds chirping, air conditioning...

4. Now, take a moment to observe the **THOUGHTS** that are running through your mind. Note down 5 of them in the space below:



e.g. "This is silly", "I can't think of anything", "my mind has gone blank"...



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Hopefully, while you were doing this exercise you were able to tune-in to what was going on inside you and around you...right here, right now....

Let's have a look at how Sophie and Ben have used this technique to TUNE-IN and ACT NOW in order to help themselves.



SOPHIE, 29 YEARS OLD

"On the weekends I try to see my friends a lot. Last weekend a couple of my closest friends came over, one of them recently got married, and the other is 6 months pregnant. When they left I found myself wondering if I will ever find someone else and worrying that I have missed my chance. In no time at all I was feeling really lonely and hopeless.."

I noticed that I had been swept away by worries about the future.... So I decided to use the *COMING TO MY SENSES* technique....I took note of the things that I saw, heard, felt and thought....

It helped me to realise that I am *HERE* right now, but my thoughts were taking me away to a depressing, imaginary future.

I decided to direct my attention to something that I could do *NOW* to create a brighter future for myself (rather than sitting and worrying about it all the time)

So I called my best friend and we spoke about plans for a road trip we are doing together in the summer holidays

The process of Tuning-in and Acting *NOW* really helped me to take charge - in a matter of moments. I was able to shift myself from a sense of hopelessness to taking positive action.



BEN, 20 YEARS OLD

"I've been having a lot trouble concentrating at work lately. The smallest reminders of my ex-girlfriend can side-track me for hours. Like yesterday a new photo of her popped up on Facebook. Before I knew it I was on her page and searching for signs of what she is up to now, who she is spending time with and whether she is happy or not. I had all of this work piling up and I felt like I couldn't focus...

I decided to go for a walk outside for a bit. I tried to be mindful of all the things that I could see and hear... I paid attention to how my body felt as I was walking...my feet, my arms, my legs.....

It was such a relief to get out of my own head for a few moments...

When I got back to my desk I checked-in with myself, and decided that the most helpful thing that I could do would be to turn my Facebook off and organise to see some friends after work.

I was able to get back to focusing on my work pretty quickly after that.

Please make a note in the space below of what you have learnt in today's workshop. At the end of the program you will be sent a summary of the program content along with any notes that you have made along the way.

#### TASKS FOR THIS WEEK: Mindfulness

TASK 1: Over the next week try to notice when your mind has swept you away... When you notice this:

1. TUNE-IN to what is happening right here, right now - by using the STOP or MY-SENSES technique
2. Then refocus your attention on doing something NOW that is helpful for you

TASK 2: Listen to a mindfulness audio recording twice over the next week (this recording will be emailed to you)

## Online Self-compassion Program

### Module 3: Common Humanity

## Workshop 2: You Are Not Alone



"You will encounter frustrations. Losses will occur, you will make mistakes, bump up against your limitations, fall short of your ideals. This is the human condition, a reality shared by all"

- Kristen Neff

Workshop 2 is designed to help you:

1. Become aware of thoughts that make us feel isolated and alone after a breakup
2. Connect with the pain and suffering that all human beings experience
3. Start to cultivate compassion for ourselves and others

When we experience a relationship breakup we often feel **lonely, isolated, rejected and disconnected**.

It can feel like we've lost not only our best friend and partner, but also our shared sense of hope, future and friendship circles.



The loss of someone close to us can leave us feeling like we have a large hole in our lives.

This hole can seem even bigger when we feel alone in our pain.

Since the breakdown of your relationship have you noticed any of these thoughts popping up?

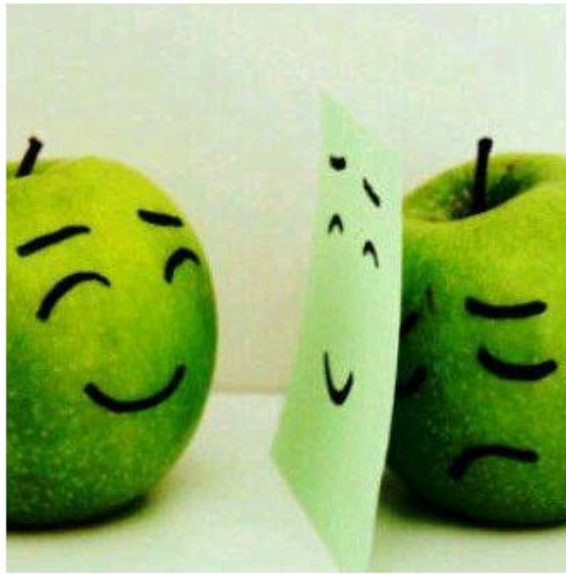
- Other people seem to be ok
- My ex has probably moved on
- Why can't I be happy like everyone else?
- I don't think I'll ever find someone like that again
- No one knows how I really feel
- This isn't normal
- Will I be alone forever?
- I 've lost my bestfriend, the only person who really knew me
- Who will want me now?
- Nobody wants to be around me
- I've been left behind
- I feel totally abandoned
- Nobody understands what I'm going through
- What is wrong with me?
- How can my ex just walk away?
- My ex seems to be fine, why am I the one left behind?

Sadly, when things go wrong we tend to focus on things that we don't like about ourselves and our lives. We also compare ourselves with others (including our ex-partner) and imagine that they are coping better than us.

This can leave us feeling different, disconnected and cut off from others.

At precisely the moment that we need support, these thoughts can make it even harder to reach out to others.

Whilst we may feel alone - the reality is that many of us share similar experiences.



People often hide their pain by acting as though they are fine. This can leave many of us thinking.... what is wrong with me? Why can't I get over it like everyone else?

Take a moment to consider the experiences of Jess, Ben and Sophie....



SOPHIE, 29 YEARS OLD

"My ex-partner and I were living together for 2 years. I felt like I had found my life partner and we often spoke about building a future together. One day he came home and told me that his feelings had changed. It was a complete shock, he seemed to have made the decision without me even knowing that there was anything wrong. A few weeks later he seemed to be doing fine. I was embarrassed and felt like I needed people to see that I was as "over it" as he was. Secretly I was devastated - I just couldn't understand how he could walk away and move on so quickly after everything we had shared. A lot of my friends are getting engaged and having babies now, and I am scared that I will be left behind."



BEN, 20 YEARS OLD

"I moved away from home to start uni in Canberra at the beginning of the year. At first, my girlfriend and I tried to do long distance, but after a few months she said that it was too hard and that we were too young.

I know it was probably the right decision but I still miss her a lot. I don't really have the kind of friends here who I can talk to about this stuff. My uni mates just say "get over it" and "you'll be fine" which makes me feel like I can't talk to them about it. Everyone else seems to be having a great time going out and getting drunk. I feel like everyone expects me to be over her and sometimes I think that there is something wrong with me because I don't seem to be able to forget about her."



JESS, 25 YEARS OLD

"I broke up with my boyfriend 6 months ago. We were together on and off for 3 and a half years. When we met I fell completely in love with him. I gave so much to our relationship that I kind of lost myself along the way. When we broke up I wasn't really sure who I was without him anymore. I felt like I had lost him and also myself. Worst of all, I felt like no one else understood me the way that he did which made it even harder to let go. There were so many nights that I would cry myself to sleep, but I never wanted to tell anyone because I thought they would think I was weak or boring."

Broken dreams, rejection and inadequacy are feelings that all of us experience in our lives.

If we can compassionately remind ourselves in times of falling down that countless others have gone through similar hardships, then the pain still hurts, but it isn't compounded by feelings of isolation.



Accepting that we all experience pain and hardship in different shapes and forms, enables us to reach out to others, rather than feeling alone in our suffering.

Reflecting on the difficulties that we all face (including our ex-partners) can also help us to feel more compassionate and more connected to others.

"Once I remembered that having problems and challenges was normal, I didn't feel so alone"

- Kristen Neff

Exercise:

In the space below, spend a couple of minutes writing down how your experience of breaking up with your partner is similar to other people's hardships. It might help to think of a few people that you know who have also gone through a difficult time. This might include acknowledging that part of being human involves having faults, making mistakes, facing challenges and set-backs.

If you are unsure, read through Sophie's response below.



"After the breakup, I had started feeling really isolated - like no-one knew how bad I felt...

It helped to remind myself that:

We all experience the pain of loss and rejection at some point, it is part of being human. I thought of friends of mine who had lost parents, lost jobs, lost relationships and loved ones. Everyone I know, even people who I pass on the street have their own stories, their own pain. There are things that I regret, like everyone I guess. Reminding myself of this made me feel less alone in my struggles..."

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Now that we have started to see our own struggles, in light of the struggles that we all face.

Hopefully we can start to cultivate warmth and compassion.... for ourselves and others who face difficulties.



#### Tasks for this week:

A copy of these tasks will be sent to you in an email once you have completed today's workshop

##### Task 1: Kindness for self and others

- Do something kind or helpful for **yourself** this week e.g. Have a warm bath, watch a funny movie, return to a favourite book. Give yourself permission to do something nice for yourself - A list of suggested activities will be emailed to you.
- Once you have done something for yourself, do something kind or helpful for **someone else** who is going through a difficult time. This doesn't have to be something big - it can just be a simple gesture e.g. calling a friend, sending a nice message, cooking for someone.

Task 2: Listening to a self-other compassion audio recording at least twice over the next week (this recording will be emailed to you)