

The Break-up Experience of Romantic Relationship and Post-traumatic Growth Among Vicenarian Adults

S Subatraa Subramaniam¹, Asong Joseph^{2*}, Mimi Fitirana³, Walton Wider⁴ and Surianti Lajuma⁵

¹*Faculty of Arts & Science, International University of Malaya-Wales, 50480 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

²*Faculty of Education and Humanities, UNITAR International University, 47301 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia*

³*Faculty of Behavioural Sciences, HELP University, 50490, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

⁴*Faculty of Business and Communications, INTI International University, 71800 Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia*

⁵*Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 Bukit Kayu Hitam, Kedah, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

This paper explains the breakup experiences of romantic relationships, coping strategies, and post-traumatic growth (PTG) among vicenarian adults. It employed a qualitative-based research design using a phenomenological method. Snowball and purposive sampling methods were used to select seven participants with a background of romantic relationship breakup experience within two years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect participant data, and data were analyzed using a thematic analysis procedure. This study found that romantic relationships included understanding of love, utmost happiness in love, and need in love. In contrast, breakups indicated decision-making, emotional impact, and self-blame. Besides, the result also reported that the coping methods involved emotional engagement and acceptance state (duration taken to overcome the emotions). After a romantic relationship breakup, self-growth was found more in personal strength, close relationships, new possibilities, spiritual development, and greater appreciation of life as

PTG implications. The findings concluded that breakup-experienced participants coped through the grief process and enhanced their self-growth. This study helped to create awareness among society to view their grief as a growth-oriented process.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 10 October 2023

Accepted: 22 August 2024

Published: 16 December 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47836/pjssh.32.4.01>

E-mail addresses:

tarasubatraa@gmail.com (S Subatraa Subramaniam)

song.aj24@gmail.com (Asong Joseph)

mimi.f@help.edu.my (Mimi Fitirana)

walton.wider@newinti.edu.my (Walton Wider)

surianti.lajuma@uum.edu.my (Surianti Lajuma)

* Corresponding author

Keywords: Breakup experience, coping mechanism, mental health, post-traumatic growth, romantic relationship, stages of grief

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian young adults aged between 18 and 29 were found to be more prone to committing suicide due to various mental health issues (Chua & Rao, 2021). Particularly at this age when they have personally experienced romantic dissolution or breakup (McKiernan et al., 2018). Although the negative effects of such relationships are well-known, breakups have not been widely discussed (Norona et al., 2017). A survey conducted by Field in 2017 revealed that experiencing a romantic breakup can harm one's emotional and physical health. Some of these include revenge or anger, overreactions, and substance abuse.

According to Franklin (2015), individuals who have broken up can then start to follow the three main paths: recovery, resilience, and chronic dysfunction. Chronic dysfunction can cause various mental health issues like depression and anxiety. In addition, it can trigger post-traumatic stress by causing symptoms such as avoidance and denial. Despite how painful it can be, breakups can still lead to positive outcomes like post-traumatic growth, especially when coping techniques are utilized properly. This growth can explain how freedom, comfort, and relief can be felt following a break-up. Although post-traumatic growth is not a cure for all situations, it can help individuals develop a stronger sense of resilience and manage their stress levels (Logan et al., 2021).

There has been a rising number of suicides and depression among young adults due to the increasing number of breakups.

It suggests that the current mental health measures are ineffective at preventing these issues (Mofatteh, 2020). A lack of knowledge about coping mechanisms and grief can prevent people from enjoying life (Gongora & Vásquez-Velázquez, 2018). Due to the limited research on the effects of breakups on growth (Kansky & Allen, 2018), the main purpose of this study was to accumulate testimony while identifying the types of effective coping methods that contribute to experiencing post-traumatic growth.

Present Study

This study focuses on exploring the experiences of romantic relationship breakups and post-traumatic growth among vicenarian adults. Specifically, it aims to explore the dynamics of romantic relationships and breakups within this age group, to identify the coping methods employed by vicenarian adults during a breakup, and to expose vicenarians' perception of their self-growth following a romantic relationship breakup.

Underpinning Theory

The Stages of Grief Model by Kübler-Ross (1970), the Transaction Model of Stress by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), and the Post Traumatic Growth theory by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) provide a solid framework for understanding the experiences of vicenarians following the breakup of a romantic relationship.

Kübler-Ross's Stages of Grief Model describes a five-stage grieving process:

denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This model, which was initially developed to comprehend the emotional journey of terminally ill patients, has since been widely applied to a variety of loss experiences, including the end of romantic relationships. This model provides a framework for comprehending the complexities and nuances of the emotional journey that young adults experience during a breakup. It permits a systematic examination of the numerous emotions, responses, and adjustments that comprise the breakup experience for this demographic.

Lazarus and Folkman's Transaction Model of Stress is utilized to further comprehend the coping mechanisms utilized by vicenarians during breakups. Individuals respond to stressors using either problem- or emotion-focused coping strategies. Using this model, research can investigate the types of coping strategies vicenarian adults employ during the experience of a breakup, specifically whether they are more prone to problem-focused or emotion-focused coping strategies.

The final component of the theoretical triad is Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) Post Traumatic Growth theory. This theory posits that following psychological conflicts resulting from adversity, individuals frequently experience positive development. This growth can manifest in various ways, including a greater appreciation for life, altered priorities, improved relationships, a stronger personal fortitude, and the recognition of new opportunities or life paths. By applying this theory, research can

investigate how vicenarians perceive their personal growth and development following the end of a romantic relationship.

The three theories collectively constitute this study's theoretical foundation, each addressing a distinct aspect of the vicenarian experience following a breakup. They enable a comprehensive examination of vicenarians' emotional journey, coping mechanisms, and subsequent personal development, providing valuable insights for professionals in mental health, education, and social policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research conceptualizes coping as a proactive strategy in managing breakup-induced grief, with an emphasis on the physiological reactions that mitigate the negative impact. In the immediate aftermath of a breakup, cognitive processing becomes integral in recognizing and pursuing avenues for growth. Field et al. (2021) found that coping is a dynamic process to manage the emotional and psychological distress stemming from romantic breakups. Although breakups can trigger grief and negative emotions, they can also stimulate cognitive processing and personal growth (Crowder et al., 2022).

The Transactional Model of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) highlights the significance of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies in navigating the aftermath. For problem-focused coping, cognitive-level methods are underpinned, such as problem-solving abilities, goal setting, and analysis of

interpersonal disagreements, as well as behavioral-level actions such as participating in smoking cessation programs, consenting to prescribed medical treatments, or dedicating time to certain activities. On the other hand, emotion-focused coping involves cognitive-level methods that aim to reduce stressful thoughts and increase positivity, along with behavioral-level actions such as seeking social support, exercising, relaxing, meditating, and joining support groups (Algorani & Gupta, 2024).

Emerging adults who effectively navigate breakups may experience post-traumatic growth (PTG; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This positive change encompasses a renewed appreciation for life and reevaluation of priorities, deeper connections with others, increased self-efficacy and resilience, exploration of existential questions and spirituality, and pursuit of new interests and life paths, fostering a renewed sense of purpose (Crowder et al., 2022; Kansky & Allen, 2018; Tiron & Ursu, 2023). According to Ramos and Leal (2013), first, the appreciation of life and altered sense of priorities stem from a newfound acceptance of uncontrollable and unpredictable life events. Second, the trauma's impact often leads to recognizing the need for support systems and fostering closer relationships with friends or family. Third, an increased awareness of personal strength is seen as an affirmation of one's capability to endure future challenges and distress. Fourth, the development of spirituality comes to the fore through religious questioning or leaning

toward spiritual growth. Fifth, emerging new possibilities prompt exploring novel opportunities across various life domains. However, PTG is not universal, and some individuals may experience prolonged distress (Field et al., 2021). Overcoming adversity, such as breakups, can foster resilience and personal strength. This study aims to explore these coping mechanisms and PTG trajectories in emerging adults. By understanding how individuals navigate and grow from breakups, we can develop more effective interventions and support systems.

METHODS

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative-based research design, employing a phenomenological method to collect participant data. Qualitative is an overarching term encompassing various interpretive techniques to describe, decipher, or elucidate meanings of specific social phenomena (Rahman, 2016). The research method used in this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a systematic approach examining lived experiences and social worlds (Noon, 2018). Ethical considerations should cover the whole research process, starting from choosing the research topic and continuing to publish the results. The present study followed the basic principles of research ethics throughout the research process. Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the International University of Malaya-Wales. Participants received written and oral information about the

study and the principles of voluntary participation. They could contact the researcher if they had further questions and abstain from participating without a reason. All participants signed consent forms, and they were able to withdraw from the study at any stage. The data was treated and reported confidentially. In addition, the results were reported openly and honestly.

Sample

Seven participants were chosen from Peninsular Malaysia using the purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The purposive sampling technique was used to choose participants with a background of romantic relationship breakup within the past two years. Thus, it was uncommon. This study employed the snowball method, requesting the initial participant to refer to others who match the sampling criteria, which eventually expanded the sample size of the research. The data was collected between March and April 2022 via the interview method. The summary of the participants’ background is presented in Table 1.

Instrument

This study employed a semi-structured interview approach, which facilitated open-ended questioning. Using open-ended questions eliminates the notion that every question has a right or wrong answer. This approach allowed participants to freely express their thoughts and ideas, leading to more accurate and insightful responses (Perdana et al., 2019). When participants

experienced difficulty answering or provided brief responses, the interviewer utilized cues or prompts to encourage deeper reflection (Mathers et al., 2002). The current study developed 15 semi-structured questions divided into three sets of questions. The sample interview questions are as follows:

“What was your emotional expression or thoughts towards the breakup incident? Describe more...”

“What was your perception about yourself during the breakdown?”

“How do you manage your emotions during breakdowns?”

“If you could build a relationship in future, what are the things you would like to change from your previous relationship? Explain more.”

“How do you feel about yourself after managing your emotions during a breakup?”

Table 1
Demographic background of participants

Variable	Total (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	1	14.29
Female	6	85.71
Age		
20–25	4	57.14
26–30	2	42.86
Current relationship status		
Single	6	85.71
In relationship	0	0.00
Complicated	1	14.29
Romantic relationship breakup background		
1 relationship within 1 year	1	14.29
1 relationship within 2 years	3	42.85
2 relationships within 2 years	3	42.85

Source: Author’s work

“What is the difference between yourself when you were in the relationship and now after the breakup recovery? Explain more...”
 “How do you live or appreciate your life now?”

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed as the method for data analysis in this study. Following the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012), the analysis involved a detailed examination and description of the various themes and ideas that emerged from the data. The analysis process consisted of six steps: familiarization with the data, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up the findings. The codes created in this study were confirmed and validated by experts in the field. This approach was used to understand the participants’ conceptualizations of their romantic

relationship and breakup experiences, identify the coping methods to navigate breakup grief and explore their perceptions of growth following the breakup.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis employed thematic analysis, identifying four main themes: romantic relationships, breakups, coping mechanisms, and self-growth, accompanied by sixteen subthemes. The verbatim interview responses were categorized under each subtheme, as presented in Table 2, aligning with the research questions.

The Experience of Romantic Relationships and Breakup Among Vicenarians Adult Romantic Relationship

This theme centers around romantic relationships and participants’ experiences in love, which bring about feelings of sheer happiness, excitement, life satisfaction, and ecstasy (Pal, 2020). Most participants

Table 2
Thematic analysis of the experience of romantic relationships and breakup among vicenarian adults

Section	Themes	Subthemes
The experience of romantic relationships and breakup among vicenarians adult.	i. Romantic relationship	a) Understanding of love b) Utmost happiness in love c) Need in love
	ii. Breakup	a) Decision making b) Emotional impact c) Self-blame
The types of coping methods that vicenarians employed during the experience of break up.	iii. Coping method	a) Emotional management b) Acceptance state c) Duration taken to overcome
The vicenarians’ adult perception of self-growth after romantic relationship breakup experience.	iv. Self-growth	a) Personal strength b) Close relationship c) New possibilities d) Spiritual development e) Greater appreciation of life

Source: Author’s work

regarded love as an essential need in their lives, coupled with a desire for understanding. The subthemes, namely, understanding of love, utmost happiness in love, and need in love, will be further elaborated to provide a deeper understanding of these experiences.

Understanding of Love

Based on the responses, most participants viewed love as a motivating and driving force. They believed that being in love encouraged them and served as a catalyst for achieving their goals. For example, participants shared descriptions of love as a form of encouragement that propelled them forward:

“The name love, but it’s a kind of support a partner gives you to lead a life you wish. It’s kind of like a form of motivation.”—P3

The researchers believe the perspective on love as a driving force for personal growth implies a profound link between romantic partnerships and individual aspirations during this formative stage of life. As mentioned in Montgomery (2005), the findings suggest that romantic relationships help develop a person’s sense of self and enable emerging adulthood to explore their goals and values.

Utmost Happiness in Love

It was observed that most participants placed a high priority on meeting their partner’s needs. It was driven by their desire for profound happiness and fulfillment within

the relationship. For example, participants shared instances where they expressed a willingness to sacrifice anything for the sake of their partner’s love:

“Oh, I prioritized my partner all the time... I just like to let him decide whatever he wants to lead to the relationship... doing things for him makes me happy during that time.”—P2

However, researchers highlight that while prioritizing a partner’s needs can be a strong aspect of a healthy relationship, excessive self-sacrifice can lead to imbalance and resentment. While this Ruppel and Curran (2012) study emphasizes the dual nature of self-sacrifice, where it is beneficial in certain instances, excessive sacrifice can harm a person’s well-being and relationship satisfaction.

Need in Love

In general, participants expressed that their partners’ efforts were indicative of the strength of the relationship. They believed that having the right mindset and making efforts for their loved ones were essential to maintaining a healthy relationship. For example, participants highlighted the value they placed on the time and effort demonstrated by their partners:

“The most loved moment during my relationship... the time and the effort that the man-made for me... his care through his actions... makes me feel that I’m the one of

the most um luckiest girls... melt away the way he shows love.”—P4

Researchers underscore the importance of active engagement and commitment in nurturing a strong and satisfying partnership, which aligns with research that underscores the impact of responsive actions and dedication to relationship contentment. Similarly, the Investment Model concept states that commitment is influenced by satisfaction and the quality of the relationship’s alternatives (Rusbult et al., 1998). Therefore, the more committed a partner is, the more likely they are to actively participate in improving their relationship.

Breakup

This theme provides a clear understanding of the profound grief symptoms experienced because of a breakup. Disrupted attachment can lead to deficit-driven reactions, as highlighted by McKiernan et al. (2018). Participants shared that the breakup elicited a range of emotions, including guilt, anxiety, and anger. The subthemes, namely, decision-making, emotional impact, and self-blame, will be further discussed to explore these experiences.

Decision Making

Based on the responses, it was observed that most participants decided to initiate the breakup. They expressed that their interests, values, and feelings were not as strong as initially believed. Factors such as incompatibility and communication skills

played a role in their decision-making process. For example, participants shared instances where they decided to end the relationship:

“... break from this relationship because I realized that being here holding on to something that will not happen in the future... I decided where I shouldn’t suffer anymore... it was very painful, but at the end of the day, I still thought let it be pain now, not later in future...”—P1

As researchers show up, it exemplifies the challenging decision-making process when contemplating ending a relationship, where one must carefully consider the current distress against the possibility of enduring future hardship. Le et al. (2010) explored various factors that can predict the dissolution of a relationship. It found that although current dissatisfaction is a common factor that can lead to a breakup, people also consider other factors, such as the quality of their partners’ relationships and the perceived value of their partners’ alternatives. It suggests that people are more likely to consider the present pain when deciding to end a relationship rather than the future gains.

Out of the seven participants, only one experienced the unexpected abandonment of her partner due to a fatal accident. Facing such a sudden loss can be extremely disorienting and shocking, which significantly impacts her ability to cope with the situation. The participant’s experience serves as an example of the challenges

faced in handling unexpected and traumatic circumstances.

“Okay, actually, uh, my relationship doesn’t go into a breakup incident... My partner passed away, so it was an unexpected situation, and I could not bear it. That is no more with me in person... the moment... when I received a call saying... my partner had an accident, and it’s no more... everything... shattered all my memories. I feel blank. I feel I have nothing to do. I feel my hope is lost...”—P7

Researchers also emphasize individuals who encounter light on the distinct difficulties of dealing with unforeseen loss, which can be notably disorienting and burdensome, especially in the absence of anticipatory grief. Chan and Ho’s (2009) handbook covers various aspects of the bereavement process, including the difference between anticipated and unexpected losses. It highlighted that unexpected losses can be particularly challenging to deal with, as they can make it harder for people to process their feelings.

Emotional Impact

It was observed that all participants experienced the stages of grief following their breakup incidents. Many participants expressed their feelings of being overwhelmed and in pain during the initial stages of loss and sadness. For instance, one participant shared their struggle in managing their grief:

“... after my breakdown... I cried a lot. I was in a denial state that these things should not happen... a god is a bad person who took away my loved one... I started to bargain... hitting myself... I feel very missed, and it takes time for me to go into the acceptance mindset... I have to live my life...”—P6

For this part, the researcher emphasizes that grieving is a normal response to loss, varying in intensity based on individual factors and relationships. According to Bonanno’s (2004) research, grief is a complex process that various factors can trigger. He highlights the variety of responses to loss and the concept of resilience, which suggests that people can cope with their difficulties. It suggests that the duration and intensity of grief can vary depending on individuals’ coping mechanisms and resilience.

Self-blame

All participants who ended a relationship tend to blame themselves, even when it is not their fault. They believe that their insecurities were the cause of the breakup. For example, participants expressed the belief that their shortcomings and negative behaviors drove them away from their partners:

“Negative thoughts... Am I not eligible enough? I always compare myself with others... what’s the thing that makes her better than me... I doubt myself... my ability... my appearance and others.”—P2

As explained in the literature review, the coping strength is an inclination to self-blame in vicenarians post-breakup, which underscores their vulnerability to self-criticism and negative self-perception. According to Tashiro and Frazier's (2003) study, young adults tend to blame themselves after a breakup, which can prevent them from moving on with their lives; where studies believe this behavior is triggered by their growing up phase, during which time they are still developing their identities.

The Types of Coping Methods that Vicenarians Adults Employed During the Experience of Break-up

Coping Mechanism

This theme highlights how participants manage the process of going through a breakup. It is evident that many of them experience symptoms related to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and undergo changes in their physical and emotional well-being, including engaging in self-destructive behaviors (Mann et al., 2024). The subthemes, emotional management, acceptance state, and duration taken to overcome, will be further explored to provide a deeper understanding of these aspects of coping with the breakup.

Emotional Management

Based on the responses, it is evident that the process is challenging for all participants regardless of who initiated the breakup. They go through both short-term and long-term steps to overcome the breakup, with the ultimate goal of establishing a healthier

relationship with themselves. For example, participants shared insights into the effects of the dissolution process on their overall well-being and emphasized the importance of navigating through it to move forward:

"... I was in pain, and I diverted myself. First, I tried to suppress my emotions by consuming alcohol for three months to help me sleep and feel better about everything. The second level of suppression came when I found another guy. I started to channel my pain into him. When I reached the acceptance stage, I began to believe that whatever I'm going through now will eventually bring blessings into my life and help me live a better life in the future."—P4

"In the first few months, I started drinking almost every week. I went out with my friends and tried to forget her. I even tried meeting and sleeping with other women. Eventually, I stopped all of that and turned to religion. For the first few months, it did help, but then all the memories came back. I started watching stand-up comedy on YouTube, going to the gym, and trying to improve my physical appearance for myself."—P6

Based on the coping technique mentioned, the researcher has indicated that challenges can lead to positive transformations. As stated in Masten (2001), overcoming obstacles and thriving in the

face of adversity is referred to as resilience, where this skill can be developed and improved through challenging experiences, such as breakups. It can also boost one's self-efficacy and emotional regulation and improve one's outlook on life.

Acceptance State

The findings of this study indicate that participants have reported experiencing a sense of comfort and positive energy when they accept the breakup. They feel better about themselves when they let go of their former partner. For example, participants shared instances where they described a sense of disengagement from their past relationship, highlighting the positive impact it had on their overall well-being:

“I just couldn't accept the fact that we broke up because there were so many promises we didn't get to fulfill. It was painful for me to face reality. I started to get mad at him for causing me so much pain and heartbreak. I redirected my anger into exercising and kickboxing. Eventually, I began to accept the breakup and realized that our relationship wouldn't happen again. I saw this as an opportunity to learn from my past mistakes and carry those lessons into the future, knowing that time will heal these wounds.”—P4

As this dwells on grief stages, the researcher highlighted that moving from anger and denial to acceptance seems vital in healing emotional wounds post-breakup.

Sbarra and Emery's (2005) study was to analyze the impact of a breakup on an individual's emotional trajectory. It revealed that negative emotions, such as anger and sadness, peak immediately following a breakup and gradually decrease throughout the following months. It suggests that undergoing the initial stages of emotional recovery is necessary for people to get back on track.

Duration Taken to Overcome

Based on the responses, the time needed for recovery following a breakup appears to be influenced by the level of emotional investment in the relationship. This pattern was evident among most participants, who took at least a year to move on. For example, participants expressed their difficulties in finding stability, even after several years had passed. However, they acknowledged their growing ability to regain footing and move forward.

“Okay, it took me two years... After my breakup, whenever I saw any other guys, I still felt like I couldn't move on, like ‘Oh, everything is gone, my whole world is dark.’ Even when my friends had small gatherings, they thought it would remind me of him. I felt like I had nothing at that particular moment. I knew I had to change my mindset and transform myself into something different.”—P3

Based on the respondents, the researcher indicates that factors like relationship length, attachment style, and coping resources

influence post-breakup recovery duration. Sbarra and Emery (2005) have shown that prolonged relationships can take longer to recover due to the increased emotional investment and the complexity of the separation process.

The Vicenarians' Adult Perception of Self-growth After Romantic Relationship Breakup Experience

This discussion provides insights into the main theme of self-growth among participants who have successfully coped with a romantic relationship breakup. It encompasses the subthemes derived from the five domains of Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG).

Self-Growth

This theme delves into the perception of growth among adults following a breakup. personal development is multifaceted, encompassing cognitive, social, and emotional aspects that shape understanding of the world (Ramos & Leal, 2013). The subthemes, namely, personal strength, close relationships, new possibilities, spiritual development, and greater appreciation of life, will be further elucidated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the growth process experienced by individuals after a breakup.

Personal Strength

Based on the responses, it is evident that most participants reported experiencing increased personal strength, which aided them in facing future challenges. For

example, participants shared instances where they expressed feelings of self-pride and acknowledged their ability to confront and overcome distressing situations:

“I feel very proud because I previously had very low self-esteem and felt like I couldn't handle anything on my own. But now, I feel very confident that I can go through this on my own without anybody's help. I really admire myself, and I'm genuinely proud. I love telling myself, 'You did it, you really did it.'”—P1

The researcher captures the empowerment and self-discovery that arose from the challenges of a breakup, acting as a catalyst for personal growth and deeper self-awareness. The Lewandowski and Bizzoco (2007) study analyzed the effects of a break-up on individuals in low-quality relationships and their personal growth. Even though they were going through a difficult time, they could still improve their self-esteem and cope with their feelings. It suggests that difficult situations can be beneficial for people.

Close Relationship

In general, participants expressed a need for support from friends or family to help them cope with anxiety and depression following a breakup. They acknowledged the importance of having a support system to understand the situation's impact on their lives. For example, participants shared instances where they developed a stronger

sense of compassion through the support received from loved ones.

“I have two types of friends: the ones who support whatever I do, and the ones who love me and tell me the truth. During my breakdown, it was this second type of friend who really helped me. Since they care for me a lot, they told me the truth to my face. When I’m in a breakdown zone, I need someone who will be honest with me, even if it’s hard to hear.”—P5

Researchers emphasize the significance of authenticity and sincere support in nurturing relationships, indicating that facing challenges with loved ones can encourage personal growth and recovery. Gable et al.’s (2004) study emphasizes the significance of capitalization, which involves sharing positive experiences with one’s partner (ex., friends or family) and getting enthusiastic reactions. Being authentic about sharing joy and genuine support can enhance a relationship’s satisfaction and promote individual well-being.

New Possibilities

It has been observed that most participants have developed new interests or a willingness to make changes in areas that are currently hindering their progress. They wanted to explore new opportunities in various aspects of their lives. For example, participants shared instances where they actively sought out new possibilities and avenues for personal growth in different areas:

“Firstly, I need to prioritize myself, no matter how much love I have for my partner. Secondly, I should not bottle up even the smallest things. Thirdly, I won’t give too many chances over the same issues because, in the end, he will take those chances for granted. My happiness cannot depend on my partner; in order for a relationship to be successful, both individuals must be happy on their own.”—P7

It strengthened the researcher’s objective, as participants’ shift led to prioritizing self-care, open communication, and setting boundaries. Neff (2003) has shown that prioritizing self-care is vital for maintaining a healthy relationship and overall well-being. Those who neglect their needs may experience resentment, dissatisfaction, and burnout.

Spiritual Development

According to the responses, it is evident that spirituality has played a significant role in assisting most participants during their coping process, serving as a source of hope and support. Developing spirituality has allowed them to open themselves up to exploring various spiritual or religious elements. For example, participants shared instances where they considered religion or spirituality as a belief system that guided a better future life:

“Spirituality is the best way for me personally to come out from... we can sense... a high level of intuition

where we can do things around us with the power of unconditional love... by meditating by looking into understanding myself.”—P2

The researchers support that spirituality protects against psychological distress and enhances resilience during challenging times. The Koenig (2012) findings of the review suggest that religious involvement is associated with better mental health and lower rates of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. Spirituality can also help individuals cope with their stress levels and improve their resilience when faced with adversity.

Greater Appreciation of Life

Based on the responses, most participants have experienced an enhanced appreciation of life and a shifted perception of importance. They expressed that this transformation stemmed from coming to terms with the traumas they experienced. For example, participants shared instances where they expressed gratitude for the small things that brought them the most pleasure, highlighting their newfound appreciation and perspective.

“I appreciate life so much more now compared to before. Previously, I thought my world was just a small space—myself, my room, and the people around me. But now, I feel like there are so many things around me: the beauty of nature, the love of animals, the sound of the waves, and the love we receive

from our mothers and the care from friends. All these forms of love make me want to live more fully in this world. I’m really grateful for my experiences, as they’ve made me feel this way and want to explore more of what life has to offer.”—P1

Through these results, the researcher indicated that individuals can develop deeper gratitude and enhanced meaning-making abilities following tough experiences. According to studies by Wood et al. (2008), gratitude can help individuals feel more social support, lower their stress levels, and decrease their depressive symptoms. It can also help them cope with challenging experiences.

CONCLUSION

This research has provided valuable insights into the experience of romantic relationships and breakups among vicenarian adults. The study explored not only the experience of these adults during romantic relationships and breakups but also the coping methods they employed during the breakup process. Furthermore, it investigated how vicenarians perceive their self-growth after experiencing a romantic relationship breakup. These findings enriched the understanding of the Stages of Grief Model, revealing potential variations or additional stages in the grief process in the context of romantic breakups. The study also explored coping methods employed by vicenarian adults during breakups, which included emotional management, the state

of acceptance, and the duration taken to overcome the breakup. This examination of coping mechanisms provided a more nuanced perspective on the Transaction Model of Stress, showing how specific stress responses operate in the context of romantic breakups. Finally, the research explored vicenarian adults' perception of self-growth following a romantic breakup. Themes such as personal strength, closer relationships, new possibilities, spiritual development, and greater appreciation of life emerged, shedding light on the Post Traumatic Growth theory.

Overall, this research has not only provided a deeper understanding of vicenarian adults' experiences with romantic relationships and breakups but also contributed to the theoretical understanding of grief, stress, and post-traumatic growth. The insights gleaned from this study hold significant implications for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers in providing support and designing interventions targeted toward this demographic. Hopefully, these findings will foster healthier coping strategies and narratives surrounding breakups, emphasizing them as potential opportunities for personal growth.

Research Implications

This research contributed to understanding how vicenarian adults handled romantic relationships and breakups. It emphasized their understanding of love, their perception of happiness within relationships, and their unique relationship needs. The

complexities involved in decision-making during breakups, the subsequent emotional impact, and the tendency towards self-blame were investigated in greater depth, providing mental health professionals with vital insights. These insights would allow them to develop effective counseling strategies based on this demographic's identified themes and subthemes.

Understanding vicenarians' coping strategies during breakups could significantly contribute to developing interventions and support programs. By examining how this population manages emotions, achieves acceptance, and recovers from the emotional upheaval of a breakup, interventions could be developed based on empirical evidence that promotes healthier coping mechanisms. These findings also had implications for policymakers and educators, suggesting incorporating emotional management and acceptance techniques into educational curricula to better prepare future generations for relationship challenges.

Additionally, this study shed light on the positive aspects of breakups, such as personal strength, the development of closer relationships, the discovery of new possibilities, growth in spirituality, and an increased appreciation for life. Understanding this post-breakup growth was essential for developing resilience- and positive psychology-focused therapeutic approaches. Recognizing self-development also promoted a healthier perspective on breakups, viewed as opportunities for personal development rather than merely negative experiences.

Media influence, particularly new media technologies such as blogs, podcasts, emails, video games, and interactive televisions (Nicoleta, 2008), was significant among vicenarians (Rogalla, 2020). These platforms could be utilized to increase awareness of post-traumatic development. Individuals recovering from a breakup could be better supported if they had access to information about effective coping mechanisms that fostered long-term positive outcomes. It could help vicenarians understand that effective emotion management could lead to self-development, thereby discouraging destructive behaviors such as suicidal ideation, self-harm, substance abuse, and seeking vengeance against their ex-partner.

Research Limitations

There are a few limitations and setbacks that can be improved to provide more enriched data and information about this research. This study consists of most female participants compared to male participants because men should not be limited by the restrictions of masculinity (Shimek & Bello, 2014). Hence, finding male participants under these categories was challenging because most did not want to recall their memories. Otherwise, the participants' willingness to talk about their identity shows that they have no problem doing so, but the researcher could not justify the data due to the gender difference. Secondly, since the time-consuming nature of the study prevented it from being disseminated to the public, the researcher

selected the participants by snowballing sampling. It might seem incomprehensible to the data collector, but it is also part of the qualitative research process. Thirdly, the online interview method was a drop back compared to face-to-face interviews. This issue prevented the researcher from getting real participant feedback (Mukhtar et al., 2020).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the individuals who provided valuable information for the study. This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors. It was entirely self-funded.

REFERENCES

- Algorani, E. B., & Gupta, V. (2024). *Coping mechanisms*. StatPearls Publishing LLC.
- Bonanno, G. A. (2004). Loss, trauma, and human resilience: Have we underestimated the human capacity to thrive after extremely aversive events? *The American Psychologist*, 59(1), 20-28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.59.1.20>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012) Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology* (Vol. 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological; pp. 57-71). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Chan, C. L. W., & Ho, A. H. Y. (2009). Handbook of bereavement research and practice: Advances in theory and intervention edited by Margaret S. Stroebe, Robert O. Hansson, and Wolfgang Stroebe: (2008). Washington, DC: American

- Psychological Association, 658 pages. *Journal of Women & Aging*, 21(4), 317-319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952840903044642>
- Chua, S. N., & Rao, M. V. (2021). *Youth suicide in Malaysia*. Relate Mental Health Malaysia. <https://relate.com.my/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Youth-suicide-in-Malaysia-2021-to-upload.pdf>
- Crowder, R. J., Acquaye, H. E., Boanca, G., & Thiesen, N. L. (2022). A journey through romantic heartbreak and psychological growth: An exploratory phenomenological study of adult females. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 50(4), 455-472. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00916471211032297>
- Field, T. (2017). Romantic breakup distress, betrayal and heartbreak: A review. *International Journal of Behavioral Research & Psychology*, 5(2), 217-225. <https://doi.org/10.19070/2332-3000-1700038>
- Field, T., Poling, S., Mines, S., Diego, M., Bendell, D., & Pelaez, M. (2021). Trauma symptoms following romantic breakups. *Journal of Psychology & Clinical Psychiatry*, 2(2), 37-42.
- Franklin, A. (2015). *The role of positive psychological factors and coping strategies following a non-marital relationship breakup* [Doctoral thesis, The Australian National University]. <https://doi.org/10.25911/5D778ADE8BB2B>
- Gable, S. L., Reis, H. T., Impett, E. A., & Asher, E. R. (2004). What do you do when things go right? The intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits of sharing positive events. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 87(2), 228-245. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.87.2.228>
- Gongora, E. A., & Vásquez-Velázquez, I. I. (2018). From coping with stress to positive coping with life: Theoretical review and application. *Psychology*, 9(15), 2909-2932. <https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2018.915169>
- Kansky, J., & Allen, J. P. (2018). Making sense and moving on: The potential for individual and interpersonal growth following emerging adult breakups. *Emerging Adulthood*, 6(3), 172-190. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696817711766>
- Koenig, H. G. (2012). Religion, spirituality, and health: the research and clinical implications. *International Scholarly Research Notices*, 2012, Article 278730. <https://doi.org/10.5402/2012/278730>
- Kübler-Ross, E. (1970). *On death and dying*. Collier Books/Macmillan Publishing Co.
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal, and coping*. Springer.
- Le, B., Dove, N. L., Agnew, C. R., Korn, M. S., & Mutso, A. A. (2010). Predicting nonmarital romantic relationship dissolution: A meta-analytic synthesis. *Personal Relationships*, 17(3), 377-390. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2010.01285.x>
- Lewandowski G. W., Jr, & Bizzoco, N. M. (2007). Addition through subtraction: Growth following the dissolution of a low quality relationship. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 2(1), 40-54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760601069234>
- Logan, A. C., Berman, S. H., Scott, R. B., Berman, B. M., & Prescott, S. L. (2021). Catalyst twenty-twenty: Post-traumatic growth at scales of person, place and planet. *Challenges*, 12(1), Article 9. <https://doi.org/10.3390/challe12010009>
- Mann, S. K., Marwaha, R., & Torrico, T. J. (2024). Posttraumatic stress disorder. In *StatPearls [Internet]*. StatPearls Publishing. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK559129/>
- Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic. Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 227-238. <https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066x.56.3.227>
- Mathers, N., Fox, N., & Hunn, A. (2002). *Using interviews in a research project*. Trent Focus

- Group. <http://web.simmons.edu/~tang2/courses/CUAcourses/lsc745/sp06/Interviews.pdf>
- McKiernan, A., Ryan, P., McMahon, E., Bradley, S., & Butler, E. (2018). Understanding young people's relationship breakups using the dual processing model of coping and bereavement. *Journal of Loss and Trauma, 23*(3), 192-210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2018.1426979>
- Mofatteh, M. (2020). Risk factors associated with stress, anxiety, and depression among university undergraduate students. *AIMS Public Health, 8*(1), 36-65. <https://doi.org/10.3934/publichealth.2021004>
- Montgomery, M. (2005). Psychosocial intimacy and identity from early adolescence to emerging adulthood. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 20*(3), 346-374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558404273118>
- Mukhtar, K., Javed, K., Arooj, M., & Sethi, A. (2020). Advantages, limitations and recommendations for online learning during COVID-19 pandemic era. *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences, 36*(COVID19-S4), S27-S31. <https://doi.org/10.12669/pjms.36.COVID19-S4.2785>
- Neff, K. D. (2003). Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self and Identity, 2*(2), 85-101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298860309032>
- Nicoleta, C. (2008). The impact of new media on society. *Behavioral and Social Sciences. Conference proceeding 4* (pp. 121-130). CNCSIS listening B+. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/215489586_The_impact_of_new_media_on_society
- Noon, E. J. (2018). Interpretive phenomenological analysis: An appropriate methodology for educational research? *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice, 6*(1), 75-83. <https://doi.org/10.14297/jpaap.v6i1.304>
- Norona, J. C., Roberson, P. N. E., & Welsh, D. P. (2017). "I learned things that make me happy, things that bring me down": Lessons from romantic relationships in adolescence and emerging adulthood. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 32*(2), 155-182. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558415605166>
- Pal, K. (2020). *Psychological Understanding Among Love And Relationships Kanchan Pal* (P.G Scholar)*. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344682596_PSYCHOLOGICAL_UNDERSTANDING_AMONG_LOVE_AND_RELATIONSHIPS_KANCHAN_PAL_PG_SCHOLAR
- Perdana, R., Riwayani, R., Jumadi, J., & Rosana, D. (2019). Development, reliability, and validity of open-ended test to measure student's digital literacy skill. *International Journal of Educational Research Review, 4*(4), 504-516. <https://doi.org/10.24331/ijere.628309>
- Rahman, M. S. (2016). The advantages and disadvantages of using qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods in language "testing and assessment" research: A literature review. *Journal of Education and Learning, 6*(1), 102-112. <https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v6n1p102>
- Ramos, C., & Leal, I. (2013). Posttraumatic growth in the aftermath of trauma: A literature review about related factors and application contexts. *Psychology, Community & Health, 2*(1), 43-54. <https://doi.org/10.5964/pch.v2i1.39>
- Rogalla, K. B. (2020). Anticipatory grief, proactive coping, social support, and growth: Exploring positive experiences of preparing for loss. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying, 81*(1), 107-129. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222818761461>
- Ruppel, E. K., & Curran, M. A. (2012). Relational sacrifices in romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 29*(4), 508-529. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407511431190>

- Rusbult, C. E., Martz, J. M., & Agnew, C. R. (1998). The investment model scale: Measuring commitment level, satisfaction level, quality of alternatives, and investment size. *Personal Relationships*, 5(4), 357-387. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.1998.tb00177.x>
- Sbarra, D. A., & Emery, R. E. (2005). The emotional sequelae of nonmarital relationship dissolution: Analysis of change and intraindividual variability over time. *Personal Relationships*, 12(2), 213-232. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1350-4126.2005.00112.x>
- Shimek, C., & Bello, R. (2014). Coping with break-ups: Rebound relationships and gender socialization. *Social Sciences*, 2014, 24-43. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci3010024>
- Tashiro, T., & Frazier, P. (2003). "I'll never be in a relationship like that again": Personal growth following romantic relationship breakups. *Personal Relationships*, 10(1), 113-128. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6811.00039>
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (1996). The posttraumatic growth inventory: Measuring the positive legacy of trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 9(3), 455-471. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02103658>
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). TARGET ARTICLE: "Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence." *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(1), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01
- Tiron, M.-L., & Ursu, A. (2023). Personal growth and psychological well-being after a romantic break. *Psychreg Journal of Psychology*, 7(2), 54-64. <https://doi.org/k7v2>
- Wood, A. M., Maltby, J., Gillett, R., Linley, P. A., & Joseph, S. (2008). The role of gratitude in the development of social support, stress, and depression: Two longitudinal studies. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 42(4), 854-871. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2007.11.003>