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### Is breaking up hard to do? Exploring emerging adults' beliefs about their abilities to end romantic relationships

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Is Breaking Up Hard to Do? Exploring Emerging Adults' Beliefs about Their Ability to End Romantic Relationships

### Abstract

**Objective:** We explored emerging adults' beliefs about their ability to end romantic relationships (i.e., breakup beliefs) and identified demographic, personality, and romantic experience factors associated with breakup beliefs.

**Background:** Emerging adulthood typically involves forming and dissolving multiple romantic unions. Thus, ending relationships is a key component of emerging adult romantic development.

**Method:** 948 emerging adults, recruited from Qualtrics Panel Services, participated in a cross-sectional study of romantic experiences and health outcomes.

**Results:** Most participants perceive they are able to carry out breakup related tasks. Most participants reported knowing when to break up, being able to do so appropriately, being able to accept it when someone breaks up with them, and not delaying breaking up. However, a sizable proportion of participants (23.5% to 47.1% depending upon the item) reported that they lacked the skills necessary to end romantic relationships. Beliefs about the ability to end relationships were most consistently associated with emerging adults' general self-efficacy.

**Conclusions:** Although most emerging adults in the sample appear confident in their abilities to break up, a sizeable minority of this sample may lack key skills to end relationships.

**Implications:** Relationship education programs for emerging adults generally do not focus on relationship dissolution. Yet, the findings from this study suggest that some emerging adults may need opportunities to build skills that will help them exit relationships that are unhealthy, unsatisfying, or out of sync with their individual goals.

*Keywords:* Breakups, relationship dissolution, romantic development, emerging adulthood

### Is Breaking Up Hard to Do? Exploring Emerging Adults' Beliefs about Their Ability to End Romantic Relationships

Romantic involvement during emerging adulthood (ages 18-29) typically involves forming and dissolving multiple romantic relationships, with varying degrees of emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, and potential for long term commitment (Arnett, 2015; Boisvert & Poulin, 2016; Rauer, Pettit, Lansford, Bates, & Dodge, 2013). Although relationship dissolution is a normative emerging adult experience, research on breakups has generally highlighted its potential for inducing negative outcomes such as emotional distress (Rhoades, Kamp Dush, Atkins, Stanley, & Markham, 2011; Wrape, Jenkins, Callahan, & Nowlin, 2016) and substance use (Larson & Sweeten, 2012; Salvatore, Kendler, & Dick, 2014). However, more recently researchers have begun to articulate how breaking up may be developmentally appropriate and beneficial for emerging adults (Kansky & Allen, 2018; Norona, Olmstead, & Welsh, 2017). Emerging adulthood is a period of exploration (e.g., exploring love, education, work, and identity) and romantic relationships can create barriers to that exploration (Arnett, 2015; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). When romantic relationships are unhealthy, unsatisfying, or otherwise unwanted, they may convey significant costs to emerging adults (Halpern-Meehin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013). Thus, for some emerging adults ending romantic relationships may be an important experience that supports their development.

Based on the existing literature, it is unclear whether emerging adults feel equipped to end romantic relationships when necessary. We contend that emerging adults' perceptions of whether or not they feel capable of successfully ending relationships will have important implications for their romantic experiences in general (e.g., how long they remain in unhealthy or unsatisfying relationships) and their reactions to breaking up more specifically (e.g., level of psychological distress). In order to expand on scholars' efforts to contextualize breakups as an important aspect of romantic and individual development, in the present study we measured emerging adults' beliefs regarding their ability to initiate or accept a breakup and identified personality and romantic experiences associated with breakup beliefs.

#### **Relationship Dissolution during Emerging Adulthood**

Norona et al. (2017) suggest viewing relationship dissolution during emerging adulthood through the lens of Relational Developmental Systems Theory (RDST), which posits that individuals actively shape their development by seeking out and evaluating experiences they expect to promote individual growth (Lerner, Lerner, & Benson, 2011). Lerner et al. (2011) refer to this process as a series of bidirectional interactions between the developing person and their changing contexts. Although we only draw on a component of RDST, it provides a helpful framework for understanding emerging adult romantic development. During emerging adulthood, individuals are coordinating their own individual developmental goals (e.g., completing their education, starting a career, solidifying a sense of identity), with their pursuit of intimate relationships (Arnett, 2015, Shulman & Connolly, 2013). This creates a unique developmental tension as emerging adults try to balance independence with interdependence (Shulman & Connolly). This balance is affected not only by changing priorities for the individual, but also by shifting contexts related to school and work.

From an RDST perspective, romantic relationships are developmentally advantageous when they promote individual growth and help address developmental challenges. As emerging adults experience significant transitions in multiple life domains, the ability to coordinate individual aspirations and life plans with those of romantic partners is necessary for emerging adults to form lasting relationships (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Additionally, balancing one's

own and one's partner's needs when making relational commitments are critically important for developing romantic intimacy (Shulman, Scharf, Livne, & Barr, 2013). Without a shared vision for the future, or in the presence of logistical or timing barriers that impede making joint life plans, RDST would suggest that emerging adults would (or should) end their relationships. For example, emerging adults may need to end a relationship in order to pursue career and educational goals unencumbered by incompatible partners. Thus, breakups may allow emerging adults to ensure their romantic involvement fosters their achievement of salient developmental tasks rather than distracting from them (Norona et al., 2017).

The process of breaking up is complex, involving multiple steps and decisions that are both cognitive and interpersonal. For example, Battaglia, Richard, Datteri, and Lord (1998) found that the cultural script for breaking up involves at least 10 steps; the first three of which are characterized by avoidance (i.e., lack of communication, physical distance, lack of communication – in that order). Only on the fourth step do individuals assess the situation, and even then, there are several steps forward and backward before communicating their feelings with a partner and actually breaking up. Baxter's (1984) seminal work on the breakup process suggests that a critical initial step of relationship dissolution is making the intrapersonal decision to end a relationship. According to Baxter (1984) this decision is often incremental and builds from a growing list of relationship problems that ultimately results in dissolution. During this process of dissolution consideration, emerging adults may be weighing their commitment to the relationship and how they could go about breaking up (VanderDrift, Agnew, & Wilson, 2009). Typically, one partner has made the decision to end the relationship first and then had to communicate their desire and/or persuade their partner to accept the breakup (Baxter, 1984). The breakup process was rarely smooth and often led to an indirect and prolonged path to dissolution. In these situations, one person begins to emotionally withdraw and ignore their partner until the relationship fades away over time (Baxter, 1984). Based on this research, it appears that initiating and following through with a breakup presents interpersonal challenges, even after the decision to dissolve is made by one or both partners. Therefore, we contend that there is a set of skills necessary for successfully ending relationships.

### **Breakup Skills**

The first important breakup skill is likely *knowing when to break up*. Emerging adults often end romantic relationships due to the unmet need for either interdependence or independence (Norona et al., 2017). This finding is notable because it suggests that individuals differ in what they need out of a relationship in order to remain satisfied. Thus, part of ending relationships is knowing one's individual needs and desires and having the capacity to assess whether they are being met in the current partnership.

Once emerging adults make a decision to end a relationship, they must be able to *effectively and appropriately carry out the breakup*. Failure to be clear and direct when breaking up may contribute to confusion about the status of the relationship. An ambiguous breakup process may put couples at risk for relationship churning (i.e., breaking up and reunifying with a romantic partner). Relationship churning can negatively affect individual well-being and relationship dynamics (Vennum, Hardy, Sibley, & Fincham, 2015), and it is associated with increased physical violence and verbal abuse in relationships (Halpern-Meehin, Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2013).

A third breakup skill involves being able to *avoid delaying breaking up*. If emerging adults delay breaking up once they have decided to end a relationship, they may fall into a pattern of relationship sliding that accrues constraints to dissolution that sustain the relationship

(Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2006). Increased entanglements (e.g., being on a lease together, sharing a pet, purchasing shared furniture) compel relationships forward, even when they may not be well-suited to a long-term commitment. Such relationship inertia may also be seen in the tendency for relationships to move forward when doubts and problems go unchecked. In these situations, clear and timely breakups are necessary to avoid sliding into an ill-fated commitment.

Finally, when individuals are not the initiator of a breakup, they must be able to *accept a breakup*. Baxter (1984) found that most breakups are unilateral, which suggests that the other partner may want to continue the relationship. However, problems with both relationship churning and relationship inertia (moving forward without careful thought) could result from a lack of acceptance of a breakup. Thus, a successful breakup must involve both an initiator who can identify the need to dissolve and communicate clearly about their wishes as well as a recipient who can be persuaded to allow the relationship to end.

### **Potential Correlates of Breakup Skills**

Like other aspects of emerging adult romantic development (e.g., attitudes towards romantic involvement, abilities to resolve conflicts, and patterns of interactions with romantic partners), perceived breakup skills may be influenced by individual characteristics and prior and current romantic experiences. For example, the Development of Early Adult Romantic Relationships model (Bryant & Conger, 2003) emphasizes that young adults' characteristics such as problem-solving, emotional well-being, and social and economic advantage are important influences on romantic behaviors and experiences. In the present study we focused on two emerging adult characteristics: general self-efficacy and sensation seeking. General self-efficacy features prominently in models of behavioral decision-making with the expectation that individuals with greater self-efficacy are more likely to follow through with their behavioral intentions (e.g. Ajzen, 2002; Bandura, 1990; Fishbein, 2008). Perhaps emerging adults' perceptions of their abilities to enact breakup tasks reflect a specific type of self-efficacy. Thus, emerging adults with greater self-efficacy may have greater confidence in their breakup skills. Researchers have previously found that sensation seeking is associated with the types of romantic partners emerging adults choose (Henderson et al., 2005) and their propensity to engage in extradyadic sex (Lalasz & Weigel, 2011). In the context of the current study, sensation seeking may impact how willing and able a person is to break up with a partner in order to move on to another partnership. Finally, we wanted to contextualize the perception of breakup skills with individuals' romantic experiences (i.e., lifetime number of romantic relationships, how often they have been single, and current relationship status). Previous relationship experience points to previous breakup experiences, which may boost an individual's confidence in their ability to break up or accept a breakup.

### **Present Study**

In the present study, we first explored the extent to which emerging adults perceived that they possess four breakup skills: knowing when to break up, appropriately breaking up, avoiding delaying the breakup, and accepting a breakup. The second aim of the study was to identify romantic experiences and/or demographic and personality characteristics associated with emerging adults' perceived abilities to break up. Based on longitudinal research on romantic development from adolescence to young adulthood (see Giordano et al., 2012) and models of emerging adult romantic development (e.g., Bryant & Conger, 2003; Shulman & Connolly, 2013) we tested if perceived break up skills were associated with emerging adults' characteristics and experiences. Specifically, we explored demographic characteristics such as age, gender,

race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and educational attainment in order to understand which individual characteristics were associated with perceived breakup skills.

## Method

### Procedures

We used Qualtrics Panel Services, which facilitates researchers' access to existing online participant panels, to recruit emerging adults to participate in a study of romantic experiences and health outcomes. Our participants were recruited from an existing double opt-in panel. Emerging adults first opted-in to the overall panel after receiving an invitation through social media sites. Once enrolled in the panel, participants could opt-in to research and survey opportunities when they meet the eligibility criteria. Eligibility criteria for the present study included being between 18 and 29 years old and reading/writing English. We did not exclude married respondents from the sample of emerging adults. Although some scholars contend that emerging adulthood ends when adult roles are assumed, we argue that a broader definition of emerging adulthood is useful when describing the explorations that characterize a person's late teens and twenties.

To ensure data validity we included three attention filters in the survey (i.e., items directing participants to select a specific response). If participants answered the item incorrectly, they were skipped out of the remainder of the survey and were excluded from the initial sample. Additionally, in order to be included in the initial sample, participants had to complete the survey in at least 1/3 of the overall median completion time. This was to ensure that participants read the questions and provided meaningful responses. Initially, 1,050 eligible participants responded to the survey. During data cleaning we removed 25 emerging adults who skipped multiple survey sections and/or did not provide demographic information. We also removed 42 emerging adults who answered all survey items with a single value (i.e., they straight-lined the survey). The remaining participants may still have some missing data (e.g., they may have skipped some scale items or demographic items), but they did not skip entire sections of the survey. We accounted for missing data in two ways. First, in order to retain participants who skipped some items on multi-item scales, we computed scale scores as proportional averages (i.e., averaging across the items they completed on a given scale). The number of items participants had to complete on each specific scale in order to be retained is provided in the measures section. We then restricted the sample to those with complete data on variables used in this study.

### Study Sample

The final study sample included 942 emerging adults (see Table 1 for sample demographics). Slightly more of these participants were female (51.7%) than male or transgender and they ranged in age from 18 to 29 years old ( $M = 24.55$ ). Most participants were White non-Hispanic (62.0%) and the most common romantic relationship status was single (34.6%). In terms of educational attainment, 18.7% had completed high school or less, 37.0% were currently attending an educational program (i.e., college or vocational training program), and 44.2% had completed at least some college.

(Table 1 about here)

### Measures

**Break up skills.** *Break up skills* were measured with four items developed for this study (see Table 2). The items assessed different aspects of the relationship dissolution experience/process (e.g., knowing when to end a relationship and an ability to end a relationship that is no longer desired; see Table 2). Participants rated how true each statement was for them using a 4-point scale (1 = *not at all true* to 4 = *exactly true*). Although an exploratory factor

analysis (using principle axis factoring with a varimax rotation) indicated that three of the items loaded onto one factor, the factor loadings (.58, .58, .54) and the scale reliability ( $\alpha = .60$ ) were quite low. Similarly, the correlations between the items were low to moderate ( $r$ 's ranged from .003 to .41). Further, based on the literature reviewed above we considered these items to represent conceptually distinct aspects of the breakup experience. Therefore, we decided to treat the items of indicators of separate breakup skills and focus on them individually rather than combine them into a single scale.

(Table 2 about here)

**Romantic experiences.** We measured three aspects of participants' prior romantic experiences. *Lifetime number of romantic relationships* was measured with the item: "How many romantic relationships have you ever had?" Responses ranged from 0 to 50. Because only 5% of participants reported more than 10, we gave those emerging adults a score of 10. *How often single* was measured with the item: "Since you turned 18, how often have you been single?" Response options were: 1 = never, always been romantically involved with someone; 2 = rarely; 3 = sometimes; 4 = often; or 5 = always, not been romantically involved with anyone. *Current romantic relationship status* was measured with the item: "How would you describe your current romantic relationship status?" We classified participants as either: single, casually dating, exclusive romantic relationship, engaged, or married.

**Self-efficacy.** Emerging adult *self-efficacy* was measured with the 10-item Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale ( $\alpha = .90$ ; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995). Items were rated on a 4-point scale (1 = not at all true to 4 = exactly true). We computed self-efficacy scores by averaging across the scale items for participants who completed at least 8 of 10 items. Higher scores reflect emerging adults believing they can generally achieve what they set out to do.

**Sensation seeking.** Emerging adult *sensation seeking* was measured with the 4-item Brief Sensation Seeking Scale ( $\alpha = .68$ ; Stephenson, Hoyle, Palmgreen, Slater, 2003). Items were rated using a 4-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree). We computed sensation seeking scores by averaging across the scale items for participants who completed at least 3 of 4 items. Higher scores reflect a greater propensity towards sensation seeking.

**Demographics.** We included demographic characteristics in our analyses: age in years, gender (female, male, or transgender), race/ethnicity (White non-Hispanic, Black non-Hispanic, Hispanic, other race non-Hispanic, or multiracial), sexual orientation (heterosexual, non-heterosexual: gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual) and educational attainment (high school or less, currently a student, or completed some college or more).

### Analysis Plan

Consistent with our study goal of exploring emerging adults' perceptions of their ability to end romantic relationships, we analyzed the data in two ways. First, we reported the response frequencies for each break up skill item. Second, we used ordinal regression analyses to determine if romantic experiences, sensation seeking, self-efficacy, and/or demographics were associated with each breakup skill item.

## Results

### Break Up Skill Frequencies

Responses to the four breakup skill items indicated that most emerging adults perceived they have the skills necessary to end romantic relationships (see Table 2). Specifically, we found that most participants rated statements about these abilities as at least moderately true for them (*knowing when to break up*, 69.7%; *ability to break up* 75.9%; *accepting breaking up*, 66.4%). Finally, we asked participants about *delaying breaking up*. Just over half (53.2%) reported this

was not at all true or hardly true for them (i.e., they did not tend to delay breaking up). Therefore, most emerging adults in our sample perceived they are able to dissolve romantic relationships. However, there is a sizable proportion of these emerging adults (24.0% to 47.1% depending upon the item) that feel they do *not* have the skills necessary to end romantic relationships.

### **Knowing When to Break Up**

The ordinal regression model for knowing when to breakup was significant,  $\chi^2(18) = 127.99, p < .001$ , Nagelkerke psudeo  $R^2 = .14$  (see Table 3). Self-efficacy ( $B = 1.13, p < .001$ ) and sensation seeking ( $B = 0.23, p = .024$ ) were both associated with being more confident in knowing when to break up. Compared to male emerging adults, transgender emerging adults ( $B = 1.54, p = .006$ ) were more confident in knowing when to break up. Compared to White non-Hispanic emerging adults, Black non-Hispanic ( $B = 0.57, p = .003$ ) and Hispanic ( $B = 0.49, p = .039$ ) emerging adults were more confident in knowing when to break up. Finally, compared to single emerging adults, those who are casually dating ( $-0.65, p = .009$ ) were less confident about knowing when to break up.

### **Ability to Break Up**

The ordinal regression model for knowing when to break up was significant,  $\chi^2(18) = 174.53, p < .001$ , Nagelkerke psudeo  $R^2 = .19$  (see Table 3). Self-efficacy ( $B = 1.41, p < .001$ ) was associated with being more confident in being able to appropriately break up. Compared to White non-Hispanic emerging adults, Black non-Hispanic ( $B = 0.66, p = .001$ ) emerging adults were more confident that they could break up appropriately. Finally, compared to male emerging adults, female ( $B = 0.26, p = .044$ ) and transgender ( $B = 1.84, p = .001$ ) were more likely believe they were able to appropriately break up.

(Table 3 here)

### **Accepting Breaking Up**

The ordinal regression model for accepting a breakup was significant,  $\chi^2(18) = 108.93, p < .001$ , Nagelkerke psudeo  $R^2 = .12$  (see Table 4). Emerging adult age ( $B = -0.06, p = .007$ ) was associated with feeling less able to accept a breakup. Self-efficacy ( $B = 1.02, p < .001$ ) was associated with feeling more able to accept a breakup. Compared to males, transgender emerging adults ( $1.22, p = .027$ ) felt better able to accept a breakup. Compared to White non-Hispanic emerging adults, Black non-Hispanic ( $B = 0.43, p = .024$ ) emerging adults felt better able to accept a breakup. Compared to single emerging adults, those in an exclusive romantic relationship ( $B = 0.36, p = .039$ ) felt better able to accept a breakup.

### **Delaying Breaking Up**

The ordinal regression model for delaying breaking up was significant,  $\chi^2(18) = 64.51, p < .001$ , Nagelkerke psudeo  $R^2 = .07$  (see Table 4). Sensation seeking ( $B = 0.30, p = .002$ ) and lifetime number of romantic relationships ( $B = 0.12, p < .001$ ) were associated with a greater tendency to delay breaking up. Compared to emerging adults with a high school diploma or less education, current students ( $B = 0.36, p = .037$ ) perceived they were more likely to delay breaking up. Finally, self-efficacy ( $B = -0.48, p < .001$ ) was associated with being less likely to perceive a tendency to delay breaking up.

(Table 4 here)

## **Discussion**

The results of our study make several important contributions to the literature on emerging adult romantic development in general, and relationship dissolution more specifically. First, it adds to recent efforts to articulate how breakups are a normative and important aspect of emerging adult romantic development (e.g., Kansky & Allen, 2018; Norona et al., 2017) by

focusing on perceived abilities to enact break up tasks. Most emerging adults in this study indicated that it is at least moderately true that they know when to end a relationship, can appropriately end relationships they no longer want to be in, can accept when a partner wants to break up with them, and do not delay breaking up. Thus, they appear confident that they can enact key breakup tasks. Yet, there was a sizable proportion (24.0% to 47.1% depending upon the item) of participants who lacked confidence in their ability to enact specific breakup tasks. Emerging adults in this study perceived the greatest challenge with not delaying breaking up in relationships they no longer want to be in. This is concerning as delaying dissolution may lead to lingering in unhealthy or unwanted relationships, which may result in accruing barriers to ending relationships and delays in accomplishing the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood.

It is important to note that we measured perceptions of emerging adults' breakup skills. Just because emerging adults believe that they are able to carry out breakup tasks does not mean that will actually do so when the time comes to end a relationship. However, models of behavioral decision making (e.g., Theory of Planned Behavior, Theory of Reasoned Action, and Social Cognitive Theory) all posit that when individuals believe they can enact a behavior they are more likely to do so when the time comes (Ajzen, 2002; Bandura, 1990; Fishbein, 2008). Thus, our study provides an important initial step towards understanding if emerging adults are prepared to end romantic relationships. An important next step for researchers will be to determine if perceived breakup skills predict ease of actual relationship dissolution. Additionally, it would be beneficial to assess emerging adults' use of these breakup skills during their most recent breakup. For example, researchers could ask emerging adults if they felt they had waited longer than they should to breakup or if they handled the breakup in an appropriate way. Such information will provide insights into if and how our proposed breakup skills impact the relationship dissolution process.

A second important contribution of our study is identifying emerging adult characteristics and experiences associated with breakup skills. Although our ordinal regression models accounted for small to moderate variance, based on psuedo  $R^2$ 's, in these breakup skills, this allows us to suggest how relationship educators can begin to strengthen these skills in emerging adults. Across our analyses, self-efficacy and race/ethnicity demonstrated the most consistent associations with these breakup skills. Specifically, greater self-efficacy is associated with greater perceived abilities in the areas of knowing when to break up, being able to break up appropriately, accepting a partner wanting to breakup, and not delaying the dissolution of relationships they no longer want to be in. Perhaps, emerging adults' abilities to enact breakup tasks are primarily derived from their general sense of self-efficacy. That is, emerging adults who generally believe they are able to accomplish their goals and follow through on their intentions believe they will be able to carry out breakup related tasks when the time comes. Compared to White non-Hispanic emerging adults, Black non-Hispanic emerging adults were more likely to perceive knowing when to break up, being able to break up appropriately, and accept a partner wanting to break up. Black adults tend to marry at lower rates than their White non-Hispanic peers and therefore may have different expectations for maintaining long-term partnerships (Raley, Sweeney, & Wondra, 2016). This may lead to greater confidence in their abilities to enact breakup tasks.

With a few exceptions, romantic experiences are generally not associated with perceived break up skills. Only current relationship status and lifetime number of romantic relationships were associated with perceived breakup skills. Compared to single emerging adults, those who were casually dating expressed difficulty in knowing when to break up, whereas participants in

exclusive relationships felt more prepared to accept a breakup. Perhaps, emerging adults were interpreting these items through the lens of their current relationships. As casual relationships are often ambiguous (Furman & Hand, 2006), emerging adults may feel unsure about when and even if there is a need to formally end the relationship. Emerging adults currently in exclusive but not yet binding unions (i.e., not engaged or married) may feel confident that they can accept a breakup because they have a direct frame of reference for the question. They can consider, “If my partner wanted to break up with me, would I accept it?” Individuals who are not in relationships have to imagine two hypotheticals, both that they have a partner and that their partner wants to end the relationship. This may widen the gap between what an individual perceives that they would do with what they might actually do given real life circumstances. Finally, having had more romantic relationships appears to be associated with a greater tendency to delay breaking up. This may be a function of emerging adults reflecting on their relationships and recognizing that they had a tendency delay dissolution in the past. Taken together, these findings may suggest that current and prior romantic partnerships provide a conceptual framework for answering questions about breaking up. However, in this study we could not assess how individuals might respond to potentially ending casual relationships compared to more serious ones. For example, individuals might feel more capable of ending or accepting the breakup of a brief union compared to a relationship that one or both partners thought might proceed to marriage. Thus, our findings are limited by what we don’t know about the real or perceived relational contexts individuals were using as they answered questions about breakup skills. The general pattern of null associations between romantic experiences and perceived breakup abilities leaves a gap to be addressed in future research. If breakup skills are not developed by practicing severing ties with others, what are the interactions that build confidence about how to do so? Other aspects of romantic partnerships (e.g., clear communication) can be practiced with family members and friends, but the same is not true for breakups. Additionally, exploring the roles emerging adults’ attachment states of mind play in their perceptions of breakup experiences may help researchers understand how broader orientations towards intimate relationships shape relationship dissolution. Further research is needed to identify the more general set of interpersonal skills that makes breakups easier and less distressing for both the initiator and their partner.

Finally, we contend that this study addresses a significant gap in the research on romantic competency and self-efficacy. Prior conceptualizations of romantic competency and self-efficacy (e.g., Bouchey, 2007; Riggio, Weiser, Valenzuela, Lui, Montes, & Heuer, 2011) have focused have on relationship stability as the desired outcome. Certainly, relationship stability is an important goal for emerging adults’ romantic involvement. It is not, however, the only appropriate outcome when considering a specific romantic union or emerging adults’ broader pattern of romantic involvement. Although relationship dissolution can be distressing (Rhoades et al., 2011; Wrape et al., 2016), it may also play a critical role in helping emerging adults align their romantic and individual goals (Norona et al., 2017). Ending romantic relationships that are unhealthy, unsatisfying, or otherwise not contributing to personal growth can be a positive choice. Therefore, it is important for scholars and practitioners to conceptualize breaking up as an experience with both negative *and* positive components (Waterman, Wesche, Leavitt, Jones, & Lefkowitz, 2017). We contend that believing that one is able to end romantic relationships is an important aspect of romantic self-efficacy, thereby influencing how emerging adults proceed through their romantic relationship experiences. Therefore, there is a need to explicitly

incorporate the ability to end relationships into models of romantic self-efficacy, competency, and development.

### **Implications for Relationship Education**

Recently, scholars have suggested that relationship education focus on equipping emerging adults with core romantic competencies before they make significant (e.g., cohabitation) or binding (e.g., marriage) relationship commitments (Cromwell & Beckmeyer, 2017; Fincham, Stanley, & Rhoades, 2011; Vennum et al., 2015). Based on our results as well as the growing literature on relationship dissolution as a normative aspect of emerging adulthood (e.g., Kansky & Allen, 2018; Norona et al., 2017), we contend that breaking up should be explicitly integrated into emerging adult relationship education. Specifically, relationship education should normalize breaking up. Most relationships during emerging adulthood end, so it is important to highlight that this is both expected and potentially beneficial as individuals seek a compatible long-term partner. This could include discussions centered on how common breaking up is during emerging adulthood and what to do when a relationship is just “OK.” Ambiguity in these situations may be contributing to a tendency to delay breaking up or doing so in a protracted manner. Relationship educators can also help emerging adults recognize that is also common to be unsure about exactly how to carry out breaking up.

In addition to highlighting the warning signs of an unhealthy relationship (e.g., verbal and emotional abuse), relationship education programs should focus on enhancing other breakup skills. For example, VanderDrift et al. (2009) discussed the nature of dissolution intentions, both in terms of the intention to remain in the relationship (i.e., commitment) and thoughts about leaving it. This work provides insight about how someone might approach the cognitive aspects of deciding to end a relationship, but it stops just short of investigating whether the individuals felt they knew how to leave. In thinking about relationship education, relationship educators can help emerging adults develop greater clarity about their romantic deal-breakers. Curricula should include information about both how to arrive at a decision to leave and should bolster individuals’ skills around communicating the desire to leave a relationship and/or accepting the end of a relationship. Based on our results, enhancing emerging adults’ general self-efficacy may translate into gains in their perceived ability to enact breakup related tasks. When individuals are generally confident that they can carry out a desired task, they are also likely to feel confident that they can end an unwanted relationship.

Finally, programs for emerging adults should include some of the research about what helps to make a breakup less distressing for both the initiator and the partner. For example, breakups that are ambiguous or in which the couple continues to have romantic or sexual contact can lead to relationship churning, which has negative outcomes for both partners (Halpern-Meehin et al., 2013). Similarly, ruminating about a breakup has been shown to make the negative psychological effects worse (Wrape et al., 2016). These suggestions may be modest additions to existing materials, but they represent an important shift from avoiding breakups in the service of relationship maintenance to the acceptance of breakups as normative and sometimes helpful when they are carried out in a clear and thoughtful manner.

### **Limitations**

The results of this study must be considered within the context of its limitations. In particular, the study data are cross-sectional. This precludes us from examining changes in perceived break up skills over the course of emerging adulthood. Despite being large and diverse, our sample is not nationally representative. Thus, these results may not represent the experiences of all emerging adults. We also acknowledge that our four items are not inclusive of

all aspects of relationship dissolution, and that measuring if emerging adults perceive themselves as being able to accomplish a task is not the same as actually testing if they can enact specific behaviors. One way to expand this research is to embed questions about breakups in existing longitudinal studies of young adults and/or relationship development. Brief interviews, diary methods, or additional survey questions could serve to provide much more insight about how and why couples break up over the course of a study. Additionally, it is important to engage in rigorous qualitative studies of relationship dissolution to better uncover the inter- and intra-personal processes that characterize healthy breakups.

### **Conclusion**

Romantic relationship dissolution is a common, yet often distressing, experience among emerging adults (Rhoades et al., 2011; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). However, from a RDST perspective, ending romantic relationships that are unhealthy, unsatisfying, or otherwise not contributing to personal growth is ultimately a positive choice (Norona et al., 2016). Thus, it is important for scholars and practitioners to conceptualize breaking up as an experience with both negative and positive components. This study provides an important complement to the many investigations of breakups as negative or distressing events. Emerging adulthood is a time for individuals to work towards achieving a committed romantic union that promotes their individual growth (Norona et al., 2016; Shulman & Connolly, 2013), and doing so requires them to have a comprehensive set of romantic skills including the ability to initiate, maintain, and dissolve romantic unions.

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Table 1

*Sample Demographics and Descriptive Statistics (N = 934).*

	% or <i>M (SD)</i>
Gender	
Female	51.7%
Male	46.9%
Transman	1.3%
Transwoman	0.1%
Age	24.55 (3.26)
Sexual Identity	
Heterosexual	81.5%
Gay or lesbian	5.9%

Bisexual	8.8%
Asexual	1.7%
Other	2.1%
Race/Ethnicity	
White non-Hispanic	62.0%
Black non-Hispanic	13.8%
Hispanic	8.1%
Other non-Hispanic	9.9%
Multiracial	6.2%
Education	
High school or less	18.7%
Current student	37.0%
Post-secondary	44.2%
Self-efficacy	3.05 (0.56)
Sensation seeking	2.67 (0.64)
Romantic experience	
# lifetime romantic relationships	3.26 (2.81)
How often single since age 18	3.08 (1.27)
Current relationship status	
Single	34.6%
Casually dating relationship	8.7%
Exclusive relationship	27.2%
Engaged	7.1%
Married	22.5%

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Table 2.

*Response Frequencies for Break Up Skill Items (N = 934).*

Breakup skill item	Construct	Response Frequencies			
		Not at all true	Hardly true	Moderately true	Exactly true
I can recognize when it is time to end a romantic relationship.	Knowing when to break up	7.3%	23.0%	48.6%	21.1%
I can respectfully end a relationship that I no longer want to be in.	Ability to break up	7.3%	16.8%	47.2%	28.7%
I am able to accept a partner telling me that he/she wanted to breakup with me.	Accepting breaking up	10.3%	23.3%	47.9%	18.5%
I sometimes stay in a relationship longer than I should because I don't know how to end it.	Delaying breaking up	23.6%	29.3%	32.3%	14.8%

Table 3.

*Ordinal Regression Models for Knowing When to Break Up and Ability to Break Up (N = 934).*

	Knowing when to break up				Ability to break up			
	<i>B</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i> -value	<i>B</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Gender <sup>a</sup>								
Female	-0.01	[-0.26, 0.24]	0.13	.925	0.29	[0.04, 0.55]	0.13	.025
Transgender	1.54	[0.44, 2.64]	0.56	.006	1.84	[0.72, 2.97]	0.57	.001
Age	0.02	[-0.03, 0.06]	0.02	.449	-0.04	[-0.08, 0.01]	0.02	.117
Heterosexual	0.05	[-0.28, 0.55]	0.17	.786	0.09	[-0.34, 0.42]	0.17	.586
Race/ethnicity <sup>b</sup>								
Black non-Hispanic	0.57	[0.19, 0.94]	0.19	.003	0.67	[0.27, 1.04]	0.20	.001
Hispanic	0.49	[0.03, 0.96]	0.24	.039	0.04	[-0.43, 0.57]	0.24	.866
Other non-Hispanic	0.13	[-0.30, 0.55]	0.22	.560	-0.22	[-0.64, 0.21]	0.22	.316
Multiracial	0.34	[-0.17, 0.86]	.26	.192	0.04	[-0.48, 0.56]	0.27	.876
Education <sup>c</sup>								
At least some college	-0.03	[-0.38, 0.33]	0.18	.877	0.07	[-0.29, 0.42]	0.18	.708
Current student	0.18	[-0.17, 0.54]	0.18	.307	0.26	[-0.09, 0.62]	0.18	.146
Self-efficacy	1.13	[0.89, 1.38]	0.12	< .001	0.07	[-0.14, 0.12]	0.10	.524
Sensation seeking	0.23	[0.03, 0.43]	0.10	.024	1.41	[1.67, 1.66]	0.13	< .001
# lifetime romantic relationships	-0.001	[-0.05, 0.05]	0.03	.955	-0.01	[-0.06, 0.04]	0.03	.811
How often single	-0.01	[-0.12, 0.10]	0.06	.872	0.00	[-0.11, 0.12]	0.06	.987
Romantic relationship status <sup>d</sup>								

## BREAKUP SKILLS

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Casually dating	-0.65	[-1.13, -0.16]	0.25	.009	-0.33	[-0.81, 0.16]	0.25	.185
Exclusive romantic relationship	-0.14	[-0.49, 0.20]	0.18	.418	0.01	[-0.34, 0.36]	0.18	.956
Engaged	-0.07	[-0.63, 0.48]	0.28	.447	0.21	[-0.35, 0.77]	0.29	.460
Married	0.02	[-0.38, 0.42]	0.20	.917	0.01	[-0.40, 0.41]	0.21	.975
$\chi^2(18)$	127.99			< .001	1.74.53			< .001
Nagelkerke pseudo $R^2$	.14				.19			

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*Notes.* <sup>a</sup>Male is the referent group, <sup>b</sup>White non-Hispanic is the referent group, <sup>c</sup>High school or less is the referent group, <sup>d</sup>Currently single is the referent group. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 3.

*Ordinal Regression Models for Accepting Breaking Up and Delaying Breaking Up (N = 934).*

	Accepting breaking up				Delaying breaking up			
	<i>B</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i> -value	<i>B</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i> -value
Gender <sup>a</sup>								
Female	-0.06	[-0.10, 0.21]	0.13	.615	-0.15	[-0.39, 0.09]	0.12	.227
Transgender	1.22	[0.14, 2.30]	0.55	.027	-0.21	[-1.24, 0.82]	0.53	.689
Age	-0.06	[-0.10, 10.02]	0.02	.007	-0.02	[-0.06, 0.03]	0.02	.490
Heterosexual	0.21	[-0.11, 0.54]	0.17	.196	-0.03	[-0.34, 0.29]	0.16	.872
Race/ethnicity <sup>b</sup>								
Black non-Hispanic	0.43	[0.06, 0.81]	0.19	.024	-0.09	[-0.45, 0.27]	0.18	.621
Hispanic	0.11	[-0.35, 0.58]	0.24	.628	-0.07	[-0.52, 0.37]	0.23	.744
Other non-Hispanic	-0.16	[-0.58, 0.26]	0.21	.461	-0.02	[-0.43, 0.39]	0.21	.915
Multiracial	-0.14	[-0.65, 0.37]	0.26	.601	-0.38	[-0.88, 0.11]	0.25	.128
Education <sup>c</sup>								
At least some college	0.09	[-0.26, 0.44]	0.18	.617	0.33	[-0.01, 0.67]	.17	.056
Current student	-0.01	[-0.36, 0.34]	0.18	.946	0.36	[0.02, 0.70]	.17	.037
Self-efficacy	1.02	[0.78, 1.26]	0.12	< .001	-0.48	[-0.71, -0.26]	0.12	< .001
Sensation seeking	0.17	[-0.03, 0.37]	0.10	.099	0.30	[0.11, 0.50]	0.10	.002
# lifetime romantic relationships	0.01	[-0.04, 0.06]	0.03	.795	0.12	[0.07, 0.16]	0.02	< .001
How often single	0.10	[-0.01, 0.21]	0.06	.074	-0.002	[-0.11, 0.11]	0.06	.976
Romantic relationship status <sup>d</sup>								

## BREAKUP SKILLS

21

Casually dating	0.08	[-0.40, 0.56]	0.24	.731	0.38	[-0.08, 0.85]	0.24	.104
Exclusive romantic relationship	0.36	[0.02, 0.71]	0.18	.039	-0.01	[-0.34, 0.33]	0.17	.978
Engaged	0.12	[-0.42, 0.67]	0.28	.655	0.13	[-0.39, 0.66]	0.27	.618
Married	0.08	[-0.31, 0.48]	0.20	.683	-0.28	[-0.66, 0.10]	0.20	.154
$\chi^2(18)$	108.93			< .001	64.51			< .001
Nagelkerke pseudo $R^2$	.12				.07			

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*Notes.* <sup>a</sup>Male is the referent group, <sup>b</sup>White non-Hispanic is the referent group, <sup>c</sup>High school or less is the referent group, <sup>d</sup>Currently single is the referent group. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .