

Since You've Been Gone: Coping with a Relationship Breakup

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Continuing bonds (CBs) are cognitive and behavioral attempts to maintain a bond with the lost loved one. They are common in bereavement and are believed to reflect the attachment system's response to loss. Extending the notion of CBs to the context of breakup of a romantic relationship, this cross-sectional study of 103 undergraduates who experienced a breakup in the past six months (87 women and 16 men) indicated that expressions of internalized CBs (such as wondering what he/she would think of something) were associated with greater grief and more symptoms of depression after taking into account attachment anxiety and avoidance. Externalized CBs (such as feeling his/her presence) were uniquely associated with greater grief, but not depressive symptoms. These findings parallel those in the bereavement literature, and suggest that CBs may be indicative of intense grief. As neither internalized nor externalized CBs were associated significantly with life satisfaction, there is no indication that CBs interfere with one's ability to function in daily life.

Keywords: breakup, grief, continuing bonds, attachment, well-being

Les liens continus (LC), qui sont les tentatives cognitives et comportementales faites par l'individu afin d'essayer de maintenir un lien avec un être cher perdu, sont communs lors du deuil et reflètent la réponse d'attachement face à une perte. Cette étude transversale applique la notion des LC à une rupture amoureuse et comprend 103 étudiants de premier cycle qui ont vécu une rupture amoureuse dans les derniers six mois (85% de femmes). De plus, les résultats indiquent que des LC internalisés (comme se questionner sur ce que l'ancien partenaire de la personne penserait de quelque chose) sont associés avec un plus grand chagrin émotionnel et plus de symptômes dépressifs chez la personne, après avoir pris en compte l'anxiété d'attachement et l'évitement. Par contre, les LC externalisés (comme ressentir la présence de l'ancien partenaire de la personne) sont uniquement associés à un plus grand chagrin émotionnel, mais pas à des symptômes dépressifs. Ces résultats font le pont avec ceux de la littérature du deuil et suggèrent que les LC peuvent indiquer la présence de chagrin intense. Étant donné que ni les LC internalisés ni les LC externalisés ont été associés significativement avec la satisfaction globale dans la vie d'un individu, il n'y a aucune indication que les LC interfèrent avec l'habileté d'un individu de fonctionner normalement dans la vie de tous les jours.

Mots-clés : rupture, chagrin, liens continus, attachement, bien-être

The termination of a romantic relationship, like the loss of a loved one through death, often evokes a grief response. Just as with loss through death, there are considerable individual differences in how people respond to the breakup of a romantic relationship. For some, this loss provokes an intense, debilitating and long-lasting grief whereas for others, it is experienced as only mildly distressing (e.g., Bonanno, 2004; Sbarra & Emery, 2005).

Influential bereavement theorists have invoked Bowlby's (1980) attachment theory to explain individual differences in reaction to loss (e.g., Stroebe,

Schut, & Stroebe, 2005). In this paper, we use attachment theory to better understand reactions to the dissolution of a romantic relationship. In particular, we examine *continuing bonds (CBs)*, a concept that has attracted significant attention in the bereavement literature, but has not been considered in the context of relationship dissolution. To the extent that the CBs play a similar role in this new context, we help generalize recent advances in bereavement-based theory and research to a broader psychology of loss (Harvey & Miller, 1998).

CBs refer to the tendency of some bereaved individuals to maintain a connection with the lost person by attempting to mentally communicate with him or her, by imagining his or her presence, holding

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on to his or her belongings, or by “seeing,” “hearing,” or “feeling” the person when in fact he or she is not there. From an attachment perspective, such continuing bonds reflect a desire to find and reconnect with the attachment figure (Bowlby, 1980; N. P. Field & Sundin, 2001). As individuals differ in their attachment orientations or styles, they may also differ in their need to maintain the attachment following loss. As such, CBs may be regarded as a manifestation of attachment-related processes in the context of loss. In this study, we extend the CB concept to the relationship dissolution literature. Furthermore, we assess the extent to which patterns of association observed between CBs and grief and adjustment in the bereavement literature replicate in the context of a relationship dissolution. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to examine whether CBs are associated with grief following relationship dissolution similarly to the way CBs correlate with bereavement-related grief, taking into account attachment orientations. Accordingly, we first review the attachment perspective on loss and then consider theory and evidence from the bereavement literature on the roles that CBs play within this attachment perspective.

Attachment and Loss

Attachment theory has become an influential lens for understanding grief as a psychosocial process, and for understanding individual differences in adult grief trajectories (Shaver & Fraley, 2008; Stroebe, Schut, & Boerner, 2010; Stroebe et al., 2005). A number of studies suggest that there are significant parallels between the attachments that infants form with their caregivers and the attachments that adults form with their partners (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987), and when adult romantic relationships end (through death or otherwise), people’s experiences of grief are not unlike the responses of young children upon separation from their caregiver. In the third volume of his influential trilogy on attachment, Bowlby (1980) argued that following the loss of an attachment figure, people are apt to search for and try to reconnect with the lost loved one, comparable to the way a young child will attempt to regain proximity to his or her caregiver following separation. The parallels between a young child’s response to separation and adults’ response to the loss of a loved one suggest the same attachment-related processes are involved. Therefore, it seems reasonable to consider grief from an attachment perspective.

Individual differences in attachment orientations fall along two dimensions: attachment-related anxiety (the degree to which a person worries that an attachment figure will be unavailable in times of need) and attachment-related avoidance (the degree to which one distrusts others and strives to maintain independence). Those scoring low on both dimensions are said to be securely attached; they are characterized by a sense that they can trust and count on others in times of need. Bowlby (1980) and those who have followed (e.g., Fraley & Shaver, 1997; N. P. Field & Sundin, 2001) suggested that grief is experienced differently depending on one’s attachment orientation. Securely attached individuals gradually come to accept the permanence of their loss, and relinquish the attachment to the lost loved one, whereas those with an anxious (also known as preoccupied) attachment may have difficulty relinquishing the connection, which may result in prolonged or chronic grief reactions. It has been suggested that those with avoidant (also known as dismissing) attachments tend to inhibit emotional expression and distance themselves from their feelings, thus they may be at risk of delayed grief (e.g., Bowlby, 1980).

Research on bereaved samples indicates that people with anxious attachments are particularly at risk of protracted or more severe grief reactions relative to those with secure attachments (N. P. Field & Sundin, 2001; Meier, Carr, Currier, & Neimeyer, 2013; Wayment & Vierthaler, 2002). Those with avoidant attachments do not report high levels of distress after loss, unless the death was violent (Meier et al., 2013). Findings similar to these have been reported in samples of young adults who have recently ended a romantic relationship (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003; Fagundes, 2012; Pistole, 1996). Fagundes (2012), for instance, showed in young adults who had recently experienced the dissolution of a romantic relationship that attachment anxiety was associated with greater distress, whereas attachment avoidance was not. The consistency of findings across studies of the bereaved and studies of dissolved romantic relationships suggests that attachment-related processes are at play in both contexts.

In summary, research indicates that grief is a common response among those who have lost a loved one by death or by relationship dissolution, and that individuals with more attachment anxiety who experience these events tend to have more severe and prolonged grief and distress than those with more

secure and avoidant attachment orientations. We now turn to the role that CBs play in the adjustment process.

Continuing Bonds After Loss

Grief researchers have noted that bereaved individuals often desire to retain an emotional bond with the deceased after the deceased has passed (N. P. Field, Gal-Oz, & Bonanno, 2003; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996; see Stroebe et al., 2005 for a review). For instance, the bereaved may do so by keeping their loved one's possessions, looking at photographs and memory objects, by mentally consulting with the deceased before important decisions, or perhaps by viewing the deceased as a role model and guide for one's life. In some cases, the bereaved report interactive experiences with the deceased, including feeling her presence or "seeing" him in a crowd.

Perhaps because expressions of CBs are commonly reported by the bereaved, those who work with CBs have long speculated on their role and function in the grief process because they are commonly reported by the bereaved. In his influential paper on mourning, Freud (1917/1957) argued that relinquishing these bonds with the deceased represents a critical aspect of grief. Although for many years grief counsellors emphasized the need to loosen and relinquish the emotional bonds to the deceased, Klass et al. (1996) suggested that failure to do so may not be problematic. Furthermore, they argued that people often use this bond to help them work their way through grief. However, empirical literature on the adaptiveness of CBs is mixed. Some research indicates that greater use of CBs is associated with more prolonged or complicated grief (e.g., Currier, Irish, Neimeyer, & Foster, 2015; N. P. Field et al., 2003), whereas other studies suggest a different view (Stroebe et al., 2010). For instance, in a longitudinal study of grief, Boelen, Stroebe, Schut, and Zijerveld (2006) showed that whereas 'sensing that the deceased was guiding you' and 'using cherished possessions of the deceased to feel near you' were both associated positively with grief and depressive symptoms 7-12 months post-loss, only the latter predicted grief and (marginally) depressive symptoms nine months later. They also reported that feeling 'calmed or supported by recovering memories or thoughts [of the deceased]' was not related at either time with grief or depressive symptoms.

Given the inconsistent findings in the literature, N. P. Field and Filanosky (2009) proposed differentiating internalized CBs (i.e., remain symbolic or spiritual, suggesting that the loss is permanent) from externalized CBs (i.e., one feels that the deceased has not really left, often involving hallucinations or illusions). They argued on the one hand that internalized CBs may facilitate adaptation to the loss when expressions of such bonds involved using the mental representation of the deceased as a secure base. On the other hand, they argued that expressions of externalized CBs, such as hearing the deceased's voice, seeing her in a crowd, reflect unresolved grief. Although they found that greater reports of externalized CBs were associated with more symptoms of complicated grief, they also found that greater use of internalized CBs was also independently associated with more symptoms of complicated grief. It remains unclear the extent to which use of internalized CB's facilitate adjustment following loss.

Recently, researchers (N. P. Field & Filanosky, 2009; N. P. Field, Gao, & Paderna, 2005) situate both internal and external CBs within an attachment framework. It was suggested that in the early phase of mourning, the attachment system has not yet registered the loss as irrevocable. As the reality of the loss sets in, the need for the return of the secure base motivates the individual to reorganize the relationship model to one based exclusively on an internal connection. However, when the personal implications of the loss are too great to be accepted, N. P. Field and Filanosky (2009) suggest that the individual may defensively avoid or exclude from awareness thoughts and feelings associated with the loss. Consistent with the notion of a defense mechanism, they suggest that the unresolved conflict between the need for reconnection and the reality of the loss may result in illusory perceptions of "hearing" the loved one's voice, or of "seeing" or "feeling" him or her. These externalized expressions of CBs may be suggestive of unresolved or prolonged grief.

The model that N. P. Field and colleagues (N. P. Field & Filanosky, 2009; N. P. Field et al., 2005) have developed suggests that the use of internalized bonds is normative in the initial post-loss period, at least among those with a secure or anxious attachment to the lost loved one. Individuals with an avoidant attachment, given their lack of trust, may be particularly unlikely to feel a need to maintain a bond with the lost loved one. Externalized bonds, indicative of problematic adjustment, should be most

common among those with an anxious attachment, as they reflect an inability to let go of the lost relationship.

Research in bereaved samples indicates mixed support for N. P. Field and colleagues' model (N. P. Field & Filanosky, 2009; N. P. Field et al., 2005). With regard to links between attachment orientations (anxious and avoidance) and CBs, N. P. Field and Filanosky (2009) were surprised to find no significant correlation between either attachment orientation and internalized or externalized CBs. However, in a bereaved sample of Hong Kong Chinese adults, Ho, Chan, Ma, and N. P. Field (2013) reported that those with anxious attachments were more likely than securely attached individuals to use externalized CBs. Use of internalized CBs in this study was not associated with attachment anxiety or avoidance. Interestingly, both studies (N. P. Field, 2006; Ho et al., 2013) showed greater use of internalized and externalized CBs to be associated independently with more symptoms of complicated grief. From these studies, it appears that whereas anxiously attached individuals may be prone to using externalized CBs, and that externalized CBs are associated with more complicated grief symptoms, the use of internalized CBs may not be as adaptive as previously thought.¹

In sum, whereas theory suggests that internalized CBs may be a normal reaction to the loss of an attachment figure, and therefore not symptomatic of intense or prolonged grief or distress, the data from bereaved samples suggests that greater use of internalized CBs is associated with greater grief and distress. Externalized CBs, however, are regarded as symptomatic of more severe forms of grief, and the evidence from the bereavement literature is consistent with this view. Although both internalized and externalized CBs are believed to reflect one's efforts to deal with the loss of an attachment figure, and thus are influenced by one's attachment orientation, they have been shown to predict grief and adjustment over and above attachment orientation. The existing literature on CBs is limited, however, to work in bereavement, though loss through death is but one way to lose an attachment bond. Anecdotally, we know that following the breakup of a romantic relationship people often report internalized and externalized CBs, but we do not know the extent to which these CBs reflect the same attachment-related processes as they do in bereavement, and whether they have the same implications for grief and adjustment.

In the present study, we therefore assess the role of CBs in adjustment following relationship breakup. We stand to gain confidence in the generalizability of attachment theory and the understanding of the function of CBs to the extent that the pattern of associations between grief, attachment orientations, and internalizing and externalizing CBs found in the bereavement literature replicate in the context of relationship dissolution. From a therapeutic perspective, understanding the function of both internalizing and externalizing CBs may help those coping with relationship dissolution, and those providing services to these individuals, recognize the significance of these seemingly aberrant thoughts and feelings.

The Present Study

The purpose of this study is to assess the extent to which patterns of associations between attachment orientations, internalizing and externalizing CBs, and grief and distress found in the bereavement literature replicate in the context of relationship dissolution. Therefore, we hypothesize, first, that grief will be correlated positively with anxious attachment orientation, but not with avoidant attachment orientation (H1). Second, following bereavement studies by N. P. Field and colleagues (N. P. Field & Filanosky, 2009; Ho et al., 2013), we test whether externalized CBs are correlated positively with attachment anxiety, but not attachment avoidance (H2). Third, and most importantly, we test whether internalized and externalized CBs significantly predict grief over and above the effects attributable to attachment orientation and characteristics of the breakup (initiator status, length of the relationship, and quality of the relationship; H3).

In addition to assessing the relations of CBs with grief (or breakup distress), we also assess their relations with more general indicators of psychological well-being, including a measure of depressed affect and life satisfaction. These secondary assessments are meant to be exploratory in nature, and thus are distinct from our hypotheses. In the context of loss, grief has been shown to correlate substantially with depressed affect (e.g., Wijngaards-de Meij et al., 2008). It is, however, recognized that they are distinct concepts. Depressed mood reflects a broader perspective on one's current situation than does grief. Recognizing that grief and depressed mood may not fully capture well-being, we also include an assessment of life satisfaction. Like depressed mood,

life satisfaction is likely influenced by events and factors beyond relationship dissolution. As such, we anticipate that CBs may have somewhat weaker links with these constructs than they do with grief.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology classes at a large Canadian university. To be eligible, they were required to have experienced the dissolution of a romantic relationship within the past six months. Those completing the online survey received a modest grade-raising credit. Of the 140 participants who began the survey, 37 were excluded because they did not meet the inclusion criterion, did not provide sufficient data, or failed attention checks imbedded in the survey, leaving a sample of $N = 103$ (87 women, 16 men; $M = 19.7$ years, $SD = 2.47$ years). The study was approved by the university's research ethics board.

Procedure

After completing an online consent form, participants were asked a series of questions about the terminated romantic relationship (e.g., how recently it ended, who initiated the breakup, and what led to the dissolution), and whether they were currently in a new romantic relationship. They then completed questionnaires assessing life satisfaction, depressive symptoms, a retrospective assessment of the quality of the relationship, breakup distress, attachment style, and CBs. Finally, they received a debriefing form explaining the purpose of the study.

Material

Life satisfaction. The *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) is a widely used instrument that assesses a global judgment about the state of one's life. It contains five items, each rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Scale reliability was $\alpha = .90$, which is consistent with Diener et al.'s (1985) findings when used with a sample of undergraduate students.

Depressive symptoms. Depressive symptoms were assessed with the Revised *Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale Revised* (CESD-R) (Eaton, Smith, Ybarra, Muntaner, & Tien, 2004). Relative to the original *Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale* (CESD) (Radloff, 1977), the CESD-R better reflects the primary symptoms of a major

depressive episode according to the DSM-IV. The 20-item CESD-R has been validated in a community sample and a student sample (Van Dam & Earleywine, 2011), where it has been shown to correlate highly and positively with trait anxiety and negative affectivity, and negatively (modestly) with positive affectivity. Van Dam and Earleywine (2011) also reported good internal consistency for the instrument ($\alpha = .92$ in the community sample and $\alpha = .93$ in the student sample). In the current study, $\alpha = .95$.

Relationship quality. Relationship quality prior to the breakup was assessed retrospectively by adapting the *Relationship Assessment Scale* (RA; Hendrick, 1988). The RA is a 7-item Likert scale that assesses participants' feelings about the relationship before the breakup. Each question asks participants to rate how they felt about a certain aspect of the relationship before the breakup occurred on a scale of 1 (*low satisfaction*) to 4 (*high satisfaction*). Example questions include: "Before the breakup, how well did your partner meet your needs?" and "Before the breakup, how many problems were in your relationship?". Hendrick's original instrument has been validated in prior research by demonstrating a high correlation ($r = .84$) with a measure of marital satisfaction (Vaughn & Mathyastic Baier, 1999). Scale reliability in the present study was $\alpha = .84$.

Grief/breakup distress. T. Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, and Delgado (2009) developed the *Breakup Distress Scale* (BD) by adapting items from the *Inventory of Complicated Grief* (ICG; Prigerson et al., 1995). The ICG is widely used in the bereavement literature for assessing complicated grief (e.g., Newson, Boelen, Hek, Hofman, & Tiemeier, 2011). The BD includes 16 of the ICG's 19 items, with the referent changed from deceased loved one to ex-partner. Items not retained were not relevant to relationship breakups. Example items include: "I feel stunned or dazed over what happened" and "I think about this person so much it's hard to do things I normally do". T. Field et al. (2009) reported that scores on the instrument correlated significantly and positively with anxiety, depressive symptoms, feeling betrayed by the breakup, hope for renewal of the relationship, and with elapsed time since the breakup in a college student sample. In the current sample, $\alpha = .94$.

Attachment. The Experiences in Close Relationships Questionnaire—Revised (ECR-R) (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000) was used to assess

participants' attachment-related avoidance and anxiety. Internal consistency and temporal stability of the two subscales have been shown to be very good ($\alpha > .90$ and test-retest correlations over a three week period, $r > .90$) and validity has been established by showing that scores on the two subscales predict subsequent reports of anxiety and comfort with closeness in interpersonal interactions from a daily diary study (Sibley, Fischer, & Liu, 2005). In the present study, $\alpha = .92$ for both subscales.

Continuing bonds. The *Continuing Bonds Scale* used was adapted from the original scale by N. P. Field and Filanosky (2009) to be made relevant to relationship breakups. Ten of the original 16 items were used, and the wording was changed to refer to an ex-partner instead of a deceased loved one (see Table 1). Participants were asked to indicate how often they engaged in a particular behaviour within the past month by choosing an option on a 4-point scale, which ranged from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*most of the time*).

Consistent with the original scale by N. P. Field and Filanosky (2009), the adapted Continuing Bonds Scale measured both the external and internal use of CBs (see Table 1 for list of items). The internal ($\alpha = .87$) and external ($\alpha = .78$) subscales demonstrated good reliability. The reliability of these scales is comparable to what N. P. Field and Filanosky (2009) found for the complete scale in a bereaved sample ($\alpha = .92$ and $.73$). The total mean for internalized continuing bonds for the entire participant

sample was higher ($M = 1.17$, $SD = 0.77$) than external continuing bonds ($M = 0.68$, $SD = 0.81$), which is also consistent with the findings with the original scale. Consistent with Field and Filanosky the distribution of scores for externalized CBs was positively skewed. Transforming scores by means of a square root transformation reduced skewness considerably but did not have a material change on the findings reported below. Given the lack of material change, we use the untransformed scores in the analyses below.

The most commonly experienced instance of internalized CBs was "imagining sharing with my ex something that happened to me" (experienced at least rarely by 78.2% of the sample). The most commonly experienced instance of externalized CBs was "imagining that my ex would suddenly come back to me" (experienced at least rarely by 59.2% of the sample).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The preliminary analyses determined the extent to which constructs of interest were associated with demographic factors and loss-related variables. These analyses were conducted to assess the extent to which these factors might confound the main set of results. Independent samples *t*-test were conducted to assess the effects of gender, current relationship status (in a new relationship or single), and time since the breakup (less than 3 months vs. 3-6 months) on

Table 1

Adapted continuing bonds scale

| Item |
|--|
| 1. I thought about the positive influence of my ex on who I am today. (I) |
| 2. I thought about my ex as a role model I try to be like. (I) |
| 3. I imagined my ex guiding me or watching over me as if invisibly present. (I) |
| 4. When making important decisions, I thought about what my ex might have done and used this in helping me make my decision. (I) |
| 5. I thought about how my ex would have enjoyed something I said or did. (I) |
| 6. I imagined sharing with my ex something special that happened to me. (I) |
| 7. I imagined my ex's voice. (I) |
| 8. I briefly acted as though I was still with my ex- such as calling out loud their name or preparing a table for two. (E) |
| 9. I actually thought I felt my ex's physical touch. (E) |
| 10. I imagined that my ex might suddenly come back to me. (E) |

Note. (I) = internalized continuing bonds subscale; (E) = externalized continuing bonds subscale.

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satisfaction with life, breakup grief, past relationship quality, attachment (anxiety and avoidance), depressive symptoms and CBs (internalized and externalized). Of the 24 *t*-test conducted, the only significant effects observed were for gender difference in attachment anxiety ($t(101) = -2.00, p < .05$) and relationship quality ($t(101) = -2.05, p < .05$), such that men scored higher than women on attachment anxiety and relationship quality. No other significant differences were found across gender, relationship status, or time since breakup ($t < |1.72|, \text{all } p > .09$).

One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to test whether initiator status (self, the other, or mutual) was associated with satisfaction with life, breakup grief, relationship quality, attachment anxiety and avoidance, depressive symptoms and internalized and externalized CBs. Only one significant difference was observed in relationship quality ($F(2, 99) = 11.84, p < .001$), where initiators perceived less relationship quality than partner initiated and mutual. No other effects were statistically significant, although initiator status had a marginally significant relation with life satisfaction (I initiated > partner initiated; $F(2, 99) = 2.77, p = .068$), breakup grief (partner initiator > I initiated; $F(2, 99) = 2.58, p = .081$), and internalized CBs (mutual > I initiated; $F(2, 99) = 2.55, p = .083$).

Main Analyses

The first goal of the present study was to assess the extent to which attachment orientations correlated with grief following relationship dissolution. Table 2 shows that high scores on attachment anxiety were

correlated positively and significantly with grief ($r(101) = .39, p < .001$); attachment avoidance, however, was not significantly associated with grief ($r(101) = -.02, p = .82$). Table 2 also shows that scores on attachment anxiety and avoidance were significantly correlated positively with depression scores and negatively with life satisfaction.

The second goal of the study was to assess the extent to which internalized and externalized CBs correlated with attachment anxiety and avoidance. Consistent with N. P. Field and Filanosky (2009) and Ho et al. (2013), internalized CBs were not significantly correlated with either attachment-related anxiety or avoidance ($r < |.12|, p > .25$). However, externalized CBs were positively correlated with attachment-related anxiety ($r = .23, p < .05$), but not with attachment-related avoidance ($r = -.11, p = .288$).

The third goal of the study was to assess the extent to which CBs predict breakup grief above and beyond one's attachment orientation. In a regression analysis, attachment anxiety and avoidance were entered in the first step and internalized and externalized CBs were entered on the second step. As shown in Table 3, attachment anxiety and avoidance together accounted for 16,7% of variance in breakup grief. Attachment anxiety was uniquely associated with grief, such that those reporting a more anxious attachment style tended to report more grief ($\beta = .42, p < .001$). The effect for avoidant attachment was not significant ($\beta = -.14, p = .153$). When internalizing and externalizing CBs were entered into the model in the second step, we observed that greater use of both internalized CBs

Table 2
Correlations of attachment style, continuing bonds and affect variables

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|---------------------------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|--------|-------|-------|
| 1. Anxiety | - | | | | | | | |
| 2. Avoidance | .27** | - | | | | | | |
| 3. CB Internal | .11 | -.08 | - | | | | | |
| 4. CB External | .23* | -.11 | .63** | - | | | | |
| 5. Breakup Grief | .39** | -.02 | .59** | .66** | - | | | |
| 6. Satisfaction with Life | -.42** | -.24* | -.12 | -.14 | -.43* | - | | |
| 7. Depressive Symptoms | .43** | .19* | .41** | .41** | .68** | -.48** | - | |
| 8. Relationship Quality | -.10 | -.38** | -.31** | .24* | .31** | -.13 | .12 | - |
| <i>M</i> | 3.53 | 3.05 | 1.17 | 0.71 | 32.94 | 23.66 | 11.50 | 19.41 |
| <i>SD</i> | 1.25 | 1.11 | 0.77 | 0.84 | 12.52 | 6.97 | 10.61 | 4.92 |

Note. CB = continuing bonds; * $p < .05$, two-tailed; ** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

($\beta = .31, p < 0.01$) and externalized CBs ($\beta = .40, p < .001$) uniquely predicted greater breakup grief. This regression was repeated including as covariates initiator status (dummy-coded), gender, and relationship quality—factors associated with our constructs of interest in preliminary analyses. Controlling for these factors had no appreciable effect on the findings.

For exploratory purposes, the regression analysis was repeated using symptoms of depression and life satisfaction as dependent variables. Table 3 shows that on the first step of the regressions, attachment anxiety independently predicted greater depressive symptoms ($\beta = .41, p < .001$) and lower life satisfaction ($\beta = -.38, p < .001$); attachment avoidance was not uniquely associated with either of these ($\beta < |.15|, p > .10$). At the second step, we observed that internalized CBs were positively associated with depressive symptoms ($\beta = .27, p < 0.5$), but not life satisfaction ($\beta = -.08, p = .475$; see Table 3). Those who reported use of externalized CBs reported marginally more symptoms of depression ($\beta = .19, p = .09$), but no effect was observed for the effect of externalized CBs on life satisfaction ($\beta = -.02, p = .878$). As was the case for the analyses involving grief as an outcome, controlling for initiator status, gender, and relationship quality had no appreciable effect on these findings.

Discussion

Loss of a loved one, whether due to death or relationship dissolution, elicits a grief response. From an attachment perspective, the loss of a close

relationship requires one to sever the bond, or at least transform it into a spiritual or symbolic level (see e.g., Bowlby, 1980; N. P. Field, 2006; Klass et al., 1996). Reports of CBs after the loss, particularly those that are internalized (e.g., thought about how he or she would have enjoyed something I did) are believed to reflect the transformation of the bond into a spiritual or symbolic level. In contrast, externalized bonds (e.g., thought I felt his or her touch) are believed to indicate problems changing the nature of the bond (N. P. Field & Filanosky, 2009).

Although there is mounting evidence of the roles of CBs in the context of bereavement, we are aware of no other study that has examined this phenomenon within the context of relationship dissolution. To the extent that a romantic relationship can be understood as an attachment bond, our main goal was to show that CBs play similar roles in the context of relationship dissolution as they do in bereavement. Confirming each of our hypotheses, we first found that attachment anxiety positively predicted breakup grief, whereas attachment avoidance did not (H1). We also found that attachment anxiety was positively associated with externalized CBs but not internal CBs, whereas avoidant attachment was not associated with either (H2). Lastly, we observed that both internalized and externalized CBs were independently associated with more grief post-relationship dissolution even after taking into account attachment orientations and characteristics of the breakup (such as initiator status, length of the relationship, and quality of the relationship; H3). These findings mirror what has been reported in samples of bereaved individuals (e.g., Ho et al., 2013). Given that our main interest centres on

Table 3

Regression of breakup grief, satisfaction with life and depressive symptoms on attachment orientations and continuing bonds

| | Breakup Grief | | | Satisfaction with Life | | | Depressive Symptoms | | |
|---------------------------|---------------|-----------|----------|------------------------|-----------|----------|---------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| | <i>b</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>b</i> | <i>SE</i> | <i>t</i> |
| Step 1 | | | | | | | | | |
| Anxious Attachment | 4.25 | 0.95 | 4.48** | - 2.11 | 0.52 | - 4.05** | 3.75 | 0.86 | 4.37** |
| Avoidant Attachment | - 1.54 | 1.07 | - 1.44 | - 0.89 | 0.59 | - 1.51 | 0.87 | 0.97 | 0.90 |
| Step 2 | | | | | | | | | |
| Anxious Attachment | 2.68 | 0.73 | 3.65** | - 2.02 | 0.54 | - 3.70** | 2.91 | 0.81 | 3.60** |
| Avoidant Attachment | - 0.31 | 0.81 | - 0.39 | - 0.97 | 0.54 | - 1.62 | 1.55 | 0.89 | 1.74 [†] |
| Internal Continuing Bonds | 5.03 | 1.43 | 3.52** | - 0.76 | 1.06 | - 0.72 | 4.04 | 1.57 | 2.56* |
| External Continuing Bonds | 5.98 | 1.35 | 4.42** | - 0.15 | 1.00 | - 0.15 | 2.55 | 1.49 | 1.71 [†] |

Note. *n* = 103; **p* < .05, two-tailed; ***p* < .01, two-tailed; [†]*p* < .10, two-tailed.

the effects of CBs on grief over and above attachment, we will first discuss these findings and then proceed to discuss the relations of attachment and grief as well as attachment and CBs.

As hypothesized, individuals scoring higher on the attachment anxiety dimension were more likely to report externalized CBs than those scoring low on this dimension. Considering that those with an anxious attachment orientation fear abandonment (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987), their externalized CBs likely reflect a desire to cling to their lost love and, to some extent, a refusal to believe that the relationship has ended. Although this analysis suggests that externalized CBs are cause for concern, we caution that pathologizing such expressions so soon after the loss may not be appropriate as the link between such thoughts and depressive symptoms was only marginally significant in the regression model.

Whereas externalized CBs were correlated positively with attachment anxiety, internalized CBs were not significantly correlated with attachment anxiety or avoidance—a pattern also found in bereavement studies (Boelen et al., 2006; N. P. Field & Filanosky, 2009; Ho et al., 2013). These data indicate that individuals with secure attachment orientations were as likely to indicate such CBs as those with insecure attachments, at least in the first six months post-breakup. Although individuals with secure attachment orientations may experience less grief following their breakup, they nevertheless face the same difficult task of severing and transforming their bond. That their grief is less intense suggests that those with a secure attachment orientation are better able to manage this change.

Although theorists have argued that internalized CBs may facilitate adjustment following loss (N. P. Field, 2006; Klass et al., 1996), data from this study and a number of bereavement studies indicate that such CBs are associated with greater grief and depressive symptoms (e.g., Currier et al., 2015; N. P. Field & Filanosky, 2009; Ho et al., 2013). Given the consistency of these findings, it is tempting to reject the theory. Before doing so, however, we recommend that the hypothesis be tested with a longitudinal data design. The cross-sectional designs used to date do not test the possibility that use of internalized CBs may lead to, or reflect, greater grief in the short term, but may facilitate a subsequent reduction in grief and distress.

It is interesting that whereas both internalized and externalized CBs were significantly correlated with grief and depressive symptoms (and perceived quality of the relationship), they were not associated significantly with life satisfaction. One way to interpret this pattern of results is to suggest that CBs affect mood but not one's general outlook on life. Unlike grief and depressive symptoms (which emphasize one's feelings), life satisfaction reflects a cognitive evaluation of one's present situation (Diener, 2000). Another way to interpret this pattern of results is to suggest that feelings of grief and distress promote the need or desire to maintain the relationship with the former partner; a feeling of dissatisfaction with life may not promote the same need. Given the cross-sectional nature of this study, we are unable to tease apart these two interpretations.

Consistent with what has been found in the bereavement literature (e.g., N. P. Field & Sundin, 2001), we found that individuals with more anxious attachments experienced more grief following their breakup relative to those with more secure attachments. Those with an anxious attachment also reported more symptoms of depression and lower life satisfaction. Since anxiously attached individuals tend to be dependent and reliant on romantic partners while fearing rejection and abandonment (Hazan & Shaver, 1987), a breakup is apt to be highly distressing for these individuals as it signifies their fears coming true. In the context of relationship dissolution, Davis et al. (2003) have suggested that anxiously attached individuals tend to be more preoccupied with their ex-partner and continued to desire to use them for attachment related needs after a breakup, which would indicate that it may take them longer to reorganize their attachment hierarchy and fully integrate their loss (Fagundes, 2012). This preoccupation with an ex-partner and delay in the ability to integrate the loss sound quite similar to unresolved grief.

Although greater attachment avoidance was associated at the bivariate level, with lower life satisfaction and more symptoms of depression; avoidance was not significantly associated with any of the three outcome measures after controlling for attachment anxiety. Once more, this pattern of results is similar to what others have found in samples of people coping with relationship breakups (Davis et al., 2003; Fagundes, 2012) and bereavement (N. P. Field & Sundin, 2001). For instance, N. P. Field and Sundin reported no relation between avoidant attachment and

post-bereavement for both physical and psychological symptoms in bereaved individuals who had lost their spouse. Similarly, among those who experienced relationship dissolution, avoidant attachment generally has not been significantly associated with distress (Davis et al., 2003) or adjustment (Fagundes, 2012). These results are reflective of the emotional distancing strategies typically used by individuals with avoidant attachment to cope with loss (Davis et. al., 2003; N. P. Field & Sundin, 2001), which have been thought to suppress attachment-related distress (Fraley, Davis, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley & Shaver, 1997).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

With this study, we have introduced the notion of CBs into the relationship dissolution literature. Now that we have confirmed links between CBs, attachment orientations, and grief, future research will have to further investigate the subject with causal designs. It is possible that intense distress or grief motivates people to think of or imagine their lost love. Longitudinal designs would not only help determine the causal direction of effects, but they would also help establish whether CBs have long-term implications for mental health. In the bereavement literature, expressions of intense grief in the first six months are not generally regarded as signs of concern. Indeed, complicated grief is normally assessed at least six months post-loss (Prigerson et al., 1995). Thus it may be premature to suggest that internalized and externalized CBs experiences within the first six months of a relationship dissolution have implications for future adjustment.

Aside from the limitations associated with cross-sectional designs, a further limitation of this study is that participants were self-selected and from an undergraduate student population. Given that participants voluntarily chose to participate in this study, individuals who were experiencing particularly distressing breakups may not have wanted to complete the study because discussing the details and feelings of their breakup may have been too difficult emotionally. The undergraduate population poses another limitation, as these results may not be generalizable to older adults or those dealing with divorce, for example (Birnbaum, Orr, Mikulincer, & Florian, 1997). Although divorce involves the severance of attachment bonds, grief in this context can be complicated by legal processes that may distort, extend, or eviscerate any feelings of loss. We assume that relationship dissolution in non-married

couples may yield similar results to what we have observed here, but we remain cautious about extending our findings to this population and await further research before generalizing. Thus, future studies should explore older samples and potentially samples which include individuals experiencing divorce, as these samples may yield different results.

In order to control for any differences in the quality of the relationships prior to the breakup, we included in our study a retrospective measure of relationship quality. We recognize as a limitation that this assessment of relationship quality may contain retrospective bias. Nevertheless, we felt that failure to take into account differences in relationship quality would leave findings open to the argument that the links between CBs and grief could be due to relationship quality (i.e., those who were in unsatisfactory relationships may grieve less, and be less likely to experience CBs).

Conclusion

Our findings shed light into how coping with death and relationship breakups generalize into the broader field of psychology of loss. Specifically, the addition of CBs into the relationship dissolution literature confirms that this behaviour is relevant to other types of loss besides bereavement. Thus the similarities observed between coping with bereavement and coping with a breakup in the present study suggest that loss is a distressing experience which can bring about a great deal of grief, regardless how that loss came about. This insight could help inform future counselling strategies for those experiencing a relationship dissolution. For instance, those with an anxious attachment orientation have greater difficulty coping and experience more grief compared to those with other attachment orientations and thus may require more social support and personalized counselling strategies to help them work through their grief. Counselling for those who are bereaved is increasingly incorporating attachment models (e.g., Currier et al., 2015), and these same models may also be appropriate for individuals coping with relationship dissolution.

Throughout this article, we have emphasized ways in which coping with loss through death and relationship dissolution are similar. It was argued that CBs play similar roles in the context of bereavement and relationship breakup. However, it is also important to note the ways in which these contexts are

different. Though both experiences can be quite distressing for some individuals, losing a loved one through death is clearly more permanent than through a breakup. Dissolved relationships sometimes do rekindle and, on occasion, a broken romantic relationship becomes platonic. Moreover, whereas relationship breakups have the potential to be mutual or amicable, death does not. It remains to be seen the extent to which these differences interacted with CBs and grief.

Note

¹Although N. P. Field and Filanosky (2009) found that internalized CBs were positively correlated with greater grief in their sample of bereaved adults, they also found that internalized CBs were positively associated with reports of posttraumatic growth. That is, those reporting more use of internalized CBs tended to report that their experience with loss has led to positive changes—for example, in how they relate to others, have greater appreciation for life, and experience increases in self-confidence or personal strength. It is unclear what to make of these findings, as reports of growth after loss or adversity do not necessarily reflect or imply adjustment (Frazier et al., 2009; Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 2004).

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