#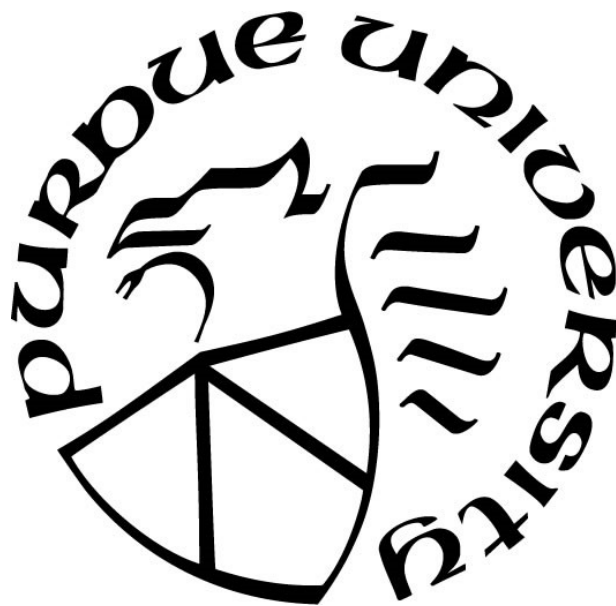 THE STORIES OF COMPLICATED GRIEVERS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECTS OF COMPLICATED GRIEVING ON THE NARRATIVES PEOPLE CREATE AFTER EXPERIENCING THE LOSS OF A ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP

by

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ABSTRACT

Author: Donovan, Caitie J. MA
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Title: The Stories of Complicated Grievers: An Examination of the Effects of Complicated Grieving on the Narratives People Create After Experiencing the Loss of a Romantic Relationship.
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The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which the narratives told by people after a serious relationship dissolution are affected by the type of grief they experience. It was based on the current literature surrounding relationship dissolution and the resulting grief that comes from the loss of partner and relationship. The terms *complicated grief* and *healthy grief* were discussed; the emerging adult demographic and the particular ways in which grief is affected by extreme emotional situations were examined. Using the ideas presented in *narrative inquiry* and *narrative therapy* as a lens, data were qualitatively collected on twenty-two 18-24-year-old college students at a large Midwestern University. The study employed interviews and thematic coding to examine similarities and differences between complicated and healthy grievers. Practical suggestions were offered as to how complicated grievers could be guided to create narratives that make them better able to place blame appropriately, less likely to feel alone, and more willing to let go of their ex-partner.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationship dissolution can be an extremely traumatic experience that may leave people feeling hopeless and emotionally scarred. Research indicates that a serious dissolution creates the likelihood that young people in particular will experience the onset of a major depressive disorder (Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999). The loss of someone who had become an integral part of one's identity requires coping and reevaluation of self-identity in order to adjust in a healthy way (Asai et al., 2010). Grieving the loss of a relationship has been compared to the experience of those grieving the death of a loved one (Archer & Fisher, 2008). This study examined how people created narratives about their ex-partner when they experience a form of grief scholars have termed *complicated grief* (cf. Holland & Neimeyer, 2010; Prigerson et al., 2009, Prigerson 1995). Complicated grief is distinctive from depression and anxiety and affects young adults directly due to the transitionary nature of young adult life (Prigerson, Bierhals, Reynolds, & Shear, 1997).

This study approached the topic through a narrative lens and aimed to add to the body of knowledge regarding narrative therapy. White, White and Epston (1990) explained that narrative therapy is the practice of helping people craft narratives that are specific to the person's individual experience rather than expecting them to meet a specific standard of "Truth" which is decided outside of themselves. This allows for participants to choose their language but still be guided to create narratives that are helpful and conducive to the patient finding healing. This study permitted participants a chance to express themselves using their own language so that scholars who practice narrative therapy could comprehend which narratives are connected to healthy grief and which narratives are unique to complicated grievers.

The goal of this study was to examine participants' narratives about their experience of relationship dissolution, their ex-partners, and themselves in order to explore what types of narratives were created by different types of participants and how that connected to their experience of grief. This research offered potential ways in which university mental health staffs might potentially encourage students experiencing a 'break-up' to cope with their trauma. This is significant to explore because without proper coping serious repercussions are possible (Prigerson et al., 1997). It is important to have specific directives because research shows that without a determined coping style, people will experience more emotional trauma than if they are provided direct and specific instruction as to how to cope (Warburton, Fishman, & Perry, 1997).

With a goal of understanding the narratives created by those grieving a romantic relationship dissolution, a review of the existing literature is offered. Following the review of literature is a description of the methodology and the use of twenty-two qualitative interviews which were transcribed and thematically coded. The findings are then reported and discussed, and future directions and limitations of the current study are suggested.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to examine the intersection of grief and relationship dissolution, a review of the current literature on these subjects was completed. This chapter presents the literature on relationship dissolution, grief, and covers important tenants of narrative theory.

Relationships and Grieving

Relationship Dissolution

Romantic relationship loss, also referred to as a break-up (cf. Tashiro & Frazier, 2003), is a worthy area of study due to its widespread and impactful nature. Scholars have found that the end of a serious romantic relationship is often a deeply painful and jarring human experience which, in some cases, cause intense emotional damage including the loss of one's sense of self (Drew, Heesacker, Frost, & Oelke, 2004). The trauma that typically accompanies the loss of one's partner can create permanent damage that impacts future relationships and affects the proclivity to trust (Guasto, 2014). The re-evaluation of identity is an integral piece of the process once the relationship is dissolved. Those experiencing this trauma are left to re-evaluate their knowledge about themselves and their plans for their future. When people experience this type of pain and loss, it is likely they will employ coping mechanisms in order to handle the emotional experience of the dissolution of the relationship. Some of them cope easily and are able to adjust to life without their significant other, while others are unable to move forward and find healthy ways to cope (Gilbert & Sifers, 2011). Since almost everyone will experience a break-up in their lifetime (Lewandowski, 2009), understanding the best ways for people to cope with this emotional trauma is increasingly important. The grief experience within this type of loss may

seriously affect the physical and mental health of those undergoing it; therefore, it is imperative that answers are offered to help people to live healthier lives (Prigerson et al., 1997).

As suggested, this type of loss has been shown to affect people negatively, thus it follows that a loss like this would cause people to re-evaluate the original positive narrative created around their ex-partner (cf. Grossoehme, 2013). However, it is also known that during significant events, people both respond to their current narratives as well as create new narratives based on their emotional experience. Negative narratives, both currently existing and newly created, are "related to levels of grief and intrusive and avoidant thinking," specifically for college-aged students who are experiencing the loss of a serious romantic relationship (Boals & Klein, 2005, p.252). This means that the types of narratives people create will likely affect their responses and thought patterns. This creates a direct effect on their mental and emotional health.

This type of loss and reconstruction of the griever's narrative is frequently compared to the loss experienced when a death of a loved one occurs and creates a similar psychological response in the brain (Archer & Fisher, 2008). This means that models of bereavement used to assess death have also been used to examine dissolution (cf. McKiernan, Ryan, McMahon, Bradley, & Butler, 2018). Due to the similar nature of these two types of loss, the literature on grief in the context of dying is presented to inform and enhance this study's examination of dissolution as a grieving process.

Grief

The loss of a loved one has the potential to affect people in a variety of complex, interesting, and detrimental ways. It can lead to increased depression, anxiety, and complex feelings surrounding one's identity (Asai et al., 2010, cf. Holland & Neimeyer, 2010). This loss, in the context of dissolution, is both painful and confusing. When their partner leaves, people are left to the daunting task of determining how to reevaluate their identity and handle the

experience of this loss. Grief is often examined as a matter of identity. The more that a person perceives their identity as co-constructed with the person they lost, the harder it is for them to adjust to their new role without that person (Kessler & Kubler-Ross, 2005). People search for meaning both in their lost relationship and also in their new reality without the person who is gone (Stroebe & Schut, 2001). A more personally constructive experience of grief involves utilizing healthy coping mechanisms to begin the process which allows them to move toward building a new acceptable narrative reality and identity that exists without the person who is no longer in the relationship (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006).

Some grief scholars suggest that confronting one's grief directly is an effective way to cope with it (cf. Worden, 2018). Therefore, a common coping mechanism that grievers use is talking about their grief and seeking social support (Basinger, Wehrman, & McAninch, 2016; Lepore, Ragan, & Jones, 2000). Social support can be greatly effective in handling the stress associated with the experience of trauma (cf. Lerias & Byrne, 2003). However, relationship loss, rather than the death of the partner, has distinct differences.

Social support is complicated because the ex-partner is still alive and social support is not always available due to the public nature under which relationship dissolution may have occurred (cf. Cupach & Metts, 1986). For example, mutual friends may choose to be loyal to one party or another, complicating who the griever can utilize for social support. More specifically, if two people are friends with another couple, it becomes unlikely that all four people will remain friends. If the other couple is overly supportive of one ex-partner, the other might not feel satisfied with the social support he or she receives (Greif & Deal, 2012). Since social support is not always available from friends or family in a satisfactory manner, many people seek support groups either in person or online in order to connect with others who understand what they are

experiencing. Researchers in this area also suggest turning to expressive writing when those grieving are unable or unwilling to disclose to their social circles, as this expression provides both mental and physical health benefits to the griever (Lepore et al., 2000).

Additionally, storytelling and the creation of narratives in order to make new meaning in the face of loss has also been shown to be extremely helpful in people's experiences with grief (Hooghe, Neimeyer, & Rober, 2011). This aspect of storytelling is a large part of why people might choose to seek other people who have had similar experiences, to connect with over grief. Oftentimes, by conveying and building these stories with other people who are experiencing similar emotions, grievers tend to feel seen and are then able to find healing (Feiring, Jashar, & Heleniak, 2010).

However, not everyone has the same access to resources or knowledge which would enable them to obtain support. Many grievers do not have the time or the resources to find or attend support groups. In addition, gender impacts whether people seek support. Men are often less likely to ask for emotional support (Burleson et al., 2011). Lack of support may leave people with a deeper sense of loss and trauma. When people experience the trauma of grief and are either unaware of or unable to properly utilize these coping mechanisms, (i.e., seeking support from social connections, or engaging in narrative reconstruction), they may become 'stuck', unable to 'move on' or seek help (Holland & Neimeyer, 2010). Scholars have examined and eventually labeled the primary differences that present themselves in someone experiencing culturally normal grief symptoms and those outside of what is considered normal by their social group (Horowitz & Bonanno, 1993). Over time, scholars have labeled this as "Complicated Grief" (CG) and the term has been used for the classification of the experiences of people whose grieving exists outside of established norms (Prigerson, et al., 1995).

Complicated Grief

The idea of Complicated Grief (CG) was introduced by Prigerson et al. (1995). Prigerson is a psychologist who specializes in studying the bereavement process. She developed the term after noticing that different people were having two significantly different experiences of grief. She defined complicated grievers as being distinct from healthy grievers in two ways. She explained that "certain symptoms of grief have been shown (a) to be distinct from bereavement-related depression and anxiety, and (b) to predict long-term functional impairments" (p.65). By this she meant that not only are the painful aspects of grieving heightened but they last for extended periods of time. For some people this attachment to their grief will last them a lifetime and they will never truly adjust back to a healthy sense of normal. This type of grieving is also characterized by people who are unable to reconstruct their identity without the person they have lost. They are often consumed by the identity they had constructed previously in relation to the person (e.g., partner, child) who was alive and continue to imagine their life with that specific person. This holds people in a state of *prolonged grief* (a.k.a., prolonged grief disorder – PGD) and prevents them from adjusting to normal society (Prigerson et al., 2009, 1995).

Additionally, follow-up work has been done on complicated grieving by Sousa et al. (2016) in order to support the validity of the two categories (i.e., healthy and complicated). They found that complicated grievers repeatedly favored a narrative which consisted of "the precipitating event, internal response, present actions, result, and end. The end of the narrative is the difficulty experienced in adapting to a new reality, longing for the deceased, and suffering because of this longing" which are all terms associated with CG. In contrast, the healthy grievers did not identify with this narrative significantly (Sousa, de Sá, & Rocha, 2016, p. 236). The literature does reveal that CG is an experience distinct from healthy grieving and has a negative impact on those who experience it, even finding it to be distinct from bereavement-related

anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Boelen and Bout, 2007,Golden & Dalgleish, 2010). For example, a healthy griever might be inclined to seek out social support of some kind but those experiencing CG are increasingly likely to avoid talking about their grief because they have trouble adjusting to their new life without the significant other whom they have lost (cf. Shear et al., 2007). This indicates that CG is a serious condition that effects people in uniquely damaging ways. Research shows that individuals experiencing CG will suffer from "intrusive thoughts, pangs of severe emotion, distressing yearnings, feeling excessively alone and empty, excessively avoiding tasks reminiscent of the deceased, unusual sleep disturbances, and maladaptive levels of loss of interest in personal activities" (Horowitz et al., 2003, p. 904). These symptoms have a significant effect on those who experience CG and they are deserving of solutions which are specific to their particular situation. This means that understanding complicated grievers and how to help them achieve healthy grieving is incredibly important to their mental health and a valuable path to pursue.

Since there have only been a few studies examining the ways in which CG has affected those experiencing relationship losses, it seems important to look at the ways that people have chosen to cope. The creation of narratives has been shown to be a helpful coping mechanism. The following section reviews narrative theory and its relationship to coping with grief due to loss (through death or dissolution of the relationship).

Narrative Theory

Narrative Inquiry

Narratives historical background, and critiques of the value and power of narrative, stretch from antiquity (e.g., Plato and Aristotle) through postmodernity (e.g., Foucault and Lyotard).Over the ages, scholars have attempted to understand the ways in which human beings

construct self and society through narrative development (For an overview see Clair, et al., 2014, Clair, et at., 2016).

Narrative has been defined as both a telling and a knowing, meaning the narrator can be someone who knows and/or someone who tells (Kim, 2015). A person might know something which impacts another person's story but might not be willing to share, therefore this narrative exists only in a state of knowing. However, once it is told, it is then known by others and the original knower becomes the narrator. At the same time the audience of this narrator now becomes someone who knows which impacts the societal ways in which knowledge is shared and created. Kim also describes narrative as "an essential strategy of human expression" (p. 341). This indicates that understanding the narratives people create and how they are shared are important to understanding people. Bochner and Ellis (2003) sought to understand how the narratives created around research could be pushed to be more open. They argued for the inclusion of art-based research specifically because art would function as a vessel through which "personal narratives" and "collective narratives" could be more deeply accessed and understood. This approach suggests that narratives help to create deeper understanding of both humanity as well as individual humans.

Narratives are also defined as the stories people create, tell, and participate in which allow them to make sense of their lives and the lives of those around them (Blenkinsopp, 2007). Blenkinsopp examines narrative within the context of careers and organizations in order to discuss how certain narratives trap people in unwanted careers. He uses Bateson's (1956) concept of the double-bind to make his argument. This indicates that narratives can reinforce both positive and negative concepts within society which creates important and complex effects on those who exist within certain narrative spheres.

Narratives that incorporate a first person perspective allow for self-reflection and insight into the individual experience (Scarfe & Marlow, 2015). They serve to connect people to their own past, allowing them to deal with difficult emotions, especially those faced due to the hardships of life, like the loss of someone they loved (Krizek, 1992). Therefore, researchers have used this as a strategy in the investigation of a wide variety of topics.

Lyotard (1984) suggested another definition which is that narrative is "the quintessential form of customary knowledge" and he indicated that individual narratives are created in accordance with and in response to grand overarching cultural narratives (p.19). In the context of a break-up narrative, there are many different grand narratives which inform how the experience of a break-up should appear. For example, participants who identify with an organized religion might be impacted by the rules and stories contained within that religious tradition. This means the way those individuals grieve will be influenced by what cultural norms exist within each religion's grand narrative surrounding grief. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, people are told that their pain serves a specific purpose and they should therefore feel grateful for it. This certainly would inform the way an individual in a religious sphere might grieve differently than someone outside. There are many other grand narratives that impact grief or demonstrate coping. Clair (1996) provided an example of how students coped via personal narratives when situated against a grand narrative that stood in opposition of their views. She discusses how the colloquialism "a real job" is used to foster and perpetuate a grand narrative, primarily of capitalism, that suggests that organizational identity is the most relevant identity in a social context. This is in line with the overarching grand narrative of capitalism which is extremely pervasive within American culture. However, Clair localizes this concept within the experience of thirty-four college students and how they think about the idea of "a real job." She described the way that some

students use the colloquialism to cope with their dislike of their current stage of life, holding onto the narrative that their real job will fulfil them despite their current lack of fulfillment while other participants perpetuated the capitalist use of the word, by affirming that they did need to find a "real job." This was often influenced by their particular family or social spheres. Additionally, some chose to cope by discussing how they felt out of place or that their work was devalued by the phrase "a real job." Clair explored the way their individual and situational stories impact their understanding of this colloquialism and allow them to cope in a variety of ways, showing that localized narrative coping is important for gaining situational understanding and especially understanding the grand narrative and personal narrative relationship. So, how has narrative has been examined in the situationally specific context of coping?

Narrative Coping

As scholars discussed the different ways narrative could be generally or specifically defined, others became more interested in how narrative constructed one's life story, that is how people developed narratives both as general identity and a means to cope with life's challenges.

A notable contributor, especially in relation to health challenges and narrative is Arthur Frank, author of the *Wounded Storyteller* (1995). Frank was interested in the stories people told about their experience with illness. He believed those who have been wounded have powerful stories to share about their experience with illness. He posited that while people create individualized stories, they use pieces from larger cultural narratives which implies commonality between the narratives. He therefore created a picture of three major narratives, the restitution narrative, the chaos narrative, and the quest narrative. The restitution narrative is characterized by the wounded storyteller describing his or her experiences with a focus on the desire to return to health. Frank showed how the person seeks to take control in order to feel better within their

own self-assessment but also to present what society expects. The chaos narrative, on the other hand, "imagines life never getting better" (p. 97). In this narrative, people lack a sense of internal ordering to their narratives and instead of looking to the future like the restitution narrative, focus on expressing the chaos being experienced at that moment in time. Lastly, the quest narrative is characterized by the ill person seeking to gain from his or her experience. The quest is different for each person, but the desire to gain something is present in all narratives of this type. If applied to the context of relationship dissolution, all three of these narratives would offer nuanced and interesting insight into the experience of the griever. However, this is beyond the scope of the current study.

Influenced by Frank, communication researchers began to think about the ways in which deeply personal and emotional narratives could be used to help people handle the hardships of life and this often occurred in the context of loss. Bateson (2004) explained her experience of embracing the discontinuity of her narrative in order to discover acceptance outside of societal expectations for a life story. This idea gives control back to the individual, taking it from society which has created oppressive expectations about the parameters of a story. This provides control to the griever who is able to shape his or her narrative in a way that is healing for him or her rather than be shaped by the societal narrative which focuses on failings.

More specifically, scholars wondered if they could use narratives to help people cope with their grief. They discovered that healthy individuals are capable of creating deep and self-aware narratives whereas those with psychological damage create partial or flawed narratives (Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2004). Tuval-Mashiach et al.'s study was conducted using five participants who had experienced a terror attack. These participants were given a questionnaire that allowed them to write narratives which were then compared to their experience with PTSD.

The researchers discovered that the more a narrative demonstrated coherence, and participants were able to speak positively about themselves, the less PTSD symptoms they reported. However, participants with less coherent narratives, they tended to experience strong symptoms of PTSD. The implication from this study, that narratives can affect mental health symptoms, gave credence to the idea that people could be taught to create healthier narratives and therefore potentially have a healthier experience of grief. Eventually, support groups incorporated the practice of having people tell their narratives as a type of therapy (Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2004; Umphrey & Cacciatore, 2011). Scholars have found that in support groups for parents whose children have died, narratives such as *the death story* and the *coping/negotiating* narrative both arise in order to help the parents deal with the loss of their child (Umphrey & Cacciatore, 2011). Narrative work is important in the context of loss of life because it allows the person to work through the 'broken narrative' to intensify self-reflection and discover who they are (Kluge, 2000).

It is important to observe the narratives that people create when they are experiencing trauma because it can touch every other part of their life. The research into how people were coping through narrative work went hand-in-hand with the theory around using narratives in therapy.

Narrative Therapy

The concept of narrative therapy came onto the academic stage when two scholars, White, White and Epston (1990), influenced by preceding philosophers, decided to approach therapy from a new perspective. To properly understand narrative therapy, it must first be situated in a theoretical backdrop. Michel Foucault, and his ideas about the discursive construction of reality (e.g., Truth, power, discipline, expert/authority, the gaze) offered a lens

through which to understand the interplay of the creation of societal knowledge and the disciplined self, which led to the development of narrative therapy. Traditionally, therapy has been steeped in the assumption that there is one holistic "Truth" and that patients must be realigned to match this sense of truth. However, Foucault argued that we must fight against this type of overtly scientific and authoritarian thinking. This does not mean he opposed science itself but instead opposed "the effects of centralizing powers which are linked to the institution and functioning of an organized scientific discourse" (Foucault 1980, p.84). This view of reality as discursively created led some in the social sciences to reject the rigid ideas present in traditional science and opt instead for an exploratory approach. This means that instead of expecting patients to meet a specific standard or Truth, they are instead encouraged to explore what truths and expectations they have internalized and therefore imposed upon themselves. Through this process of externalization, patients are able to be more reflexive and open to a variety of stories through which to interpret their world and experience (White, White & Epston, 1990). The importance of words is emphasized as White (1995) believes, drawing from Foucault, "words are the world" (p. 30) and so patients are told to expand upon words and what they mean by selecting certain ones over others. Another main goal of Narrative Therapy is to assist people in resolving circumstances in their life through reconceptualizing themselves as separated from the stories and knowledges that they feel are causing them suffering (Pia, 2013).

However, the difficulty of this new method arose when there was no scientifically measurable way through which to instruct patients. Social scientists began to wonder that if there is no one legitimate way to interpret meaning, then how would they help their patients discover ways to improve? This led to the concept that a person's own story becomes "self-legitimizing" (Parry & Doan, 1994). This was a massive shift in the field because no longer were people

required to match up to the standards presented by society or the discipline but instead each individual story contained significance. Unpacking this significance became vital to understanding each patient's lived experience and helping them feel that their story was legitimate even if it diverged from the reigning master narrative. An important aspect of this is unpacking a patient's "unique outcomes," a term coined by Goffman (1961) that is used when the patient expresses something that runs in contrast to the dominant narrative they had been constructing (Payne, 2000). It is important to focus on these areas because it allows the patient to see perspectives outside of their own and consider why these moments exist which run contrary to the dominant narrative the person had previously been accepting as Truth. This strategy has been applied to many different therapeutic contexts and specifically been used in helping people process their divorces.

Narrative Therapy has been used in the context of divorce to help patients deal with the specific trauma and grief that accompanies a divorce, which is often considered the most severe type of relationship dissolution, baring loss of life (Sclater, 1997). An important aspect in prior divorce therapy has been to ask the patient to set goals in order to facilitate the healing process through action. However, some scholars have examined the ways in which this older perspective can be combined with Narrative Therapy in order to place a greater emphasis on transitioning out of the marriage with a focus on recreating the narrative of self, free from hegemony and dominant power ideologies (Pietsch, 2002). This is important in modern American society due to the grand narrative (Lyotard, 1984) permeating the current cultural climate which strongly suggests that divorce is morally wrong and therefore should have a staining mark on a person's identity. This narrative could be applied to break-ups as well, which may cause people to feel inadequate due to the rejection they experience. Narratives can support the dominant ideology,

but they can also be used to resist and free people from the strong claws of hegemony (Clair, 1993; Clair et al., 2014).

While narrative therapy has been used in some break-up contexts, the literature does contain a gap in which no one has seen how narrative coping and CG overlap. Understanding this will help the field of narrative therapy by offering insights into the types of narratives that emergent adults are creating and identifying ways to help them create narratives which allow them to express themselves more fully and do not cause them to experience the adverse health effects which are experienced by the complicated grievers.

This understanding of relationship dissolution, grief, and coping as seen through a narrative perspective, led to the creation of two research questions:

RQ1: What similarities and differences exist between complicated and healthy grievers in the break-up narratives that people create about their former relationship?

RQ2: What types of narratives should be encouraged or avoided in order to help more people experience healthy grief rather than complicated grief?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the methodological framework employed in the present study. A qualitative approach was taken, as qualitative methods are of particular value when studying the dynamic complexity of coping with grief (cf. Phinney & Haas, 2003). A software driven and hand-coded thematic analysis was done of the transcriptions of twenty-two interviews with emergent adults, conducted at a Midwestern University.

Individuals of any age may be subject to a break-up, but a particularly vulnerable population is the emergent adult. Emergent adults are defined as those ranging in age from 18 to 25 years and who are exploring a new world of possibilities (Arnett, 2007). The emerging adult demographic is an important population to research because such individuals are known to be especially sensitive to traumatic experiences. This is due to the transitionary nature of their current stage of life (Smith-Marek, Durtschi, Brown, & Dharnidharka, 2016). Many are leaving their childhood homes for the first time and taking on the responsibility of college coursework. They begin making independent decisions for the first time concerning life and love (Arnett, 2007). This means that while romantic dissolutions are likely to affect almost everyone at some point in their life (Lewandowski, 2009), the potential for emotional damage is higher in this demographic because this could be their first significant trauma as an adult.

Additionally, it is important to examine emerging adults because many remain significantly connected to their parents. This means that when looking at narratives as coping mechanisms, the types of stories that emerging adults create will often reflect what they observed in their parents' relationships (Allen & Mitchell, 2015). Students in this demographic are discovering their attachment to their parents and the experience of a break-up brings them to the realization that their ability to emotionally regulate may be related to their parent's behavior

during their childhood (Ávila, Cabral, & Matos, 2011). Also, they are increasingly likely to seek support from their parents when they are experiencing a traumatic loss, like a break-up (Carlson, 2016). This connection to their parents indicates they are a unique population to study in order to understand how their narratives form and the ways in which they mention their family as a part of this narrative. It is common that family members are involved in their child's emotional needs at this stage and therefore, might appear in the narrative surrounding the break-up (Shimkowski, Punyanunt-Carter, Colwell, & Norman, 2018). Emerging adults are easily affected, easily accessed, and have a unique perspective on break-ups. They are, therefore, the demographic on which this study focused. The specific details regarding the sample and the sampling technique are offered below.

Sample

Twenty-two emergent adults who were enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate program at a large Midwestern university during the time of this study were recruited. The participants were selected utilizing both freshman level communication classes and through the online university research participation system (See Appendix A for recruitment materials). Students either signed up or emailed the researcher for an interview time slot. In order to participate, the students had to be between the ages of 18-24 to qualify as emergent adults. They were required to have experienced a break-up of a "serious relationship" sometime during the last two years, with the exception of two participants who were only a few months outside of the requirement and felt that they vividly remembered their experiences. These two participants were accepted because the idea of a "serious relationship" is nebulous, and therefore, if they identified the relationship as serious, they were likely experiencing grief. Overall, thirty-six participants were identified and scheduled for an interview. However, because several participants did not meet the

requirements of identifying the relationship as serious as well as some difficulties with the technology, only twenty-two of the participant's interviews were transcribed and coded. However, according to Bernard (2011), there is "growing evidence that 10-20 knowledgeable people are enough to uncover and understand core categories in any well-defined cultural domain or study of lived experience" (p. 154). Therefore, this study likely captured the experience of grief in this particular emergent adult demographic.

The twenty-two participants provided demographic information. Further, no information other than the break-up qualifiers was used to disqualify participants from inclusion. Sixteen women and six men were interviewed. Twenty of the participants identified between the ages of 18-22 and two were in the 23-24 bracket. There were seven freshman, two sophomores, seven juniors, and six seniors attending a large Midwestern university at the time of the study. Twenty of the twenty-two had been in their relationships for six months or longer and twenty out of the twenty-two relationships occurred within the last two years. In addition, participants were also asked to indicate if during the relationship they had expressed intent to marry their ex-partner; interestingly, there was an even split with eleven participants indicating yes, and eleven indicating no(See Table 1, p.86, for demographic information and results of the measure). Table 1 contains data regarding their scores on the ICG (Sum), their gender identification (1=male, 2=female, 3=other), their age range (1=18-22, 2=23-24), if their relationship was 6 months or longer (1=yes, 2=no), if their relationship was in the last two years (1=yes, 2=no), and if they expressed intent to marry their ex-partner during the relationship (1=yes, 2=no).

Procedure

Once the participants were recruited, a meeting time was established—during which participants were given a consent form which the researcher provided to identify the risks of the

study and inform them that they could end the interview if they became uncomfortable. Participants were also told at this time that their interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed at a later date. They were then provided with an option to decline participation if they felt uncomfortable; no participants chose to opt out. nor did they refuse to answer any of the questions during the interviews. Next participants received a survey requesting demographic information and the Inventory of Complicated Grief (Appendix B) which was used to sort them into complicated grievers and healthy grievers (Scale development and history will be provided below). After completing this short questionnaire (27 items in total), the interview began. Individual semi-structured interviews were done which lasted between thirty-five minutes and one hour. The researcher chose to do semi-structured but open-ended interviews because it allowed participants to give a significant amount of detailed information about their experience while still allowing the researcher to probe deeper into areas that were relevant (Turner, 2010). Additionally, the same interview guide was utilized for each participant to increase the reliability of the findings (Boyce & Neale, 2006). The length of the interview was dependent upon the participants' willingness to talk. There was a vast difference from participant to participant; some would talk at length per question while others had little to say regardless of the follow-up questions. However, each participant was asked follow-up questions in order to allow them to open up regarding their experiences (Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, & McKinney, 2012). The interview guide (Appendix C) began with an open-ended question of "Tell me the story of your break-up" which allowed participants to share what they felt was important. Other examples of questions in the guide were "When did you start to notice problems within the relationship?" and "What was your life like immediately following the break-up?" Many of the probing questions

were simply "How did that make you feel?" or "Can you say more about that?" in order to get the participants to express what they had been feeling.

The interviews were all audio-recorded and after completion of every interview, those audio-recordings were transcribed. Transcriptions were completed using TEMI software to obtain an initial machine-created transcript which required substantial hand editing by the researcher. To ensure privacy, all participants received a pseudonym and all records were stored in a secure location. Additionally, no identifying information was left in the transcriptions in order to ensure that participants could not be identified by their stories.

Analysis

After transcriptions were completed, coding began (Example transcript is located in Appendix D). In examining the transcriptions, the researcher sought to understand the specific manner in which participants were talking about their ex-partner, themselves, and the break-up as a grieving process. Coding was accomplished by importing all transcripts into QDA Miner, a software that allows for the creation of individual codes under a larger heading. Using the software, the researcher examined each transcription and highlighted different words, sentences, and paragraphs to mark them as the appropriate code. Research has shown that tools like QDA Miner increase the academic rigor of qualitative work as they allow for concepts and themes to emerge more easily and make the data more manageable to analyze (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Themes were identified by the researcher and the software was only used to mark each time a certain theme occurred so repetition could be easily examined later in the process. In the first round of coding, the researcher was simply looking for basic positives and negative feelings towards the participant themselves as well as toward their ex-partner and who was to blame for the end of the relationship. Examples of codes that were used during this round were "Feelings

about Self: Positive, Negative, or Neutral" and "Feelings about Ex-Partner: Positive, Negative, or Neutral." As the second round of coding began, the researcher looked back at the literature and research questions, adding more nuance and looking at specific word choices that were repeated across the differing transcripts. Additionally, the transcripts were examined for feelings that people were experiencing/expressing in the wake of their grief. For example, some participants felt relief that the relationship had come to an end and did not regret it. In contrast, other participants expressed sadness that the relationship had ended and regretted having entered the relationship in the first place. The unique combination of feelings expressed by each participant were considered as the transcripts were coded. These codes were eventually boiled down into six major themes around similarities and three major themes regarding the differences (See Table 2, p. 87). After the transcripts were coded, the inventory that participants had taken was analyzed to determine which participants were complicated or healthy grievers.

Inventory of Complicated Grief

The Inventory of Complicated Grief (ICG) consists of nineteen questions on a 5-point Likert scale asking participants to indicate how often they experienced a feeling represented by a statement about the loss of the loved one, which is evaluated as 1= Never to 5=Always. It originally had twenty-two items but Prigerson found that it had more internal consistency when three items were deleted. At nineteen items, this scale had a Cronbach's α of 0.94 (Prigerson et al., 1995). While the original measure created by Prigerson used death language, these items were modified to inquire about relationship dissolution. However, the format of the questions remained the same (Appendix B). An example of statements included in the original Prigerson measure is "Memories of the person who died upset me" and "I feel that life is empty without the person who died." An example of how these items were changed is "Memories of my ex-partner

upset me" and "I feel that life is empty without my ex-partner." Additionally, one question was divided into two because the original question had two parts within it which confused the participants. The measure, with the changed break-up items, was tested for the internal consistency of the twenty items using Cronbach's alpha which showed them as accurate predictors of CG according to the standards of reliability (α=.904, Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). However, this study did not recruit enough participants to accurately claim a significant Cronbach's α, therefore this version of the scale would need further testing that was beyond the scope of this study Through the evaluation of a participant's score on this measure, the person can be labeled as experiencing complicated grieving as distinctive from the healthy grieving process. This was tested on 97 conjugally bereaved elders who completed the ICG. It was found that "Respondents with ICG scores >25 were significantly more impaired in social, general, mental, and physical health functioning and in bodily pain than those with ICG scores <25. (Prigerson et al., 1995). In the current study there were twelve participants who scored below a 25 and were then labeled as "healthy grievers" and ten of the participants scored above a 25 and were labeled as the "complicated grievers."

After the participants' scores on this inventory were determined, their coded transcripts were printed out and then re-coded by hand using a color coordination system. While there were over 50 themes found in the first round of coding, during the second round the themes were reduced to the eight most important themes which were each assigned a color. These themes were determined by both frequency and commonality across all participants. The researcher read through each transcription, counting how many participants fit into each thematic category. If a category did contain more than a few of the participants, then it was considered to be central to the narratives. Additionally, emphasis of the participants was considered. If a participant

emphasized a certain part of their story as important or expressed a strong emotion about it, it received extra attention from the researcher. At this stage, the research questions were revisited in order to see what, if any, thematic and narrative differences existed between the two categories of grievers. Since the transcripts were coded prior to this separation of participants into categories, the researcher attempted to avoid biasing the coding based on the categories. The multiple rounds of coding led to the emergence of six important themes that were similar across all participants. These six themes each had anywhere between two and four sub-categories. Additionally, three of these themes contained, one or two subcategories that were distinct to either healthy or complicated grievers which allowed the researcher to see how their narratives were distinct from one another.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The current chapter is a presentation of the findings related to the first research question. The findings for the first research question have been divided into two categories, the similarities and the differences. Each of these areas has thematic sub-categories. This chapter is an exhibition of the six important similarities and the three major differences in the narratives. The participants have been assigned pseudonyms for the readers' convenience and for the protection of the participants.

Similarity in Narratives

The themes presented in this section address the first research question, which is "what differences exist between complicated and healthy grievers in the break-up narratives that people create about their former relationships?" This question was examined by outlining the similarities that emerged between the narratives of the healthy and complicated grievers. During the interview, participants were asked a set of questions which forced them to consider how they felt immediately following their break-up as well as how they felt about the relationship holistically. Since individual break-ups are different, this resulted in a wide variety of answers and stories.

Six general themes emerged from the analysis of the data: *View of Partner, View of Self, Blame, View of Relationship, View of the Future, and Coping Mechanisms.* The first theme addressed how the participant viewed their ex-partner, the second addressed the ways they conveyed their own self-identity, the third how they felt about the relationship overall, and the fourth was who was to blame for the end of the relationship. The fifth was how participants felt

when they looked toward their futures and the sixth was what the participants did to help themselves through the negative feelings of grief.

View of Partner

It was quickly clear that participants were interested in disclosing how they felt about their ex-partners even beyond what was asked of them during the interview. Participants often felt inclined to explain their ex-partners' behaviors and explore what their motivations might be for certain types of behaviors. Nine of the participants felt very negatively about their ex-partners. For example, one participant, Amelia, a healthy griever, made blanket statements such as "He was just not the best person…he's just a bad person." Other participants felt inclined to label their ex-partners. For example, they said things like, "He kind of became a very abusive individual" and "I just know he's the crazy one. Like he's crazy" (Victoria and Aria, both healthy grievers).

However, interestingly the participants wanted to communicate about that negativity with nuance. Eight of the participants wanted to explain who their ex-partners were or actively defend their ex-partners' actions. They communicated what they believed their ex-partner's motives to be and defended that negative behavior. They tried to analyze their ex-partners' families in order to explain why their ex-partners might have acted in certain ways. Ava (a healthy griever), explained that she "blames his parents" because:

> They weren't the best people to him growing up. So, he never really had some,
> like, he had to grow into his version of a man on his own, so that's why it is what
> it is now. Like he didn't really have guidance.

This explanation shifted the blame off her ex-partner and onto his parents, which still allowed the participant to express her ex-partner's negative qualities but took a portion of the blame off him

for his behaviors. Emma, a complicated griever, also employed this tactic in an attempt to explain the reasons her ex-partner deceived her about his sexuality:

> He hid it for so long just so that I could be his beard because his family would never agree with it. And so he like wasted just two years of my life. Like, I mean I understand his point of view because it's super hard for people to come out, especially in his culture. He's Muslim, but that shouldn't be like justification for just ruining so much of my time and wasting so much of my time. Like, I mean I understand his point of view because it's super hard for people to come out, especially in his culture. He's Muslim, but that shouldn't be like justification for just ruining so much of my time and wasting so much of my time…He was just using me as his like beard, like a shield to protect himself from society.

Emma felt angry over how her ex-partner had deceived her, but she attempted to understand how his family and their opinions on homosexuality were factors in his decision to deceive her. She was specific in indicating that, in her eyes, his family and their views were not a justification of his behavior and she felt like his lie was wrong. She recognized the nuance of the situation while still openly critiquing his negative behavior.

In addition, to their desire to explain their ex-partners' behaviors, participants were prone to qualifying or defending their own negative opinions regarding their ex-partners. For example, Sophia (a complicated griever) described her ex-partner as "really clingy" and described how he "tried too hard," however, she tried to explain why she felt negatively about his behavior:

> I started to hate how he talked. He would talk like, such a douchebag oh my God, it would just drive me insane and I couldn't even be with him. Like I would avoid him at parties sometimes because he would get so drunk and he'd be so loud and so obnoxious and I just was, I couldn't handle it. He was clumsy and like maybe that's just me. I don't know. I mean he's not perfect, but uh, yeah, it was just the little things really started to bother me.

She wanted to feel justified in her criticism, so she explained that it might be only her that felt bothered by him. She admitted that he wasn't perfect but continued with her assertion that those qualities in him were enough to terminate the relationship. Another example of this is Olivia (a complicated griever) who described her ex-partner as "night and day" because when she was

finally done with the relationship, it was only then that "he just felt like he had to be the person in that moment." She admitted that he was capable of positive behavior but only when he felt like he was at risk of losing the relationship. She did not feel as though his effort to make amends with the goal of maintaining their relationship status was enough reason to continue in the relationship.

There were five people, both complicated and healthy, who felt positively about their ex-partners. While these people were in the minority, they were able to articulate not only defensive positions about their ex-partners, but some were openly positive towards their ex-partners. As an example, when Allen (a healthy griever) was asked about what he would tell his ex-partner if given the option, he said:

> Um, I would probably just thank her for like being like very kind to me. And even though she didn't deal with everything uh great at first but, she did apologize, and acknowledge that, and uh, thank her for being extremely like compassionate during the break-up and like talking me through it a decent amount.

He felt that even though his ex-partner made mistakes which resulted in pain for him, overall, she was a kind and compassionate person. He credited her behavior as a catalyst which helped him to work through the break-up. Allen was not the only participant who felt positively about his ex-partner, Nathan (a complicated griever) felt more positively about his ex-partner than any other participant, describing her as:

> I would describe Mary as a, a loving person. Uh, she loves the world. She's very, she's a big Christian and, and it, it, lightens her soul so much. Um always super nice unless you get in her face about basketball. And, uh, she was, she never, she never did anything to hurt anyone, um, for being like, what, 17 at the time. Um, she was very, she, she was a very much adult, um, which is kind of wild because if you meet her as a friend, she's one of those people that like, can't take anything seriously. But that was, uh, she, she took it very seriously. So she did the adult thing. Um, uh, I'd say she's an awesome girl that deserves the world.

Clearly, when given the opportunity to describe her, he chose to only speak highly of her. There were three other participants who wanted to express positives about their ex-partners. Two even went as far as to indicate that they would not want their ex-partners hearing that they had spoken negatively about them. In these cases, the participant was either friends or on somewhat friendly terms with their ex-partner, which might have encouraged them to speak more positively about their exes. Although the participants who felt positively were in the minority (only five of the twenty-two), they represented the nuance of a break-up narrative which views the ex-partner in a positive light. Through examining the participants' responses to their ex-partners, it seemed that a participant's view of their ex-partner was also tied to their view of themselves.

View of Self

The participants spent of lot of time during the interview explaining who they were and what motivated them during the break-up process. Ten of the participants spoke positively about themselves and were interested in expressing themselves with nuanced. Six of the participants had criticisms of themselves but defended their positions or feelings. The last six of them described how they felt negatively about themselves during the relationship but were attempting to reconstruct a positive view of themselves.

Ten of the participants spoke positively overall about themselves and explained why they felt positive and justified in their break-up scenario. One participant, Caleb (a healthy griever), was insistent on praising his own actions post-break-up because he felt his partner had demanded certain behavior from him that was unreasonable. He explained that if he could speak directly to her, he would say, "Like the entire two years I've been thinking about only you, I have to think about myself now." This was his moment of self-empowerment. Not only did this statement convey that he was finished attempting to meet the expectations she had set for him, but it also

expressed that he felt as though he had been a good partner to her and that she was

unappreciative. Therefore, post-break-up he did not owe her anything. He used this opportunity

to speak highly of himself and how he handled the relationship as well as the break-up.

Another example of this emphasized self-praising is Aria (a healthy griever), who had the

most condemnation for her ex-partner out of everyone, but also had a positive view of herself,

> Oh, I feel like I should not have let that happen because I have more respect for
> myself, but then again, it's like, once again, like I would not be the person who I
> am today without it. So, I'm, I wouldn't say I'm happy that it happened, but I
> definitely am like not taking it as an full negative just because like it's made me a
> very strong woman. So, I mean I do wish I was more like logical in a sense and I
> was more like how I am now. But like in reality, like that's not how anyone is.
> Like no one is just like knows stuff right away.

She explained that now she had grown and become strong and proud of herself. However, she

was defensive of the person she was then. She wanted to be honest with herself about the part

she played in her break-up, and she offered fair criticisms of herself. However, she also wanted

to emphasize that she was young and in love, therefore, she cannot be held accountable for her

decisions the way she might be accountable currently. This was a sentiment continued

throughout her entire interview. She was proud of her growth as a person. She was interested in

using criticisms of herself as a way to emphasize how much better she was post-break-up.

Some of the participants in this category (feeling overall positively about themselves)

wanted to emphasize to the researcher that they had grown in a positive way and explained that

they felt their growth made the negative experience worth the pain. Harper (a complicated

griever) explained it this way,

> I don't regret our relationship. I learned so much from it. I grew so much as a
> person, um, and I'm so willing to be in, in pain if it means like getting the person
> that I'm supposed to like spend my life with or it means that I learned so much
> about myself. Like I'm willing to have that trade off and I want him to recognize
> that just because things ended and I was so upset, doesn't mean that our
> relationship was worthless or should be thrown away or should be forgotten.

The participant conveyed to the researcher that the pain she experienced was meaningful for her because it facilitated her to growth, and she became a stronger person. She indicated that there was great value in that knowledge about herself, and she was more than willing to risk potential pain in order to have that knowledge. She also wanted to emphasize that she does not regret her relationship and instead feels grateful for her experience. She wanted her ex-partner to understand the inherent positive value that she gained through her suffering.

While no participant was holistically negative about themselves, six participants felt as though something about their personhood was part of the relational conflict that occurred and so they still expressed a somewhat negative view of themselves. Charlotte (a healthy griever) was one of the most negative about herself. There were several times that she expressed how her behavior resulted in a negative reaction or communication style from her ex-partner. For example, she explained, "a lot of like, my communication was much more like, stressed about it and like I think that made him stressed about it." While she identified this as "certainly not effective," she also asserted, "I don't know that I've really changed that." However, even Charlotte asserted she had learned from her mistakes. When she explained that she's "still learning not to do that," she stood up for her own needs by claiming, "I need someone who is like that kind of calm understanding person who can calm me down." So, even though Charlotte was harder on herself than many other participants, she gave herself room to grow from her experiences.

The last six participants seemed to consistently talk about themselves by explaining how their ex-partner made them feel negatively about themselves, and how they were working to move forward out of that mentality. An example of this is Asher (a complicated griever), who said that:

>It just made me feel like I wasn't good enough, or... it made me feel like I was just, like literally a boy or something, like I, I didn't mean anything to her, I was just to be used for... having around I guess, for her own enjoyment I guess.

During this relationship, his ex-partner made him feel as though he was unable to meet her expectations. He later expressed that, additionally, she would compare him to her other ex-partners and make him feel "worthless." However, since the break-up he had been trying to do what he feels is right so if other people "truly saw the actual big picture they'd realize that [he] wasn't a bad dude." He didn't want to let his character "be ruined by one freaking person, like, putting [him] on blast." So, he had slowly learned to separate from the negative ways that his partner made him feel during the relationship and was focused on trying to restore his self-esteem. His rationale was that, if he had the support of others, one person who made him feel negatively about himself was not going to make a difference. In addition to explaining their ex-partners and themselves, the participants were asked to discuss who was at fault for the ultimate demise of their relationships.

Blame

Participant Attributed Blame

The participants were asked to comment on who they thought was to blame for the dissolution of their relationships. Nine of the participants explained that they did not blame anyone for the end of the relationship, instead they blamed the situation or personality differences. Seven of the participants felt that their ex-partner was primarily at fault, although some had qualifiers for this while others blamed their ex-partner entirely. Two of the participants felt they were the ones primarily to blame and the remaining four felt that both themselves and their ex-partner were at fault.

The most common response (nine out of the twenty-two participants) was that their ex-partner enacted negative behaviors, but they felt uncomfortable placing blame on their ex-partner, instead opting to absolve both parties of blame. As an example, when asked who was at fault, Evelyn (a healthy griever) first responded that she didn't know, but that some of his behavior was "not okay." When she was asked to explore that thought more deeply, she defended him saying, "I just don't think he even realized like how, how poorly he was acting." While this acknowledged the missteps on the part of the ex-partner, she seemed to be uncomfortable attributing the blame to him. She portrayed it as a difference in personality. She was not the only one to express this concept, for example, Allen (a healthy griever), explained that:

> I didn't see it as much of blame, more as uh, because there wasn't anything. It wasn't like getting cheated on or anything. It wasn't a big falling out, it was just she doesn't want to be with me. I, you know, I, you should respect that.

This again removed the blame from the ex-partner and placed it on personality differences which are out of either partner's control. He expressed that she did not want to be in the relationship anymore, and he did not blame her for that. However, it was not only the healthy grievers that talked this way about their ex-partners. Several complicated grievers also attributed blame to common differences rather than to individual behaviors. Ella (a complicated griever), was very disorganized in her thoughts regarding blame, but ultimately came to the explanation that,

> I blamed him at first because I was like, you didn't really try. I was trying, I tried to cook us dinner, I tried to do something, but he kind of would like disconnect. And I, I told him that he didn't try. He said we both tried, so he wouldn't blame either of us. And I don't think I would blame either of us either. I think we were just, yeah. And for a while, even still, like some of the things that he's done since, um, are, are really out of character for him. Not really out of character, but one of the things, I guess he's, really just broke my heart and he, um, I would, I dunno like how to explain it. I just feel like he, I don't know, he's going through like he's trying to figure out his whole thing and his like, mom, like his is like a really good mom, I'm not taking, but like she like has done everything for him and like

> super like micro manages, like the whole situation type of thing. And I think he
> wanted, and with me I did a lot for him too and I think he had side before. Like I
> want to know, I can do things on my own. Like I want to know like I can be
> independent and like things like that and I can't do that if I'm relying on, you
> know, me or like things like that. And that's true. I would really make sure, I
> don't know, make sure things like that. So, I don't, I don't blame him. I don't, I
> don't blame me either.

While she changed her answer frequently, she ultimately indicated that she did not blame either

of them, even though she identified that he did not enact equivalent effort in solving their

problems which caused her to experience heartbreak. Interestingly, she identified multiple

mistakes he made and identified very minimal mistakes on her part but still concluded that

neither of them was to blame. Instead, she spent time describing the distinct differences between

them.

Building on the category of blaming no one, some participants spoke less about blame,

appearing unwilling to blame personal differences for the situation. These participants preferred

to keep blame out of the conversation entirely. Emily (a healthy griever), explained that,

> I just, I don't think anybody was at fault just because like there is nothing like, it's
> not like either of us cheated. It's not like either of us, like I don't know if he
> started liking somebody else. Um, but I, I didn't, and it's not like, I dunno, like
> anybody really did something like, like said something really mean to the other
> person or anything. So just, yeah, it just happened.

She felt that in order to attribute blame to her ex-partner, he would have had to have committed

an extreme violation of their relationship. This implied that she did not identify the blame as his

because his feelings for her changed over the course of the relationship. Other participants like

Madison and Scarlett (both complicated grievers) when asked if they blamed anyone said

respectively, "no…it just isn't the time, you know, for us," and "I don't think so….I think we

both would've gotten there eventually." Both participants indicated that they felt neutral about

blame. This is different from the experiences of the previously mentioned Ella and Victoria, who

felt the need to describe their ex-partners behaviors but not attribute blame. They were comfortable not discussing blame and did not offer anything negative about their ex-partners.

In contrast to these cases, some participants felt comfortable placing all (or at least a significant portion) of the blame on their ex-partners. Emma and Andrew (both complicated grievers) explained that "it is definitely his fault for hiding it so long," and "she felt like the bad guy, um, which she was." These statements indicated that the fault was attributed to the ex-partners, and while Andrew did qualify this by indicating "there's probably a couple things on [himself]," Emma denied having any blame whatsoever. She explained that her ex-partner attempted to place blame on her by labeling her "controlling." However, she felt that because he lied about his sexuality, it meant that he was "gay all along" and "just wasted [her] time." In this case, both participants felt their ex-partners were responsible for nearly all, if not all, of the damage to the relationships and, unlike the aforementioned participants, they did not feel the need to remove blame from the conversation. Emma continued to express that her ability to fully blame her ex-partner had assisted in her recovery because she "couldn't have done anything different," so she "accepted that and decided to like move on." She believed that blaming him directly furthered her through the healing process, although her results on the survey indicated that she remained a complicated griever.

There were two participants who blamed themselves, one who was a healthy griever and one who was a complicated griever. Both indicated that they were the primary reason the relationship had ended. However, they also expressed negative feelings toward their ex-partners. Sophia, the complicated griever, said that:

> I guess maybe me, because I knew I should have just ended things way sooner
> before they got as serious as they did. And like, I mean, yeah, it's not like, I mean,
> I loved him. I cared for him. It's not like I didn't, but um, I mean maybe I didn't
> treat him as right. Like I didn't, I, I just wasn't used to having somebody do so

> much for me and like literally do everything for me. Like I'm a very independent
> person, so like, everyone's like, why? Why are you like, why are you like pushing
> him away? And I'm like, it's not that it was so much like it was just all so much.
> And people were like, you would be stupid. Like, like any girl would die to have
> like what you have right now. Like he literally will do anything for you and he's
> so in love with you. And I'm like, and he'll buy anything for me. And I kinda, and
> I was like, well that's like not really making me happy. And uh, so I guess maybe
> it was me cause he like if it were him, we'd still be together now I think.

Sophia felt conflicted about placing blame but ultimately settled on blaming herself. Primarily she blamed herself because she believed her ex-partner had offered her things that other women would want, but she did not want them. She also expressed that if it had been up to her ex-partner, they would still be together. However, because she chose to dissolve their relationship, the blame was on her. She did explain the nuanced aspects of his personality which had been incompatible with hers but unlike some of the other participants, she did not seem to indicate those flaws meant that they shared the blame equally. Ryan, a healthy griever, held greater conviction and certainty that he was to blame for the end of the relationship. He identified the fault was due to his mental illness, but, similar to Sophia, he felt the need to mention some of his ex-partner's flaws in the relationship:

> I think I'm at fault. Um, I, I know a lot of people like love to talk shit on their
> exes and I've done it a little bit. Like there were problems there, things that she
> did that were kind of like Shitty, but I think, uh, I think it's my fault because um, I
> think it's my fault because I didn't realize that I think I had some like serious
> problems going on in my senior year that I wasn't really addressing because I
> didn't want to accept that I had problems. Um I think it was going through anxiety
> and insecurity, and just a lot of things to do with like dumb stuff. And I think,
> yeah, the relationship fed into those problems more so it wasn't helping. But, um,
> but I think me just trying to go on with my life and not accept the fact that I'm,
> you know, uh, probably not in the best health mentally and not trying to take care
> of that. I think that attributed to probably most of the problems. Well like most of
> the reason we broke up.

He explained that his mental health problems became a large contributor to the relationship coming to an end. He mentioned his ex-partner's behaviors which were negative, but he believed

that these mistakes were not greater transgressions compared to his own mental health. He took full responsibility and indicated that his decision to end the relationship was a part of his desire to make growth in his mental health. These two participants were the only ones who accepted the majority of the blame for their break-ups.

The remaining four participants were those who blamed both themselves and their ex-partners. However, these will be discussed in the differences section of the paper as all four were healthy grievers.

Ex-Partner Attributed Blame

In addition to being asked who they felt was at fault, participants were also asked to express who they believed their ex-partner blamed for the break-up. Twelve of the twenty-two participants indicated they felt as though their ex-partner blamed them, while the other ten felt as though their ex-partner blamed either no one or both people. This meant that no one identified their ex-partner as taking full responsibility for the break-up. The participants who felt their ex-partners blamed them were often direct about it. They would express that their ex-partner blamed them and chose not to expand their answer in the manner they had when discussing who they believed was at fault. Victoria simply stated that, "For the first like year to two years, definitely he thought it was my fault," and Evelyn said that her ex-partner "100%" blames her for the end of the relationship. However, many of the participants did not feel the need to share anything more about that and preferred to focus on who they blamed. Emma, a complicated griever, was one participant who did express significant emotion that her ex-partner had cast blame on her because she did not agree that she was deserving of any blame. She explained that:

> He doesn't place any blame on him. I thought he would eventually realize that
> some of the blame should go on him, but he's just adamant on thinking it was all
> my fault because I was controlling or like I wouldn't want him to like do makeup

on other girls…It was kinda like, he didn't realize he was being like, not possessive, but um, the word when like bossy… Kind of like he was kind of pushy, very assertive, very pushy and like he didn't realize and he still doesn't.

She felt as though he was unfair when he placed the blame on her, and she invalidated his opinion because of the way that he had behaved during their relationship. Many of the participants in this category felt their ex-partners were invalid in blaming them but did not feel it was necessary to spend time justifying themselves.

Additionally, the participants who felt their ex-partner either placed blame equally between them or blamed no one at all felt agreeable about that. They were accepting of the fact that their ex-partners did not need to place blame on anyone. They brought the conversation back to how they felt about blame instead of who their partner blamed. Nathan, a complicated griever, when asked if he thought his ex-partner blamed anyone, said:

No, I don't think so. I hope not. Um, but like we came to the, I mean ended up coming to the conclusion like not really together cause I wasn't really that down for it. But um, she came to the conclusion, um, but I respected it. Uh, so I don't think, I don't think anyone's like at fault.

He mentioned that he believed she did not blame either of them, but he shifted the conversation back to his thoughts. The last thing he mentioned was that he did not place the blame on either party. Many of the participants felt uncomfortable speaking for their ex-partners, so they would answer simply about who their ex-partners blamed and return to their feelings on the relationships.

It was important to the participants to work through and communicate who they believed was at fault, but they also expressed a great deal when evaluating their feelings about the relationship overall.

View of Relationship

The participants were asked to reflect and offer their own evaluation of their relationships. Responses in this category varied the most due to the fact that the participants had retained a number of complex and conflicting feelings about their relationships. This led to the creation of six categories, and each participant fell into one or two of the categories. Since some of the participants were too dynamic to be placed in one category, the following division does not total twenty-two. Seven participants told narratives that communicated feelings of loss over the end of the relationship, while eight of them believed they had made the right choice to end the relationship. Another five participants felt bitter about living through this negative experience. The other categories of feeling lonely, desiring their ex-partner, or accepting are all discussed in the section on differences as there was division in these categories based on the type of griever.

Many participants felt they had lost something significant when the relationship came to an end. Charlotte, a healthy griever, explained:

> I feel like I can't, it like gives me like this surreal, like feeling that like it never happened. Like, you know what I mean? Like I have this like weird like thing like of like, did this happen? Like did I actually date Chris? Like did we actually like have two years of like very like intimate, like friendship where like we just like talked about like everything in our life, you know what I mean? Like cause like now it just seems like it didn't ever happen

Charlotte described the intimacy that she experienced with her ex-partner which vanished upon her break-up. She felt the loss of this intimacy to such a great degree that she questioned if her experience was real. It did not appear real anymore, which made her feel a dual loss of the relationship, and her friendship with her ex-partner. Another participant, Andrew (a complicated griever), felt that he had lost something different when his relationship ended:

> I'll have this experience. And from that experience it kind of feels like I've cheated on whoever the next person is not, there's anything wrong. I haven't done anything and we were, we didn't even kiss or anything, it was, we didn't do anything, but um just how I've always kind of wanted to be like my Dad just, like that one person, I feel like I'll be carrying emotional baggage in that next relationship and it just kind of hurts me for whoever is that next person.

Andrew held an ideal of marrying the first person he dated because that is what his dad had done. This relationship was meant to fulfil that expectation, so when it ended, he lost that dream forever. He now felt as though he had cheated on his future partner because of the negative effects he experienced. This loss was arguably one of the most devastating aspects for him, which nearly brought him to tears while sharing during the interview. These seven participants explained their sense of loss in different and nuanced ways, but it was a unique expression of emotion that was not present in every participant's narrative.

On the other hand, eight participants expressed that the end of the relationship was the right choice for them or their partner or both. They were pleased the relationship had ended, either because they were glad for the learning experience, or they were glad to be out of a negative situation. As an example, Caleb, a healthy griever, described how he felt after the relationship had ended:

> I'd be really happy, like so happy that you'd never seen me that happy in one year. And in general I'm extremely hyper. I'm quite like crazy that way. Like I'm quite like happy in my life. But um, like, and then I came back to being my old self, which was like a huge win for me and uh, people saw that.

He felt he had returned to his true self. He was happy and believed that during the relationship he had been a negative version of himself. He was visibly excited that he did not have to be that person anymore. He was now back to who he used to be and even his friends noticed this positive difference that had taken place. For Sophia, a complicated griever, the realization that she had made the right decision came when she accepted that things would never change:

> I keep thinking that it was going to be better and I'm like, no. He's like, he's not going to cheat on me again. Like he's not going to do this again, like he's going to get better. Like he really said that he's going to try and get better and we're gonna make this work and it just never happened. Um, like my dad said, he said just make sure that I'm not just settling.

She explained that she wanted her ex-partner to change, and that desire prolonged the break-up. However, she realized it was the right decision to end it when she concluded that her ex-partner was never going to change, and the problems they had would never resolve. She mentioned an integral conversation with her father in which he helped her to understand that by continuing in the relationship, she would be settling for a "comfortable" life rather than a life with a partner she truly desired. This helped her conclude that she had made the right decision when she terminated the relationship.

The more negative of the participants were the five who felt bitter over the way their relationship was or how it ended. These participants discussed situations in which they were either lied to or made to experience pain they did not believe they deserved. Emma, a complicated griever, was asked how she would feel if her partner apologized and she explained:

> I think it would definitely like make that like bitter taste in my mouth for him go away. Like just thinking back in, like knowing that he's done all that stuff and blames me for it, it just frustrates me that he could think in what universe that I'm the wrong one when he just led me on for so long.

She felt bitter because her ex-partner blamed her for the relationship ending and did not accept any responsibility himself. This made her feel as though he was unrealistic regarding their situation which caused her a lot of bitterness. The feeling of bitterness continued after they had distance from one another for a while. The lack of reconciliation caused Emma to feel bitterness long after the end of the relationship. Ava, a healthy griever, also had the experience of feeling bitter after the relationship had ended. She had a child with her ex-partner and then he cheated on

her. When asked how she felt about his behavior (considering they had a child) she explained that she felt:

> Uh, annoyed, bitter, agitated, and I feel like I'm doing a lot of it on, um by myself because I have our family support, but I don't know, I just feel like he should want to be better than what his dad was and the fact that he isn't irritates me, but he likes to pretend on social media that he is, which is irritating.

She described herself as feeling bitter and frustrated by his behavior. She did not like how he presented himself on social media and believed that he should present himself in a better light. She revealed he had a difficult father and, therefore, she believed he should be a better father to his own child. Her bitterness carried forward because their situation required that they continued to co-parent the child.

The participants felt a multitude of different emotions, but when they reflected on the relationship, they either felt as though they had lost something significant in the break-up, like they had made the best decision possible given the situation, or they were bitter over their partner's behavior. This view of their relationship impacted the way that they thought about relationships in the future.

View of the Future

The participants were asked to explain how they felt when they thought about their futures. All of them fell into two categories, split evenly down the middle with eleven participants in one category and eleven in the other. The participants either looked forward to the future positively, having learned from their experience, or they felt as though their future was likely positive, but they needed to be wary and take future relationships more slowly.

The eleven participants who felt positively towards their future relationships referred to the fact that they had learned from the loss of the relationship. This meant they could move

forward to new things with a positive outlook. This was often spoken in conjunction with the

participant speaking highly about themselves. An example is Aria (a healthy griever) who felt

that:

> Personally, like I would say I'm very, I'm very mature. I'm a fresh. I'm only a
> freshman. But I think I'm, I'm very mature for my age, same with my boyfriend.
> And we talk about that a lot. And I would say like I think I'm very ready and I
> just know I am personally, I think I'm strong enough and I've just realized a lot
> about myself that I know what I want in a guy. So I'm very hopeful for the future.

Aria felt as though she was mature and ready for anything her future held. She expressed that her

new relationship was proceeding well, and she identified that she felt equipped to have a good

relationship. This was attributed to her experience with her ex-partner. Other participants also

discussed feeling better about the future due to the loss of the relationship. Allen, a healthy

griever, explained that he felt he was "much more confident after that relationship." Emma, a

complicated griever, said something similar:

> I definitely feel hopeful. I do feel extremely, like I do feel much stronger after that
> relationship because I did learn a lot in it. I do think that after that relationship, I, I
> like totally changed like confidence level, awareness level, uh, knowing how to
> trust, knowing that I should always trust my gut. Uh, no matter what it's saying.
> Um. It just made me more confident in my own like instinct and ability.

She felt she was stronger and ready for the future. She felt positively about herself because she

had been through that experience and used the break-up to learn what she wanted for her future.

She also used the word "confident," as many of the other participants did in this category. As a

whole, they felt as though they had learned from the experience, were confident their futures

would be bright, and they were equipped to make positive decisions in future relationships.

In contrast, the other eleven participants came out of their relationships feeling cautious

of what was before them. They identified a desire to take things slowly and to be more evaluative

of letting another person into their life. There was a range between participants who felt they still

had emotional work to complete before they were ready for a new relationship to participants

who felt openly afraid to pursue anyone else. Victoria (a healthy griever) explained that:

> I'm equipped with a lot more knowledge than back then, which is good. I still
> have a lot of trust issues based on that, that I still have to work through. And I
> think it's, it's still very easy for me to lapse back into, um, like not having a lot of
> self-confidence and thinking that like, or just not right. I think taking things into
> my own control. So, I still am working on that and hopefully in the future I'll get
> better at it.

She was able to recognize that some issues remained for her to work through and that it would be

easy to slip into her old negative patterns. There were notes of positivity when she talked about

her growth, and she hoped that in the future she would fully embrace herself. Other participants,

like Ryan (a healthy griever), were less focused on themselves and more careful when

considering a new relationship. Ryan explained that:

> I also really don't want to like, um, get myself in dumb situations or be or do
> something that I think is dumb for me to do. So, I like, I, um, I think that I need to
> be a lot more cautious for longer periods of time. Like if I'm ever going to
> commit to somebody, I need to like know, that I'm going to commit somebody,
> not just be like, oh, we've been dating for four months. Let's, let's get serious.

Ryan felt that he wanted to make smarter decisions when it came to future romantic

relationships. This meant that he needed to take things slowly and create more of a connection

before entering another serious relationship. While Ryan wanted to take things slow, he also

wasn't necessarily afraid to move forward with someone new. However, some of the participants

felt fearful of pursuing future relationships. Ella, a complicated griever, described her fears about

the future:

> I guess I just kind of get scared that and that it's hard for me to stay positive and
> think that well I, I deserve, you know, a good person and I'm a great person to
> like a great catch to have. So I've just been trying to like tell myself that. So, like,
> in the future, I don't know, I just, it's kind of, it's scary… I'm trying not to have
> expectations because it's, it's kind of, it's hard because when, when you meet
> someone and then it just doesn't end the right way or the way you thought.

Ella was unsure over her future's outlook. She carried expectations for her first relationship that were eroded when that relationship ended. She was working to rebuild her relationship expectations in order to look forward to her future, but she felt unready to fully be excited or positive. Ella wanted to believe that she was deserving of a successful relationship, but she had not yet fully accepted that, which made the idea of dating someone in the future scary for her. Overall, the eleven participants in this category were, at best, cautiously optimistic and at worst, afraid to date again. However, overwhelmingly most expressed a feeling of having grown from the relationship and identified that if nothing else was positive, that was a reward from the failed relationship. Understanding how the participants felt about their futures connects to how they chose to cope with their break-ups.

Coping Mechanisms

The participants were asked how they handled their experience of negative emotions and how they chose to cope in those moments. Across all the participants was a combination of distractions which helped them avoid thinking about their ex-partners. A short list of these type of distracting coping mechanisms includes working out, watching television, talking to friends, writing of some type, dating other people, and focusing on school. These were the activities that emerged for everyone, and they all fell under the larger category of distraction. Every participant mentioned a need to distract themselves as it helped them feel less sad. Interestingly, the coping mechanisms which involved their ex-partners directly played a significant role in their narratives. Eight of the participants described their desire to avoid their ex-partner altogether. Nine of the participants expressed their want for civility with their ex-partner, in the sense of wanting to be friendly in public but not necessarily seek friendship with their ex-partner. The remaining five participants either still communicated with their ex-partner on a regular basis, or they wished

they could interact with their ex-partner on a regular basis. This last category will be discussed in

the differences section as all five of these participants were complicated grievers.

The eight participants in the avoidance category felt very strongly that they had no desire

to see their ex-partner again. These participants blocked their ex-partner on social media or went

out of their way to avoid seeing their ex-partner in public. As an example, Olivia, a healthy

griever, pulled up next to her ex-partner in her car and described how she reacted:

> He had his window down, like he like actually looked like decent and I looked
> like crap. Like I looked like a homeless person and I was like, this is not the way,
> like, I want him to like see me. Like what if he thinks I'm this, I'm dressed this
> way and I'm looking like this, like, because like of him. And so I was like, no, I
> have to be the one that looks better when we, when we run into each other. So,
> um, um, I made sure I like, I put my window up like mmmm, really slowly, just
> like so it doesn't like look like dramatic, dramatic movement that's going to like
> look, like catch his attention. So, um, but it was just, um, I just think it was that
> like I just didn't want him to see me looking a way that wasn't uh or a way that
> wouldn't make him feel bad for acting the way he did.

Olivia was avoidant of her ex-partner because she did not want him to make assumptions about

her. She believed he would interpret her appearance inaccurately, so she avoided the interaction.

Another participant was forced by her ex-partner to obtain a no-contact directive through the

university so that he would stop following her. Evelyn, a healthy griever, explained how she felt

about having to this route:

> He emailed me twice. Um, and I never answered or I think I answered once and
> was like stop… There was one day I was actually up in the library…He actually
> somehow managed to find me, which I had only been there for maybe 20 minutes.
> So I don't know if someone he knew like had my location, like snap location or
> something. But ended up finding me and like like coming and trying to talk to me
> and obviously I was like, well I'm not going to talk to you. So, my friend walked
> me out and he actually followed us, like…followed us all the way down that
> block. So, then my friend just took me to his car, um, and like locked the doors
> and like waited until he actually went away and like my friend was like, what's
> going on? I just like, was like, I don't want to deal with like the questions or
> anything. Um, it, I was just like, it just needs to be kept very quiet. So like when
> stuff like that was happening, like people were like, what is going on? Like, why

is this weird kid following you? So then after that, um, I actually went into CARE and then, um, I now have a no contact directive with the university against him. Um, just for my own safety because we just don't know. Like if I was alone, you know would he be willing to walk away and stop talking to me or not. So it's just for the best.

She explained how she felt as though involving the university was the only way that she would feel safe with her ex-partner on campus. He could not comprehend that she did not want to discuss their relationship. Many participants in the avoidance category discussed a lack of agreement with their ex-partner regarding communication after the break-up. They identified this discord as their motivation to avoid. However, Evelyn was the only participant whose situation required university action. Avery, a complicated griever, chose to remove herself from her ex-partner's social circle. She stopped attending parties that she knew he would attend because it made her feel an "itching anger" and "annoyed." Her avoidance also carried over to social media. She described how "Other than that, like I'll occasionally see him on a Snapchat story of a friends, and I have to turn it off. Like I don't want to see it." It made her uncomfortable to see stories on Snapchat about him because she did not want to know about his life. Seeing this content brought up thoughts and memories about him which she did not want to entertain. The people who wanted to avoid their ex-partners altogether were those that felt that the situation that had occurred was too emotional for them to continue communicating with that individual. However, some people felt that even though their ex-partner had hurt them, they were still interested in civility.

The desire for civility for nine participants was important in their process of moving through the break-up. For example, Isabella, a healthy griever, explained how she did still text her ex-partner occasionally:

We don't talk about the relationship. It's pretty, it's pretty casual. Um, it is different obviously cause like he and I were like, he was one of my closest friends

like before the relationship and during the relationship. But now all of that is kind
of like gone. So I can't really see him as like a close friend anymore either.

She felt it was casual and explained how it did make her feel a little sad or uncomfortable, but

she felt it was important to maintain that space. When asked if she would be interested in talking

more, she said "I would still try to maintain the dynamic that we have currently a little bit."

While civility meant that she lost her ex-partner as her best friend, she asserted it was best for

them both. Emily, another healthy griever, had a similar experience when she found herself in a

class with her ex-partner:

We had a class actually like that spring after that. Um, and yeah, we were fine. So
like I'd see him like in class, we wouldn't sit together, but like I would like see
him and we talked for a couple minutes, I'd be like, hey, how's it going? And so
yeah, it was fine after that.

They were not trying to be friends, but they were able to be civil when they saw each other

during class. This made her feel more comfortable because they could interact, but they did not

have to interact regularly. However, for each of these participants, their ex-partner had agreed

that being civil was the best course of action. Interacting with their ex-partner became much

harder for participants when the ex-partner did not agree to the participant's desired approach.

As an example, Emma, a complicated griever, wanted civility with her ex-partner, but her ex-

partner felt so negatively toward her that he refused to be civil with her. She described what she

would say to him if she could:

I do… do think we could still be civil and I wish you could just give it a try and I
just don't want to hate you in the hallway. I just want to be able to say hi. I'm not
trying to be best friends, but I just think that if we could just say hi, and get over
it. Cause it has been a long time

When asked to explain further, she replied:

Um, I would be civil. I wouldn't want to hang out with him. I wouldn't want to be
his friend or his best friend. I would just want to be able to just, if I see him say
hi, if we're at the same place, like Starbucks, be able to sit with him and chat for a

few minutes. Just very like acquaintances. I wouldn't want to be back in his life
and his circle, but I would want to be able to be civil.

Once again, the participant emphasized that she did not want to be friends with her ex-partner,
but she did wish they could say hello and show civility toward each other. There was frustration
in her voice as she talked about this topic, because her ex-partner did not feel the same and chose
instead to lash out at her on social media. She described this as when he "subtweets" her in order
to say cruel things about her to his followers, some of whom know her. She did not appreciate
these reoccurring negative interactions and believed that they could have been civil with each
other, but he was not allowing that outcome.

Civility was very important to the participants in this group, and they communicated that
they had hoped their ex-partner would feel similarly. However, every participant in either the
avoidant group or in the civility group felt that how they interacted with their ex-partner, either
in person or on social media, was an important aspect of coping. It was integral to their process
of moving forward without that person as a central part of their identity.

These six major themes of *View of Partner, View of Self, Blame, View of Relationship
View of Future, and Coping Mechanisms* provides insight into the complicated and healthy
grievers and how they create similar but complex narratives surrounding their break-up. While
each of their individual experiences were unique and nuanced, they all repeatedly brought up
these six things and fell into similar categories within these overall themes. However, in addition
to these similarities, the analysis brought to the surface several interesting differences.

Differences in Narratives

This section addresses the differences in the narratives that were created by healthy and
complicated grievers in order to address both of the research questions which sought to

understand what differences existed between the narratives and how those differences should potentially be encouraged or avoided so that their expressions reflect the narratives created by healthy grievers. The participants were asked to recall their thoughts and feelings during their break-up experiences and, through the analysis of the narratives they created, there were three themes which contained categories that were unique to either the complicated grievers or the healthy grievers. These three themes were, *Blame, View of Relationship, and Coping Mechanisms.* While each of these themes had overlapping similarities between complicated and healthy grievers, as discussed previously, there were some key differences within specific categories which will be presented in this section.

Blame

Blame was a significant component to the participants' construction of break-up narratives. Many of them felt that establishing who was at fault for the end of the relationship would help them to better understand their experience. However, interestingly, there was one category within blame that contained four healthy grievers and no complicated grievers. This was the category of placing blaming on both the ex-partner and oneself equally for the end of the relationship. There were five complicated grievers who were willing to say that no one was at fault, but this was a distinctly different narrative than those who chose to blame both individuals. For example, Victoria, a healthy griever, said:

> I definitely think after the first year of the break up I blamed everything on him. Um, now looking back, as I said earlier, I think we just had the exact type of personalities that brought out the worst in each other. Like he made me feel super insecure and the more insecure I was, the more he felt like he could leverage his power. I mean I think if I have to say who was at fault, I still think he holds most of the fault because there really is no excuse to treat someone that way. But I definitely don't, like, I still hold myself accountable for like whatever part I held in the relationship.

She was able to identify that her ex-partner was to blame for the end of their relationship, but she recognized that together they both became negative versions of themselves. This meant that potentially her ex-partner could have a different relational dynamic in which those negatives were not present. She also explained that she was responsible for her negative actions within the relationship, even if she did not articulate what they were.

Another participant who expressed fault on both parties was Charlotte, a healthy griever. When asked who she blamed for her break-up, she gave detailed examples:

> Um, I think we share fault. Uh, it's kind of hard to say cause like, um, I think that there's like obviously like stuff he could have done better in terms of like, just like communicating that he had like specific issues earlier on because like I think like there were troubles with him. Like he didn't want to be the one to always come see me and so we needed to work something out like way, like months, like, you know, like 12 months before that. Uh, and we just didn't because I didn't realize how much it bothered him, like that kind of stuff. Um, but at the same time I think I also a lot of the fault was on me because like I just like, like didn't know how to like handle the conflict that was happening. Like I didn't know how to like ask for what I needed or even articulate it.

Charlotte was the most specific participant about attributing blame for each relational dynamic in the context of her relationship. She labeled specific actions or dynamics as either being her ex-partner's fault or her fault. She was able to communicate what he had done wrong but was also able to express her communication failings. Similar to Charlotte, Ava, another healthy griever, felt that:

> I honestly would say like now that I can, you know, look at it, we were both at fault. Like I definitely wasn't at fault for you stepping out. You should. I think he should have left when, when he realized that he wasn't ready to grow up, like I he, he acted a complete ass when I was pregnant compared to him being like prince charming when I wasn't. So I felt like when I got pregnant he was only... Now he's 19 he's a year younger than me, so he was 18 when I got pregnant. So I felt like to him he felt trapped and that's, when started acting out and doing all type of stuff like hanging out with his friends more and girls more cause he felt trapped. But it's like if, if I felt like maybe I could have like contributed to that, like him feeling trapped.

Ava admitted that while her ex-partner's behavior was not acceptable, she thinks they share the blame because he was young and felt trapped. Even though it would have been easily justifiable for her to simply place the blame onto her ex-partner for cheating, she chose instead to see it as something that they both contributed to in their own ways.

The last participant in this category, Olivia, asserted that part of her recovery process was acknowledging the blame for both people:

> And then after that, like it just, I felt like I released all my demons. I just accepted everything that happened and I accepted that, that, you know, maybe he wasn't the only one to blame. I had my share of things that, um, I didn't do well in our relationship.

She explained that she was able to move forward once she had realized that there were mistakes made in the relationship for which she needed to take responsibility. Initially, she attributed all the blame to him, but she had concluded that certain aspects could have been handled differently. The knowledge gained through self-reflection allowed her growth and caused her focus to shift toward what she could change within herself.

Overall, these four participants were the only ones who felt as though they could divide blame evenly by acknowledging that they played a role in the end of the relationship. All four were healthy grievers. In contrast, the complicated grievers preferred to either blame no one at all or they blamed their ex-partner. This difference in attribution of blame impacts the way that participants viewed the relationship when asked to reflect on it.

View of Relationships

The participants had a complex and nuanced view of their past relationships. However, there were two categories that stood out as being either uniquely complicated or healthy. The first is the category of loneliness or desire for ex-partner which included eight of ten complicated

grievers and none of the healthy grievers. In contrast, the category of acceptance included seven of twelve healthy grievers and none of the complicated grievers.

It seemed that as the participants began to talk about their experiences, several of them repeatedly mentioned feeling lonely and further, several of them wanted to continue being in a relationship with their ex-partner. While this was an interesting pattern, it wasn't until the participants were sorted, based on the ICG inventory score, as either a healthy or complicated griever, that the researcher realized that it was only the complicated grievers who expressed this sentiment. Avery described her experience after the break-up by saying:

> I didn't know what it would be like to lose this massive, not even figure but just like time holder in my life. And, um, that was definitely rough. It was just lonely. Like there were just weren't people to talk to.

She felt that she had been forced to experience this pain alone. There was no one to help her get through this time in her life and, without her ex-partner who had provided companionship, she felt alone. Sophia had a similar experience when describing her experience trying to avoid her ex-partner after the break-up:

> But then like he would give me, like he would stop giving me all this attention and then like it's like that thing where I was like, oh my God, I need it. And I didn't, I think it was just me being like, not even lonely but desperate at that point.

She explained it was because she felt desperate, which she connected to loneliness, that she continued to interact with him or desire him although their relationship had ended. When talking about the support she received, she mentioned a desire to be alone but in actuality time alone sometimes contributed to her loneliness:

> Like, yes, it's nice to have that support, but like, I think this is a time where I kind of just like need to do my own thing and I, I don't mind being alone. I get lonely sometimes.

Other participants in this category not only felt alone after their break-up but also felt as though they could not accept the loss of their ex-partner to the point of still wanting to be with that person. Nathan admitted that he has yet to move on, and when discussing why he would not want to give up communication with his ex-partner, he responded:

> I know it's over, but I guess it's like my, like instinct to think like if I keep like talking to her or like keep in some kind of contact that like it's not over, but like the relationship is over, but her being next to my side isn't over. Like if I keep talking to her, like even if it's just through that friendship just um, she was an amazing person.

The way he qualified that he wanted her around as a friend heavily implied that he was still experiencing disappointment that they were not romantically linked. He could not break contact with her because that would signify the end of the relationship, and he was not ready to release his connection to her. In a similar vein, Harper discussed her numerous encounters with her ex-partner, post-break-up, which caused her to miss the person she perceived him to be:

> It just makes me like, it makes me feel like I got tricked because I got to see this side of him that was like so sweet and so caring. And then all of a sudden that was just gone. Um, so it was like I kept going back to him expecting it to like return to the way that it was. And I finally just had to accept that. Like the person that I loved was just gone. I think I even got to a point where I was talking to my mom about it and I was like, like the person that I was in love with is dead, like they're never coming back. And I'm never going to have that person again. So that was really hard.

Harper returned to her ex-partner and attempted to be friends with him. This was because she wanted to feel like she had a piece of the relationship back to some degree even if only through friendship. However, she expressed feeling hurt and upset upon discovering her ideal of her ex-partner was gone. She was grieving the loss of the person she imagined her partner to be more than the relationship itself. She became emotional to the point of tears during the interview when she mentioned the fact that she would never have that same person back. A majority (eight of ten) of the complicated grievers felt lonely or still loved their ex-partners.

In contrast, the acceptance category was filled with the healthy grievers. While there were only seven of twelve healthy grievers in this category, three others felt as though they were glad the relationship had ended, which meant, as a whole, the healthy grievers were ready to embrace the end of their relationship and shift their focus forward. Aria felt as though she was a new person after this break-up:

> It's definitely one of the biggest situations I've learned, not the biggest, but one of the biggest regarding like relationships. One of the biggest I've learned from wouldn't take it back because I don't think I would be who I am today if I didn't go through that. So I definitely don't think, I don't regret it, but it was just, it was, it was a learning step for me in my life. And then once I got through it, I, I greatly matured and I greatly realized I learned a lot and I just, I became more of like a woman, I would say. As cheesy as that sounds, I just became like more of a woman, I would say.

She had accepted the relationship was over, and she was glad for it. She was happy that she had gone through that experience because she was able to move forward and mature. She did not talk about a desire to be with her ex-partner and said that she eventually just got "over it." Aria had accepted what happened between her and her ex-partner and wanted to focus on herself and her own growth instead of dwelling on him or their relationship. Similarly, Caleb, when asked to reflect on the relationship as a whole, said "It's just experience. Like it was an experience. It's fine. It's done. I'm on to bigger things." Similar to Aria, he did not want to dwell on the past relationship. He had accepted that the relationship had ended and was uninterested in implying that it was able to impact him in a long-term sense. Allen also felt as though he had accepted the break-up because he learned his ex-partner was dating someone new and explained:

> I realized I was fine just because it didn't affect me the way I thought it was going to originally, it's started and I was like, oh no. And then it kind of can really, I think they, I don't know if they, exactly dated but they were kind of together for a little while…I was just like, very comfortable during it. It didn't bother me at all it was actually, because I thought it was going to bother me that's why it kind surprised me. That's when I really knew. Like I'm fine.

He was confident that seeing his ex-partner date someone new confirmed for him that he was not jealous of her new partner and therefore was ready to move forward. He felt comfortable with the situation and therefore had accepted that the relationship had come to an end. The healthy participants' ability to move on made them distinct from the complicated grievers, who were more attached to their previous relationship, which is likely what drove them to hold onto friendship with their ex-partner.

Coping Mechanisms

The participants shared numerous aspects about coping with the trauma of dealing with a significant romantic relationship loss. However, one aspect which was unique to the complicated grievers was the desire to remain close to their ex-partner. Five of the ten complicated grievers fell into this category. This category is distinct from the previously discussed civility category because in that category, participants wanted to be on friendly terms but did not want to see their ex-partner regularly. In this case, the five participants talked about either communicating with their ex-partner regularly or wishing they could communicate with their ex-partner more.

When Harper was asked about what she would say to her ex-partner if she could tell him one thing, she described:

> I would, and I would also just say to him that I really, really wish that there was a universe where we could be close friends again, but I just don't know if we'll ever get to that place.

She admitted to herself that while it did not make sense for them to maintain a friendship, she still wished it was realistic. When she was asked why, she revealed it was not because she did not want the friendship but because:

> I think because he turned off that part of himself, he'll never see me in the same light again and he'll just see me as like more of a nuisance than someone who could be equal in terms of a friendship.

She believed that her ex-partner was no longer capable of communicating with her effectively enough to foster a friendship. However, she would desire that friendship if he would restore their previous emotional connection. Similarly, Madison explained that she was "hoping we'll be friends but like maybe mend, some issues that we have right now." When asked why she wanted that friendship, she explained that:

> I always wanted him around. Like even if I wasn't dating him, I would still want him in my life just because I feel like we have a really strong connection and we've been through a lot over our relationship and like the, even just when we were friends I like, I would want to, yeah. Keep him around.

Madison felt that having her ex-partner in her life as a friend was worth it because of all they experienced together as a couple.

Some of the participants already were close friends with their ex-partners and expressed that they knew a friendship was not a healthy choice for them. Nathan expressed that:

> I haven't really moved on yet. Um, yeah, I still have her notifications on, on Twitter and it's probably unhealthy. Um, but it, it happens. Uh, yeah, so I still keep up with her a lot. I don't know if she does with me. Uh, we still, we have a streak on snapchat, which really that cause it was, we've, we started it when we were still dating and uh, now that we broke up, like to see her every day, it's a little rough, but, um, I don't think, I don't know. I don't want to give it up, which this is really unhealthy,

He explained that he followed her social media in order to see her every day, and they still talked "as friends." He was able to admit it was not enabling him to move on, however, he was attached to their interactions. Scarlett also became close friends with her ex-partner after the break-up. She explained that she and her ex-partner had been ignoring each other but decided to have a conversation in which he said to her "Um, look, I really want, you know, to be your friend, to make sure like things are okay." When asked how she felt about that, she explained that:

> I felt a lot more comfortable that he was going to school at Duke and also having someone close by that I can talk to whenever uh, and so yeah, then we started talking again. And then over the summer we kind of talked a little bit. Um, and

> we still see each other a lot more than all of our other friends… Which is funny…
> And then yeah, now we just kind of more or less talk every day. Not necessarily
> just in conversations, but just keeping up to date with each other's lives.

Scarlett and her ex-partner were speaking almost every day. She was glad knowing that he was around and that if she needed him, he was only a bus ride away. This meant that, despite the termination of their relationship, he was still an integral aspect of her life, and she considered him to be a close friend.

Interestingly, all the participants in this category were complicated grievers. They wanted to be close friends with their ex-partners, or they already were close friends. None of the healthy grievers felt this same type of desire for friendship that went beyond civility. This means that the experience of wanting to hold onto their ex-partners was distinct in that over half of the complicated grievers felt this drive to remain close friends.

These findings about the similarities and differences between the narratives of complicated and healthy grievers gives the basis for a discussion on the implications of the findings and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This study illuminated the variety of ways in which students in the emergent adult demographic create narratives about the dissolution of their romantic relationships. It examined what similarities exist between those who are complicated grievers and those who are healthy grievers, and what key differences emerged between the two groups. The interviews allowed the participants to engage in sensemaking about themselves, their ex-partner, and the relationship as a whole. The findings that resulted from the interviews will be discussed in five sections which address both of the research questions. The discussion chapter includes interpretations of the similarities, an examination of the differences, the possible practical implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Similarities of the Narratives

Every participant that was interviewed had a diverse and unique narrative regarding the end of their romantic relationships. However, despite this variety in experience, there were particular narrative themes that were common across all the participants. This section will discuss the six themes that were found across the participants and use additional literature to examine what might be important about these types of stories.

View of Partner

The participants were divided on how they described their ex-partner, with nine who felt largely negative, eight who felt negative with qualifications, and five who felt positive when discussing their ex-partners. This is a significant range among the participants, and it was not divided by healthy or complicated grievers. This is interesting because it means that largely

participants felt negatively toward their ex-partners. Adding to the complexity of relationship dissolution, the participants who felt holistically negative about their ex-partners, had a particularly negative or painful experience such as having their ex-partner lie continually or being unable to agree with their ex-partner as to how to handle the break-up. In order to protect themselves, it was easier to craft a narrative which was altogether negative. However, to contrast, the negative with qualifications category was of interest because it indicates that even though the eight participants in this category recognized that their partner had made mistakes in the relationship, they still wanted to defend their ex-partner's actions. This is likely because research shows that when two people enter a partnership they engage in some level of creation of a combined identity (Kwang, 2010). Therefore, during a dissolution, they must disengage from that combined identity. However, since they were once both emotionally and socially tied to this combined identity, they likely feel some level of attachment to their ex-partner and therefore engage in defense of their ex-partner as a defense of themselves.

Additionally, this idea of combined identity potentially suggests that those who felt more positively, experienced an increased sense of attachment to their ex-partner. They therefore might not have wanted to feel negatively about their partner because that might cause them to feel negatively about themselves. While a dissolution involves removing oneself from that sense of connectedness to the ex-partner, there will always be some level of social connection that those around the participant have between the two ex-partners. The type of narrative the participant created did not seem to affect their ability to grieve in a healthy manner, as there were healthy grievers in all three of the categories; either a negative, negative with qualification, or a positive view of partner. It seemed that as long as the participants were being honest about their

feelings regarding their ex-partner, they could have the potential to experience healthy grieving rather than complicated grieving.

View of Self

Many of the participants took their interview as an opportunity to analyze themselves and their feelings about their break-up. Ten of the participants spoke positively about themselves and expressed themselves with nuance. Six of the participants were critical but defensive of themselves and the last six of them described how the relationship made them feel negatively about themselves but now the break-up had allowed them to construct a new positive narrative about themselves. During the interview, participants in all three categories would spend time explaining to the researcher how they felt and who they were. This intuitively follows because people often seek to construct their identity through their experiences. Since the interviewer asked the participants to think about the story of their break-up, this naturally led them to engage in identity construction through conceptualizing life as a story and their identity as being consistent with that life story (McAdams, 1985).

The participants who were the most expressive were those who were engaged in explaining how they felt during the relationship and how that was different from their current feelings. The ways in which they had felt negatively toward themselves during the relationship was a central and reoccurring aspect of their narrative. They often attributed this negative self-view to their partner, with some of them expressing that they had internalized their ex-partners' negative critiques. However, it was vital to their narrative that they express their growth and repaired self-image. They had executed emotional labor in order to see themselves positively and they were proud of this work. This is a common response to trauma as people feel as though one positive outcome from trauma is growth (Lewandowski, 2009). A central part of their identity

became feeling positively about themselves and proud of the growth they saw in themselves. Across all the participants there was interest in creating a story that allowed them to construct and explain their feelings of self. It did not make a difference if they felt positively, critically, or negatively about themselves, as any of these narratives could be experienced by someone in the category of complicated or healthy grief.

Blame

The participants were asked to explain what role they felt blame played in the process of their relationship dissolution. Nine participants wanted to blame no one for the dissolution. This was the largest category and contained both healthy and complicated grievers., These participants explained during their interview that they did not place blame on their ex-partner but were also unwilling to place blame on themselves. This makes sense because feelings of guilt are mitigated by attributing blame to situational circumstances rather than oneself or the other person (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1995). Participants, whether healthy or complicated, were interested in reducing their feelings of guilt, so they shifted the blame to the situation rather than to either person in the relationship.

In contrast, seven participants exclusively blamed their ex-partner for the end of the relationship. In these cases, the participants described their experience of having negative conflict combined with negative overall feelings about their ex-partner. They did not want to understand their ex-partner, nor did they feel there was any type of justification for their ex-partners' behavior. This is logical because research shows that in relationships where a violation (in this study, infidelity) occurred, participants were more likely to end the relationship and less likely to forgive if their partner engaged in conflict-promoting behaviors (Hall & Fincham, 2006). The participants who blamed their ex-partner believed that their partner was making the

relationship difficult and the only reasonable response was to terminate the relationship. Therefore, people whose ex-partner created a significant amount of unnecessary interpersonal conflict, told narratives that included blaming the partner who was perceived as causing conflict. However, both healthy and complicated grievers fell into all of the blame categories and therefore none of them have the potential to affect which type of grief one experiences.

View of Relationship

A large portion of the participants reported feelings of loss regarding the end of their relationship. Seven participants felt they had experienced loss when the relationship ended. This highlights that the relationship was significant and they were now reconstructing their identity without the person who had been so impactful on their formation (Asai et al., 2010). However, this feeling of loss was not directly connected to the complicated grievers exclusively, therefore it did not affect their ability to move forward and seemed to be a reflection on the fact that the relationship had positive components. The participants felt recognition that those positive memories were gone forever which caused them to experience a sense of loss but not so significantly that it was crippling.

In contrast, eight of the participants believed it was the right choice to end the relationship. This is logical because when people are telling the stories of their life, they often feel compelled to prepare for their new life without their partner and this causes them to engage in self-justification or explaining behaviors (Rollie, Duck, & Duck, 2013). These participants felt a need to create a narrative which justified either their partner's decision to leave them, or their own decision to end the relationship. They explained the situation to themselves by justifying their decision.

The last five participants felt angry or bitter that they had to experience a negative situation. This was largely dependent on the circumstances of their break-up as some situations were harder than others. In addition to negative situations, another potential reason for participants experiencing anger or bitterness is that it helps mitigate sadness. Experiencing anger in a relationship makes the participant less likely to experience ongoing sadness (Sbarra, 2006). This means that these participants might have been constructing a narrative around anger so that they did not experience as much sadness or pain regarding the loss of their partner. There were healthy and complicated grievers in each of these categories, meaning any of these narratives can be a part of a healthy grieving process.

View of the Future

Interestingly, the participants were divided evenly between feeling either positively or wary toward their future. None of them were holistically negative because they likely did not want to feel completely hopeless. In both categories, the growth in the relationship was connected to their view of the future. Some identified growth as allowing them to engage in new relationships confidently, like Caleb who felt that the only way this relationship affected him was "now [he] knows, like to be able to pick someone better." He grew and felt confident that he would select someone more suited to his needs in the future. In contrast, those who were wary identified that their growth allowed them to move slowly. Avery felt that people should "just be very conscientious about the decisions [they are] making with [their] time." Overall, across the participants, they recognized their growth, and it suggested that they felt positively toward their future, or it suggested that they would take things slower. This allowed the participants to feel like the results of the break-up either made them confident or helped them to avoid feeling hurt again in the future. Both these positive outcomes served to justify their pain and rationalize their

negative experience. Constructing either a positive or wary narrative about the future can lead to healthy grieving as long as the participants maintain some level of positivity even in their caution.

Coping Mechanisms

The participants were able to express many different types of coping mechanisms. All of them mentioned the distraction based coping mechanisms, such as working out, watching tv, or spending time with friends. However, the aspect of coping that surprised the researcher was whether the participants had a desire to interact with their ex-partner or not. Eight of the participants expressed a desire to avoid their ex-partner altogether. In all likelihood, this desire to avoid was significantly impacted by the situational experience of the break-up. As an example, Evelyn, was forced to contact her university to protect her from her ex-partner because he had been harassing her. This could be because he was experiencing distress or had an anxious attachment style (Dutton & Winstead, 2006). However, the more he followed her, the more she wanted to avoid him. Similarly, other participants in this category had negative experiences with their partner such that they were unable or unwilling to maintain a friendship with that person. They were healthy grievers though, so it did not impact their ability to move on from the relationship likely because they were able to assess the situation with a realistic understanding.

In contrast, nine of the participants said that they wanted to be civil with their ex-partner, in the sense of wanting to be friendly and exchange greetings but not necessarily be close friends with their ex-partner. This is potentially the case due to the fact that it may mitigate their feelings of loss. When the participants discussed this, it was often in the context of not wanting to lose the friendship aspect of the relationship. They did not want to feel as though they had lost everything related to that person, but they also did not want to be overly close in a way that might lead to

restarting the relationship. These narratives both contained healthy grievers and complicated grievers so future grievers could potentially craft their narratives in either of these ways and still experience healthy grieving.

All six similarities across the interviews showed what people felt was important in their narratives about the grief of their relationship dissolution. However, just as important as what was similar in their stories, was what important differences existed.

Differences in the Narratives

These twenty-two participants had a lot in common as they discussed their break-up narratives. However, understanding the unique nuances in their narratives is just as significant as inspecting what brought them all together. The three themes that showed unique differences between categories were *Blame, View of Relationships, and Coping Mechanisms.*

Blame

The participants had a significant amount to say about their feelings regarding blame. However, only the healthy grievers were able to identify the ways in which they were both at fault for the end of the relationship. Research has shown that people experience attachment-related anxiety when they have too much partner-blame but they also feel a lot of self-blame when they are attachment avoidant (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003). This means that when people experience a relationship dissolution, they experience self-blame when they feel too detached from their partner. However, they also have a significant amount of partner blame if they feel too anxious about the loss of that person. Therefore, it follows that those who adopt a narrative of equal blame tend to be the healthy grievers because they are neither too detached nor overly attached. It is being in a neutral ground with their ex-partners that allowed them to accept

the reality of their situation and move forward onto 'bigger and better things'. This means that participants who are struggling with CG could be helped by working through how their partner is to blame but also what they themselves are accountable for. This might potentially help them to create stronger narratives which lead them to acceptance of their situation. That way they can begin to grieve similarly to the healthy grievers and eventually move forward with a fully reconstructed identity.

View of Relationships

This study discovered that the complicated grievers were more discuss having felt lonely or a desire to be with their ex-partners. In contrast, the healthy grievers created narratives around the acceptance of the loss of their ex-partner. One potential reason for this difference is that research shows that perceived self-efficacy after trauma is a large aspect of being able to move forward in the grieving process (Bauer & Bonanno, 2001). Since the complicated grievers in this category expressed either feelings of loneliness or a desire to be in the relationship, it would make sense that they have a lowered sense of self efficacy. They felt alone and therefore may not have felt capable of moving forward due to the lack of adequate support.

On the other hand, participants who wanted to continue dating their partners also have a lowered sense of self-efficacy because they do not feel they can move forward without the support of their ex-partner. The participants who were currently friends with their ex-partners explained how they felt unable to end contact with their ex-partner even if they identified that as the healthier decision. They felt they emotionally needed that connection to their ex-partner. This also lowered their sense of self-efficacy because they directly expressed needing or desiring that person's support in their day-to-day life. They described feeling either alone or empty without that feeling of support. This type of narrative was not present for the healthy grievers.

The healthy grievers described having already reached acceptance and therefore, they believed in their own ability to move forward without that person. Almost all the healthy grievers in the acceptance category described having a strong sense of support from either family or friends. This allowed them to feel less alone in their process. They also placed less emotional weight on the support from their ex-partner which meant when the support was gone, instead of feeling alone and incapable of moving forward, they simply shifted that desire for support to others in their community. Additionally, reaching acceptance is an important part of developing a healthy narrative because research shows that participants who have less separation acceptance after a dissolution, also experience poorer psychological adjustment (Mason, Sbarra, Bryan, & Lee, 2012). This indicates that it is important to help people create narratives which move away from loneliness or sadness about separation and instead, shift their narrative towards accepting that loss.

Coping Mechanisms

The participants differed in their coping mechanisms with the break-up only when it came to how they wanted to handle their ex-partner. As a form of coping, many of the participants experiencing CG wanted to continue holding onto either the idea of a friendship with their ex-partner or were actively maintaining such a friendship. However, the healthy grievers all seemed to either avoid their ex-partner or they wanted civility but not a full friendship. There is potential that part of the reason for this is that the healthy grievers were able to create more holistic narratives that came to a close or had a degree of completeness (Weiss, 1975). The level of completeness of a narrative is connected to a person's ability to adjust to relationship dissolution (cf. Kellas & Manusov, 2003) which potentially indicates that the problem some complicated grievers were having was creating closure for themselves within their narrative.

These participants were looking to their ex-partner to provide emotional support through friendship, continued contact, or by observing their social media. This need to remain connected to their ex-partner may have prevented them from creating a narrative that felt complete. They were keeping the door open for their partner to create new situations that require changes to their narrative. Research has shown that continued contact with an ex-partner after the end of the relationship is connected to feelings of distress and linked to increased social media monitoring (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015). This is not negative in every case as some ex-partners have situational reasons to remain connected; however, if social media monitoring becomes severe, the participants are more likely to become distressed.

In contrast, the healthy grievers wanted to avoid their ex-partners or to be civil with them. This type of narrative has a more natural close because they are not creating new experiences or memories with their ex-partner which would require them to feel new emotions and therefore cause them to re-work their break-up narrative. The desire for civility over avoidance leaves an openness for new potential, however these participants were uninterested in having a deep and meaningful emotional connection with their ex-partners. They were most interested in avoiding any potential negative social encounter that would come from feeling like they had to actively avoid their ex-partner. These participants saw civility as a way to maintain emotional distance and in order to not be forced into reworking their narrative around their ex-partner in any significant way. One participant, Emily, explained this by talking about the last time she had a serious conversation with her ex-partner, and it was after that she felt:

> And then that just like gave me closure and then after, um, but yeah, so like, since I had closure, then it kind of doesn't really feel like I have like regret not saying anything to him or, you know… So like, I'm like really grateful for that, honestly. Um, but yeah, and he was like a good guy, so I'm glad I got to know him. I'm glad. I like know him on campus and everything.

She felt grateful that she was able to have a last conversation with him which brought their narrative to a close. Once she received this closure, she was glad to see him on campus and exchange greetings but there was no longer anything else she needed to say to him. This meant that there were no new significant changes to their narrative, and she would be able to move on. This was an important method for coping in her case but also for other participants as well. Whereas, the complicated grievers are defined by their inability to move on and this was seen in their attachment to their ex-partners and their desire to continue to have some level of connection to them. This means that they should work to change their narratives from needing their ex-partner to desiring civility that contains healthy distance and boundaries.

Practical Implications

There are several ways that these findings might potentially help people experiencing dissolution to craft healthier narratives. As was discovered in the analysis, participants who felt that blame was split evenly between partners tended to be healthy grievers while participants who felt lonely or attached to their ex-partners tended to be more complicated grievers. This means that for either staff at university mental health facilities or for those interested in narrative therapy as a practice, there is a potential that helping participants create narratives in which they divide blame more evenly might allow them to better process their experience. This does not mean forcing participants to blame their ex-partners, because several participants expressed frustration when they were forced to see their partners in a negative way. Instead, they should be helped to accurately label responsibility for both themselves and their ex-partners. Additionally, helping them create a narrative of acceptance instead of one of longing might be helpful. Encouraging the person to lessen communication with their ex-partner and to instead focus on the positive ways that they can grow and learn from the negatives of their situation might help

them create a healthier narrative. Lastly, asking the person to identify if they are feeling alone or a sense of loneliness could be helpful. Then they would be led to rework that narrative to focus on what support is available to them. If that person can focus on the support they do have and they are given proper outlets to communicate what their experience was, it should help them to feel less alone in their grief and trauma which will likely help them get to the path of being a healthy griever rather than a complicated griever.

None of the above suggestions recommend forcing the participant to lie or hide what they are feeling as research shows that suppression after trauma can lead to dysfunctional avoidance which is not beneficial to the person (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002). However, gently guiding the person to explore the idea of having available support or to explore who might truly be at fault for the end of the relationship has potential to help people who are complicated grievers shift into healthier narratives and thought patterns.

Limitations

This study contributes to an understanding of how complicated and healthy grievers in the emergent adult demographic construct different narratives; however, certain limitations must be considered. First, this study was conducted using a small sample size of traditionally college-aged participants (18-24 years old) in the Midwestern region of the U.S. This being acknowledged, their experiences and narratives reflect a certain culture and are not generalizable across cultures. Second, participants were all cis-gendered and heterosexual which yet again only represents a certain demographic. This homogeneity could limit the findings as participants from different socioeconomic, education, and sexual orientation backgrounds may have different emotional experiences, have been socialized differently, and might experience grief in a variety of different expressions. Third, social desirability must be considered as participants may have

tried to answer the questions the way they believed the researcher wanted, especially considering they received credit for their participation. They might have also been trying to answer the way that society or their particular social groups have encouraged them to believe that they should feel which could be distinct from how they truly feel. Additionally, the study is biased by the type of participants who might self-select into an in-person interview. There might be an uncovered group of complicated grievers who are unable or unwilling to discuss the level of pain they are experiencing and due to their lack of desire to participate, the research cannot provide clarity in this area.

There are also limitations which come with using a thematic analysis. There is potential that there exists an entirely different set of themes which could speak to the experience of either complicated or healthy grieving however, the goal of this study was not to provide a comprehensive list of every theme rather it was to initiate an understanding of the most prominent themes found in the narratives of emerging adults. Additionally, this study did not examine the ways in which Lyotard's (1984) grand narratives or Frank's narrative types might have guided an analysis. This and other approaches might be considered for future research.

Future Directions

Future research in this area might benefit from examination of several variables (e.g., time, age, culture, distance/proximity). For instance, time might be a factor in the participant's experience with grief. The participants in this study varied greatly on how recently their relationship dissolution had occurred, some were in the last three months while others had happened two years in the past. It might benefit research to control for time as a variable and require that all break-ups exist within a specific time frame in order to see if that would affect the ways in which participants grieve. There might be less complicated grievers if all the break-ups

occurred two or more years in the past or healthier grievers if the break-up had occurred in the last six months. Future research could add to our understanding of grief by controlling for time.

Additionally, future research should examine different age demographics. Since emergent adults are particularly susceptible to trauma, this might also be impacting what makes them a complicated versus healthy griever. Examining not only older participants but potentially looking at this same topic within the context of divorce might shed some interesting light onto how different demographics grieve.

Culture may also play a role. For instance, if scholars were to study how LGBTIQ individuals make sense of their relationship dissolution grief, they might find that a small and interlocked group has even higher demands for civility and maintenance of friendship.

Another important future direction to explore would be the examination of complicated and healthy grief as a spectrum rather than a binary of two distinct categories. This would be particularly helpful in the context of qualitative work as trying to fit the nuance and complexity of each individual narrative into these two simple concepts causes a potential loss of insight. The participants in this study had a wide range of scores but were only divided into two categories. This means that someone who scored a twenty-two on the ICG was in the same category as a participant who had a score of one. Both were labeled healthy grievers for the sake of this study based on how the scale had been used previously. However, it is likely that their narratives contained distinct nuances that would have been better explored on a sliding scale rather than a dichotomy. This area has been largely unexplored as these terms have been examined in a primarily quantitative context. It would serve future qualitative research in this particular area to explore what this new spectrum could look like and how that might create a more nuanced understanding of grief.

Also important to interpersonal theory is to study the areas suggested in the discussion as likely related to grieving styles. For example, is cognitive dissonance or locus of control a contributing factor in relational loss grieving? Are some people presenting a mature 'face' to the interviewer? What role does social performance play in grieving (e.g., putting on a 'brave face,' keeping a 'stiff upper lip,')? How does a desire for privacy interact with a desire to seek social support for a relationship dissolution?

With respect to this study, narrative theory was used to guide the work, but the methodology with drive by a rather narrow thematic analysis. Themes are a part of narratives, but focusing only on themes, meant that the stories were not discussed extensively in light of protagonists, antagonists, the role of supporting characters, plot, and so on. And although mentioned in the theory section, that local narratives are related to grand narratives (e.g., divorce is deemed a stigma), this study did not unpack these notions for experiences of break-ups for emergent adults. One clear example of how the grand narrative influences the local narrative can be seen in the example of the young woman who dated a gay man who kept his sexual preference a secret from her (see Appendix D). A future study could undertake a detailed interpretive analysis of her story. Nevertheless, the narrative component did dovetail into narrative therapy so that practical or applied advice could be suggested to less socio-politically charged situations. Those suggestions might be further tested in future studies.

Conclusion

The experience of relationship dissolution has been significant in modern culture for as long as people have 'loved and lost'. It is important that researchers understand the ways in which people experience the grief of this type of relationship loss. Previous research has suggested that those who experience CG may have negative repercussions and adverse health

effects. This indicates it is very important to understand how to help people create narratives that allow them to avoid those negative repercussions. This study suggests that helping those experiencing loss to acknowledge blame equally, to feel less alone, and to let go of the hope of continuing a relationship with their ex-partner, could potentially help them express themselves similarly to the healthy grievers. The idea that reworking these narratives to help people falls in line with both the literature on narrative therapy as well as what grief scholars have found about complicated and healthy grieving until this point. This study revealed what the significant differences were, offered suggestions as to how those differences could be utilized to help future grievers, and offers insight into what the emergent adult experience is with complicated grieving.

TABLES

Table 1 Demographics and Summary of Scores on IGC

	Name	Sum	Gender	Age	Length	Recent	Intent
Sum	Allen	4.00	1	1	1	1	1
	Amelia	3.00	2	1	1	2	1
	Andrew	38.0	1	1	1	1	1
	Aria	14.0	2	1	1	1	2
	Asher	30.0	2	1	2	1	2
	Ava	13.0	2	1	1	1	2
	Avery	34.0	2	1	1	1	1
	Caleb	1.00	1	1	1	1	1
	Charlotte	14.0	2	2	1	1	1
	Ella	28.0	2	1	1	1	1
	Emily	8.00	2	1	1	1	2
	Emma	26.0	2	1	1	1	1
	Evelyn	21.0	2	1	1	1	1
	Harper	29.0	2	2	2	1	1
	Isabella	10.0	2	1	1	1	2
	Madison	29.0	2	1	1	1	2
	Nathan	28.0	1	1	1	1	2
	Olivia	11.0	2	2	1	1	2
	Ryan	21.0	1	1	1	1	1
	Scarlett	45.0	2	1	1	1	2
	Sophia	33.0	2	1	1	1	2
	Victoria	19.0	2	1	1	2	2

Table 2 Summary of Thematic Findings

Similarities	
Theme: View of Partner	**Description:** Participants primarily talked about their partners in three significant ways: • Overall negatively (Nine participants) • Negative but with qualifiers (Eight participants) • Overall positively (Five participants)
Theme: View of Self	**Description:** Participants conceptualized their own identity in three primary ways: • Overtly positively (Ten participants) • Critical but with qualifiers (Six participants) • Negatively during relationship but positive growth (Six participants)
Theme: Blame	**Description:** Participants discussed who they placed blame on in three categories: • No one was to blame (Nine participants) • Ex-partner was to blame (Seven participants) • Participant was to blame (Two participants) **Description:** Participants discussed who they believed their partner placed blame on in two categories: • No one or both people were to blame (Ten participants) • Ex-partner felt participant was to blame (Twelve participants)
Theme: View of Relationship	**Description:** Participants expressed three general feelings about their experience of the relationship: • Loss (Seven participants) • Right decision (Eight participants) • Bitter (Five participants)
Theme: View of Future	**Description:** Participants had two distinct feelings toward their future: • Positive and excited (Eleven participants) • Positive but wary (Eleven participants)
Theme: Coping Mechanisms	**Description:** Participants interacted with their partner as a coping mechanism in two ways: • Avoidance (Eight participants) • Civility (Nine participants)

Table 2 continued

Differences	
Theme: Blame	**Description:** Only healthy grievers fell into this category of blame: • Both people were to blame (Four healthy grievers)
Theme: View of Relationship	**Description:** Participants interacted with their partner as a coping mechanism in two ways that were unique: • Lonely/desires ex-partner (Eight complicated grievers) • Acceptance (Seven healthy grievers)
Theme: Coping Mechanisms	**Description:** Participants interacted with their partner as a coping mechanism in one exclusive way: • Friendship (Five participants)

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Materials

<u>Short Description:</u> The purpose of this research is to learn about the narratives people create when they are faced with grief over the break-up of a significant romantic relationship. Participants must be 18-24 years old and in a relationship, which lasted 6 months or longer and was no more than 2 years ago.

<u>Long Description:</u> The purpose of this research is to learn about the narratives people create when they are faced with grief over the break-up of a significant romantic relationship. This study is expected to take approximately 45- 60 minutes. Participants must be 18-24 years old and in a relationship, which lasted 6 months or longer and was no more than 2 years ago. This study is conducted by Ralph Webb and Caitie Donovan.

APPENDIX B

Inventory of Complicated Grief

You are not required to answer the following questions. This information will remain strictly confidential. Your name and demographic information will be kept separate from your responses. Only the researcher will have access to your individual data and any reports generated as a result of this study will use pseudonyms when connected to an interview answer, or a questionnaire.

1. Name _____

2. What is your age? (Check one of the following)
____ 18-22 years old
____ 23-26 years old
____ 31+ years old

3. What is your gender?
(Check one of the following): Male___/ Female___/Other___

4. Do you attend college?
(Check one of the following): Yes___/No___

If yes, what year are you in:_____

5. Have you been in a romantic relationship that lasted for six months or longer?
(Check one of the following): Yes___/No___

6. Have you been through a break-up in the last two years?
(Check one of the following): Yes___/No__

7. Did you express intent to marry your significant other?
(Check one of the following): Yes___/No___

Please check the answer to the following questions that most accurately reflects how you feel about your ex-partner at this moment in time.

8. 1. I think about this person so much that it's hard for me to do the things I normally do.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

9. Memories of my ex-partner upset me.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

10. I feel I cannot accept the loss of my ex-partner.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

11. I feel myself longing for my ex-partner.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

12. I feel drawn to places and things associated with my ex-partner.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

13. I can't help feeling angry about the break-up.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

14. I feel disbelief over what happened.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

15. I feel stunned or dazed over what happened.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

16. Ever since s/he broke up with me it is hard for me to trust people.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

17. Ever since s/he left I feel like I have lost the ability to care about other people.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

18. I feel distant from people I care about
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

19. I have pain in a physical area of my body due to the break-up
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

20. I go out of my way to avoid reminders of the person I was dating.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

21. I feel that life is empty without my ex-partner.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

22. I hear the voice of my ex-partner speak to me.

(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

23. I see my ex-partner stand before me.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

24. I feel that it is unfair that I should have to live without my ex-partner.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

25. I feel bitter over this break-up.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

26. I feel envious of others who have not experienced a break-up.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

27. I feel lonely a great deal of the time ever since my relationship ended.
(Check one of the following): ___Never ___Rarely ___Sometimes ___Often ___Always

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide

I. **INTRODUCTION**

    A. Thank you for meeting with me today. I am grateful to be able to hear about your experience.

    B. During our time today, I will be asking questions about your break-up and your ex-partner in order to learn more about you and your story.

    C. Through this interview I hope to better understand how you communicate your feelings about your ex-partner and examine how you understand your own emotions through this experience.

    D. Our time together should take approximately one hour but feel free to express yourself for however long you need.

II. **BODY**

    A. <u>To start us out, why don't you tell me the story of your break-up?</u>

    B. <u>So how did you meet <Insert ex-partner's name>?</u>
        1) How did you know you wanted to be in a relationship with this person?
        2) How long were you together?

    C. <u>When did you begin to notice problems within the relationship?</u>
        1) What sort of feelings did these problems create?
        2) Can you describe how the relationship ended?
        3) Do you believe there was a turning point that led to the end of the relationship?
            a) Do you believe someone is at fault for this turn?

            b) How did you ex-partner perceive this event in the relationship?

        4) <u>Is that how you handle this in all relationships or in future relationships?</u>
            a) Who takes the most responsibility?

            b) What perceptions did you have about this dynamic within your relationship?

        5) <u>What was your life like immediately following the break-up?</u>

(Transition: Now we are going to focus more on your ex-partner)

D. <u>How would you describe the way in which your ex-partner handled the break-up?</u>

    1) What words would you use to describe his/her reactions?
        a. Why did you choose that word?

    2) How do you explain and describe her/him as a person to someone who did not know her/him?
        a) What have interactions with her/him been like since the break-up?

        b) How do these interactions make you feel about the relationship in general?

E. If you could have one last conversation with him/her, what would you say to him/her?

    a. What purpose would it serve to have a conversation like this?

*(**Transition:** Finally let's talk about how you feel you are progressing through the break-up process)*

F. <u>What advice have friends/family given to you?</u>
    a. How have you have taken up that advice?

    1) What do you feel when thinking about the future?

    2) How have you processed the effects of this break-up?

III. **CONCLUSION**

A. Aside from the questions we have already addressed, what would be one last overarching statement about your break-up?

B. It has been great getting to hear your experience. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

APPENDIX D

Example Transcript

Speaker 1:   All right. Thank you so much for meeting with me today. I'm very grateful to hear about your story. So during our time I'll be asking you questions about your break-up and your ex-partner in order to learn more about you and your story. Through the interview I hope to better understand how you communicate your feelings about your ex-partner and kind of examine how you understand your own emotions through that experience. So, our time together should take about 45 minutes to an hour, but feel free to express yourself however long you need. So why don't you start out by going ahead and telling me about the story of your break-up.

Speaker 2:   Story of our breakup. Okay. So, um, we were dating for a year and a half and we had like mini breakups, maybe like two of them. And then, um, I think it was just because we would fight a lot and mainly we would fight because like he had certain hobbies that I just didn't want in a partner. And then, um, the last straw was when I just couldn't take it anymore. Like it was way too toxic. Like it was literally fighting every single day. And so then I was like, yeah, we should just end it. And the week before that he had ended it and then we got back together. So then this time I was like, I like, we got back together just to see how it would be for a week by changing ourselves, just giving it one last shot since we lasted a year and a half already. And it was our longest, both of our longest relationships that we, we just tried one more week, didn't work. I ended things. And then the next day I found out that I should have ended it way before because he actually turned out to be gay and he was pretending the whole time. It's very interesting.

Speaker 1:   Okay. Yeah. So we'll kind of, unpack a lot of that. Um, so can I actually have you speak a little bit louder. Yeah, sorry. But yeah. Great. So we're gonna, we're gonna back up and then we'll get into all of that. So to start us off, how did you guys meet?

Speaker 2:   So we were in the same, so we were both, we both came the same time to college. And then we lived at hilltop our first year. Are you, I don't know if you know, it's a dorm and I lived in building 10. He lived in building 11 and we had like RAs, like the RA would be, uh, in charge of two buildings. And coincidentally it was both of ours. So like when we would have RA meetings, like we would meet. So we were kind of neighbors and then my roommate and him were in a lot of the same classes because they were in the same major. So then we all just started hanging out. We were friends for like a year and then we started dating so that's how we met.

Speaker 1:   So how did you know you want it to be in a relationship with that person?

Speaker 2:   So I had just, um, I was in a relationship for like about a month and then we broke up and then me and this guy were best friends and he was just there for me during the breakup. And then he tried to like um, date me. Like he kept like asking and then, and at first I was like, not sure because he was super feminine and I didn't know if he was gay or bisexual or what. Um, but then I asked him straight up, I was like, just tell me are you, are you not, are you just trying to like hide? I don't know. And he said, no, no, I'm not. I really like you. And stuff like that. And we got along really well and like we were best friends, so it was kind of like we just clicked. So yeah, so we started dating.

Speaker 1:   Okay, great. So when did you kind of start to notice problems in the relationship?

Speaker 2:   Probably not for like three or four months because the first three or four months he was kind of like on his best behavior where he was trying his best to not show his authentic self, which is him being gay. So he was just trying to like impress me by being like masculine and like saying that he's changed and saying that he's like, like he kind of blamed his, like, femininity on his mother growing up because she had a big um, influence on him. And, um, he realized that after coming to college and being away from her, like he's not that person and that's what he wanted me to believe. And then after three months, I mean, you can't like lie for a long time, you can't hide your authentic self for a long time. So I think after like three or four months, I would notice like things that he said he's not into anymore, he doesn't want to do anymore. Like, I dunno, like watching makeup tutorials, doing makeup on girls, um, needing to like online shop every five seconds or like just a lot of feminine things and like, So yeah

Speaker 1:   Yeah that makes sense. So how did you guys communicate about that?

Speaker 2:   So I would just be like, just tell me like, are you, are you not, are you confused? Like, I can be there for you. Um, and like in the beginning it was kind of passive where I would try not to say anything and I would just like make little hints like avoid him if like he wanted to like do my makeup and be like, oh, I have homework because I didn't want him to. But um, eventually like I would just like get angry at him, like, stop and like, um, you're being super annoying and like, why can't you be like other guys? Like you're super feminine, like Blah Blah and stuff like that.

Speaker 1:   Yeah. So when you would say things like that to him, what did, how would he respond?

Speaker 2:   He would like, it was dependent on his mood. So sometimes he'd feel bad and be like, I'm sorry I'm not who you want me to be. And sometimes he would just be like, how can you like be so rude to me for my hobbies? Like you should be liking me for who I am. And then I would be like, I would say that that's not what you said. You were kind of like, you changed after three or four months. Like you got me into this relationship, you've got me starting to like you so much that it would

be hard to break up and then you showed your true colors kind of. So we would just go back and forth on that.

Speaker 1: And how did that, those kind of conversations make you feel?

Speaker 2: Uh super frustrated and angry. Confused cause I don't know if I should keep going or end it there or give it another shot or if I should have never started it. So yeah, confused.

Speaker 1: That makes sense. Yeah. So can you kind of describe for me how the breakup conversation, like the final one, how did that, actually tell me first about the, the mini ones and then we'll talk about the last one. How did that go?

Speaker 2: So the mini ones are mostly kind of like just like us fighting about how he would want to do my makeup. And I'd be like, I just don't want to put makeup on today. And he'd kind of be forceful about it. And then I would just like walk cause we were kind of like living together. Like I had my own apartment, but I stayed over a lot. So I would just like in the middle of the night if we're fighting and it's like 1:00 AM or 2:00 AM, I would just like leave and then like we wouldn't talk for a few days and then we'd like be like, let's just have some space and then, but within a week we would like just get back together and like one of us would, would apologize.

Speaker 2: Um, it depends. Sometimes it was me, sometimes it was him, um, or we would just say like, let's forget it. Like, let's just move on let's just forget that ever happened. And then the serious breakup happened, um, it happened when we were trying super hard. It was right after his birthday. It was actually like probably exactly a year ago where we tried to change ourselves for like a week. Like we talked, we communicated like, what you don't like about me? What, I don't like about you and let's see what happens for a week. And I was like, okay, I'm going to try and not interfere with your hobbies, but just don't push them on me, kind of like that. And then we would try that for a week and it was going fine, but it was just like we were both just not connecting anymore. Like we weren't like compatible anymore.

Speaker 2: If that makes sense. Um, and like he can do whatever hobbies he wanted, but that's just not something that I was attracted in or wanted to be with. It couldn't see my future with him anymore. And so I was just like, let's just end it. I mean, summer's coming soon anyway, like let's start senior year fresh and like, yeah.

Speaker 1: Yeah. That makes sense. Um, so why do you think that it didn't stick the first couple of times?

Speaker 2: uh, I think it was mostly because we got way too comfortable with each other, where to the point where we would just be with each other for 24, seven and like we had our own group of friends, but we would always blow them off just to hang

out with each other. And so most of the day, most of the weeks I would literally just be with him. And then we just got way too comfortable. Like I started moving my stuff into his apartment. It was just my apartment. I got an extra key. Like it was just like very comfortable and it was kind of convenient and it would be super hard to leave, especially in thinking like we've had so many, mini breakups. Like if I move all my stuff and do all that work and like I have my other homework to deal with or exams and then we're just going to get back the next day. So we would just like cool off until we both just decided to get back.

Speaker 1:   Yeah. And how do you feel looking back on that dynamic?

Speaker 2:   I think that dynamic was really bad and I wish I knew. I wish I trusted my gut and my friends more because they told me a lot that we weren't compatible, but I was just being stubborn and I definitely regret it um, I can see now outside the relationship that obviously like we didn't click, we weren't compatible, but being so comfortable and so into the relationship, you can't really see that. And then, yeah.

Speaker 1:   So yeah. So you described, you know now that he is gay and you know, you described his kind of feminine qualities did that affect like other areas, of your relationship, like the physical side or did it not affect those things?

Speaker2:   It didn't really affect the physical side, but it just, it made me feel like bad about the physical side after we broke up after I found out, cause I actually found out that he was gay like two days after we broke up. Um, so that wasn't the reason we broke up. But that made us stop being friends because he hid it for so long just so that I could be his beard because his family would never agree with it. And so he like wasted just two years of my life. Like, I mean I understand his point of view because it's super hard for people to come out, especially in his culture. He's Muslim, but that shouldn't be like justification for just ruining so much of my time and wasting so much of my time. And like we had trips in the summer, like spending so much of my money, like we went to Lebanon and Los Angeles and Miami and like it was just, it just seems so like I could've been doing other stuff or meeting other people or being with my friends and making other connections instead of just being stuck in a relationship that was never going to go anywhere. And he knew it wasn't going to go anywhere. He was just using me as his like beard, like a shield to protect himself from society

Speaker 1:   Yea I can see how that would be frustrating for you. Yeah. So, um, how did he, like what did he say when you told him? Like, okay, yeah, like you guys have that final breakup conversation and you were like, yeah, I don't think we should continue. What did he kind of, how did he communicate that conversation?

Speaker 2:   He definitely agreed and he was like, I do agree but I don't want to lose you as a friend. And so can we just try and be normal friends. And I agreed to because I knew I didn't want to lose him out of my life because he was such a big part of my

whole, like freshman year or sophomore year, junior year. So I decided to stay friends with him. But as I said, like just in the next like two, three days I found out he was gay because I was like hanging out with him and we were at this shop, we were at like Adidas or Nike, like a shoe shop and they didn't have like a full size mirror.

Speaker 2:   So he wanted me to take a picture of his shoes of him like full. And then um, when you just open the camera, like on the side you can like see like a little picture and I saw like some pictures of him, like insinuating he was gay. So then I confronted him about it and we were in public, so he said we'd talk later and then I said, okay, can we talk now? Like this is kind of a big deal for me. And he was like later, later, later. And then I told him, okay, I'm going to come over. And he said, no, you go home, I'll talk to you later. But as soon as I got home, I got a text from him, like a long text explaining because he didn't want to talk about it face to face cause he was too embarrassed.

Speaker 1:   How did that make you feel?

Speaker2:   Super annoyed. Like I felt like kind of wanted to tell myself like I told you so because I knew, but I didn't know because I had a strong gut feeling he was. But every time I asked him, he said he wasn't. So I chose to believe him and chose to trust him because I didn't want to be like someone like who tells someone who they are. I didn't want to put a label on him when he was so adamant that he wasn't gay. So I just felt like bad doing that. So yeah.

Speaker 1:   Okay, that makes sense. Um, so do there was a specific turning point for you that led more towards like, hey, maybe this has a future to no, it definitely doesn't.

Speaker 2:   So from for the, I think we have a future, it was when I went in the summer to Lebanon to visit him and I got to meet his mom and sister and hang out with them and bond with them. So that's when I thought it's getting serious. But um, I think that when I realized it's not going to go anywhere was, I honestly did have hope we would get back together even after the final straw. But when I saw the pictures that showed that he's obviously gay and like that's just when I instantly was like, there's no way. Like there's no future. Like I still wasn't over him. It took me at least like four to five months to get over him and I kind of had a lot of panic attacks. So I had to go on like anxiety medication. But um, I knew like his sexual preference, is that is that the word? Yes. Sexual preference, like would just, I'm not a guy. So it just would never work.

Speaker 1:   That makes sense. And do you think that someone's kind of at fault for that turning point?

Speaker 2:   What turning point?

Speaker 1:   Like when you realized, okay, this is done forever. Like you found those photos and you were like,

Speaker 2:   I think it's definitely his fault for hiding it for so long. And in the beginning I was super angry and mad at him. And even now, sometimes I get annoyed because he shows me attitude because he pretends like I'm the one that was toxic in the relationship because I, because, and he, in his mind, it's like I was controlling because I didn't let him do makeup. But in my mind it was you were always gay all along. You just wasted my time. So, and he doesn't want to admit that yet. So we're still not friends and unfortunately we're neighbors, so that's not, we're still neighbors. So that's not great because when I signed the lease, we were dating and then we broke up. So, um, yeah, I definitely think it's his fault.

Speaker 2:   That we, he wasted so much of our time and the relationship should have never happened in the first place.

Speaker 1:   Right. And so how does he see it does he place blame on only on you on himself?

Speaker 2:   He doesn't place any blame on him. I thought he would eventually realize that some of the blame should go on him, but he's just adamant on thinking it was all my fault because I was controlling or like I wouldn't want him to like do makeup on other girls or I wouldn't want him to like, well, if we went out for dinner, like if I just didn't want to put makeup on and he would force me to, like, I would just yell at him and he would think that's controlling as well. It was kinda like, he didn't realize he was being like, not possessive, but um, the word when like Bossy, like kinda like, like you have to do this, kind of like, um, what is it? I don't know the word, but it's like when you like put something on people, like when you're like you have to do this, you have to do this. Kind of like he was kind of pushy, very assertive, very pushy and like he didn't realize and he still doesn't. So um yeah.

Speaker 1:   Yeah, that makes sense. How did it make you feel when he, that he like blames you?

Speaker 2:   It makes me feel super angry, but I just still have hope that when he grows up and becomes more mature and when he comes to terms with himself because he's still not pretty proud of his sexual preference. So I think once he's proud of that, he might realize that he is wrong. But for now I don't see that changing anytime soon.

Speaker 1:   And how does that affect how you kind of feel towards him as like an, you know, a neighbor, Someone you have to see?

Speaker 2:   In the beginning it was much worse where I would just be, it was like kind of like weird things. It was like in the beginning it was like, I want to be his friend so I'm just going to be nice to him and civil. And I tried, I saw him and I said Hi. And he

ignored me. So that made me mad because I was trying to be civil because we were in each other's lives for so long. But when he was like rude to me and just ignore me when we're like this close to each other, it, um, I just decided to stop trying. And then, um, then I started getting angry then I just stopped caring. It was just irrelevant if I saw him. I didn't see him. I would just pretend like he's a stranger. Like I just don't know him.

Speaker 1:   Okay, how did it, why do you think, in your perception, he chose to ignore you when you were trying to be civil?

Speaker 2:   He was, um, he wasn't even ignoring me. He was more like giving me like the death stare. So it wasn't even like I was irrelevant. It was like he wanted to show me he was mad and then he went on social media and said some things like about like, how dare she say hi, something like that. Um, I think he's super dramatic. It just comes with his personality and in his mind, I, cause I was going through the breakup and I had to tell people that he's gay but only my close friends and he has no proof that I did that because I only told like one or two people that I trust completely. But he thought that it was super bad of me to give that information to people that he didn't want to give it to, but at the same time I had to get over a two year breakup and I can't do that when I can't talk about it to anyone.

Speaker 2:   Um, and like it's easier to talk to friends than a therapist. So especially if they know the person. Um, so yeah, I feel like he should understand that he did scar me and I needed to, I needed to go to my support system and he just didn't get that. He just got angry at that because he thought I was telling people that he's gay. And so I think that's why he kinda got mad at me when I said hi because he just wanted to show that he's like not on good terms with me.

Speaker 1:   Yeah, that totally makes sense. Okay. So, um, in other kinds of relationships it can even just be friendships. Other dating relationships, your family, do you typically tend to place a lot of blame on yourself, on others, on nobody? How do you handle blame normally?

Speaker 2:   Uh, usually I'm pretty like, I think I'm pretty fair where like I think I can tell when it's someone else's fault or it's my fault or it's both of our faults or if it's just like a thing that happened that no one can be blamed for. Um, but mostly that's like in general so like friendships and like, um, family. But in relationships I do tend to like put the blame on myself and I am aware of that. And even if it's not my fault, I'll just say it is like I remember I was dating someone before him and if he cheated like this, my ex cheated on me and I would say it's my fault even though it wasn't my fault.

Speaker 1:   Right. How does that, how did that make you feel kind of going into this relationship with this person?

Speaker 2:   Um, the blaming or the cheating?

Speaker 1:   Both.

Speaker 2:   Okay. So with the cheating, I was kind of like scared to trust him at first because I have been cheated on. I didn't want to do that again. So I did tell them at first like if we do break up, I don't want it to be because you're gay or because you cheat on me. That is it. Like I just went straight up and said that. Um, and then I tried not to always blame myself. Like I tried to see it from a different point of view and like, um, ask my friends what they think just to see the third party because I can usually tell when something's right or wrong for other people, but not myself. Cause you're too into it. To see it.

Speaker 1:   Yeah, that makes sense. So how does that make you feel now that you're able to kind of identify that the blame was his fault for the end of the relationship?

Speaker 2:   Um, I do feel like more confident because I do know I was at a very bad point back then where I just kept replaying everything. Like what could I have done different? What could I have done different? But if he's gay, he's gay, I couldn't have done anything different. And I think I just accepted that and decided to like move on. The only thing I feel bad about is the time that I wasted. Like I wish that I learned that lesson in a shorter period of time. I don't wish I never dated him because I did learn something from the relationship, but I just feel like two years or one and a half year was way too long to stretch out and waste my time. Yeah.

Speaker 1:   That's totally fair. So you know, we've talked about your guys' kind of dynamic in the relationship. We talked about that final breakup conversation. Can you tell me what your life was like just immediately following the breakup?

Speaker 2:   Immediately following, it was terrible. I was just always crying, always in my room, not hanging out with anyone, just staying alone. Uh, when I started going on the anxiety medication, it did start to help a lot because I stopped overthinking everything and then I start, I started saying yes to my friends, so if they asked me to do anything, I would always say yes to get out of the house and keep myself busy. And then, um, over the summer I was with my family, so that was distracting. Um, but I remember immediately it was terrible. It was just like a week or two weeks of just straight, not going to class, crying, going to a lot of therapy sessions and getting prescribed anxiety pills.

Speaker 1:   Yeah, that makes sense. Okay. So how did you kind of, so obviously going to a therapist, uh get anxiety medication, hanging out with your friends, what were other things you did to kind of cope with those feelings of sadness.

Speaker 2:   A lot of TV, that's all I did. I would just, if I had to go to class, I would just walk to class watching TV, like go home, watch TV. Like if I even felt myself get a little bit sad, I would just straight away order food, put TV on, just distract myself. Like, watch something that totally in like engrossed, like gets my attention completely. So I can't even think about other stuff.

Speaker 1:   That makes sense. So would you, uh, would you stay away from like lovey dovey things or did you want to watch lovey dovey things?

Speaker 2:   It was weird. It was like, um I preferred comedy because if I watched like romantic, like romantic comedy would be fine because it was kind of like funny. It wasn't way too lovey dovey but too lovey dovey, would like make me like trigger me and like even just walking and seeing like people hold hands with like make me mad. So um I just stayed on like comedy and like mystery and stuff like that.

Speaker 1:   Okay. Yeah, that makes sense. Okay, great. So kind of, we've talked about how you handled it, uh, to contrast. How in your perception did he handle the breakup?

Speaker 2:   Um, I think it was kind of similar where he didn't do anything for a couple of weeks. And then I did notice he was trying to branch out and find friends to like hang out with because he didn't want to be alone anymore. And I do know that he would always like watch Netflix because I would like walk past and I could hear it. So I did know that. Um, and then over the summer he decided to like say yes to opportunities that I know personally he wouldn't before. So there's this friend back home where who's always into adventure stuff and he planned a spontaneous last minute trip to Turkey and I saw on social media that my ex decided to go, which I don't think he would've, but so I think he was saying yes to more opportunities and I do think that he was focusing on like being more himself and being more happy and not being judged by me. So he would take all the baths he wanted, buy all the, all the bath bombs he wanted, buy a lot of makeup, skincare experiment on girls, experiment on his Himself. Um, um, made a lot of friends that were girls. He has maybe one or two friends that are guys and then like the rest, like 15 are girls. And before it would be a problem because I would be like all you do is hang out with girls and talk about makeup. And now he just felt more like confident to do what he wanted. Um, but I think it was pretty similar for both of us. But I do think he's still more bitter than me because he hasn't found himself. He's not authentic. He's not true to himself. He's not proud of who he is in terms of his sexual preference. And I don't think he's dated anyone after me, whereas I have, so I'm, I do feel more confident. I do feel like I'm completely over it. But the fact that he's still like tweets about me, like even like last week, like we haven't talked for like a year and he's still like sub tweets me like talks about me, which it's obvious. It's me. So, um, because if I see him in the hallway and then like my friend will send me a tweet saying, oh, your ex said this on Twitter. And I would just be like, oh, I just saw him and it's obviously about me. So if he's still talking about it, he's not over it.

Speaker 1:   Right. Okay. So how first, how does it that you feel that there are a lot of ways in which you guys were similar in handling the breakup?

Speaker 2:   Um, I think that kind of gave me comfort knowing that we both were just going in the same journey. It was nice to know that we both were dealing with the same

stuff. It would be weird if like he was completely fine straight away or he was just, yeah, if he was just completely fine straightaway, that would freak me out. But I liked that we both took our time and did our things our own way, which ended up being pretty much the same.

Speaker 1:   Yeah. Okay, that makes sense. And how did it, you said that you think he's kind of more bitter than you are. How does that make you feel now that like..

Speaker 2:   Right now it makes me feel kind of like, like just get over it. Like just like frustrated. Like I don't care because I don't think about him, but when I do see him or see that he's still talking about me, it does annoy me that he's still like trying to start drama or be negative in my life or just talk about me. Like it's, it's over, it's done with, it's been a year, I'm over it. You should be too kind of a thing. Kind of like, not angry, but kind of like, just like annoyed. Yeah.

Speaker 1:   Why, what do you think his motivation is in like the sub tweeting you kind of thing?

Speaker 2:   I definitely think his motivation is his, um, hatred towards me because he thinks I'm telling everyone that he's gay when I'm not saying that, I'm just telling the people I trust and he's just scared that I'm going to give that information to anyone else because he's so scared about keeping that secret. And so he's overthinking it and he thinks I'm telling people, but I'm really not, especially not people that would spread it or something. So I think his main motivation to hate me is because he does tweet a lot about how I could betray his trust kind of thing. And I've not done that except for in his eyes. I do think he thinks I'm telling people about his sexual identity. Which I'm not.

Speaker 1:   Right. So that makes sense. Um, okay, great. So if you had to choose just one word to describe his reaction to the breakup, what would, what would, what word would you choose?

Speaker 2:   Um....I think we both were pretty confused and also like scared cause we didn't, because we had so many, mini breakups before, we didn't know if it was the last one until I saw that picture. And then it was like mix of relief because we had been fighting so much that it was just like a deep breath, like peaceful. But on the other hand it was also like we were losing our comfort and our convenience that we'd been so used to. It was confusing, I think.

Speaker 1:   That makes sense? Okay. So let's say you were talking to someone who didn't know him and didn't know you guys together, um, and was just like, Hey, uh, what's your ex boyfriend like? How would you describe him as a person to someone like who's asking you about your ex and asking about your guys's

Speaker 2:   right now?

Speaker 1:   Yeah.

Speaker 2:   Uh, I would say he is funny. He's dramatic. He is feminine. Um, and he does like to start drama. I would say that. Yeah. And he's kind of sassy.

Speaker 1:   Okay. Why sassy?

Speaker 2:   Uh, I think he just likes to throw sarcastic comments and like kind of like clap back at you. Like he would just do anything to try and get a laugh out of people even if it might be like insulting or something. So he's just always trying to be like fabulous, which I should have seen before.

Speaker 1:   How did that make you feel about him when you guys were dating? That he would like clap back?

Speaker 2:   Um, sometimes it was super funny, um, because he would do it when it was just me and him. He did it in a more subtle way and I would laugh, but if we were in a crowd of people, like in a, in a group of people and he would do it way more feminine and I would ask him like, why are you being more feminine in a group compared to when it's just me and you? Like, are you just trying to impress me? Is this the real you or is that the real you? And he would just get annoyed by all my questions and just tell me like, stop fighting with me. Stop talking about this. I don't want to talk about this and just like dismiss the whole topic.

Speaker 1:   What do you think it was about that conversation that made him avoidant of it?

Speaker 2:   Especially, uh, I think it's definitely like his secret and he didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to admit to it and be like proud of it because he knew if I kept grilling him on it, he'd have to like say something. So he was just trying his best to avoid that whole thing because he just didn't want to go to that part of himself or admit to that part of himself. Yeah.

Speaker 1:   Okay. That makes sense. Um, okay, great. So we talked about this a little bit, but can you tell me what have interactions with him been like kind of since you had that, he admitted to you over the over text that he was gay? What have interactions with him been like since then?

Speaker 2:   It's been a lot and it was kind of confusing. Like he would, we would still try to be friends, but then he wanted me to pretend like I was his girlfriend. It was really weird. Like he would message me saying, what if I haven't messaged him like two days? He'd be like, why aren't you asking me how I am? Where I was like, we're friends, I can message you when I want to message you. And then he got mad at that and he blocked me first he started insulting me, then he blocked me everywhere. And then, um, What was the question?

Speaker 1:   What have interactions been like?

Speaker 2:   Oh yeah. So that was interaction straight away in the summer because we weren't ne, with each other because he's from a different place than I am. But when we came back, our first introduction was awkward because my stuff was at his apartment for storage over the summer. So I had to see him right after summer and it was super awkward. We didn't really talk, we just kind of trying to be nice to each other, but also like not too warm. And then after that it was pretty much just ignoring or bitter or, uh, totally avoiding, pretending like we didn't even see each other.

Speaker 1:   Do you guys, does he still have you blocked on all of his stuff?

Speaker 2:   Um, we both, uh, well I blocked him too, so I don't really know. I don't really check, but yeah, I don't know.

Speaker 1:   So you also have him blocked on everything?

Speaker 2:   Yeah.

Speaker 1:   Okay. That makes sense. Um, why did you decide to block him?

Speaker 2:   Um, so he was insulting me on whatsapp so I blocked him on whatsapp so that he stopped saying rude things to me cause I just didn't want to hear it anymore. I just didn't want to see it anymore cause I was just done with it. I just thought if I block him, like he'll take a deep breath cool down and then we can talk about it when he's calm. Because when I told him to calm down and talk about it in a bit when he's calm because he just got mad and blew it out of proportion that I didn't message him for two days when he could have done the same thing. But I just did that so that he calms down. I wasn't trying to like, and I explained that to him. I wasn't trying to be rude. I was just trying to tell him to stop and he when, he wouldn't, and the words were affecting my mental health. I decided I'm just going to block him. And then he started insulting me on Instagram because I've blocked him on whatsapp on the, on like dms. Right. And then I started insulting him back on dms because I was just done with like being stepped on kind of. And then he, and then he blocked me on Instagram. Then on Twitter, he started talking to me the next day because he wanted to insult me some more. So then I blocked him there. It was just like social media to social media. Like he would just start insulting me and either one of us would block each other. The only place we're not blocked anymore is whatsapp because, um, I don't really know why. I think it's just comfort knowing that he is my neighbor, so I could go to him if anything ever happened because I am alone. Like I do live in a one bedroom and I am scared of living alone. So I think, I think that's why I unblocked him, but I don't know why he had unblocked me on whatsapp, but I haven't had to use that. Yeah.

Speaker 1:   Yeah. You guys haven't talked since all the blocking?

Speaker 2: Uh, only thing was like when he wanted to, he kept talking about me to my friends saying that I'm telling people that he's gay. And so I just messaged him saying, I just want you to know that I'm not telling people and don't listen to whoever's telling you that because that's not true and I don't want you to be mad at me, but I also don't care if we're not friends. And then he would just fight with me, fight with me, and be like, no, I know you're saying everything. I know you're doing this. Like he'd just make up his own story. So I was like, believe what you want to believe. But that's the only conversation we had.

Speaker 1: How does that make you feel that you guys don't interact at all anymore?

Speaker 2: Um, in the beginning it was kind of hard. I just didn't want to lose him as someone in my life, but I feel like the more time that has gone by, the more peaceful I feel without him in my life. And I just feel like there's less drama and less negativity. I think he's very much a spark for negative negativity and drama. You just likes causing it in any way possible. I don't, I don't think he means to and don't think he's aware that he does it, but it's just, I've never had such a peaceful year at Purdue and the only year that I had without him was senior year. So it just, it's nothing else has changed, so I just feel like it was him.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. So is he aware that you are dating someone new?

Speaker 2: I'm not sure actually. Um, I haven't told him. Um, I do know that we have mutual friends and our mutual friends have seen me with my boyfriend, so I don't know if they must've told him or not, but he hasn't. Like, I dunno.

Speaker 1: Yeah. And in your new relationship, is there any level of like comparison between your new boyfriend and your ex?

Speaker 2: Oh yeah, 100%. Um, my boyfriend is super masculine, super protective, super like manly. And I just feel more comfortable in that relationship where I don't feel like I have to like be the man or be the protector or be the mother because my ex was extremely immature so I did have to like take care of him. But I do like that I can be taken care of in this relationship.

Speaker 1: Yeah, that makes sense. Okay. Um, so if you could have one last conversation with him just like about the breakup or about the relationship in general, what would you want to say to him?

Speaker 2: Uh, I would say that, um, I am sorry for when I did yell and insult you. It was my anger, um, from the things that you said to me, but that's still not justifiable. Like it's still not okay that I stooped that low. But, um, I do do think we could still be civil and I wish you could just give it a try and I just don't want to hate you in the hallway. I just want to be able to say hi. I'm not trying to be best friends, but I just think that if we could just say hi, and get over it. Cause it has been a long time and I would just like to extremely, extremely like pressure the fact that I'm not

telling anyone his secret details because he just doesn't get it and I haven't been able to tell him face to face. It's always been over text. Maybe if he sees me like seriously say it, he might believe me. I Dunno. But yeah.

Speaker 1:   Yeah. And what would you want him to say to you?

Speaker 2:   Um, I would definitely be, the thing I'd like just always wanted to hear is, I'm sorry I hid the fact that I was gay for two years. I'm sorry that I wasted your time. That's all. I will always wanted to hear from him. But he hasn't been able to do that because he's still not come to terms with it himself.

Speaker 1:   So does it, do you feel like it's maybe helpful for you to be able to understand that it's because he hasn't come to terms with it? Or do you think it still is just as frustrating?

Speaker 2:   Um, I think, um, it's definitely easier to deal that. I do know how, how hard it can be for people for like um gay, so he does, I do get, because I do know his family. I do know his culture and his religion and how it's super, super against. So I do understand his struggle, which makes it easier to deal with because I have a reason why he did it because if he didn't have a reason, it would just be like if, if his parents were totally supportive and he just did this for, for fun, it would just be more hurtful. Like it would hurt more.

Speaker 1:   That totally makes sense. So if you guys did have that conversation, he said those things, to you, what purpose would that serve for you?

Speaker 2:   Uh, not much. I think it would just take away that last bit of bitterness from my heart for him because I do feel peaceful cause I'm over him. When I wasn't over him, I definitely was not peaceful. But I do feel peaceful. I do feel like he's not relevant in my life. I don't think about him. Um, but I think it would definitely like make that like bitter taste in my mouth for him go away. Like just thinking back in, like knowing that he's done all that stuff and blames me for it, it just frustrates me that he could think in what universe that I'm the wrong one when he just led me on for so long. Yeah.

Speaker 1:   Yeah, that makes sense. So if you guys, if he ended up apologizing, would you want to be his friend now or have you moved on from that?

Speaker 2:   Um, I would be civil. I wouldn't want to hang out with him. I wouldn't want to be his friend or his best friend. I would just want to be able to just, if I see him say hi, if we're at the same place, like Starbucks, be able to sit with him and chat for a few minutes. Just very like acquaintances. I wouldn't want to be back in his life and his circle, but I would want to be able to be civil.

Speaker 1:   Yeah. Why not?

Speaker 2:   Uh, I just said, I just feel like he does attract drama and negativity and I just feel like it's good to leave it on a good note and like keep it as little conversation as possible so that there is no possibility that we could fight again because it's hard to get over that. Especially knowing him. I know it's hard to, um, fix issues with him because he's super stubborn so I would just want to keep my distance and keep it like wrap up in a good, like little bow kind of like done. Like yea

Speaker 1:   You've kind of expressed too that make you feel better if you guys could be civil with each other, what would that, why, why, what would that do for you?

Speaker 2:   I just feel like if I, like when I go home, like I, uh, if I, like this morning I went to get my laundry and like this is apartment nine me, apartment 10 him. And so I went down to get my laundry. I was coming upstairs and like I could, I could feel, I could, I heard him like open the door and like, normally if we were civil, I'd be able to turn it around and say, hi, how are you? Good morning. But because I know that there's so much tension between us, I literally just ran into my apartment and I just, I just don't want to think about, I just don't want to think about the tension and the awkwardness. I'd rather just be and not be worried about bumping into him or if he says something to me or if he looks at me a certain way or if he is just rude to me. Yeah.

Speaker 1:   Yeah. Makes Sense. Okay. So, um, what kind of advice did your friends or family give you right after the breakup? Like when you're going through that sad time, what did people tell you?

Speaker 2:   They said to not stay in my house, my apartment. And they said to always, always, always be busy. Whether it's class, whether it's friends, whether it's eating or whether it's just studying, not in my apartment. Even if I want to watch TV, they would say like, watch it in the library. Like, just don't be alone. Don't be in your apartment. Um, just hang out with friends, hang out with people, keep herself busy. Um, start like they would always say like, if you look good, you'll feel good. Kind of where it would be like, you know, like take time now to take care of yourself. Like pamper yourself, go for a massage, kind of like treat yourself and like you'll start feeling better as well. Um, and they did tell me, like I said, I'm going to go to therapy and they did agree that I should. Um, and instantly, probably like after like a month of taking that anti anxiety medication, I felt much, much better. Like I don't think I'd be able to cope with the breakup without it because it was just too much for me to hand, handle. Especially being my first serious relationship and then knowing it was just a lie or it was just like such a waste. Yeah. Yeah. That makes sense. Um, how much of that advice did you think was helpful? Was, did you get any advice that was not helpful? How did you feel about it?

Speaker 2:   I think the staying busy part was super, super helpful because it just kept me so distracted from my own thoughts. Uh, I did have some weird advice, like, just forget about it or like, don't worry, you'll be okay. And just things that not of any

substance where like I can't do anything with it. Yeah. It was just like, you'll be fine. I've been over, I've had a breakup too. Or at least now you know, he's gay. It's easier to get over him. Right. Where it's not like knowing he's gay, it's harder to get over him because then you're like looking back at all the memories and realizing that they were all a lie. So that's just, that just gets you more bitter and angry and annoyed. Yeah. Sad.

Speaker 1: Yeah. I totally understand that. So when you, uh, when your friends will tell you things like that, how did it, how did it make you, like what, how did you interact with them about it? Like were you just like, yeah. Okay. Or did you try to like, be like, well that's not helpful? Like what did you do?

Speaker 2: Um, I was definitely not confrontational. I would definitely just say like, yeah, yeah. Okay. Like thank you for that advice and then like talk about it with someone else, and be like, oh, she said this to me and that really upset me. Like I would still talk about it but just not to them. Yeah. Because I just was so in such a sensitive place with him and my emotions and all that, that I just didn't want to have a fight with anyone else or have any tension with anyone else. Um, so yeah, I just kept to myself.

Speaker 1: Did it make you less likely to go back to that person for advice?

Speaker 2: Yes, definitely. But, um, these kind of people, like they would just give advice when you don't even ask for it. So just start avoiding those people. Or like start pretending like I'm fine, so that they would stop giving me advice if I had to hang out with them. So yeah.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Okay. That makes sense. So what do you feel when you think about your future now?

Speaker 2: Uh, I definitely feel hopeful. I do feel extremely, like I do feel much stronger after that relationship because I did learn a lot in it. I do think that after that relationship, I, I like totally changed like confidence level, awareness level, uh, knowing how to trust, knowing that I should always trust my gut. Uh, no matter what it's saying. Um. It just made me more confident in my own like instinct and ability because I knew from the start I just didn't want to believe it. Right. So it's just like, it's teaching me to not be blind in love and like look for the red flags. Yeah

Speaker 1: So you kind of are both more confident but also like more critical.

Speaker 2: Yeah.

Speaker 1: Okay. Yeah, that totally makes sense. Um, so how have you kind of processed through the effects of the breakup?

Speaker 2:   Um, processed through like how have I gotten over it?

Speaker 1:   Yeah.

Speaker 2:   So it's been friends, family, TV, a lot of TV, a lot of food, um, anxiety, medication. And then I started, um, like dressing up and like trying to look confident and look pretty so that, and then I would get approached and then I would get people asking me on a date and like I would go on dates, but it was just like one time, things or two times, like maybe just like coffee or something. It was nothing serious or anything. Um, and then so I did feel more like confident going out there and being able to like learn how to get back into the single life and flirt again and stuff like that. So that's, and it was fun because it would keep me super distracted because like, the best way to get over someone is to start like flirting with other people and getting distracted and like getting the butterflies all over again and stuff like that.

Speaker 1:   So how did it, when people would ask you on dates, how did that make you feel?

Speaker 2:   Uh, confident and like excited and like I'm not, I'm not going to be single forever kind of. Um, because I just didn't imagine myself with anyone else before. So like knowing that I would be dating again, it was just kinda like, oh, I'm just, people are still interested in me kind of thing.

Speaker 1:   That makes sense. Okay. So like, aside from everything we've kind of talked about, what would be one last, like overarching kind of statement you would tell me about either about the breakup or about him or about yourself? Whatever you want to tell me.

Speaker 2:   Pretty much said everything, but I would say I don't regret it. I don't regret getting into the relationship with him. I just regret staying as long as I did. Yeah. Because I, sh... Knew I just like my gut told me every day that I shouldn't be in it. I did feel wrong. I did feel something was off. I just didn't want to end it because I guess I just didn't want to be alone at that point in my life. Yeah. Um, yeah.

Speaker 1:   Okay, great. Well, it's been wonderful getting to hear your experience. And thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

Speaker 2:   Thank you so much.