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Adlerian Therapy With Recently Romantically Separated College-Age Women

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Most female students in college will experience the breakup of a romantic relationship. Romantic separation can negatively affect their emotional state, social relationships, and understanding of personal identity. Adler's theory of individual psychology (IP), with its focus on social interest and personal worldview, is a useful theoretical framework for assisting this population. In this article, the authors offer a case study to illustrate how college counselors can use an IP approach to meet the unique needs of recently romantically separated college women.

Keywords: Adlerian therapy, romantic relationships, college students

Alfred Adler's theory of individual psychology (IP) suggests that individuals are not simply a number of parts but holistic beings who create meaning from the social contexts within which they are actively involved (Bitter, 2007). Adler's concept of social interest involves feelings of belongingness and interest in others' well-being. This is in stark contrast to the withdrawal, isolation, and self-absorption that may be immediately present in the thoughts and behaviors of an individual who recently separated from a romantic relationship (Gibb, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2011). IP counselors identify *mistaken goals* that lead to dysfunctional behavior while fostering courage and increased self-confidence (J. Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2005).

One group that might seek counseling is women who have experienced a recent relationship breakup. Although research related to significant romantic relationship separation exists, less is known about counseling strategies for those experiencing a breakup. Some researchers (M. R. Miller, 2009) identify romantic separation experiences as opportunities for positive change, while others note both positive and negative post-breakup emotions (Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003), with women having more intense negative feelings after a relationship ends (Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). Using IP in therapeutic treatment with recently separated women may promote their innate capacity to strive toward wholeness or completion (Bitter, 2007) while approaching life's tasks of friendship, occupation, intimacy, self-care, kinkeeping, spirituality, and change (Sonstegard, Bitter, & Pelonis, 2004) in a useful manner and with greater confidence. The purpose of this article is to relate the needs of college-age women who have recently experienced romantic relationship dissolution to the ideas of Adler, as represented in the use of IP with these clients.

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Recently Romantically Separated College-Age Women

Distress associated with romantic relationship dissolution or poor academic performance is one of the issues most frequently reported at campus counseling centers (Oliveira, Dantas, Azevedo, & Banzato, 2008). Breakups negatively affect students' emotional health and behavior, resulting in depression, anxiety, anger, intrusive thoughts, and increased alcohol consumption (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2011). Some students attempt suicide following the dissolution of a romantic relationship (Gilbert & Sifers, 2011). Larson and Sweeten (2012) also noted increased alcohol use and binge drinking, particularly in females, following a romantic dissolution. Because academic, emotional, and social adjustment and identity development negatively affect college student attrition (Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2013), it is clear that breakups negatively affect university students' academic performance.

Connectedness to the social environment predicts adjustment in college students post-breakup (Moller, Fouladi, McCarthy, & Hatch, 2003). Field (2011) explained that those experiencing romantic breakups may demonstrate signs of bereavement, including negative thoughts, disrupted sleep, depression, and anxiety, all of which are linked to social isolation and lack of academic focus. Therefore, utilizing Adlerian therapy, which has an intense focus on social connectedness and identity development (Adler, 1931/1980), is an appropriate intervention for bolstering adjustment and lowering college student attrition rates (Azmitia et al., 2013).

Understanding the demographics of recently separated college-age women and common challenges they experience allows helping professionals to determine the most effective treatment methods. Most of the research that has been conducted is specific to divorce, but there is a small literature base on young women who experience romantic breakups. Wood, Avellar, and Goesling (2008) reported that 60% of young adults were in a romantic relationship and delayed marriage until their mid- to late-20s. Most of those studied rated their relationship quality as high, with daters rating their relationship quality slightly lower than did cohabitors or married couples. For couples who marry, the likelihood of divorce for individuals married after 1980 has significantly increased (A. J. Miller, Sassler, & Kusi-Appouh, 2011). Married couples report reluctance to enter a marriage and concerns regarding the difficulty of leaving a marriage due to associated social confusion and emotional stress (A. J. Miller et al., 2011) and lack of social network (Bogolub, 1991). However, leaving a tumultuous romantic relationship is often viewed as positive and opportunistic (Määttä, 2011). We discuss the challenges related to mental distress, social connections, and developing new identities in the following sections.

Mental Distress

Associations between romantic separation and mental distress have been a topic of interest for many researchers. Gibb and colleagues (2011) conducted a longitudinal study exploring the dynamics of relationship separation and mental health problems. They found a correlation between separation and later depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation. Mandelbaum (2011)

noted decreased self-esteem, happiness, and increased psychological distress in individuals who experience divorce. A connection also exists between breakups and the first onset of major depressive disorder in young adults (Monroe et al., 1999). Clearly, relationship dissolution leaves individuals feeling vulnerable.

Emotional issues following breakup appear to continue long after the relationship ends. Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, and Cheng (2008) learned that most partners still communicate after the relationship ends, with 12% experiencing turbulent relationships after breakup. Sprecher et al. (1998) noted that high levels of commitment to the relationship and the overall length of the relationship prior to breakup increased the long-term distress in young adults. Sometimes relationship dissolution leads to complicated grief with long-term emotional issues and poor adjustment (Sbarra & Emery, 2005).

Several studies have also noted gender differences in emotional reactions following romantic dissolution. Women report higher levels of distress (Park, Sanchez, & Brynildsen, 2011), hostility, and depression (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003) following a breakup than do men. Of the various types of stress in their lives, college women report the highest stress from social relationships (Broughman, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009). Women, more so than men, seem to experience relational stress more significantly.

Social Connections and Attachment

A change in an individual's couple status is regarded as a highly significant social life transition (Ben-Zur, 2012), with divorce or loss of a spouse being the most stressful events experienced by adults. The absence of meaningful social relationships following the loss of a romantic relationship may leave an individual feeling isolated, lonely, and detached. With most young adults entering romantic relationships at some point (Wood et al., 2008), it can be assumed that the social transition of romantic dissolution is a common occurrence.

Socialization in early life has a significant influence on how women view themselves and the manner in which they adjust. Baum (2007) explored separation guilt in women who initiate divorce. He suggested that the inclination for separation guilt began in infancy when autonomy develops along with the fear that pursuit of life without the parent is harmful to the parent. This fear later translates to fear of harming a significant other in a breakup. In a study investigating the effect of birth order on separation, Ziv and Hermel (2011) also found that developing independence and forming self–other boundaries in early childhood are associated with feelings of guilt. Sprecher et al. (1998) noted higher levels of fearful attachment style post-breakup. In another study, Moller et al. (2003) examined attachment and social support related to adjustment after romantic dissolution. Attachment style related to levels of hopelessness, stress, and loneliness, whereas social support had no effect. Therefore, family-of-origin and early attachment issues seem to relate to current relationship difficulties and coping following breakup.

New Identity

Individuals who have recently separated from a romantic relationship have greater success adjusting when they understand how the divorce or separation fits into

their life experience and then redirect focus on the new life in which they are involved (Mandelbaum, 2011). Baum, Rahav, and Sharon (2005) reported that notable changes following separation from a romantic relationship include higher levels of self-esteem, independence, feelings of competence, and responsibility and confidence to approach life's tasks. Such research suggests that romantic dissolution is an opportunity for positive self-development.

Following this positive tone, Gregson and Ceynar (2009) explored identity development of women following divorce. Because of a lack of clarity in defining these new roles, women are left with apprehension and/or confusion about how to define self. Individuals are often not readily prepared to handle personal freedom and higher levels of social equality (Sonstegard et al., 2004). However, Tashiro and Frazier (2003) explored positive changes after breakup and identified themes related to positive growth in interpersonal connections and identity development. The women, in particular, appeared to learn more about themselves because of the stress resulting from the breakup. It seems possible for women to view romantic dissolution as an opportunity for growth as an individual.

Research suggests romantic separation is a process rather than a single event (Radford et al., 1997). An awareness of the previously detailed issues commonly experienced by recently separated women provides insight into possibilities for effective therapeutic treatment. The following is an explanation of how IP may best serve the current population.

IP

Adlerian theory, or IP, is based on three main constructs (Dufrene, 2011). The first states that all human behavior is purposeful, or goal-oriented. Focusing on purposeful behavior is a key element of IP. This entails exploring the interpretations of self, others, and life that clients have formulated (Bitter & Nicoll, 2000). These interpretations make up their *worldviews* and are helpful in understanding motivation. Second, individuals possess an innate drive toward *social interest*, which involves cooperating with others and making beneficial contributions to the social environment. Human drive toward social interest is determined by the early need to rely on others to survive (Sonstegard et al., 2004). The meaning of life is found in what we contribute to society. Third, the individual is considered in a holistic manner, with all of the parts making up a unified whole person (J. D. Carlson & Englar-Carlson, 2008). Individuals experience the world, or the parts of the whole, within a system that includes family, school, work, and cultural contexts (Corey, 2009).

As previously mentioned, Alfred Adler (1931/1980) divided human beings' cooperation with the environment into three life tasks, which were later expanded by other researchers (Dreikurs & Mosak, 1966/1977a, 1967/1977b; Sonstegard et al., 2004). Adler proposed the tasks from an understanding of how individuals respond to or find solutions to circumstances. An individual's lifestyle informs his or her approach to managing the life tasks. The three original tasks of occupation, social, and sexual cooperation link people to one another and to the world in which they exist (Mansager & Gold, 2000). Researchers later expanded Adler's list to

include life tasks such as self-care, kinkeeping, spirituality, and change (Mansager & Gold, 2000).

Phases of IP

To assess the manner in which an individual approaches the life tasks and, eventually, to facilitate motivation modification, one must gain an understanding of the four phases of IP (J. Carlson et al., 2005). The three aspects of IP previously mentioned are governing concepts involved in understanding an individual. The four phases show how a successful series of sessions progresses.

The first phase involves building a relationship with the client based on empathy and mutual respect (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). The counselor begins therapy before actually meeting the client (Bitter & Nicoll, 2000). Counselors use information about the client obtained from other sources to formulate hypotheses. These assumptions provide counselors a starting point that can be reformulated upon interacting with the client. For example, counselors can explore the emotional issues and identity changes predicted to occur following a breakup. Establishing a strong therapeutic alliance is essential in promoting effective treatment outcomes (Sprouse, Ogletree, Comsudes, Granville, & Kern, 2005). Bitter and Nicoll (2000) have suggested that information can be gained even in the simple touch of a handshake. Clients also gather information about the counselor in these initial moments of therapy.

In a profession where the timeliness and cost-effectiveness of treatment are promoted, Bitter and Nicoll (2000) have suggested that Adlerian therapists should use *brief therapy* in practice. The theoretical framework for Adlerian brief therapy (ABT) is essentially identical to classical IP. The differences are found in timeframe and an intentional focus on the flow of the therapy session or sessions. Counselors using ABT introduce a contract outlining the time limitations of treatment to inform and motivate clients. Providing this contract at the beginning of therapy allows clients to develop an optimistic outlook on the effectiveness of treatment.

The second phase is a psychological investigation in which the counselor assesses the client's lifestyle (Powers & Griffith, 2012) utilizing subjective and objective interviews. The counselor uses empathic connection to help clients explain what brought them to counseling. For example, the counselor would elicit the breakup story and how the dissolution affected the client's well-being. Following the telling of the client's story, the counselor poses what Adler (1929/1964) called *the question*. Dreikurs's (1997) form of the question asks clients what they would be doing if they did not have the presenting problem, an intervention used to determine if the cause of the problem is physiological or psychological. If the problem is physiological, the client might insist the problem would simply be gone, that nothing else would change. However, if the problem is not physiological, clients will often answer with the very outcome they are avoiding. This aids the counselor in understanding motivation and challenges with life tasks.

The objective interview takes place following the psychological investigation. Apart from the presenting problem, the counselor uses a lifestyle assessment to

determine the client's motivation for functioning in social interactions (Bitter & Nicoll, 2000). The counselor attempts to understand the client as a whole person, asking about medical, social, and problem histories. From here, the counselor assists the client in speaking about family constellation, life tasks, and early recollections. Learning how the client views family-of-origin issues helps the counselor understand how the client interprets personal fit in the world. Parental and sibling influence, family constellation, and birth order affect current relationships (Sonstegard et al., 2004) and may influence reaction to current romantic separation (Ziv & Hermel, 2011). Disque and Bitter (1998) insisted that what clients remember about their past influences their interpretation of the present and their anticipation of the future. For a thorough description of the Adlerian Lifestyle Assessment, readers can see the work of Eckstein (2003).

Following the systemic exploration of the second phase, the third phase consists of the counselor posing explanations to clients regarding their challenges (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Using the information gathered in interview process, the counselor discusses hypotheses for goals and purposes that motivate the client's social behavior (Bitter & Nicoll, 2000). The counselor should be sure to offer goals from a tentative position and allow the client to correct, modify, or approve the guesses. This collaborative dialogue promotes clarity and conscious recognition for the client (Sprouse et al., 2005). In the case of clients experiencing a breakup, counselors may tentatively note how past relationships have affected current beliefs about the romantic dissolution.

In the final phase of reeducation and reorientation, the client uses insight to move into a more socially competent way of being in the world. Here, the highly important sense of belonging helps clients move away from an isolated vantage point. The counselor helps the client move away from insecurity and danger to a place of safety, security, and higher self-esteem (Sprouse et al., 2005). Encouragement and empowerment help promote the client's confidence to take action. It is important to recognize the possibility of felt chaos by the client in times of significant change; this sense of chaos is what Rasmussen (2010) calls a *compelling emotion*, one that is necessary if the client is to be motivated for change. Still, during this vulnerable time, the counselor must remain supportive, staying present with the client and not engaging in consideration of life-changing decisions.

Adlerian counselors are interested in making a difference in their clients' lives. They strive to have an impact, even if it is a small change in a single session. Bitter and Nicoll (2000) spoke of terminating the interview but never fully terminating the therapeutic relationship. The counselor and client may reconnect in the future, following a brief separation or an extended time, recognizing that change happens in the space between sessions.

College counseling centers are increasingly implementing session limits and brief therapy models to meet growing demands for mental health services on college campuses (Lacour & Carter, 2002). Although students experiencing significant distress following a romantic breakup are likely to have experienced insecure parental attachments, be slow to progress in treatment, and present challenges to college counselors (Gilbert & Sifers, 2011), it is possible to provide effective treatment for this population within the parameters of services offered at college

counseling centers. ABT offers a timely stage model for promoting focused work (Bitter & Nicoll, 2004) that fits within the time-limited service models, typically allowing 10 to 14 sessions, that have been adopted by many university counseling centers (Wolgast, Lambert, & Puschner, 2003). ABT also suggests ways that counselors can positively impact clients within a single session (Bitter & Nicoll, 2000), potentially benefiting those students who are discontinuing treatment prior to maximum session limits.

IP With Women Following Breakup

IP seems to be a logical framework for helping women after a romantic breakup. Adler's (1931/1980) *psychology of use* explains that an individual's interpretation of life experience is essential in understanding how that person interacts in the world and approaches challenges in life. Feelings of depression may relate to Adler's theory of inferiority. Määttä (2011) explained that an individual's concept of self-respect might be challenged during the dissolution of a serious romantic relationship. The embarrassment associated with failing to maintain a relationship often evokes emotions related to inferiority. Social connection is the heart of IP, and romantic dissolution can shatter that interconnectedness for young women. IP can help clients recognize the importance of social connections by looking at family-of-origin issues while focusing on future goals.

Researchers (Park et al., 2011) suggest that the manner in which individuals cope with separation from a romantic relationship greatly affects those individuals, their other relationships, and society as a whole. In particular, researchers have noted that separated women most often act based on feelings of depression, which may be the opposite of social interest. Adlerian therapy (Adler, 1931/1980) helps individuals approach life's challenges in order to move away from feelings of inferiority to a place of confidence and social connectedness.

Case Illustration

Given the Adlerian concept that all problems faced by individuals are socially based, we present a case study using Adlerian therapy with a young woman who has recently experienced separation from a romantic relationship. The counselor uses the four phases of Adlerian counseling in working with Katherine, a fictional client who is a composite of actual cases. We will explore her presenting problems from the vantage point of a counselor using Adlerian therapy as a framework.

Katherine is a 20-year-old college student who has recently experienced a breakup after a 1-year relationship. She is experiencing feelings of depression related to the breakup, along with recent weight gain. She is also troubled with anxiety regarding her ability to succeed in her classes. She reports that the breakup was mutual but mentions that her ex-boyfriend, Daniel, was emotionally abusive, often calling her names and telling her she was worthless, throughout the relationship. She decided to seek help from her college counseling center.

When the counselor meets Katherine, she immediately begins processing apparent information about her. Katherine is well-dressed, slightly overweight, and fails to make eye contact when timidly shaking the counselor's hand. The counselor

displays enthusiasm during their initial introductions. She tells of her Adlerian theoretical orientation, introduces a contract, and elicits Katherine's feedback as they consider goals of therapy within the contract. The two also discuss time limitations. The duration of the therapy will be no more than 10 sessions.

The counselor asks Katherine to share her reasons for coming to therapy. Katherine speaks of her depression and anxiety. The counselor asks Katherine what she would be doing if she were not experiencing these feelings. Katherine explains she dropped out of her sorority when she started dating Daniel. As he was a sophomore in the same major, he often helped her study for her courses. She also stopped attending her weekly Zumba dance classes at the campus recreation center, insisting that depression now inhibits her from leaving her dorm room to make new friends. Katherine adds that anxiety is keeping her from signing up for library study sessions available in the weeks prior to finals and reports feeling depressed, isolated, and incapable of moving forward. She also speaks of working out, but when she describes her fears related to other people in the gym, her feelings of poor self-esteem emerge. Throughout this session, the counselor assesses the emotional issues surrounding the breakup while building a relationship based on empathy.

In the following session, the counselor begins the lifestyle assessment, asking Katherine about her history regarding medical treatment, social situations, and any other problems experienced. Katherine describes a pattern of engaging in emotionally abusive romantic relationships, not having many friends, and often feeling limited in her ability to connect to others during romantic relationships. The counselor investigates these situations for the duration of the session.

When Katherine returns for the third session, the counselor assesses her client's experience within her family. She asks Katherine about her family constellation and birth order. Katherine tells the counselor about her experience of being the youngest child raised by a working father and stay-at-home mother. She mentions that her parents never fought in front of them, but she often overheard her father berating her mother and noted that her mother always agreed with her father. Later in the session, the counselor asks Katherine to recall three of the earliest memories from her childhood—before the age of 10, if possible. Katherine recounts memories with themes of feeling inadequate and isolated.

In the remaining sessions, the counselor and client work together to come to an understanding of information gathered in past sessions and to move toward reorientation. The counselor poses her hypothesis regarding themes related to Katherine's current struggles with self-esteem, confidence, and isolation as they align with Katherine's family constellation and early memories. She hypothesizes that her past relationships, and what she observed from her parents, may be affecting her current beliefs about herself and her relationship with Daniel. The counselor allows Katherine to correct any incorrect assumptions.

Throughout the discussion, Katherine has moments of insight where she begins to recognize how her past experiences may be affecting her current behaviors. Using body awareness, Katherine connects her feelings of inadequacy during childhood to her feelings of being unable to move forward after her relationship with Daniel ended. Recognizing this connection empowers Katherine to imagine new possibilities such as attending open social gatherings in the student center and group study

sessions in the library, along with reestablishing contact with friends she had before meeting Daniel. Katherine speaks of best-case possibilities for starting a workout regimen at the campus gym, including attending one drop-in Zumba class per week. Katherine also identifies some strategies for coping with feelings of depression and anxiety. The counselor terminates the counseling experience but reminds Katherine of the ongoing possibility of returning to the therapeutic relationship for further development.

Implications

There are many similarities between the identified needs of women who have experienced the end of a romantic relationship and the goals of IP. The most notable concept of IP to relate to the challenges these women face is the concept of addressing the tasks of life, including friendship, occupation, intimacy, self-care, kinkeeping, spirituality, and change (Sonstegard et al., 2004). Evidence for the positive impact of social support in the loss of a romantic relationship in the work of Ben-Zur (2012) speaks to the appropriateness of using Adlerian therapy with this population.

As previously mentioned, the timely stage model of ABT (Bitter & Nicoll, 2000) is consistent with college counseling centers' needs to employ brief treatment methods and implement session limits (Lacour & Carter, 2002). The ability of college counselors to assess the effectiveness of IP with their clients and to document therapeutic gains is a necessary condition for adopting this method. Outcome studies have specifically identified the effectiveness of Adlerian therapy with children (Weisz, Hawley, & Jensen-Doss, 2004) and adults (Grawe, Donati, & Bernauer, 1998). Nikelly (2005) noted the relationship between social interest and improved physical health, reduced stress, and increased social capital, all of which relate to academic success. Relevant to the use of Adlerian therapy with college-age women, Crandall (1980) demonstrated a correlation between social interest and optimism, adjustment, and well-being. When applying ABT with this population, college counselors may document therapeutic gains by focusing on the reorientation phase (Bitter & Nicoll, 2000) and reporting evidence of insight and change. Insight may be demonstrated by clients' recognition of past experiences affecting their current behaviors. Change may be evidenced by movements toward social interest and confidence, activities in which clients engage in social contact for support and academic success, as well as strategies for coping with depression, anxiety, and adjustment.

During the case study, the counselor helped Katherine process her breakup by assessing her depression and anxiety and by discussing detrimental aspects of the relationship, including social isolation and dependency. The counselor helped Katherine discover a link between her motivations within the relationship and the worldview she developed within her family of origin. Katherine gained insight by reflecting upon her role as the youngest child and from memories of her father berating her mother while she hid in her room. She realized the feelings of inadequacy and fear that defined her existence as a child left her feeling stuck in current situations in her life. By reviewing a client's family-of-origin issues, connecting these with current concerns, and providing a safe space anchored by empathy

and warmth, counselors can help college-age women such as Katherine begin to feel empowered to move forward in their lives, no longer hindered by feelings of inadequacy and social isolation.

Katherine worked on regaining a sense of social connection as she identified the things she would be doing if depression and anxiety were not holding her back. The counselor encouraged her to take control of her life in small steps like joining a workout class and attending study sessions. As Gregson and Ceynar (2009) noted, women who have recently separated experience difficulty in defining their new roles. Establishing a sense of community can help them find a sense of belongingness, which ultimately promotes life satisfaction. Radford et al. (1997) suggested using information known about the challenges associated with separation to help young women post-breakup.

A mental health practitioner working with this population should anticipate and prepare for the shift associated with separation and redefining self occupationally, intimately, and socially. As college counselors often join with students working through issues related to identity development, the aforementioned implications may be particularly relevant. Additionally, considering the client's career development process is essential to helping students in a college or university setting (Bishop, 1990). Young women working through the emotional strains of a romantic separation may report low career-decision-making readiness (Sampson, McClain, Musch, & Reardon, 2013). Assessing the impact of the separation along with family-of-origin interaction patterns on the student's progression toward the occupational life task of succeeding academically and developing professionally will offer insight and further promote opportunities for motivation modification (Hargrove, Creagh, & Burgess, 2002).

College counselors may also assist young female students by encouraging social connectivity in campus activities and organizations. Getting involved outside of the classroom increases marketability, provides networking opportunities for occupational goals, fosters mental health, and affords possibilities for building friendships and intimate relationships as students connect with other young adults who have similar interests and aspirations (Kraack, 1986).

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