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The influence of compassionate love on strategies used to end a relationship

Susan Sprecher1, Corinne Zimmerman1, and Beverley Fehr2

Abstract
Past research has identified several communication strategies that are used to end relationships (e.g., Baxter, 1982). The present study extends this research by considering how young adults’ propensity to experience compassionate love for a romantic partner is associated with their reported use of breakup strategies. A sample of US university students (n = 343) who had initiated the breakup of a past relationship completed a survey about the disengagement strategies they used. Participants’ compassionate love for their partner (recalled when the relationship existed) was associated with the use of more compassionate strategies to end the relationship. Compassionate love for humanity also was associated with the use of compassionate strategies, albeit to a lesser extent. The present findings suggest that compassionate love not only is beneficial for a relationship while it is intact, but may also play an important role in the process of relationship dissolution.

Keywords
Breakup strategies, compassionate love, disengagement processes, relationship endings

Most people who enter romantic relationships experience a relationship dissolution at some point, which can be very distressing particularly for those who are in the “left” role
(Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). The degree of distress can vary considerably, however, and be affected by several factors including the strategies that are used to end the relationship. The purpose of this study was to examine whether people who love their partners compassionately at the height of their relationship, measured by the Sprecher and Fehr (2005) Compassionate Love Scale (CLS), are more likely to use compassionate breakup strategies when they decide to end the relationship. In exploring this issue, we also examined how scores on a version of the CLS that measures love for strangers and even all of humanity are associated with breakup strategies. This study contributes to a small body of literature on the outcomes of compassionate love in the context of romantic relationships (for a review, see Fehr & Sprecher, 2013) as well as to the study of the process of relationship breakups (for a review, see Vangelisti, 2006).

**Breakup strategies**

Baxter (1982) and Wilmot, Carbaugh, and Baxter (1985) identified 40 disengagement strategies based on accounts provided by individuals who were asked to describe how they ended a relationship (see Cody, 1982, for an alternative typology). Analysis of the breakup strategies yielded four factors: (a) avoidance/withdrawal (e.g., avoid contact with the person); (b) manipulation (e.g., get a third party to break the news); (c) positive tone (e.g., prevent the person from having hard feelings); and (d) openness (e.g., openly express desire to break up). Baxter argued that these strategies could be further categorized by the degree to which they are direct (explicit) versus indirect (ambiguous) and self-oriented versus other-oriented. Other-oriented strategies focus on concern for the other and the reduction of hurt toward him or her, whereas self-oriented strategies are characterized by less consideration for protecting the partner (for review, see Zimmerman, 2009). In more recent research, the list has been expanded to include strategies that use more distant communication (e.g., messaging via the Internet) (e.g., Collins & Gillath, 2012; Sprecher, Zimmerman, & Abrahams, 2010).

The assumption underlying models of disengagement strategies is that some strategies (e.g., positive tone) are more sensitive and caring than others (e.g., avoidance/withdrawal). Sprecher et al. (2010; Study 1) examined this assumption directly and found that participants distinguished among dissolution strategies (adapted from Baxter, 1982) in terms of the degree to which they were compassionate. For example, strategies classified as positive tone and openness were perceived to be the most compassionate. In Sprecher et al.’s Study 2, participants read a hypothetical breakup scenario and were asked to indicate the likelihood they would use each of 47 strategies to end their relationship. It was hypothesized that those who scored higher on compassionate love for their partner would choose more compassionate strategies to end their relationship (in response to the hypothetical situation) than those who scored lower on compassionate love. Support was found for this hypothesis.

**The present study**

In the present study, we gathered data on actual (recalled) breakups to further explore the link between compassionate love and the behavioral outcomes of compassionate
disengagement strategies. Participants who had ended a nonmarital romantic relationship were asked to recall the strategies they used to end the relationship. They also reported on the degree of compassionate love they experienced, both for their partner at the peak of the relationship and for humanity/strangers. Our focus was specifically on those who were fully or mutually responsible for initiating the breakup.

Our major hypothesis was:

**H1**: Compassionate love for partner, recalled for a past relationship at its peak, will be (1A) associated positively with the use of openness and positive tone breakup strategies; (1B) associated negatively with the use of manipulation, avoidance/withdrawal, and distant communication breakup strategies; and (1C) associated positively with the overall compassionate level of the breakup strategies used (determined by weighting the use of each strategy by the degree it was compassionate, as rated by an independent sample).

Second, we examined whether compassionate love for humanity is associated with the breakup strategies used. Compassionate love for humanity can be considered to be a general propensity to experience compassionate love independent of a specific target or the quality of a specific relationship. We hypothesized:

**H2**: Compassionate love for humanity will be (2A) associated positively with the use of openness and positive tone breakup strategies; (2B) associated negatively with use of manipulation, avoidance/withdrawal, and distant communication breakup strategies; and (2C) associated positively with the overall compassion score of the breakup strategies used.

We further predicted that relationship-specific compassionate love (i.e., compassionate love for the partner) will be a stronger predictor of the use of compassionate breakup strategies than compassionate love for humanity (**H3**). This hypothesis was based on other research showing that relationship-specific measures tend to map more closely onto relationship outcomes than more general, dispositional measures of the same construct (e.g., Sprecher & Fehr, 2011).

**Method**

**Participants and procedure**

Students (*n* = 582) from a large Midwestern US university completed a survey about a breakup. They were recruited either from a social science class as an optional in-class activity (*n* = 460) or from the psychology participant pool at the same university (*n* = 122). From this larger sample, we selected those who reported on a breakup that was either self-initiated or mutually initiated (eliminated were 103 participants who reported on a hypothetical breakup or did not respond to this question; an additional 136 participants who reported that their breakup was characterized by greater partner than own initiation or did not respond to this question; and 8 other participants who reported on
the ending of a marriage\(^1\). The final sample consisted of 335 participants (70.7% female) with a mean age of 20.88 (SD = 2.65). Of this final sample, 25.4% reported that the relationship (before the breakup) was casual dating, 50.7% said seriously dating, 21.8% chose the option “very seriously dating (had discussed marriage),” 3 participants (0.9%) reported being engaged, and 4 participants (1.2%) selected “other.” Participants had been in the relationship for an average of 16.60 months (SD = 14.16).

**Measures**

*Compassionate love.* Two forms of the Sprecher and Fehr (2005) 21-item Compassionate Love Scale (CLS) were administered. One was the specific-other version (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005, Study 3). Specifically, participants were directed to think of their ex-partner when the relationship was at its peak. Second, we included the humanity version of the CLS, in which the items refer to strangers or all of humanity. One of the two forms of the CLS appeared early in the questionnaire, and the other form appeared later in the survey. The order of the two versions of the survey was counterbalanced; the order did not affect the CLS. Participants were asked to respond to each item on a 7-point response scale that included the anchors, 1 = *not at all true*; 4 = *somewhat true*; and 7 = *very true*. Cronbach’s \( \alpha \) was .95 for the close other version and .94 for the humanity version.

**Questions about the breakup**

*Preliminary questions about the breakup.* For actual breakups,\(^2\) questions were asked about the relationship stage at its peak and how long the relationship had lasted. Participants were also asked who took the first steps to initiate the breakup. A 7-point response scale was provided with the anchors, 1 = *I did*; 4 = *we both did*; and 7 = *my partner did*. As noted above, we eliminated the participants who selected a response above 4 in the direction of *my partner did* because our focus was on those who initiated a breakup and therefore were likely to have engaged in breakup strategies. Of the participants included in the sample, 50.1% reported that they had completely initiated the breakup (a score of 1), 30.7% reported that they had mostly initiated the breakup (a score of 2 or 3), and 19.1% said it was a mutual breakup (a score of 4 on the 7-point response scale).

*Breakup strategies.* Participants were instructed to rate each of 47 breakup strategies on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *not at all characteristic of my breakup* to 7 = *extremely characteristic of my breakup*. The breakup strategy items were taken from Sprecher et al. (2010), which included 40 items adapted from Baxter (1982) and 7 additional items, most of which referred to breakup strategies that can be used over the Internet or through other forms of distant communication (e.g., “Used e-mail or instant messenger to tell my partner how I felt.”). Scales for the present study were created based on the factor loadings of the items from the original two studies of Baxter (1982), Study 2 data from Sprecher et al. (2010), and the data from this study.\(^3\) The *avoidance/withdrawal* subscale consisted of 9 items (e.g., “I avoided contact with my partner as much as possible.”), \( \alpha = .88 \). The *manipulation* subscale consisted of 11 items (e.g., “I became unpleasant to my partner in the hopes that
s/he would make the first move’’), $\alpha = .79$. The third subscale, positive tone, contained 7 items (e.g., “I avoided hurting my partner’s feelings at all costs.”); $\alpha = .80$. The fourth subscale (openness) had 3 items (e.g., “I openly expressed to my partner my desire to breakup”); $\alpha = .67$. In addition, a fifth subscale consisted of 3 distant communication items (e.g., “inform my partner of my feelings in an e-mail”); $\alpha = .83$.

A score was created for each participant that reflected the degree to which compassionate strategies were used to end the relationship overall (the compassion of breakup strategies used). To create this score, the standardized mean compassion score for each strategy obtained from Study 1 of Sprecher et al. (2010) was first multiplied by the participant’s (from this study) reported use of the strategy. Then, the mean of these scores was calculated; this total score represented the overall degree of compassion of the breakup strategies used by a participant. The higher the score, the more compassionate the strategies, regardless of the specific type of strategy.

**Results**

**Descriptives**

The participants’ mean ($M$) score on the specific-other version of the CLS (i.e., for the partner when the relationship was at its peak) was 5.66 ($SD = .98$). This score was significantly higher than the mean score for the humanity version of the CLS ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.01$), paired $t(330) = 15.52, p < .001$. The two scale scores were positively correlated, $r(331) = .19, p < .001$, although the moderate association indicates that they are not identical compassionate love orientations. A repeated measures analysis indicated a significant difference in the use of the breakup strategies, Wilks’ $\lambda = .18, F(4, 327) = 373.86, p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .82$. From most to least common, the strategies used were openness ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.39$), positive tone ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.31$), avoidance/withdrawal ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.44$), manipulation ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.03$), and distant communication ($M = 1.72$, $SD = 1.41$). Some of the most commonly used strategies to end the relationship (e.g., “I verbally explained to my partner in person my reasons for desiring to break up,” “I told my partner that I didn’t regret the time we had spent together in the relationship”) were also strategies that had been rated as the most compassionate ways to end relationships by an independent sample (Sprecher et al., 2010).

**Test of hypotheses: Compassionate love and breakup strategies**

As hypothesized (H1A & H1B), scores on the CLS-Partner were found to be associated positively with openness and positive tone strategies, and associated negatively with avoidance/withdrawal and distant communication strategies (Table 1). A negative correlation between CLS-Partner and the manipulation strategy also approached significance. In addition, and in support of H1C, the correlation between CLS-Partner and the overall compassion level of the breakup strategies was .32 ($p < .001$), indicating that the more compassionate love the participants reported for their partner (at the relationship’s peak), the greater likelihood that they used strategies to end the relationship that were judged as compassionate by a separate sample (Sprecher et al., 2010; Study 1).
In support of H2A and H2B, CLS-Humanity was associated positively (and significantly) with openness and positive tone strategies and associated negatively with the manipulation strategy; in addition, a near-significant negative correlation was found between CLS-Humanity and the distant communication strategy (Table 1). In addition, CLS-Humanity was positively correlated with the overall degree to which compassionate breakup strategies were used, \( r = .18, p < .01 \), in support of H1C.

A multiple regression was conducted, with the two compassionate love scores as predictors and the overall compassionate score of the breakup strategies as the dependent variable. The results indicated that each compassionate love orientation explained unique variance in the compassion score of the breakup strategies used, \( \beta = .30, p < .001 \) for CLS-Partner, and \( \beta = .12, p = .02 \), for CLS-Humanity; total \( R^2 = .12, F(2, 327) = 21.76, p < .001 \). CLS-Partner was the stronger predictor of compassionate breakup strategies, as predicted by H3.

### Discussion

Although some breakups are mutual, most are nonmutual, initiated more by one partner than the other (e.g., Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976). The dissolution process is often difficult and distressing, especially for the person who is broken up with (e.g., Sprecher, 1994). Various strategies are used to end relationships (e.g., Baxter, 1982), and these vary on a number of dimensions including the degree of orientation toward the other. Related to the other-oriented dimension, strategies also differ in the degree to which they are compassionate or caring for the other during this stressful time. Building on Baxter’s (1982) typology, a previous study (Sprecher et al., 2010) found that the strategies that could be classified as positive tone or openness were perceived to be more compassionate than others (e.g., avoidance/withdrawal). These same strategies, in other research, have been found to be associated with fewer negative outcomes. For example, Collins and Gillath (2012; Study 2) found that the use of direct strategies (positive tone, openness) was associated with the greater likelihood of maintaining a friendship with a former dating partner after the breakup.

### Table 1. Associations of compassionate love (partner and humanity) with breakup strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscales for breakup strategies</th>
<th>Openness</th>
<th>Positive tone</th>
<th>Manipulation</th>
<th>Avoidance/withdrawal</th>
<th>Distant communication</th>
<th>Overall compassion of breakup strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compassionate love scores</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL for partner</td>
<td>.21***</td>
<td>.25***</td>
<td>-.10(^f)</td>
<td>-.22***</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
<td>.32***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CL for humanity</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>-.11*</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.10(^f)</td>
<td>.18**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^f\) \( p < .10 \); \(^*\) \( p < .05 \); \(^**\) \( p < .01 \), \(^***\) \( p < .001 \).

*To create this score, the standardized mean compassion score for each strategy taken from Sprecher et al. (2010; Study 1) was first multiplied by the participant’s (from this study) reported use of the strategy.
Because some strategies are more caring and compassionate (Sprecher et al., 2010) and less likely to lead to negative outcomes (Collins & Gillath, 2012) than others, it is important to identify the factors that predict the use of such strategies. In a past study, Sprecher et al. (2010; Study 2) found that participants’ scores on the specific-other version of the CLS (Sprecher & Fehr, 2005) were associated with the likelihood of choosing strategies that were more compassionate in response to a hypothetical breakup scenario. The present study expanded this research by considering how young adults’ compassionate love, as recalled for their ex-partner, was associated with actual use of breakup strategies.

As hypothesized, greater compassionate love for the partner (recalled when the relationship was at its peak) was associated with the greater use of openness and positive tone breakup strategies as well as with the lesser use of the indirect strategies, avoidance/withdrawal and distant communication. In addition, compassionate love for the partner was associated positively with a score that represented the overall compassion level of the breakup strategies used. Therefore, the results indicated that compassionate love for a partner has the potential to be a factor in predicting the outcome of actual breakups.

Scores on the CLS-Humanity also were associated positively with the use of openness and positive tone breakup strategies and with the overall compassion of the breakup strategies used; and negatively associated with the use of the manipulation strategy. Compassionate love for humanity is a measure of the degree to which people’s propensity to experience compassionate love (e.g., caring, concern) for anyone or all of humanity, and therefore may be more independent of the quality of the relationship and more dispositional in nature. A person who scores high on the propensity to experience compassionate love (for another or for all of humanity) likely would want to end a relationship in ways that minimize the amount of harm to the other. As noted by Sprecher et al. (2010), the empathy-altruism model (e.g., Batson, 2002) is relevant to understanding how a compassionate person (vs. a less compassionate person) would choose strategies to end a relationship. According to this model and research to support it, people who are empathic and compassionate to a person in need will not withdraw or escape from the situation if there is an opportunity to help and relieve the other’s distress. Conversely, people who are less empathic will focus on reducing their own personal distress, and if there is an opportunity to escape rather than help, they are more likely to choose the easy option. In a similar way, when ending a relationship, the person who desires to disengage can either choose to be selfish and escape quickly (e.g., avoid/withdraw, manipulate indirectly) or take the time to be thoughtful toward the partner who is likely to be in distress. As predicted, however, CLS-Humanity was a weaker predictor of compassionate breakup strategies than was CLS-Partner. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Sprecher & Fehr, 2011), more proximal and relationship-specific variables more strongly predict relationship outcomes than more distal and disposition variables.

**Strengths, limitations, and future directions**

This study goes beyond past research on compassionate love and breakup strategies, which focused on individuals’ reactions to hypothetical breakup scenarios (Sprecher et al., 2010) by asking people about their actual breakups. A limitation of the present...
study, however, is that memories about past events and feelings can be distorted based on current assessments. Although a longitudinal study would be challenging to conduct, future researchers should consider beginning with a sample of people in ongoing relationships, measure their compassionate love for each other and other possible predictors of breakup strategies at various times, and then follow them over time to obtain enough pairs that experience a breakup. If a dyadic sample is obtained, both partners’ perspectives on the breakup strategies could also be considered, including recipients’ reactions to compassionate versus less compassionate breakup strategies. Even more useful would be a diary study, in which participants who are in the process of ending a relationship are asked to respond to daily surveys about the process as it unfolds.

We also suggest that the findings from this study and other research on breakup strategies be used for interventions and educational programs that could educate adolescents and young adults about compassionate and caring ways to end relationships. Those who have distressing breakups are at risk for depression and even suicide (e.g., Monroe, Rhode, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999). Although people are often encouraged to be compassionate toward strangers in need, perhaps the most important context for being compassionate is when one is ending a relationship, particularly with someone who does not want the relationship to end and may not have forecasted its demise.

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Notes
1. The strategies used to end a marriage are likely to be more complex (e.g., requiring legal proceedings and extended over a longer period of time) than those used to end a nonmarital, dating relationship.
2. Participants were given the option of responding to a “hypothetical breakup” if they had not initiated an actual relationship dissolution and were asked to indicate if responses were to an actual or hypothetical breakup (only those who responded about an actual breakup were included in the analyses, as noted). Some descriptive questions about the breakup only applied to those who responded about an actual breakup.
3. We included an item in a particular factor if it loaded .40 or above on the factor in a minimum of two of the four samples.

References


