"When It's Good It's Great, but When It's Bad It's Awful": The Relationship between Compassionate Goals and Breakup Distress

THESIS

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Abstract

One of the most devastating human experiences that we share is the loss of a romantic relationship. We are motivated to create and maintain lasting bonds, however not all relationships last (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). When a breakup occurs, people report negative affect and symptoms of depression, such as intrusive thoughts and sleep disturbance (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2009). Research has examined predictors of breakup distress, including attachment style and relationship factors such as love and commitment. Interpersonal goals have received little attention in this literature.

The present research explores the effect of compassionate goals, interpersonal motivations with an intent to support and care for others, on breakup distress. Three studies were designed to test whether holding compassionate goals increased or decreased breakup distress and explored several potential mechanisms behind this relationship. Study 1 provided initial insight into the effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress after an actual breakup, specifically revealing a positive association between the variables. Communication amount and satisfaction were tested as mediators to understand this association. Studies 2 and 3 examined compassionate goals and other relationship factors for individuals currently involved in a romantic relationship by employing a hypothetical breakup scenario. Specifically, Study 2 examined the mediating role of self-expansion pre-breakup and contraction of self post-breakup on the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress. Study 3 extended the model
proposed in Study 2 by including support given and support received as mediators of the path between compassionate goals and self-expansion. A final path model revealed a significant indirect path from compassionate goals to breakup distress with support given, support received, self-expansion, and contraction of the self-concept as mediators. These findings suggest that compassionate goals increase positive outcomes during an intact relationship, but these positive outcomes ultimately increase the distress experienced when a breakup occurs.
Dedicated to my greatest inspiration, my father, Bennie Haynes Jr.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

One of the most significant negative events that people experience during their lifetime is the breakup of a romantic relationship. Breakups have been linked with various negative outcomes such as depressive symptoms, poor academic performance, and even suicide attempts (Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewisohn, 1999; Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2009; Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2013; Donald, Dower, Correa-Velez, & Jones, 2006). Research has examined predictors of breakup distress, looking at relationship factors such as love, commitment, and positive illusions, as well as individual difference variables such as attachment style and self-esteem (for a review and meta-analysis see: Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010). Interpersonal goals, specifically compassionate goals, have not been examined in the context of a breakup. The aim of the studies in this package is to examine the connection between compassionate goals and breakup distress, specifically the indirect link between these two variables through mechanisms such as communication, self-expansion and contraction, and support.

Breakups have many negative consequences. The dissolution of a romantic relationship is a prospective risk factor for the first onset of Major Depressive Disorder (Monroe et al., 1999). In a sample of adolescents, newly diagnosed depressed individuals were more likely to report the occurrence of a breakup within the past year. In a sample
of young adults in Australia, the occurrence of a breakup was a major risk factor in medically serious (resulting in hospitalization) suicide attempts (Donald, Dower, Correa-Velez, & Jones, 2006). However, not all individuals who experience a breakup will experience these extreme outcomes. Although a breakup is not necessarily predictive of a diagnosis of depression, breakups within clinically healthy populations have been associated with depressive symptoms. In a study of college students who had a recent breakup, those who experienced greater distress reported more intrusive thoughts, sleep disturbance, and higher levels of anxiety (Field et al., 2009). These symptoms are similar to those exhibited during depression and bereavement (Field, 2011), suggesting the sense of loss experienced when a romantic relationship ends. Although most people report some level of distress following relationship dissolution, some people suffer more or exhibit greater breakup distress than others. It is important to understand the antecedents of a breakup to better distinguish who is more susceptible to experiencing greater breakup distress.

One predictor of greater breakup distress is who initiated the breakup; people whose partner initiated the breakup sometimes feel “dumped” (Sprecher, 1994; Sprecher, Felmless, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). Being dumped is associated with higher breakup distress (Field et al., 2009). Dumped individuals typically feel betrayed, as if the breakup came as a huge, surprising blow. Those who are dumped perceive their relationship as highly satisfying and then are left surprised with the initiation of the breakup by their partner. Consistent with this idea, people who report greater satisfaction with their relationship prior to the breakup experience the most distress when the relationship ends.
(Field et al., 2009). Following the surprising breakup, those who report higher breakup distress exhibit greater negative emotions, heavier drinking, and disorganized behavior (Field et al., 2013). This is not to say that those who initiate a breakup do not experience negative affect as well. Research has shown that those who initiate a breakup can experience guilt and sadness (Sbarra, 2006; Sbarra & Emery, 2005; Vaughan, 1986). Unfortunately, breakup initiator status cannot be used to predict breakup distress until after the relationship has ended. The present research focused primarily on identifying people prior to a breakup who are at risk for experiencing the greatest breakup distress.

Personality and individual difference risk factors for breakup distress can be identified prior to a breakup. Attachment insecurity has been linked with greater breakup distress and poorer recovery. Specifically, anxious attachment is associated with use of alcohol as a coping mechanism, rumination over the lost partner and relationship, and greater physical and emotional distress (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003). Also, anxiously attached individuals report less emotional adjustment after the breakup (Fagundes, 2012). Insecure attachment styles have received the most attention in predicting breakup distress. Does this suggest that those who are more secure in relationships will always fare better in the context of a breakup? It might be beneficial to examine how breakups affect those who are thought to fare better in relationships.

Factors that promote stronger, better quality relationships have been associated with greater breakup distress. Relational factors, e.g. love, are the strongest predictors of relationship stay-leave behavior and have also been examined as predictors of breakup distress (Le et al., 2010). People who feel closer to a partner and have been in the
relationship longer report greater intensity of emotional distress following a breakup (Simpson, 1987). This seems intuitive in that losing a relationship that has lasted for a long time should be more distressing than losing a relationship that is shorter and potentially less meaningful. Greater satisfaction and commitment within a relationship also predict greater breakup distress (Sprecher et al., 1998). For people who were currently single, retrospective reports of relationship quality were positively associated with suffering due to separation from a partner (Imhoff & Banse, 2011). Losing a good quality relationship is painful, especially when one has not yet moved on and become involved in a new relationship.

To summarize, breakup initiator status, attachment styles, and relational factors have been examined as moderate to strong predictors of breakup distress. Initiator status as a predictor can only be identified after the breakup has occurred. Attachment styles can be identified prior to a breakup, however research has focused primarily on people high in anxiety. It is unclear how people who are chronically less anxious are affected by a breakup. Relational factors such as love and commitment are the strongest predictors of stay-leave behavior in a relationship. That is, those who experience greater love and commitment are less likely to end a relationship. However, these same individuals experience more distress when the relationship actually does end (Simpson, 1987). In the past decade, current research has neglected how motivational factors that are beneficial during a relationship, i.e. interpersonal goals, can have detrimental effects for the self after a relationship ends. Interpersonal goals have many benefits for intact relationships, however it is unclear how these goals might affect the self after a breakup. Can our
interpersonal goals towards a romantic partner predict the distress we experience when we lose that partner? In the current studies, I examined compassionate goals as a predictor of breakup distress.

**Compassionate Goals**

Compassionate goals are self-transcending motivations with an intent to support and care for others (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). These interpersonal goals foster a supportive environment for the self and others (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). Holding compassionate goals provides an opportunity to genuinely create relationships in which the focus is not solely on one’s own needs but the needs of both people in the relationship. That is, one’s needs are met through cooperation with others (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). People who have compassionate goals also hold nonzero-sum beliefs, that is the belief that a situation can benefit both people and another’s gain is not necessarily a loss to the self (Crocker & Canevello, 2008).

Compassionate goals are associated with many positive outcomes that are beneficial for the self and one’s partner in close relationships. Compassionate goals predicted cooperative feelings, which in turn predicted emotional clarity (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). That is, through the promotion of cooperation, compassionate goals predicted loving and connectedness feelings. Compassionate goals also positively predicted changes in responsiveness, which in turn predict changes in perception of responsiveness, which in turn leads to changes in relationship quality (Canevello & Crocker, 2010). Compassionate goals were positively correlated with chronic closeness and interpersonal trust (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Past literature examined
compassionate goals in the context of roommate relationships and friendships. The current set of studies will examine compassionate goals within romantic relationships, specifically exploring how compassionate goals can affect relationship factors that influence breakup distress.

Compassionate goals as a predictor of breakup distress has not been empirically tested, however two opposing predictions can be made about this association. First, having compassionate goals may reduce breakup distress, that is, when people have compassionate goals towards a (former) romantic partner, they may feel less distressed about the breakup. Within the context of roommate relationships, compassionate goals predicted decreases in distress over the course of a semester (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). Having compassionate goals may also buffer against the distress that comes with a romantic relationship. Having compassionate goals predicts greater responsiveness to a close other and a better quality relationship (Canevello, & Crocker, 2010). Responsiveness to an ex-partner might lead to a better quality relationship, thus leading to less distress. Alternatively, compassionate goals may predict an increase in breakup distress. As previously mentioned, having compassionate goals is associated with greater feelings of connectedness, trust, and love. Greater closeness to and love for a partner prior to a breakup is associated with greater distress and worse adjustment to a breakup (Simpson, 1987; Sprecher et al., 1998). Losing someone that one feels strongly connected to, trusts, and loves may lead to greater breakup distress.

The two potential predictions seem to operate from a similar source specific to compassionate goals – caring about the partner with an intent to be supportive. The first
prediction of a negative association between the two variables suggests that people with compassionate goals find that being responsive to an ex-partner leads to a better quality friendship which reduces distress about the breakup. The second prediction of a positive association between the variables suggests that people with compassionate goals are so emotionally invested in their partners that breakups are more distressing. The present studies examine relationship processes that might account for association between compassionate goals and breakup distress; communication, expansion and contraction of the self, and giving and receiving support.

Communication

Loss of intimacy, which can be conceptualized as poor communication and other components of reduced closeness, is a common reason for a breakup (Field et al., 2010). Poor communication, post-breakup, can negatively affect the self. Communication with an ex-partner is prevalent within the college population (Schneider & Kenny, 2000). This may be due to living in close proximity on college campuses or the ease of connection with social media. Continued contact with a partner after a breakup is negatively associated with life satisfaction (Rhoades, Kamp Dush, Atkins, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). That is, those who communicate with an ex-partner feel less satisfied with their lives. Communicating with an ex-partner may be a reminder of what one is missing or how one’s life is discrepant with their ideal.

To better understand why communicating with an ex-partner is distressing, it might be important to understand the effect the communication content has on the individual. If the content of the communication is maladaptive or unsatisfying, this may
lead to greater distress. Destructive communication patterns (e.g. withdrawing or disengaging from discussion when a problem occurs within the relationship) have been associated with increased depressive symptoms, whereas constructive communication patterns (e.g. both members of the relationship try to discuss problems when they occur) have been associated with decreased depressive symptoms (Givertz & Safford, 2011). Destructive communication patterns are also negatively associated with perceived relationship quality, whereas constructive communication patterns are positively associated with relationship quality (Givertz & Safford, 2011). Mason, Sbarra, Bryan, and Lee (2012) examined the circumstances in which communication can be maladaptive, specifically for ex-partners; for those who communicated with an ex-partner, greater acceptance of the breakup was associated with better psychological adjustment (e.g. less emotional intrusion). That is, communication with an ex-partner may only be adaptive when one has truly moved on from the breakup. For people who still hold onto the lost partner, longing to be reunited, communication might increase distress related to that breakup.

Compassionate goals predict greater responsiveness to a partner and feelings of empathy and this may facilitate increased communication with an ex-partner, perhaps in the form of checking up on an ex-partner after the breakup. Having compassionate goals may lead an individual to hold on to a partner even after the relationship has dissolved. Study 1 explored communication as a mediator of the association between compassionate goals towards an ex-partner and the current level of distress felt about the breakup.

**Self-Expansion Theory**
Individuals expand their self-concepts when entering a new relationship to increase self-efficacy (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995). A partner’s resources are incorporated into one’s own sense of self (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991; Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, Mashek, Lewandowski, Wright, & Aron, 2004). These resources can consist of personality traits, experiences, memories, skills, abilities, and tangible resources. When a breakup occurs, all of the resources that were acquired during the relationship are now lost and one is left with a less clear, shattered sense of self (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). This loss of resources and rapid contraction of the self-concept is proposed as a predictor of breakup distress (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). Self-expansion during a relationship predicted greater contraction after a breakup, that is, the more the self-concept expands during the relationship, the more it will contract with the loss of that relationship (Lewandoski et al., 2006).

Research has not examined the path from expansion to distress with contraction as a mediator. Nor have compassionate goals as a predictor of expansion been examined. People with compassionate goals may create an environment that is more conducive to self-expansion. Experimental manipulations of self-disclosure (e.g. sharing of experiences and memories) shift reports of self-expansion for newly-acquainted participants using the same measures used in the current studies (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997). When people create supportive environments with compassionate goals, their partners may be more willing to share nontangible resources (e.g. memories and experiences), resulting in expanded self-concepts. In Study 2, I
propose that compassionate goals positively predict self-expansion, which predicts contraction post-breakup, leading to greater breakup distress.

**Support Given and Received**

Giving and receiving support might also explain associations between compassionate goals and breakup distress. Research has examined the role of giving and receiving support on well-being and other positive outcomes. For example, giving and receiving of autonomy support, or offering the opportunity for self-initiation and choice by being responsive to that partner, had unique effects on needs satisfaction and relationship quality (Deci, La Guardia, Moller, Scheiner, & Ryan, 2006). Receiving support after a breakup has also been examined. Social connectedness, a feeling of receiving support from the social environment as a whole rather than from a specific relationship, negatively predicted depressive symptoms following a breakup (Moller, Fouladi, McCarthy, & Hatch, 2003). In a distinct but similar context, providing support to others after losing a spouse has been associated with reduced depressive symptoms in a sample of bereaved older adults (Brown, Brown, House, & Smith, 2008).

Support provided and/or received prior to a breakup has not been examined as a predictor of post-dissolution distress. In a sample of adolescents, social support from parents at time 1 was associated with less depressive symptoms at time 2, 6 months later (Zimmerman, Ramirez-Valles, Zapert, & Maton, 2000). In a similar sample, lower support from peers and family was associated with subsequent depressive symptoms (Auerbach, Bigda-Peyton, Eberhart, Webb, & Ho, 2011). This suggests that support earlier in a relationship affects future distress. Compassionate goals over the course of 10
weeks positively predicted support received from a friend; this path was attenuated by the friend’s report of support received and given in return (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). That is, when people have compassionate goals they create an environment in which their partner feels supported and gives support in return. Support given to a partner, controlling for the support received from that partner, has been shown to mediate the relationship between compassionate goals and distress within roommate relationships (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). Therefore, in Study 3, I propose that support pre-dissolution mediates the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress.

Overview of the Current Studies

The current set of studies explore the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress, specifically whether compassionate goals predict more or less distress following a breakup. They also explore three relationship processes that might account for that association, in three path models. Two possibilities about the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress were derived from previous research. Study 1 set out to test this association in a sample of individuals who had recently experienced a breakup, and also explore whether communication accounts for this association. Studies 2 and 3 test whether compassionate goals predict breakup distress for individuals who hypothetically thought about breaking up with a current romantic partner. Study 2 examined whether self-expansion and contraction could account for this association. I hypothesized that compassionate goals would predict greater expansion, which would lead to greater contraction, which in turn would predict greater distress. Study 3 examined the role of support as the mechanism accounting for the association.
between compassionate goals and self-expansion. I hypothesized that compassionate goals would predict greater support given and received, and this would lead to greater self-expansion. The full path model was tested in Study 3. That is, Study 3 tested the indirect path from compassionate goals to distress with support, self-expansion, and contraction as mediators.
Chapter 2: Study 1

Within the context of roommate relationships, people with compassionate goals experience positive outcomes, such as less depressive symptoms, reduced anxiety, and feelings of love, empathy, and connection (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). Research has not yet established how having compassionate goals affects how people feel following the breakup of a relationship. Having compassionate goals towards an ex-partner might predict less breakup distress. As previously mentioned, compassionate goals predict greater responsiveness from a close other leading to better relationship quality (Canevello & Crocker, 2010). Therefore, people with compassionate goals may have better, more responsive relationships with ex-partners and thus feel less distressed about the breakup. Alternatively, having compassionate goals might predict greater distress because compassionate goals are linked to greater loving feelings and past research has shown that exhibiting greater love towards an ex-partner is associated with greater sadness following a breakup (Sbarra & Emery, 2005).

In Study 1, I sought to understand the relationship between compassionate goals and breakup distress in an exploratory study. Specifically, we sought to address several questions: (a) Do compassionate goals relate to distress experienced following a breakup? (b) If so, is the association positive or negative? and (c) Does communication with an ex-partner mediate the relationship between compassionate goals and breakup distress?
Study 1 examined current compassionate goals towards an ex-partner following a breakup and current distress about the breakup.

**Method**

**Participants**

One hundred thirty-seven undergraduate students (63 males) at The Ohio State University participated in exchange for course credit in their introductory psychology course. To be eligible, participants must have experienced a breakup of a romantic relationship within the past 3 years. Participants’ mean age was 20.40 (SD = 12.04). A majority of participants self-reported as Caucasian (76.6 %), followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (10.9%), Black/African-American (10.2%), Hispanic/Latino (2.2%), and other (3.2%). When asked to indicate how long ago the breakup occurred, 30.7 % of participants reported that the breakup occurred within the past 6 months, followed by 1-2 years ago (27%), 6 months to 1 year ago (26.3%), and 2-3 years ago (16.1%).

**Procedure**

Participants were scheduled in groups of 10 to 20. A research assistant asked participants to sit at any computer with a consent form on the screen. The research assistant went over the consent form that participants viewed on their screen, answered any questions that were asked and then participants were allowed to continue to the survey. All measures in this study were presented to the participants in the form of an online survey. When participants had completed the survey, the research assistant debriefed them.

**Measures**
Participants completed an online questionnaire that assessed compassionate goals, self-image goals, communication, and breakup distress. Participants were also asked to provide demographic information about themselves (i.e. age, gender, race, relationship status, and sexual orientation), as well as descriptive information about their relationship with an ex-partner (e.g. length of relationship, time since breakup, closeness, and previous history with ex-partner). Additional measures not germane to the goals of the present study were also included.

**Compassionate Goals and Self-Image Goals.** Compassionate goals and self-image goals were assessed by an adapted version of the original 13-item scale developed by Crocker & Canevello (2008). Validity and reliability have been established for this scale. The current study used a shortened, 16-item version of the scale in which each question was adapted to reference the current relationship with an ex-partner. All items were prompted with the phrase, “In my CURRENT relationship with my ex-partner, I want/try to…” Some sample items for the compassionate goals subscale are “have compassion for my ex-partner's mistakes and weaknesses” and “avoid neglecting my relationship with my ex-partner.” Some sample items for the self-image goals subscale are “get my ex-partner to do things my way” and “avoid revealing my shortcomings or vulnerabilities.” In the current study, the scales for compassionate goals and self-image goals demonstrated high internal consistency, $\alpha = .93$ & $\alpha = .80$, respectively.

**Breakup Distress.** The dependent variable breakup distress was assessed by a single item, “Currently, how upset are you about the breakup?” measured on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) not at all to (5) extremely.
**Communication.** Two questions were used to assess different aspects of communication with an ex-partner. The first assessed the amount of communication participants currently have with an ex-partner: “Currently, how often are you in contact with your former partner? (Contact includes face to face conversations as well as communication via phone conversations, text messaging, email, social networking, etc).” Participants responded on a scale ranging from (1) never to (7) daily. The second item referred to satisfaction with the communication with an ex-partner: “How satisfied are you with the amount and quality of contact you currently have with your former partner?” rated on a scale ranging from (1) very dissatisfied to (6) very satisfied. The two communication items were uncorrelated, \( r(136) = .04, p = .67 \).

**Results**

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations among the variables of interest in Study 1. Zero-order correlations revealed a positive association between compassionate goals and breakup distress, \( r(136) = .25, p < .01 \), suggesting that the more compassionate goals one has towards an ex-partner, the greater breakup distress one will experience.

Regression analyses were conducted to test the relationship between compassionate goals and breakup distress. Compassionate goals were highly correlated with self-image goals, so I controlled for self-image goals in all analyses to examine the unique effects of compassionate goals.

Regression analyses were conducted to test the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress with communication amount and
communication satisfaction as mediators. Compassionate goals positively predicted communication amount, $\beta = .49$, $t(130) = 5.70$, $p < .001$. Having compassionate goals towards an ex-partner predicted more communication with an ex-partner. Compassionate goals negatively predicted communication satisfaction, $\beta = -.20$, $t(130) = -2.15$, $p < .05$. Communication amount and communication satisfaction were entered simultaneously into the regression equation to examine the unique effects of each on breakup distress.

Controlling for compassionate goals, communication amount positively predicted breakup distress, $\beta = .27$, $t(128) = 3.33$, $p < .001$, and communication satisfaction negatively predicted breakup distress, $\beta = -.47$, $t(128) = -6.19$, $p < .001$. Greater communication with an ex-partner led to greater breakup distress. Also, the less satisfied one was with the communication, the more distress experienced. Analyses revealed a marginally significant relationship, $\beta = .15$, $t(133) = 1.68$, $p < .10$, such that compassionate goals positively predicted breakup distress. When both communication variables were entered as mediators, the effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress was no longer marginally significant, $\beta = -.07$, $t(128) = -.82$, $p = .41$. The path model with standardized regression coefficients is presented in Figure 1. Next, the statistical significance of this indirect effect was tested.

A non-parametric bootstrapping approach (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) was used to assess the mediating role of communication amount and communication satisfaction. Unstandardized indirect effects were computed for each of the 10,000 bootstrapped samples using a 95% confidence interval. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect with communication amount as a mediator was .13 (CI [.05, .24]). The confidence
interval did not include zero, which suggests that the indirect effect was statistically significant. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect with communication satisfaction as a mediator was .09 (CI [.01, .20]). The confidence interval did not include zero, which suggests that the indirect effect was statistically significant.

**Discussion**

Study 1 assessed the association between compassionate goals towards an ex-partner and the distress experienced following the breakup with that partner. The compassionate goals literature has linked having compassionate goals with less depressive symptoms and overall more positive well-being (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). However, this link has been made for roommate relationships and has not examined the role of compassionate goals for romantic partners, and more specifically ex-partners. Past research has found that reaching out to an ex-partner led to more feelings of sadness (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Analyses revealed that compassionate goals towards an ex-partner predict more breakup distress.

I also explored potential mechanisms accounting for this association. Two communication variables, amount of communication and satisfaction with communication with an ex-partner, were examined as creating an indirect path from compassionate goals to breakup distress. Specifically, I found that the more compassionate goals participants had, the more they communicated with an ex-partner, but that communication was not particularly satisfying. The amount and dissatisfaction with communicating with an ex-partner is associated with greater distress.
These findings are consistent with past research suggesting that communicating with an ex-partner leads to worse outcomes for the self (Rhoades et al., 2011). Furthermore, while compassionate goals towards a roommate have many beneficial effects for the self, compassionate goals towards an ex-partner are potentially maladaptive, especially when people have compassionate goals and communicate with an ex-partner. Trying to be supportive and reaching out to an ex-partner who is no longer responsive or present in one’s life may lead people with compassionate goals to feel dissatisfied and unfulfilled because they no longer can offer support and compassion to the partner. This loss of opportunity to support one’s partner and be compassionate may increase the individual’s distress. This loss may be particularly painful for those with compassionate goals because these are the individuals who want to and/or try to continue to be supportive and compassionate.

To test these ideas, Study 2 further examined the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress, drawing on self-expansion theory. Self-expansion theory provides insight into how the self is affected by the beginning and ending of a relationship, thus it might provide insight into why compassionate goals predict distress following the loss of a romantic partner.

There were several limitations of Study 1 that I attempted to address with Study 2. Study 1 asked participants who had experienced a breakup within the past 3 years to report on their current compassionate goals towards an ex-partner. Study 2 focused on compassionate goals towards a current romantic partner. In Study 1, participants were asked to indicate how long ago the breakup occurred which ranged from less than 6
months to 3 years ago. A majority of the breakups occurred more than 6 months prior to the study. This may have had skewed the results, particularly because the mean for current breakup distress was very low. Most individuals reported not feeling distressed at all. To keep time since the breakup consistent for participants and to capture breakup distress at its peak intensity, in Study 2 I recruited participants who were currently in a romantic relationship and had them think about a hypothetical breakup. In the current study 63.5% of the sample reported having very little to no contact with an ex-partner. Therefore, communication may not be the best direct indication of why individuals feel distressed after a breakup. In Study 2, I used a theoretical model of breakup distress to understand the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress. Study 2 examined self-expansion and contraction as mediators of compassionate goals and breakup distress.
Chapter 3: Study 2

According to self-expansion theory, people are motivated to expand their self-concept within a relationship to increase self-efficacy (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995). Self-expansion is achieved through including one’s partner in the self. That is, by incorporating a partner’s resources into one’s self-concept, self-expansion occurs. Inclusion of other in self promotes closeness, relationship satisfaction, and many other relationship benefits (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995; Wiedler & Clark, 2011). Unfortunately, when relationships end, an opposite process of self-expansion occurs. When a breakup occurs, the self-concept that was expanded at the beginning of the relationship contracts. This rapid contraction of self produces greater breakup distress. It is not clear whether certain environments can promote greater self-expansion during a relationship. Compassionate goals create supportive environments that foster similar benefits as self-expansion within relationships (Crocker & Canevello, 2008).

Study 1 found that compassionate goals positively predicted breakup distress. Past literature conceptually proposes that self-expansion and contraction of self predict breakup distress, although this has not been empirically tested within the same study. Study 2 combines these two findings and tests them as a path model. I proposed that having compassionate goals would predict greater self-expansion within a relationship, which would predict greater contraction with the loss of that relationship, which would
ultimately predict greater breakup distress. Study 2 examined compassionate goals and self-expansion in a current relationship and contraction and distress following a hypothetical breakup.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Seventy-seven undergraduate students (49 females) at The Ohio State University participated in exchange for course credit in their introductory psychology course. To be eligible, participants must have currently been involved in a romantic relationship. The average length participants had been dating was 19.92 months ($SD = 19.04$). A majority of the participants self-reported as dating exclusively (76.6%), followed by dating casually (18.2%) and married (5.2%). Participants’ mean age was 19.82 (SD = 2.91). A majority of participants self-reported as Caucasian (76.6 %), followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (16.9%), Black/African-American (2.6%), Hispanic/Latino (1.3%), and other (2.6%).

**Procedure**

Participants were scheduled in groups of 4. A research assistant went over a consent form that participants would view on their screen, answered any questions that were asked and then escorted participants to individual cubicles with a computer with the online survey. Participants first completed measures about their current relationship, including demographics. Participants were asked to enter their current partner’s name on the first page of the survey. All measures were adapted to refer to the participant’s
partner, specifically. Next, participants completed measures of compassionate and self-image goals, self-expansion, and others measures that were not germane to the hypotheses of the current study. Next, participants were asked to imagine a hypothetical breakup scenario. They were given the following instructions:

Imagine that you and [Name of partner inserted here] are forced to break-up because [Name of partner inserted here] had to be sent to a distant and undisclosed location to take part in secret military intelligence operations. These operations are not dangerous to [Name of partner inserted here], but they will last a minimum of 10 years (possibly longer). Since [Name of partner inserted here] had been specially selected for participation when he or she was in kindergarten, [Name of partner inserted here] had no choice in deciding whether to go or not (and had forgotten about being selected). For this reason, you are not permitted to contact [Name of partner inserted here] for any reason, making the continuation of your relationship impossible. That is, you will have to end the relationship through no fault of [Name of partner inserted here] due to circumstances beyond anyone’s control. Visualize the time period one or two weeks after [Name of partner inserted here] has left. (That is, long enough after [Name of partner inserted here] is gone that you had gotten over the initial shock of it.)

This scenario was implemented by Lewandowski and colleagues (2006) to induce a mandatory breakup that would allow for contraction of the self for participants who were currently involved in romantic relationships. After imagining the breakup scenario
participants reported on contraction and breakup distress. When participants had completed the survey, they were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Materials

Compassionate and Self-image Goals. Compassionate goals and self-image goals were assessed with an adapted version of the 13-item scale developed by Crocker & Canevello (2008) as in Study 1. However, in the current study all items referred to participants’ current romantic partner. All items were prompted with the phrase, “Over the past two weeks, in my current relationship with [name of partner inserted here], I want/try to…” In the current study, the scales for compassionate goals and self-image goals demonstrated high internal consistency, $\alpha = .81$ and $\alpha = .83$, respectively.

Self-expansion. Self-expansion occurs through the process of inclusion of a close other in the self (Aron & Aron, 1986). Self-expansion was assessed with the inclusion of other in the self (IOS) scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). The scale consists of seven sets of circles that vary in their degree of overlap. The two circles within the set represent the self and one’s partner. Convergent, construct, and predictive validity have been established for this scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). Selecting a set of circles with greater overlap indicates greater self-expansion. In the current study, higher numbers indicate greater overlap between the circles, and therefore greater self-expansion.

Contraction of self. Contraction of the self was measured with a single item adapted from Lewandowski et al., 2006. This item was “To what extent do you feel that you lost a part of who you are, as a result of the breakup?” This item was assessed with a
7-point likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). Higher scores indicated greater contraction of the self.

**Breakup distress.** Breakup distress was measured with a 100-point slider rating scale in which participants were asked to rate how upset thinking about their relationship ending (the hypothetical breakup scenario) made them feel. Higher numbers indicated greater breakup distress.

**Results**

The zero-order correlations, means, and standard deviations for the variables of interest are presented in Table 2. I replicated Study 1’s finding that compassionate goals were positively correlated with breakup distress, $r(74) = .39, p < .001$. This association remained significant when controlling for gender and self-image goals, $r(72) = .45, p < .001$.

Regression analyses were conducted to test the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress with self-expansion and contraction as mediators. I hypothesized that compassionate goals would predict greater self-expansion which would lead to greater contraction. Greater contraction was hypothesized to predict greater breakup distress. Gender and self-image goals were controlled in every regression analysis. Compassionate goals positively predicted self-expansion, $\beta = .50, t(65) = 4.38, p < .001$. Those who reported having more compassionate goals also reported greater self-expansion within their relationship. Self-expansion, controlling for compassionate goals, positively predicted contraction, $\beta = .32, t(63) = 2.67, p < .01$. Greater expansion within a relationship predicted greater contraction after a (hypothetical) breakup.
Contraction, controlling for self-expansion and goals, positively predicted breakup distress, $\beta = .40$, $t(62) = 3.45$, $p < .001$. The more contraction participants experienced after an imagined breakup, the greater the breakup distress they experienced. The direct effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress, controlling for gender and self-image goals was $\beta = .47$, $F(72) = 4.30$, $p < .001$. When self-expansion and contraction were included as mediators, the effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress was reduced, $\beta = .14$, $t(62) = 1.10$, $p = .27$. The fit of the model was much stronger when self-expansion and contraction were included as mediators, adjusted $R^2 = .40$, than the direct association between compassionate goals and breakup distress, adjusted $R^2 = .20$. In other words, including self-expansion and contraction as mediators helped to explain more of the variance in the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress. The mediation model with standardized regression coefficients is presented in figure 2. Next, the statistical significance of this indirect effect was tested.

A non-parametric bootstrapping approach (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) was used to assess the mediating role of self-expansion and contraction of self. Unstandardized indirect effects were computed for each of the 10,000 bootstrapped samples using a 95% confidence interval. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect was 2.91 (CI [.81, 7.58]). The confidence interval did not include zero, which suggests that the indirect effect was statistically significant. The unstandardized direct effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress was 20.10 (CI [10.01, 30.19]). When including the mediators, the effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress was no longer significant; the effect dropped to 4.67 (CI [-5.65, 14.99]).
Discussion

Study 2 assessed the mediating role of self-expansion and contraction of self on the relationship between compassionate goals and breakup distress. As hypothesized, compassionate goals positively predicted self-expansion. Self-expansion positively predicted contraction of the self; this was a replication of past findings (Lewandowski et al., 2006). Contraction of the self positively predicted greater distress; this was also a replication of past findings using a different measure of contraction (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). Bootstrapping analyses were implemented to test the indirect effect through expansion and contraction. The direct relationship between compassionate goals and breakup distress was reduced to non-significance by including these two variables as mediators.

In summary, having compassionate goals in a romantic relationship predicts greater distress when that relationship ends, specifically because of the processes of expansion and contraction of the self-concept that occur. Study 2 extended the findings of Study 1 by providing support for a theoretical mechanism behind the relationship between compassionate goals and breakup distress. Study 1 found that compassionate goals towards an ex-partner was associated with current breakup distress. By using participants who were currently involved in a romantic relationship, I was able to provide support that compassionate goals held during an intact relationship can also predict distress following the loss of that relationship.

The current study provided theoretical mechanism for the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress, however several questions were still left
unanswered. Compassionate goals were associated with self-expansion, such that people who reported wanting or trying to be more supportive of their current partner also reported experiencing greater self-expansion in the relationship. From this study, it is not clear why compassionate goals predicted greater expansion. In Study 3, I hypothesized that support may mediate the relationship between compassionate goals and self-expansion. Next, Study 2 tested and provided support for a multiple mediator path model in a college sample, but it is not clear whether this model would explain breakup distress in an adult population. In Study 3, I attempted to replicate the path model tested in Study 2 using an adult population. Finally, Study 2 used an artificial, hypothetical breakup scenario to induce contraction of the self. This scenario has been used in past literature, however, I wanted to induce contraction of the self in a less fictional manner. That is, could I find the same support for this model using a different hypothetical breakup manipulation? In Study 3, instead of imagining an extremely artificial scenario, participants were prompted to simply imagine their relationship ending and reflect upon how they would feel, think, and behave. Study 3 addressed these three questions.
Chapter 4: Study 3

Compassionate goals are positively correlated with intrapersonal reports of giving and receiving support (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Having these goals create a supportive environment as evidenced through the effect of the self’s goals on a roommates’ reports of support given and received (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). In Study 2, compassionate goals predicted greater self-expansion within a relationship. The mechanism behind this association was explored in the current study. Specifically, support given to and received from a partner were examined as mediators of the connection between compassionate goals and self-expansion.

Study 3 sought to address several aims: (a) Could the path model with self-expansion and contraction as mediators of the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress be replicated in an adult sample using a simpler hypothetical breakup scenario? (b) Could the association between compassionate goals and self-expansion be explained through support given and support received? and (c) If so, could the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress be extended by including both support variables? Study 3 examined compassionate goals, support given and received, and self-expansion within a relationship and contraction and breakup distress following a hypothetical breakup scenario.

Methods

Participants
One hundred and seventeen adults (62 females) were recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk website to participate in exchange for $1.00. Amazon’s Mechanical Turk allows users to participate in research studies for monetary compensation. This study was open to users who resided in the U.S. and whose work had been approved for at least 95% of the previous tasks they had completed on the site. To be eligible to participate in the current study, participants must have currently been involved in a romantic relationship. The average length participants had been dating was 83.23 months ($SD = 94.34$). A majority of the participants self-reported their relationship status as married (41.9%) or dating exclusively (40.2%), followed by engaged (12.8%), and dating casually (5.2%). Participants’ mean age was 33.26 ($SD = 8.61$). A majority of participants self-reported as Caucasian (74.4%), followed by Asian/Pacific Islander (14.5%), Hispanic/Latino (6.8%), Black/African-American (6%), and other (0.9%).

**Procedure**

Participants who chose to participate in a study entitled “Close Relationships” were redirected to the online survey on the Qualtrics website. Participants first completed measures about their current relationship, including demographics. Participants were asked to enter their current partner’s name on the first page of the survey. All measures were adapted to refer to the participant’s partner, specifically. Next, participants completed measures of compassionate and self-image goals, self-expansion, and support. Next, participants were asked to imagine that their relationship had ended and to imagine how they would think, feel and behave. After imagining the breakup scenario participants
reported on contraction and breakup distress. When participants had completed the survey, they were debriefed and compensated.

Materials

Self-expansion and contraction measures were identical to those of Study 2.

Compassionate and Self-image Goals. Participants completed a 12-item version of the compassionate and self-image goals measure used in Study 2. The items were selected from the full scale based on their high item-total correlations in Study 2. In the current study, the scales for compassionate goals and self-image goals demonstrated high internal consistency, $\alpha = .88$ and $\alpha = .84$, respectively.

Breakup distress. Breakup distress was identical to that of Study 2 except that it was measured with a 10-point slider rating scale.

Support Given and Received. An adapted, shortened version of the Perceived Social Support Scale was used to measure support given to and received from a romantic partner over the past 2 weeks (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). The internal reliability and construct validity of this scale has been demonstrated (Zimet et al., 1988). Each subscale consisted of 5 items. A sample item of support given subscale is “I was a real source of comfort to my partner.” A sample item of support received subscale is “My partner was a real source of comfort to me.” In the current study, both subscales for support given and support received demonstrated high internal consistency, $\alpha = .91$ and $\alpha = .93$, respectively.

Results
The zero-order correlations, means, and standard deviations for the variables of interest are presented in Table 3. Compassionate goals were positively correlated with breakup distress, \( r(117) = .45, p < .001 \). This association remained significant when controlling for gender and self-image goals, \( r(110) = .44, p < .001 \).

First, I wanted to replicate the path model from Study 2, which examines the indirect association between compassionate goals to breakup distress through self-expansion and contraction. Compassionate goals positively predicted self-expansion, \( \beta = .33, t(109) = 3.54, p < .001 \). Controlling for compassionate goals, greater self-expansion within a relationship predicted greater contraction after a (hypothesized) breakup, \( \beta = .46, t(108) = 5.05, p < .001 \). Controlling for self-expansion, contraction positively predicted breakup distress, \( \beta = .37, t(107) = 4.37, p < .001 \). The direct effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress, controlling for gender and self-image goals was \( \beta = .48, t(109) = 5.34, p < .001 \). When self-expansion and contraction were included as mediators, the effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress was slightly reduced, \( \beta = .31, t(107) = 3.82, p < .001 \). The mediation model with standardized regression coefficients is presented in Figure 3.

Next, the statistical significance of this indirect effect was tested using bootstrapping. Unstandardized indirect effects were computed for each of the 10,000 bootstrapped samples using a 95% confidence interval. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect was .21 (CI [.06, .49]). The confidence interval did not include zero, indicating that the indirect effect was statistically significant. The unstandardized direct effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress was .92 (CI [.42, 1.43]). When
including the mediators, the effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress was .54 (CI [.21, 1.02]). Although it remained significant, the effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress was reduced by including the mediators.

Next, I conducted regression analyses to test the relationship between compassionate goals and self-expansion with support given and support received as mediators. I hypothesized that having compassionate goals would create a supportive environment, such that giving support would lead to receiving more support. Gender, self-image goals, and social desirability were controlled for in every regression analysis. Compassionate goals positively predicted support given, $\beta = .60, t(109) = 6.86, p < .001$. Support given positively predicted support received, $\beta = .43, t(108) = 4.89, p < .001$. That is, giving support to a partner predicted how much support was received from that partner. Support given and support received were entered simultaneously into a regression analysis to test their unique effects on self-expansion. When entered together, only support received significantly predicted self-expansion, $\beta = .46, t(107) = 3.11, p < .01$. Although support given did not directly predict self-expansion, it did predict how much support was received from that partner, and support received from the partner predicted self-expansion, consistent with the idea that having compassionate goals fosters a supportive environment where support is not only given but received as well. The relationship between compassionate goals and support received ($\beta = .52, t(109) = 6.39, p < .001$) was attenuated by support given, $\beta = .28, t(108) = 3.17, p < .01$. Compassionate goals positively predicted self-expansion, $\beta = .33, t(109) = 3.54, p < .001$. When both support variables were included as mediators, the effect of this association was reduced, $\beta$
= .15, \(t(107) = 1.37, p = .17\). The mediation model with standardized regression coefficients is presented in Figure 4.

Next, the statistical significance of this indirect effect was tested. Support given and support received were entered into a multiple mediation model. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect with support given and support received as mediators was .23 (CI [.08, .52]). The confidence interval did not include zero, which suggests that the indirect effect was statistically significant. The unstandardized direct effect of compassionate goals on self-expansion was .52 (CI [.16, .96]). When including the mediators, the effect of compassionate goals on self-expansion was no longer significant; the effect dropped to .34 (CI [-.25, .92]).

Finally, I wanted to test the full path model, which examines the indirect relationship from compassionate goals to breakup distress with support given, support received, self-expansion and contraction as mediators. Gender, self-image goals, and social desirability were controlled for in all analyses. Compassionate goals positively predicted support given, \(\beta = .56, t(109) = 6.86, p < .001\). Controlling for compassionate goals, support given positively predicted support received, \(\beta = .43, t(108) = 4.94, p < .001\). Controlling for compassionate goals and support given, support received positively predicted self-expansion, \(\beta = .36, t(107) = 3.11, p < .01\). Controlling for compassionate goals, support given, and support received, self-expansion positively predicted contraction of self after a (hypothesized) breakup, \(\beta = .47, t(106) = 4.90, p < .001\). Contraction, controlling for compassionate goals, support given, support received, and self-expansion, positively predicted breakup distress, \(\beta = .37, t(105) = 4.30, p < .001\). The
direct effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress remained significant, $\beta = .49$, $t(108) = 4.60, p < .001$. When support given, support received, self-expansion and contraction were included as mediators, the effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress was reduced, $\beta = .36$, $t(105) = 3.68, p < .001$. The mediation model with standardized regression coefficients is presented in Figure 5.

Next, the statistical significance of this indirect effect was tested using bootstrapping. Unstandardized indirect effects were computed for each of the 10,000 bootstrapped samples using a 95% confidence interval. The bootstrapped unstandardized indirect effect was .06 (CI [.02, .17]). The confidence interval did not include zero, so the indirect effect was statistically significant. The unstandardized direct effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress was .96 (CI [.34, 1.59]). When including the mediators, the effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress was reduced to .50 (CI [.03, .99]), although it remained significant.

**Discussion**

Study 3 replicated the findings of Study 2 revealing the significant indirect effect of compassionate goals on breakup distress through self-expansion and contraction. As previously supported, compassionate goals positively predicted self-expansion. Self-expansion positively predicted contraction of the self. Contraction of the self positively predicted breakup distress. Study 3 attempted to better explain this path model by examining support given and support received as mediators. Specifically, I hypothesized that support given and support received would mediate the relationship between compassionate goals and self-expansion. Compassionate goals positively predicted
support given which predicted support received and support received predicted self-expansion. Finally, the full path model with support given, support received, self-expansion, and contraction as mediators of the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress was tested. This full model was supported such that having compassionate goals led to greater support received from a partner, which led to greater self-expansion which led to greater contraction after a (hypothesized) breakup, which led to greater breakup distress. This path model was replicated using a simple breakup manipulation in which participants were just asked to think about a breakup with their current partner. Study 3 replicated the path model in a non-college student sample, which included people in non-marital as well as marital relationships.
Chapter 5: General Discussion

Most people will experience a breakup at least once in their lifetime and this experience can be devastating. Researchers have examined many predictors of the negative affect that accompanies a breakup, however motivational goals have received little attention. Specifically, the research that has examined motivational accounts in the context of a breakup have examined need fulfillment and self-determination (Patrick, Knee, Canfelllo, & Lonsbary, 2007; Slotter & Finkel, 2009). Interpersonal goals, specifically compassionate goals, have not been examined as predictors of a breakup. Several mechanisms were tested to understand the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress. A path model linking compassionate goals within a relationship with breakup distress was developed and supported.

Across three studies, compassionate goals positively predicted breakup distress. That is, having the interpersonal intent to be supportive and caring was associated with greater breakup distress. This association was tested in a college sample as well as an adult sample. Study 1 found that having compassionate goals towards an ex-partner predicted greater current breakup distress. This association was mediated by communication amount and communication satisfaction with an ex-partner. Having compassionate goals was particularly distressing when people remained in contact with an ex-partner and were not satisfied with this communication. Study 1 provided initial support for the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress, however
this association was tested post-breakup. Study 2 found that compassionate goals towards a current romantic partner predicted distress following a fictitious, imagined breakup scenario. A different set of mechanisms, specifically self-expansion and contraction of the self, were examined as mediators of this relationship. When people have compassionate goals in a relationship, they experience greater self-expansion, or an expanded self-concept. Greater expansion during the relationship predicted greater contraction of the self-concept following a hypothetical breakup. It is the contraction of self-concept that predicts breakup distress. In Study 3, I examined support given and support received as potential mediators of the relationship between compassionate goals and self-expansion. These variables expanded the path model from Study 2 to reveal an indirect path explaining the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress. That is, having compassionate goals towards a partner predicted giving more support to a partner, which predicted receiving more support from a partner. This support predicted self-expansion, which predicted contraction. Contraction ultimately predicted more breakup distress. Overall, in three studies I found support for a positive relationship between compassionate goals and breakup distress.

The current set of studies extended the existing literature on breakup distress in several ways. First, these are the only studies to test compassionate goals as a predictor of breakup distress. Compassionate goals positively predicted breakup distress when examining current compassionate goals towards an ex-partner. Compassionate goals towards a current a partner also prospectively predicted breakup distress following a hypothetical breakup scenario. Second, self-expansion theory conceptually proposed
contraction of self as a mediator of the relationship between self-expansion and breakup distress; the current set of studies empirically tested and supported this association. Self-expansion positively predicted contraction of self, and contraction positively predicted breakup distress in a college student and an adult sample. Third, a path model provided support for an existing notion in the literature that positive factors during a relationship are associated with more breakup distress. Giving and receiving support in a relationship predicted greater self-expansion during the relationship, however when a (hypothetical) breakup occurred, self-expansion predicted greater contraction, which ultimately predicted breakup distress.

These studies expand the existing literature on compassionate goals as well. The current studies are the first to test how compassionate goals affect reactions to the loss of a romantic relationship. Past literature has examined responsiveness in roommate relationships and the current set of studies specifically explored the amount of and satisfaction with communication with an ex-partner. When examining post-breakup relationships, compassionate goals positively predicted amount of communication with an ex-partner and negatively predicted satisfaction with communication with an ex-partner. When examining intact romantic relationships, compassionate goals positively predicted support given and received, as has been found in roommate relationships (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Compassionate goals positively predicted self-expansion, which has not been examined prior to the current set of studies. Finally, the current set of studies found that having compassionate goals towards a romantic partner predicted increased breakup-specific distress. Within roommate relationships, having
compassionate goals predicted reduced depressive symptoms (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). Although compassionate goals predicted an increase in distress in the current studies, this distress was specific to the ending of the relationship; it is not clear whether compassionate goals reduce general distress within an intact relationship as has been shown in roommate relationships.

There are several limitations of the methodology of the current set of studies. First, the correlational design of these three studies prevents me from making any causal claims about the nature of these constructs. That is, it is unclear what the order of the effects are in the proposed path model. For example, the model suggests that having compassionate goals predicts greater self-expansion as measured by inclusion of other in the self. However, it is possible that including one’s partner into one’s self-concept could lead one to having compassionate goals towards that partner. An experimental design may be necessary to assess the direction of the relationship between the variables included in the path model.

Second, the current set of studies all consisted of a cross-sectional design which made testing the effect of variables in an intact relationship on processes after a breakup difficult. Study 1 asked participants to report their current level of distress months after an actual breakup had occurred. However, this study provided little to no information about how factors during the relationship affected breakup distress. Studies 2 and 3 asked participants currently involved in a relationship to imagine their relationship ending, but did not test distress experienced after an actual breakup. Although I cannot make people breakup in the lab, using the hypothetical breakup scenarios allowed me to gain
preliminary insight into how factors during a relationship affect distress following the (hypothetical) loss of a relationship for people currently in relationships. A longitudinal study seems to be necessary to truly test the role of compassionate goals during an intact relationship on actual breakup distress.

Finally, self-expansion was operationalized in the current studies using the inclusion of other in the self (IOS) scale. Self-expansion theory posits that people expand their self-concepts in a relationship through including a partner into their self. That is, including a partner in one’s self-concept is an integral part of self-expansion. Self-other overlap occurs in close relationships as evidenced by several studies using different methodologies including a me/not me reaction time task. Using this methodology, a list of traits that are characteristic of the self, a partner, and neither the self or partner are presented to a participant and they are asked to categorize each trait as belonging to the self or not to the self. Participants responded slower to traits that were characteristic of the partner but not the self when making me/not me decisions, indicating an inclusion of a partner’s traits into the self (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). This is evidence of inclusion of other in the self that occurs in close relationships, but not indicative of IOS as an explicit measure of self-expansion. Using inclusion of other in self in the current set of studies may have only indirectly assessed self-expansion. The IOS scale has been commonly used in the literature as a measure of closeness. This scale has been used to assess the effect of pre-dissolution closeness on contraction of self, which yielded similar results as the current studies (i.e. IOS was associated with greater contraction). Using IOS in the current studies may yield a slightly different interpretation of the results if IOS
does not truly assess self-expansion. That is, the findings of this study may instead suggest that compassionate goals increase closeness, rather than self-expansion, and that closeness predicts contraction post-breakup. Self-expansion has been operationalized in several different ways in the literature. Future studies should attempt to replicate the proposed path model of this set of studies using other measures of self-expansion, such as the self-expansion questionnaire (SEQ; Lewandowski & Aron, 2002).

The current set of studies left several questions unanswered that can be addressed in future studies. The first question that remains is: Do compassionate goals in an intact relationship predict breakup distress following an actual breakup? Study 1 examined the association between compassionate goals towards an ex-partner and breakup distress after a breakup occurred; compassionate goals while the relationship was intact were not collected. Studies 2 and 3 examined the association between compassionate goals and breakup distress following a hypothetical breakup. People tend to be poor at forecasting how they will be impacted by future negative experiences, so there may be a discrepancy in how participants in the current studies reported how they felt thinking about a hypothetical breakup and how they may feel if their relationship actually ended. A longitudinal study is necessary to capture compassionate goals during a relationship and the effect they have on actual breakup distress.

One remaining question concerns whether factors other than support given and received relate to compassionate goals and explain more of the variance in the proposed path model? Compassionate goals positively predicted self-expansion, but the mechanism behind this association is unclear. In Study 3, when I examined support given and support
received as the potential mechanism, the effect of compassionate goals on breakup
distress was reduced but remained significant. Perhaps other mechanisms could better
explain the association between compassionate goals and self-expansion. Study 3
examined support given and received because compassionate goals have been found to
create a supportive environment in other close relationships. Intuitively I thought a
supportive environment, characterized as giving and receiving support, would offer more
opportunities for self-expansion. A different mechanism that might explain some of the
variance in the association between compassionate goals and self-expansion is
responsiveness. Having compassionate goals predicted greater responsiveness and
ultimately increased relationship quality in roommates (Crocker & Canevello, 2012). A
future study could test responsiveness as a mediator of the association between
compassionate goals and self-expansion.

An interesting question for future studies is whether people can and/or should
regulate their compassionate goals during times of interpersonal risk (e.g. when a breakup
is occurring)? In three studies, compassionate goals positively predicted breakup distress,
such that having compassionate goals led to greater breakup distress. Compassionate
goals positively predicted self-expansion during the relationship, which has been shown
in the past to lead to greater self-efficacy and closeness (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992;
Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995). Therefore, having compassionate goals predicts positive
outcomes during a relationship but in the event that the relationship ends, having
compassionate goals also predicts greater distress.
How do we rectify this situation? Perhaps it is important to understand the trajectory of compassionate goals in a relationship. When a relationship takes a turn for the worse and is on the brink of a breakup, should we reduce the compassionate goals we have to protect ourselves from the devastating blow that is to come? It is suggested that people have competing goals of connectedness and self-protection that must be regulated during times of interpersonal risk (Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes, 2008).

Alternatively, providing support to others is beneficial to reducing distress following the loss of a spouse. Having compassionate goals and being supportive of others, rather than a former partner, may be helpful in recovering from a breakup. Study1 found that having compassionate goals towards an ex-partner increased breakup distress, however it is unclear whether having compassionate goals towards someone else reduces breakup distress. Future research should examine how compassionate goals change over time following a breakup. Having compassionate goals towards those other than a former partner should also be examined to test for changes in breakup distress.

There is one final question that is left unanswered and is worth exploring. Although, compassionate goals positively predicted breakup distress, does having compassionate goals within a relationship make us less susceptible to a breakup overall? In the current studies (Studies 2 and 3), compassionate goals predicted self-expansion. Including a partner into one’s self-concept, a key component of self-expansion, has been found to be a strong predictor of remaining in a relationship (Le et al., 2010). Therefore, having compassionate goals may predict longevity of a relationship and the risk of
experiencing a breakup may not be as prevalent. However, this needs to be supported with future research.

As social beings we are motivated to enter into and maintain close relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000). We work towards building closeness and satisfaction by expanding our self-concept through including our romantic partner into our self. Unfortunately, despite our motivations for connectedness, not all relationships last. When a breakup occurs, we are left feeling distraught. The severity of the distress we experience can vary. Who experiences the most distress? The present set of studies provide initial answers to this critical question. Having compassionate goals and truly wanting to be supportive of a partner can lead us to feel deeply devastated when a breakup does occur. Having compassionate goals leads us to feel connected and close to our partner. We create an environment that fosters support; we give support to our partner and in turn we receive support back. We truly integrate them into who we are, but unfortunately when the relationship doesn’t work out, our merged sense of self becomes shattered. This contraction of our self-concept leads us to feel distressed. We’ve not only lost a relationship and a romantic partner, but we’ve lost a part of ourselves. With this overwhelming loss, it is not surprising that breakups are one of the most devastating experiences that we all share.
References


Appendix A: Tables

Table 1

Zero-order Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for the Main variables in Regression Analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1.</th>
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<th>5.</th>
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<th>SD</th>
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<td>3. Communication Amount</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.46***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>2.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Communication Satisfaction</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
<td>-.24**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Breakup Distress</td>
<td>.31***</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td>-.48***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Self-Image and compassionate goals were measured using a 1(not at all) – 5(very satisfied) scale. Communication amount was measured using a 1 (never) – 7 (daily) scale. Communication satisfaction was measured using a 1 (very dissatisfied) – 6 (very satisfied) scale. Breakup distress was measured using a 1 (not at all) – 5 (extremely) scale.

*p < .05  **p < .01  ***p < .001

Table 1: Descriptives (Study 1)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.  Self-Image Goals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>.72</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.  Compassionate Goals</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.  Self-Expansion</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>1.65</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.  Contraction</td>
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<td>.48***</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5.03</td>
<td>1.89</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.  Breakup Distress</td>
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<td>.53***</td>
<td>.59***</td>
<td></td>
<td>75.11</td>
<td>27.43</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Self-Image and compassionate goals were measured using a 1( *not at all*) – 5( *extremely*) scale. Self-expansion was measured using 7 sets of overlapping circles, higher numbers equal greater overlap. Contraction was measured using a 1 ( *not at all*) – 7 ( *extremely*) scale. Breakup distress was measured using a 100 point slider rating scale.  
*  *p < .05  **p < .01  ***p < .001
Table 3

Zero-order Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for the Main variables in Regression Analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
<th>6.</th>
<th>7.</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Self-Image Goals</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>.85</td>
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<td>2. Compassionate Goals</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Support Given</td>
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<td>.58***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>.48</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Support Received</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.51***</td>
<td>.60***</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Self-expansion</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.21</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Contraction</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.24***</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.18†</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Breakup Distress</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td>.23†</td>
<td>.23†</td>
<td>.42***</td>
<td>.54***</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8.79</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Self-Image and compassionate goals were measured using a 1(not at all) – 5(usually) scale. Support received and support given were measured using a 1(strongly disagree) – 5(strongly agree). Self-expansion was measured using 7 sets of overlapping circles, higher numbers equal greater overlap. Contraction was measured using a 1 (not at all) – 7 (extremely) scale. Breakup distress was measured using a 10 point slider rating scale.

†p = .05 *p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Table 3: Descriptives (Study 3)
Appendix B: Figures

Figure 1. Mediation Model 1 (Study 1). Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between compassionate goals and breakup distress as mediated by communication amount and communication satisfaction. Each analysis was run controlling for gender and self-image goals.

\[ \cdot.15^\dagger \ (\cdot.07) \]

\[ -.20^* \]

\[ .49^{***} \]

\[ .27^{***} \]

\[ -.47^{***} \]

\( \dagger p < .10 \)

\( * p < .05 \)

\( ** p < .01 \)

\( *** p < .001 \)
Figure 2. Mediation Model 2 (Study 2). Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between compassionate goals and breakup distress as mediated by self-expansion and contraction of self. Each analysis was run controlling for gender and self-image goals.

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001
Figure 3. Mediation Model 3 (Study 3). Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between compassionate goals and breakup distress as mediated by self-expansion and contraction. Each analysis was run controlling for gender, self-image goals, and social desirability.

*p < .05  **p < .01  ***p < .001
Figure 4. Mediation Model 4 (Study 3). Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between compassionate goals and self-expansion as mediated by support given and support received. Each analysis was run controlling for gender, self-image goals, and social desirability.

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001
Figure 5. Mediation Model 5 (Study 3). Standardized regression coefficients for the relationship between compassionate goals and breakup distress as mediated by support given, support received, self-expansion and contraction of self. Each analysis was run controlling for gender, self-image goals, and social desirability.

*p < .05  **p < .01  ***p < .001