

# ROMANTIC ATTACHMENT STYLE, SELF-ESTEEM, AND FORGIVENESS: CORRELATES OF DEPRESSION IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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*Abstract:*

Measures of romantic attachment, forgiveness, self-esteem, and depression were completed by participants (N=311). We used a linear regression analysis to test our model and found that anxious romantic attachment, low self-esteem, and forgiveness accounted for 41.1% of variance in depression. Additionally, forgiveness moderated the relationship between anxious romantic attachment and depression.

*Supporting Summary:*

Romantic relationships during college are an important part of the socialization process for many students. Anxiety around romantic attachment along with low self-esteem can influence decision-making, which often results in poor choices in romantic relationships. Relationship problems, anxious romantic attachment, and low self-esteem have been shown to be associated with psychological distress and depression in adolescents and young adults (Gjerde & Westenberg, 1998). We hypothesized that poor romantic attachment and low self-esteem would be associated with higher levels of depression in college students. Additionally, forgiveness has been associated with decreases in depression and poor romantic attachment and increases in self-esteem (Reed & Enright, 2006; Luskin 2002). Thus, we hypothesized that forgiveness (a teachable coping skill) would moderate the relationship between romantic attachment and depression.

Our cross-sectional, correlational study examined data collected from 311 college students (76.0% female; 59.3% European-American; 19.1% African-American; 9.3% Latino(a); and 12.3% Other). Participants on average were 21.1 years of age (SD=5.0), ranging from 18 to 56 years and 20.2% reported currently being in a committed relationship. Participants completed the Multi-Item Measure of Adult Romantic Attachment (MIMARA; Brennan, Clark & Shaver, 1998;  $\alpha=.91-.94$ ), the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS; Thompson et al., 2005;  $\alpha=.92$ ), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, Schooler & Schoenbach, 1989;  $\alpha=.89$ ), and the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977;  $\alpha=.85$ ). The mean depression score was 17.03 (SD=8.6; Range=47), indicating the majority of students displayed “depressive symptoms” (Radloff, 1977).

A hierarchical linear regression analysis revealed students who reported higher levels of anxiety in romantic attachment ( $\beta=.26, t=5.38, p<.001$ ) and lower levels of self-esteem ( $\beta=-.29, t=-5.93, p<.001$ ) also reported higher levels of depression. Higher levels of forgiveness ( $\beta=-.27, t=-5.44, p<.001$ ) were associated with less depression. A gay orientation ( $\beta=-.15, t=-2.61, p<.01$ ) was also negatively associated with depression. Our model accounted for 41.1% of the variance in depression [adjusted  $R^2=.41, F(9,301)=25.06, p<.001$ ] in our sample.

Additional hierarchical regression analyses were performed to determine whether forgiveness moderated the relationship between anxious romantic attachment style and depression. All variables of interest were standardized, and the variance between forgiveness and anxiety in romantic attachment was controlled for (Frazier, Tix & Barron, 2004). Our analyses found that forgiveness did moderate anxious attachment and depression ( $B = -.07$ ,  $t = -2.94$ ,  $p < .01$ ), with higher levels of forgiveness reducing depression, even in those with anxious attachment styles (McClelland & Judd, 1993).

Although our cross-sectional, correlational design limits us from inferring causality from our results and our sample was from one university limiting generalizability to other geographic populations, our findings are important because they identify common psychosocial factors related to an increasingly prevalent problem on college campuses. Future longitudinal studies that examine the causal relationships of these constructs and participant recruitment from multiple sites will yield valuable information about these relationships. Clinical interventions that incorporate a forgiveness skills building component and attend to romantic attachment style may be useful for assisting some college students presenting with depressive symptoms.