

# After breakups, people feel less in-control—but only at first

August 3 2022

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A torn paper heart on a string. Credit: Kelly Sikkema, Unsplash, CC0 ([creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/](https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/))

A new analysis of people who underwent different types of relationship loss found that these experiences were linked with different patterns of

short- and long-term sense of control following the loss. Eva Asselmann of the HMU Health and Medical University in Potsdam, Germany, and Jule Specht of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany, present these findings in *PLOS ONE* on August 3, 2022.

Previous research has shown that a greater perceived sense of personal control over one's life is associated with better well-being and better health. Romantic relationships are closely linked to perceived control; for instance, evidence suggests a link between perceived control and better relationship satisfaction. However, less is known about how the loss of a relationship might be linked to changes in perceived control.

To shed new light, Asselmann and Specht analyzed data from three timepoints in a multi-decade study of households in Germany. Specifically, they used yearly questionnaire results from 1994, 1995, and 1996 to evaluate changes in perceived control for 1,235 people who experienced separation from their partner, 423 who divorced, and 437 whose partners passed away.

Statistical analysis of the questionnaire results suggests that, overall, people who experienced separation from their partner experienced a drop in perceived control in the first year after separation, but followed by a gradual increase in later years. After separation, women were more likely than men to have a decline in their sense of control, while younger people had an increased sense of control compared to older people.

People whose partners passed away had an overall increase in perceived control during the first year post-loss, followed by a continued boost in perceived control compared to the period before the death. However, compared to [older people](#), [younger people](#) experienced more detrimental effects of [partner](#) death on their sense of control.

The analysis found no links between divorce and perceived control.

The researchers call for future investigations to track people who have not yet experienced relationship loss and evaluate changes in perceived control when loss occurs. They also call for research into the mechanisms that underlie post-loss changes in perceived control.

The authors add: "Our findings suggest that people sometimes grow from [stressful experiences](#)—at least regarding specific personality characteristics. In the years after losing a [romantic partner](#), participants in our study became increasingly convinced in their ability to influence their life and future by their own behavior. Their experience enabled them to deal with adversity and manage their life independently, which allowed them to grow."

**More information:** Personality growth after relationship losses: Changes of perceived control in the years around separation, divorce, and the death of a partner, *PLoS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0268598](#)

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Citation: After breakups, people feel less in-control—but only at first (2022, August 3) retrieved 20 November 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-08-breakups-people-in-controlbut.html>

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