



Breaking up is hard to do

Acknowledging students' pain following a traumatic romantic relationship break-up can increase help-seeking behaviour and reduce the risk of intergenerational attachment trauma.

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Students often feel very hurt after a non-marital romantic relationship break-up. Many students want their painful experiences to be acknowledged and treated with seriousness.

Their pain is real to them. However, their painful experiences are often not acknowledged or are trivialised as a normal event that they must “just get over” because everyone goes through it.

Research indicates that students may experience break-ups as severely distressing. Break-ups are associated with negative consequences, including psychological disorders, poor academic performance and maladaptive behaviour. Based on attachment theory, students may also try to “fix” the broken attachment through repetitively engaging in similar (often malfunctioning) relationships.

“They continue to re-experience the same attachment trauma, resulting in disorganised attachments which can become intergenerational,” says Alberta SJ van der Watt.

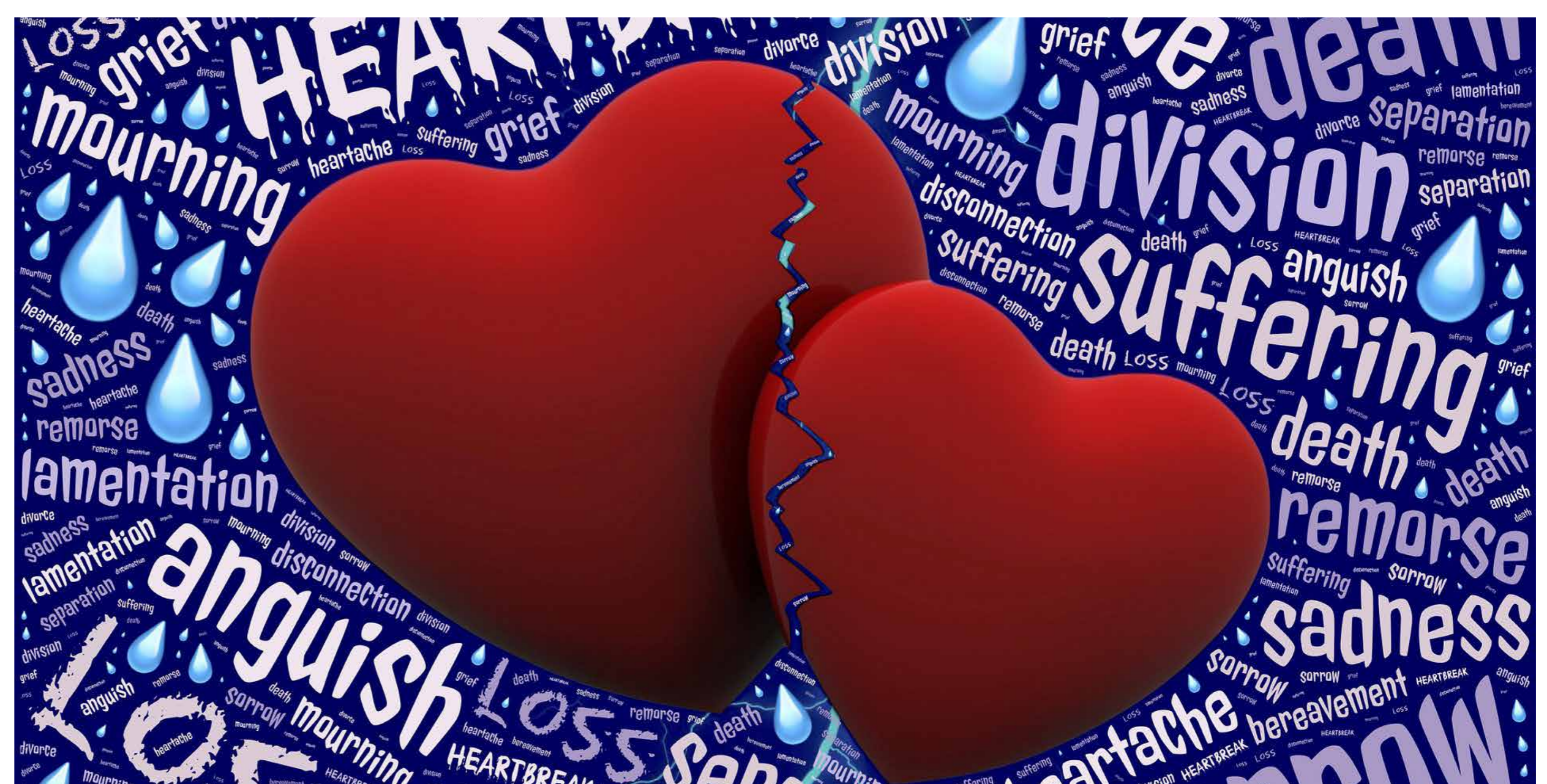
“Trivialising what can be potentially very distressing to students may decrease help-seeking behaviour and have long-term consequences.”

As a researcher and PhD candidate at Stellenbosch University, Van der Watt aims to provide evidence of the potential seriousness of non-marital romantic relationship break-ups through empirical research, including quantitative measures, functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) and in-depth qualitative interviews. Her PhD research is supported by the South African Research Chair in PTSD (SARCHI UID

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Mental healthcare providers, including student counselling services, should open their minds to the potential subjective nature of traumatic experiences. Acknowledging students' feelings and experiences, albeit “part of life”, may increase help-seeking behaviour and stop the proverbial snowball from rolling.

“Another possible benefit includes increased research into potential treatment modalities, such as Prolonged Exposure Therapy, often used for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the mitigation of intergenerational attachment trauma.”



Students' subjective trauma experience from a romantic relationship break-up