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Review

Friendship loss and dissolution in adulthood: A conceptual model

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Abstract

Adult friendships are important relationships, yet little work has examined the processes through which they end and the antecedents and consequences of endings. Building on work that has highlighted the reasons friendships end (Fehr, 1996), we propose an adult friendship dissolution process model that features how situational, personal, and interpersonal variables may influence whether friendships are ended via active or passive routes. Furthermore, potential intervening variables that could lead to different paths of friendship dissolution, including the emotional toll of experiencing dissolution via one path versus another, are discussed.

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Imagine two adult friendships: The first ends when one person moves away. The two friends no longer feel connected, gradually stop communicating, and experience little if any distress. The second friendship ends abruptly following a heated argument. Afterward, both individuals feel a mixture of anger, regret, and sadness, and both remain upset for several months. In this paper, we examine the sources of and psychological reaction to these markedly different routes of friendship dissolution.

Friendship dissolution

Although friendships have received less attention than other types of relationships, they are associated with better long-term health, well-being, and life satisfaction [2,3]. Moreover, experiencing strain in friendships, such

as doubting that friends will be supportive when needed, predicts having chronic illnesses later in life [4]. To date, research has focused primarily on the benefits of valuing and cultivating friendships in adulthood, with less attention being devoted to the negative experiences and processes that lead to friendship dissolution. The reasons why and the ways in which friendships actually end remain poorly understood [1*]. This is particularly true of adult friendships, which are the focus of this review (see Meter & Carol, 2016; Nielson et al., 2020 for discussions of friendship dissolution in adolescents) [5,6].

The manner in which friendships end varies considerably, perhaps because friendships tend to be more ‘flexible’ relationships [7]. Friendships, for example, are not mutually exclusive relationships, which allows some to simply fade away with minimal or no formal closure. Friendships are also not bound by institutional norms that make exiting them more difficult when major problems arise. Accordingly, individuals can follow different pathways when ending friendships, ranging from more passive routes to more active routes, each of which should have different postdissolution consequences.

Most friendships, of course, involve some amount of conflict, hurt feelings, or even acts of betrayal, any of which can trigger an active, abrupt ending to a friendship (e.g., a heated argument that results in an immediate breakup). Most friendships, however, end more passively [1*], such as when a person allows a friendship to fade away gradually over time, perhaps because passive endings are easier and leave open the possibility for future friendship renewal. Active friendship endings, which are less common, tend to be more acrimonious and are more likely to terminate a friendship forever [1*]. Relatively little is known about the factors that forecast these two different routes to friendship dissolution, including their emotional outcomes. Fortunately, some prior work suggests a set of potential factors.

The earliest research on friendship dissolution focused on the likely importance of certain situational and interpersonal factors. Rose [8*], for instance, identified four primary reasons why adult friendships dissolve: physical distance, the emergence of new friends, growing dislike for a friend, and interference from romantic partners/relationships. One key interpersonal

factor, therefore, is likely to be the degree to which friends feel close to each other [9]. Passive routes of friendship dissolution may be utilized more often with friends to whom one feels less close. Indeed, less close friendships are more likely to dissolve due to lack of physical proximity or irregular social contact, whereas closer friends are less susceptible to changes in these variables [9,10]. The dissolution of close or best friends, in contrast, may be more attributable to decreases in the quality of their interactions, which could be due to changes in either friend's social network, other pressing obligations, perceptions that a friend is not putting sufficient time or effort into the relationship, or when declines in mutual affection occur because of differing values or feelings of betrayal. Any or all of these reasons may promote active friendship endings.

Situational and interpersonal processes may also interact to influence whether and how friendship dissolution occurs. In a study of geographically close versus distant friends, interpersonal closeness was most predictive of whether friendships eventually ended among long-distance friends. Thus, although physical distance commonly contributes to friendship dissolution, the impact of distance varies depending on how close friends feel to one another. Friendships marked by feelings of interpersonal closeness can actually grow in commitment with greater physical distance if friends engage in maintenance behaviors that keep them in contact [11]. Accordingly, despite the fact that one person can decide whether and how to end a friendship, the situational and interpersonal context in which a friendship is embedded may also affect both the route and ease with which friendship dissolution occurs.

Moreover, recent qualitative work on women's friendships has identified certain 'turning points' in these friendships that can reduce closeness and trigger dissolution, which then occurs via either active or passive routes. Such turning points include moving away from a friend, starting a new job, a life crisis (e.g., death of a loved one), or entering a new life stage (e.g., having children). Turning points can also include interpersonal events such as very heated conflicts or major betrayals [12*]. While these experiences, if handled well, can sometimes generate deeper feelings of closeness or promote friendship maintenance, they usually lead to dissolution [12*,13]. Thus, situational forces — in and of themselves — may also influence whether individuals experience an active or a passive end to a friendship.

To summarize, some prior research suggests that certain interpersonal and situational factors might impact not only the reasons for friendship dissolution but *how* dissolution unfolds, the degree to which it is permanent, and the downstream psychological and emotional outcomes that people experience. The current evidence, however, is scattered and rather idiosyncratic. A unifying

model is needed, one that incorporates these factors and specifies how they are related to the active and passive routes through which friendship dissolution in adulthood typically occurs.

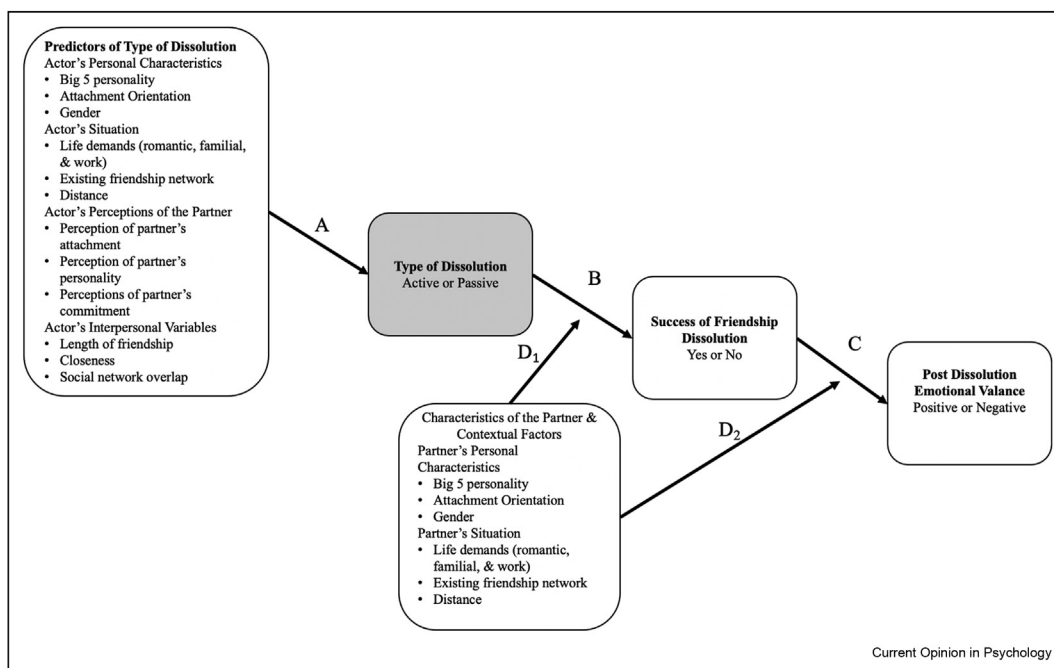
A friendship dissolution process model

Our adult friendship dissolution process model, shown in Figure 1, describes the process of friendship dissolution in adults from the perspective of the person who wants to end a friendship (i.e., the actor). The model identifies a set of interpersonal, situational, and personal factors that are likely to govern whether the actor enacts an active or a passive path (route) to ending a friendship and describes the hypothesized psychological and emotional consequences associated with each route, including some of the factors that may regulate these consequences.

According to the model, when a person decides to end a friendship, there are two primary routes they can follow — active or passive. Path A in the model indicates that whether an individual follows a passive or an active route should depend on certain personal, situational, and/or interpersonal factors. For instance, an individual who has become a new parent and now faces a new set of major life demands may find it easier to let a friendship dissolve passively. Conversely, an active route may be followed by someone who has a disagreeable personality or believes that a friend is insufficiently committed to their relationship [14,15]. Previous research on adolescent friendships, for example, has shown that aggression is associated with higher rates of friendship dissolution under certain circumstances [16,17]. Moreover, personal, situational, and interpersonal factors may interact. For example, someone who moves far away from a new friend and is less emotionally connected to them may decide to enact a passive route to ending the friendship, whereas someone who still feels connected to a distant friend may employ an active route. Perceptions of how a friend might react to dissolution could also affect the dissolution process. For example, a passive route to friendship dissolution may be more difficult to enact with a friend who is highly committed to or dependent upon the friendship compared to a friend who is less committed or less dependent.

Once a route toward dissolution is chosen, it needs to be enacted, which might introduce interference from the friend being left. The success of the chosen path (Path B), therefore, may be moderated by a friend's response to attempted dissolution (Path D₁). Imagine, for instance, an individual who tries to enact a passive ending to avoid hurting their friend's feelings; however, given their friend's personality (e.g., they are anxiously attached), the friendship may be difficult to terminate completely [18,19]. Conversely, a highly avoidant friend may be less resistant to a friendship ending passively, making it easier to end. Although passively ending a friendship with an anxiously attached friend may prove to be more

Figure 1



The adult friendship dissolution process model depicts different pathways (routes) toward friendship dissolution in adults from the actor's perspective (i.e., the person who wants to end a friendship). Although not exhaustive, the factors listed in each box are likely to influence the process of friendship dissolution at each stage. **Path A** involves the likely predictors of the type of friendship dissolution path the actor decides to enact (i.e., active or passive). In the box on the upper left side, four categories of predictors are listed, the first of which involves potential personal characteristic predictors. An actor's personality, attachment orientation, and perhaps gender may influence the dissolution path chosen. Certain situational features may also influence which route is chosen. They include the actor's current life demands, their friendship network, or the distance between friends. The actor is also likely to consider a friend's personal characteristics and their probable response to the breakup when choosing a pathway. Perceptions of a friend's attachment orientation, personality, and whether they are high versus low in commitment to the friendship may affect which route is chosen. Finally, interpersonal characteristics such as the length of the friendship, its closeness, and the social network overlap between friends might affect the route chosen. Once a pathway (active vs. passive) has been chosen, **Path B** addresses whether or not friendship dissolution is successful. After a path is enacted, both the characteristics of the friend who is being left (i.e., the partner) and features of the current situation may hinder or promote the ending of the friendship (**Path D₁**). Specifically, the partner's gender, personality, and attachment orientation are likely to influence how the partner responds to the actions undertaken by the actor. Furthermore, situational factors associated with the partner such as their current life demands, their existing friendship network, and the distance between friends may influence responses to dissolution. **Path C** addresses the emotional toll following an attempted friendship dissolution. When a friendship ends, an emotional response is elicited in the actor, depending on several factors. Both the actor's own personal characteristics, as well as the factors that led to the chosen dissolution path, may influence the emotional response experienced by the actor, which can range from positive emotions such as relief to negative emotions such as distress (**Path D₂**). Furthermore, the partner's personal and situational characteristics may also impact the actor's emotional response (**Path D₂**). For instance, someone whose friend is highly committed to or dependent on the friendship may feel guilty and be more distressed when the friendship ends. Consider the different and complicated ways in which friendship dissolution can play out in two examples. **Passive ending:** Because of one's new job, a move to a new city, and the perception of already dwindling commitment from one's friend, a passive route to friendship dissolution is chosen. The two friends gradually reduce contact. However, the dissolution process is more difficult than expected because the actor's friend (the partner being left) is anxiously attached and tries to maintain the friendship. Over time, however, the friendship comes to a slow end, and contact totally ceases. Because of their former friend's relatively small social network, the actor feels bad for letting the friendship end and experiences mild distress (e.g., sadness, some regret) on reflection. **Active ending:** Two individuals in a highly committed, long-term friendship have a heated argument regarding a betrayal — the disclosure of sensitive information that should have remained private. During the argument, one friend (who is avoidantly attached) decides to be straightforward about ending the friendship immediately, enacting an active route to end the friendship. The other friend (who is nonconfrontational and highly agreeable) does not counterargue and accepts the decision, primarily to end the unpleasant conversation. The friends then go separate ways. Although the end of the friendship was tense, abrupt, and distressing, over time, the friend who abruptly ended the relationship experiences minimal distress due to their avoidant attachment tendencies.

challenging, individuals higher in attachment avoidance or anxiety report that it is easy for them to 'let go' of friends [20], most likely when they are doing the terminating.

Situational factors may also shape how the dissolution process unfolds. Greater physical distance or entering new life stages (e.g., starting college, getting married,

becoming a parent) are situational forces that might facilitate dissolution with certain friends. However, continuing to have overlapping social networks with certain friends may also hinder active and/or passive friendship endings. Consistent with the former proposition, friendship dissolution in adolescents is often associated with the start of a new school year or the

transition to high school [21]. Thus, although an individual may want a friendship to end and may attempt to end it in a passive or active way, such attempts may not always be successful due to a variety of factors.

Depending on both the pathway and whether a friendship actually ends, dissolution should elicit an emotional response that ought to vary in negativity/distress (Path C). In some circumstances, the final dissolution of a friendship should not be distressing and might even engender relief or evoke fond memories (e.g. ‘That was a good friendship for that time in my life, but it was never a life-long one’). Friendships that end via an active route, in contrast, typically should elicit more negative emotions due in part to the turmoil surrounding the dissolution. Moreover, after a friendship ends, emotional reactions may vary based on statistical interactions between the specific factors that precipitated the dissolution and how it transpired (Path D₂). The model also identifies factors that could moderate the impact of experiencing friendship dissolution, such as the friend’s characteristics or the current situation, each of which may generate distressing emotions, which may well include feelings of loneliness, remorse, or sadness.

Qualifications and limitations

This adult friendship dissolution process model provides an initial synthesis of several factors that are likely to shape how adult friendships end, but it does not capture all of the variables that might impact friendship dissolution (e.g., mental illness, cultural norms). In addition, friendship dissolution processes are not likely to be completely active or completely passive; rather, they probably exist along a continuum. Some endings, for instance, may begin as passive but become more active as a friendship deteriorates and/or commitment wanes in both partners. Furthermore, within certain stages of the model, friendship dissolution may suddenly cease, or friendships may rapidly be rejuvenated. These processes are not captured in the model.

The current model is designed to explain friendship dissolution in adults that is relatively intentional. This, of course, may not be true of all adult friendship dissolutions. Some friendships may start to fade away and dissolve before either friend is aware of it. Once noticed, one or both friends may take steps to stop the friendship from dissolving or simply allow it to continue to fade away. These actions reflect dyadic processes that may occur across longer periods of time than most intentional friendship dissolutions. Furthermore, some active endings to friendships may begin as unintentional, perhaps sparked by an initial confrontation that spirals out of control and leads to major arguments that, if left unresolved, may lead to intentional dissolution. Future research should investigate how changes in the intentionality of friendship dissolution across time

affect how dissolutions unfold and their subsequent emotional toll.

Future directions and conclusion

More descriptive research on friendship dissolution in adults, along with empirical tests of the current model, is needed to better understand the psychological processes through which friendship dissolution occurs in adults, including the specific factors that are most influential. For example, future research needs to document the specific interpersonal, situational, and personal factors — or combinations of them — that best predict the use of active versus passive routes of adult friendship dissolution. Additionally, although there are gender differences in how friendships are viewed and valued by women and men [22,23], we do not know whether gender moderates any of the paths in our model. We also do not know whether or how attachment orientations affect the processes through which friendships dissolve. Characteristics such as attachment may predict whether individuals follow passive or active paths to friendship dissolution, but may also exert direct effects on post-dissolution emotional outcomes. A deeper understanding of the emotional toll of friendship dissolution, including the range of emotional responses and how they might differ depending on the route of dissolution, is another area in need of empirical research. Finally, because friendship strain is associated with impaired physical health [4], it may be best to end acrimonious friendships that become too difficult to maintain.

In conclusion, adult friendships are some of the most important relationships that people have. How they end and the ramifications of friendship dissolution have only begun to be examined and understood. Our adult friendship dissolution process model highlights the primary ways in which many adult friendships end, as well as some of the factors that could contribute to both how dissolution occurs and its emotional aftermath. The model outlines many opportunities for future research that could appreciably expand our knowledge on why and how adult friendships end, as well as the emotional toll that comes with losing a friend.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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