Relationship Distress Increases the Risk of Suicide
Sylwia Hardman, Kiri Brough, Jennifer MacArthur, Sean Lamb, Dr. A. J. Panos
Master of Social Work (MSW) Program

Introduction
Suicide results from a complex interaction of factors including mental illness, family history, social pressures, and adverse life events.1,2 The vast majority of those who attempt or die by suicide have had one or more major adverse life events (ALE) that directly contributed. ALE’s can include job loss, disability, the threat of incarceration, as well as many others.3 A significant major life event that has been found to precede suicides is stress from a romantic relationship.4

Literature Review
Although associated with happiness and life satisfaction, high levels of commitment and investment can worsen symptoms of depression once a relationship ends. This in turn is associated with increased risk of suicide.5 Divorced people carry suicide risks from acute and chronic stressors from divorce.6 This risk is present whether the couple is married or cohabitating.7 Although divorce is a known major risk factor for suicide, separated people may face a greater risk of suicide.5 Divorced men are eight times more likely to die by suicide than divorced women. Men are less likely to show distress and seek help from friends and family. Men also have fewer close relationships.8

Disagreements and relational distress are associated with higher rates of suicidal ideation (SI). People with unsolved conflicts have higher levels of SI, hopelessness, and depression than those who solve issues with their partner amicably.9,10

The ending of relationships is reported as the most common concern associated with suicidality for adolescents.11,12 Breakups are common among adolescents, putting them at high risk for suicide.9 Often these breakups are thought trivial by parents and peers who may think these relationships are inconsequential.3

The characteristics associated with lower levels of depression after a breakup are optimism, self-esteem, and “grit”. These can be reinforced through education and counseling to support individuals after a breakup.9

Conflict
An adverse life event that has been found to precede suicides is stress from a romantic relationship. This stress can be a simple conflict like an argument.4

Break Up/Separation
The ending of romantic relationships is one of the biggest risk factors for suicide attempts.7 Some studies show that separated people face a greater risk of suicide compared with divorced individuals.3

Divorce
Divorced individuals carry unique suicide risks from both acute and chronic exposure to stressors from divorce.6 Divorced men are over eight times more likely to die by suicide than divorced women.11

Disclosed Intent by Persons Who Died by Suicide

Criminal legal problems
5.2%
Financial problems
6.8%
Job problems
6.8%
Health problems
13.6%
Other substance abuse
10.3%
Alcohol abuse
10.4%
Initiate partner problems
16.5%
Argument or conflict
9.4%
Family relationship problems
5.4%
Crisis
17.9%

Conclusion & Recommendations
• Understanding that termination or conflict in a relationship is a major precipitant for suicide will allow social workers, family, and friends to better recognize and respond to signs of someone contemplating suicide.

• Relationship status should be a significant component in any suicide risk assessment.2

• Although often transient, adolescent relationships should be taken seriously by parents and clinicians as a major risk factor for suicide.8

• Support from friends and family and positive social interactions are major factors in reducing the risk of suicide after an adverse life event, especially relationship breakdown.3

• School-based rehearsals of healthy responses to adversity can improve responses later in life.4

References
5. Love, H. A., & Swann, W. B. (2015). Understanding that termination or conflict in a relationship is a major precipitant for suicide will allow social workers, family, and friends to better recognize and respond to signs of someone contemplating suicide.

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