

Breaking Up and Changing Romantic Partners is Linked to Increased Risk for Substance Use in Young Adults

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Young adults often experience changes in romantic relationships. They often start and end relationships and make changes in levels of commitment. These transitions may result in changes in substance use. Prior research has focused on the effects of marriage and divorce on substance use. This study is the first to look at less formal romantic relationship changes and substance use among young people in the first few years after high school.

We assessed whether relationship changes in young adulthood were linked to short-term changes in substance use using a sample of 939 young men and women from the Raising Healthy Children project. We also examined whether increases in depressive symptoms and more time spent with substance-using friends after breaking up helped explain greater substance use.

Participants reported on their romantic relationships, substance use (their own and close friends'), and depressive symptoms at six-month intervals over a two-year period from ages 18 to 20:

Relationship status was defined as single, dating (i.e., having a boyfriend or girlfriend but not living with that person), cohabiting, or married. We compared reports at the beginning and end of each six-month interval to determine changes in relationship status as well as changes in romantic partners.

At each time point, participants reported on their own **substance use** in the prior month, including frequency of heavy drinking, marijuana use, and cigarette

smoking. They also described the drinking and marijuana use of their friends. The presence and severity of nine **depressive symptoms** were measured using the short form of the Hamilton Depression Inventory.

Key Findings

- As expected, change in romantic relationship status was common in adults age 18 - 20. One third experienced change across each six-month interval.
- Some changes were associated with increased substance use.
 - * Breaking up was linked to increases in heavy drinking, marijuana use, and cigarette smoking.
 - * Switching partners was also linked to increases in marijuana use and cigarette smoking, but not heavy drinking.
 - * Starting a dating relationship was linked to increases in smoking.
- Entering a relationship after being single or increasing commitment did not have protective effects on substance use.
- Stability in romantic relationships was linked to stability in substance use.
- Depressive symptoms and exposure to substance-using peers increased after breakups of all kinds and may help

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To understand and promote healthy behaviors and positive social development among diverse populations, we:

- ◆ conduct research on factors that influence development;
- ◆ develop and test the effectiveness of interventions;
- ◆ study service systems and work to improve them;
- ◆ advocate for science-based solutions to health and behavior problems; and
- ◆ disseminate knowledge, tools, and expertise produced by this research.

Results

As expected, change in relationship status was common, with approximately one third of the sample experiencing some type of change within any given six-month interval. Most of these changes involved beginning or ending a dating relationship or switching from one dating partner to another. Only a small number of individuals got married, but a considerable number moved in with their partner or broke up with a cohabiting partner.

Some changes were associated with increased risk for substance use. Ending a dating relationship was associated with increases in all forms of substance use (heavy drinking, marijuana use, and cigarette smoking), while ending a cohabiting relationship was linked to increases in heavy drinking and marijuana use. Switching dating partners was associated with increases in marijuana use and cigarette smoking. Figure 1 illustrates some of these patterns with respect to marijuana use over a six-month period.

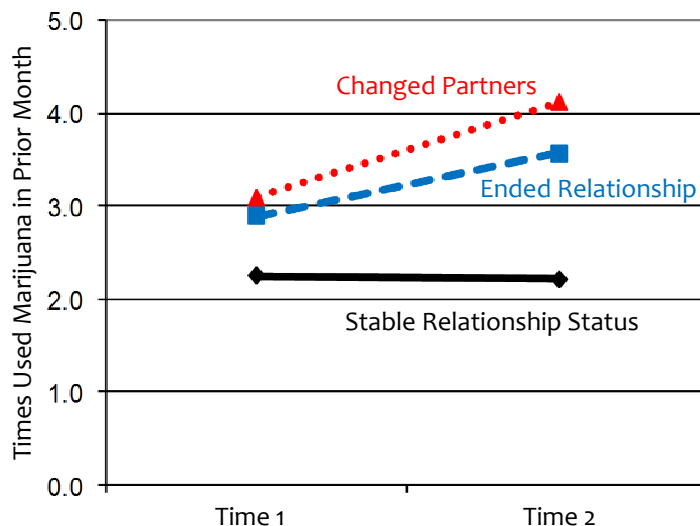
We did not find any links between decreasing substance use and romantic relationship changes in young adulthood. Within the same relationship, transitions to greater or lesser commitment did not predict changes in substance use. Surprisingly, entering a dating relationship after being single was associated with increases in smoking.

As expected, we found that breaking up leads to increases in substance use, in part through co-occurring changes in depressive symptoms and time spent with substance-using friends.

Summary

This study found that instability in romantic relationships is common in emerging adulthood.

Figure 1: Marijuana Use Increases With Changes in Romantic Relationships



More generally, the results highlight the risks associated with transitions involving the breaking of social bonds between young adults. Those ending romantic relationships drink more, as well as increase their smoking and use of marijuana. They also spend more time with substance-using friends, and may use drugs and alcohol to ease the loss of a partner.

We did not find evidence that entering a new dating relationship or increasing commitment was protective with respect to substance use. Protective effects such as those found for marriage may take longer to play out in young adulthood.

These findings have implications for intervention. Recent prevention efforts have attempted to target young adults, for instance with programs designed to prevent binge drinking among college students. The results from this study may help inform these efforts by highlighting the importance of relationship transitions on elevated risk for substance abuse.

For additional information on this topic, refer to the original article:

Fleming, Charles B., White, Helene R., Oesterle, Sabrina, Haggerty, Kevin P., & Catalano, Richard F. (2010). Romantic relationship status changes and substance use among 18- to 20-year olds. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 71, 847-856.

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