

Self-affirmation Shortens the Grieving Process after Romantic Abandonment and can Increase Self-esteem

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ABSTRACT

Recovering from a break-up or divorce can be a long and difficult process. Grief is an emotional response to interpersonal rejection and loss. Romantic rejection has been found to have long-lasting effects on self-esteem, increasing the risk of prolonged grief. When individuals experience long periods of intense emotional distress after a romantic break-up, this can affect their overall mental health. The benefits of self-affirmations have been illustrated in past research; however, the beneficial role of self-affirmations on individuals going through the grieving process after the dissolution of a romantic relationship has not been fully explored. This study examines the effect of self-affirmations on shortening the grieving process in individuals who have recently gone through the dissolution of their romantic relationship. The research used a sample of 52 participants experiencing the breakup as non-initiators. The study focused on a 21-day program in which Group 1 repeated specific self-affirmations following a determined schedule, while Group 2 only participated in the control condition. The results of the research suggested that 21 days may be enough to make improvements in the life of the grieving person and that it contributes to regaining self-esteem and life satisfaction sooner after a romantic breakup. The results were compared to the unaffirmed group, which reported insignificant changes during the same time frame. The study supports the hypothesis that self-affirmations can reduce the duration of the grieving process in individuals who have recently gone through romantic break-up dissolution as non-initiators.

Keywords: *Self-Affirmations, Self-Esteem, Grief, Romantic Breakup, Negative Self-Talk, Intrapersonal Communication*

Individuals who have recently been rejected in their romantic relationships tend to have an internal dialogue based on negative messages. This can impact the overall mental health and emotional wellness. Romantic rejection often takes the shape of persistent self-criticism, self-doubt, and rumination. This raises a concern for increasing the quality of life of those who had recently broken up with their romantic partner (as non-initiators) by shortening the duration of the grieving process.

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Self-affirmation Shortens the Grieving Process after Romantic Abandonment and can Increase Self-esteem

This research used the audience of a YouTube channel dedicated to romantic relationship advice and coaching, with over 40,000 subscribers, of which 52 people (men and women) participated in the self-affirmation study.

Self-affirmations have been widely prescribed and used in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy with great results in altering behaviors, restoring self-esteem, overcoming negative thinking, and promoting optimism. For several decades, psychologists, neuroscientists, and communication experts have researched the benefits of self-affirmations on physical and mental health, academic and career performance, and interpersonal relationships.

Social psychological studies have argued that interventions such as self-affirmations have long-term positive effects (Cohen et al. 2006, 2009; Sherman et al. 2013). The success of positive affirmation practice is explained through the brain's capacity to form new neuropathways (neuroplasticity). Neuroplasticity is defined as the ability of the brain to change and adapt due to experience, reorganizing structures and functions, and creating new connections.

The brain's characteristic to change its structure and function even in old age has been intensely researched during the last decades. Studies illustrated the brain's capacity to rewire itself in response to exercise, experience, and imagination (Norman Doidge, 2010). Doidge states that individuals can change their brain anatomy simply by imagining. The repetition of thoughts in mental practice strengthens the existing neuronal connections and creates new ones.

Cascio et al. (2016) investigated the neural mechanisms of self-affirmation using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Participants who affirmed (in comparison with those who did not affirm) showed increased neural activity in reward-related regions of the brain (ventromedial prefrontal cortex and ventral striatum.) The research suggested that self-affirmations affect brain activity.

Wei-Ju Chen (2017) researched the effects of self-affirmation on emotional and cardiovascular responses and found benefits such as improved heart rate and lower ratings of negative affect.

Sherman et al. (2013) conducted a longitudinal study in middle school with Latino-American and European American students. The experiment found that affirmed Latino-American students achieved higher grades than non-affirmed Latino-American students and were less likely to have their daily feelings of academic fit and motivation undermined by identity threat.

Intrapersonal and interpersonal communication have been argued to play a role in the success of romantic relationships and the former can influence the latter. Positive self-talk and positive self-perception improve self-esteem and lead to building better interpersonal relationships. Wenberg and Wilmot (1973) stated that all communication responses take place within the individual in reaction to various communication cues and that intrapersonal communication provides the basis for all types of communication.

Self-affirmation Shortens the Grieving Process after Romantic Abandonment and can Increase Self-esteem

Negative self-talk refers to the individual's thoughts acting like an inner critic which can affect mental health. It was directly related to distress and anxiety (Kley et. al., 2012) and was found to negatively impact self-esteem.

The present research focuses on the transition from negative self-talk to positive internal dialogue through the practice of self-affirmations. The study observes the progress made by the participants as they follow through a daily routine which includes 10 repetitions of 3 different affirmations on a determined schedule for 21 days. Repetition and consistency stimulate neuroplasticity. Former studies have found that a high number of repetitions may lead to cortical reorganization (Kimberley et. al). The neural pathways that are not used are eliminated through a process called synaptic pruning, in which neural connections are reduced, while those that are used are strengthened. This process allows brain circuits to become more efficient (Hutchinson, 2011). These neuroscience findings encouraged the hypothesis of the present research that the consistent daily practice of positive self-affirmations may help individuals shorten the grieving process after romantic dissolution, facilitating a faster transition to normal life dynamics and promoting well-being. The objective of the study is to confirm this hypothesis.

METHODOLOGY

Initially 60 participants were selected (30 men and 30 women, aged 25-55) and were randomly assigned to the self-affirmation condition (Group 1) and non-affirmation condition (Group 2). An equal number of men and women were planned to participate in each condition. Initially, both groups completed an identical questionnaire to evaluate their current mindset, core beliefs, and self-esteem post-breakup. 8 participants did not complete the entire study and were excluded from the research results, which in the end included 52 participants, as showed in the table below:

Table 1: The demographic data of the participants

Participants	Age 20-30	Age 30-40	Age 40-50	Age 50-60
Men	8	9	8	1
Women	7	9	6	4

All participants were Romanian speakers, as the selection was made from the 40,000 subscribers of a Romanian-speaking YouTube channel², dedicated to romantic relationships.

Participants in Group 1 were asked to repeat a set of daily affirmations for 21 days. Even though the habit formation period has been disputed (21 days - Dr. Maxwell Maltz and 18 to 254 - Phillippa Lally et. al.), the presumption was that 21 days represented a suitable timeframe to ensure the participants' engagement and commitment in the process. Both groups (affirmed and unaffirmed) were asked to complete the same questionnaire for the control condition and again after 7, 14, and 21 days.

A total of 21 affirmations were developed respecting the criteria described below:

- Expressed in Present Tense;
- Self-addressed;
- Instantly memorable;
- Free of negative words (without verbal negations or words with negative connotations).

² "Sfaturi de Iubire – Beatrice Baiu", YouTube, www.youtube.com/@SfaturiDeIubire

Self-affirmation Shortens the Grieving Process after Romantic Abandonment and can Increase Self-esteem

The participants were asked to follow a specific schedule for their daily self-affirmation routine (see Appendix 1). Example of self-affirmations used in the research: “I wake up every morning feeling happy with myself”, “Today I will excel in everything I have to do”, “I am worthy, everyone appreciates my value”, “I have in me all the love I need”.

During the remaining weeks (up to 21 days), the affirmed group repeated the same self-affirmations as in week one.

The questionnaires that the participants were asked to complete focused on 5 measures: self-perception, introspection, self-esteem, life satisfaction, and dominant thoughts. For each measure, participants were given 4 pairs of 2 possible choices (one positive, one negative). For simplification, only the positive choices were included in the final calculations for both groups.

1. Self-perception - Self-perception theory states that individuals learn about their own beliefs, attitudes, and internal states by observing their own behavior and circumstances (Bem, 1965). Self-perception changes from one circumstance to the other (Bem, 1973). This measure was meant to notice if the participants perceive themselves differently as the prospect of the circumstance changes due to the practice of self-affirmations. For this first measure, participants were given 4 pairs of opposite adjectives regarding how they characterized themselves at the specific moment. The participants were asked to choose one word from each pair. The possible choices were: happy/unhappy, strong/weak, respected/disrespected, lucky/unlucky (see Appendix 2).

2. Introspection - Several studies found that self-reflection, self-observation, and self-monitoring play a key role in developing problem-solving strategies (Jäkel, Frank, and Schreiber, Cornell (2013). Cognitive processes involved in introspection were also considered to contribute to understanding problem-solving behavior (Jäkel, Frank and Schreiber, Cornell (2013). Therefore, introspection (the individuals' capacity to determine their inner feelings) was considered to be useful in investigating the shortening of the grieving process. For this measure, the participants were given 4 pairs of 2 opposite nouns and were asked to choose one word from each pair to define their emotions post-breakup (joy/sadness, hope/despair, satisfaction/disappointment, and enthusiasm/apathy).

3. Self-esteem - The experience of romantic rejection has been found to impact mood, behavior, and cognition (Finkel & Baumeister, 2019). In such circumstances, self-esteem decreases and the individual believes to be unworthy of receiving love. Studies found that the intensity of emotional distress following romantic rejection results from the imbalance in neurotransmitters triggered by abandonment (Fisher, 2006). The goal of this measure was to determine if the 21 days of self-affirmation practice determines an improvement in self-esteem. There were 4 pairs of 2 opposite statements (I like myself/I don't like myself, I am happy with myself/I am disappointed with myself, I have all it takes to be loved/I don't have all it takes to be loved, I am successful/I am a failure).

4. Life satisfaction - Outlook on life changes when individuals experience grief due to romantic dissolution. This measure was thought to determine if the practice of self-affirmations can lead to improvements in the individual's general attitude to life, following romantic abandonment. The participants were asked to choose one word from each of 4 pairs of adjectives to characterize their outlook on life (happy/sad, meaningful/ pointless, exciting/boring, easy/difficult).

5. Dominant Thoughts

Studies have found that times of high stress and negative life events can activate cognitive distortions (Beck, 1963). This may influence individuals' emotions and

Self-affirmation Shortens the Grieving Process after Romantic Abandonment and can Increase Self-esteem

perceptions, which ultimately dictate their actions. In this last measure, participants were asked to detect their dominant thoughts by choosing one word of each of 4 pairs of opposite statements (thoughts about my career and hobbies/thoughts about my ex, sense of security/fear of abandonment, motivation/fear of failure, desire to move on/desire to rekindle the relationship).

RESULTS

The prediction was that Group 1 (the affirmed participants) and Group 2 (the unaffirmed participants) would differ. The affirmed participants were expected to experience improvements throughout the program and by the end of the 21-day period (more positive choices in their replies to the questionnaires), while the unaffirmed participants would have had a steadier evolution (the number of positive choices was expected to remain steady).

After the data was analyzed, no significant increases were found between the pre-affirmation scores and the post-affirmations scores in all measures for Group 1 after 7 days. Moderate increases were found between the pre-affirmation scores and the post-affirmation scores in all measures for Group 1 after 14 days. Significant increases were found between the pre-affirmation scores and the post-affirmation scores in all measures for Group 1 after 21 days.

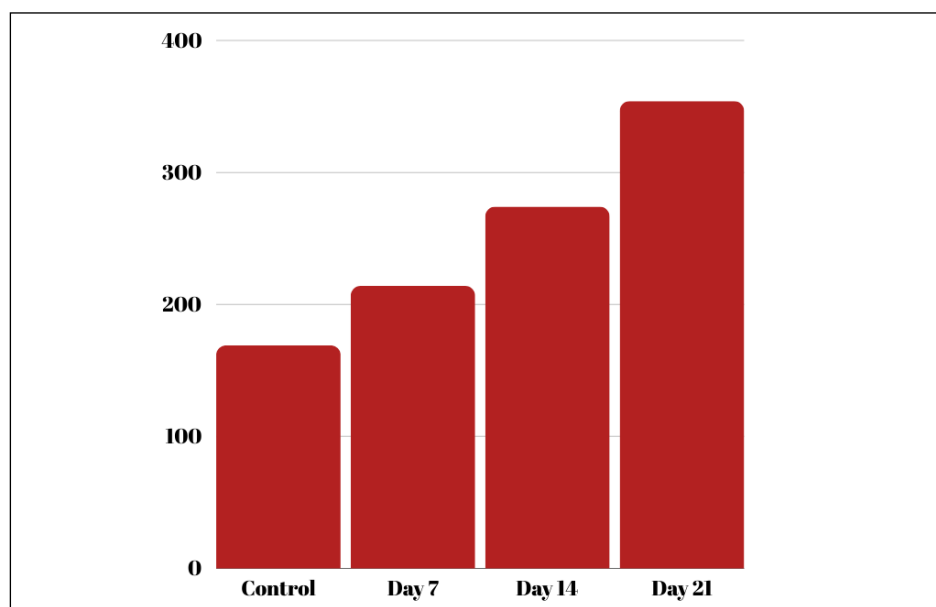


Fig. 1 – Score evolution within Group 1 after 7, 14 and 21 days.

When comparing the variables in Group 2, only slight differences were found between the control condition scores and the scores after day 7, day 14, and day 21.

Self-affirmation Shortens the Grieving Process after Romantic Abandonment and can Increase Self-esteem

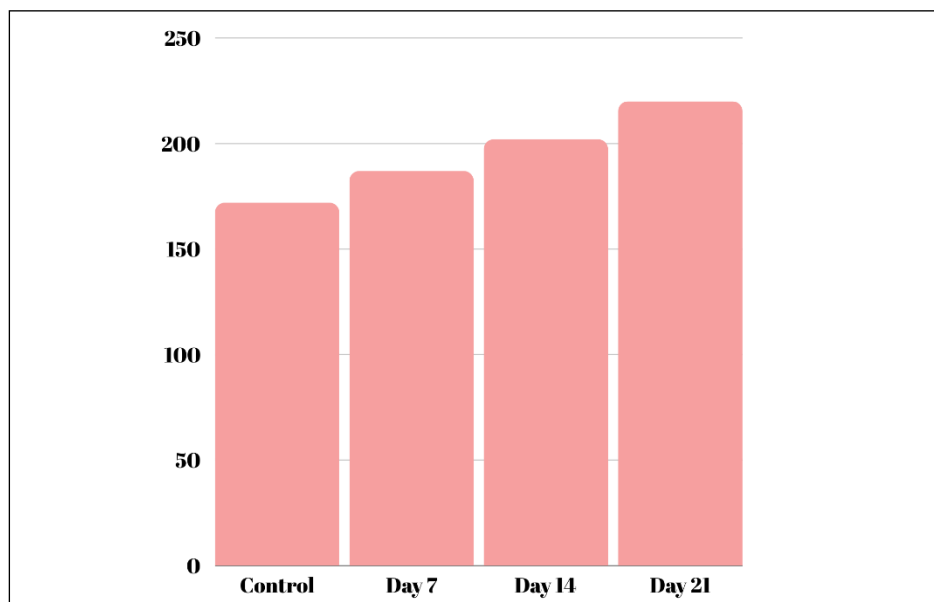


Fig. 2 – Score evolution within Group 2 after 7, 14 and 21 days.

The most significant differences inside Group 1 between the control condition and day 21 were noticed in the “Dominant Thoughts” measure (88,88 %), followed by “Introspection” (69,56%), “Self-perception” (75,72%), “Life Satisfaction” (75,47%), and “Self-esteem” (51,51%). The results suggest that Self-Affirmations have an important impact on the individual’s dominant thoughts, perception, life satisfaction and self-esteem. The most significant changes in the unaffirmed group (Group 2) between the control condition and day 21 were noticed in the “Self-perception” measure (41,75%), the rest of the changes were found as follows: “Dominant Thoughts” (35,29), “Introspection” (25,64%), “Life Satisfaction” (12,3%), “Self-esteem” (10,9%). This can suggest that in a non-affirmation condition there is a slight improvement in the grieving process after romantic breakup. When comparing the percentage variables in the two groups the research found that all the measures were significantly increased in the affirmed group vs. the unaffirmed group, between the control condition and day 21.

Table 2: The comparison of all measures between Group 1 and Group 2 expressed in percentages.

Participants	Self-Perception	Introspection	Self-esteem	Life satisfaction	Dominant Thoughts
Group 1	75,72%	69,56%	51,51%	75,47%	88,88 %
Group 2	41,75%	25,64%	10,9%	12,3%	35,29

When comparing the variables between Group 1 and Group 2, no differences were found after day 7 for „Self-perception” measure, moderate changes were noticed after the 14th day and significant changes were noticed after the 21st day.

Self-affirmation Shortens the Grieving Process after Romantic Abandonment and can Increase Self-esteem

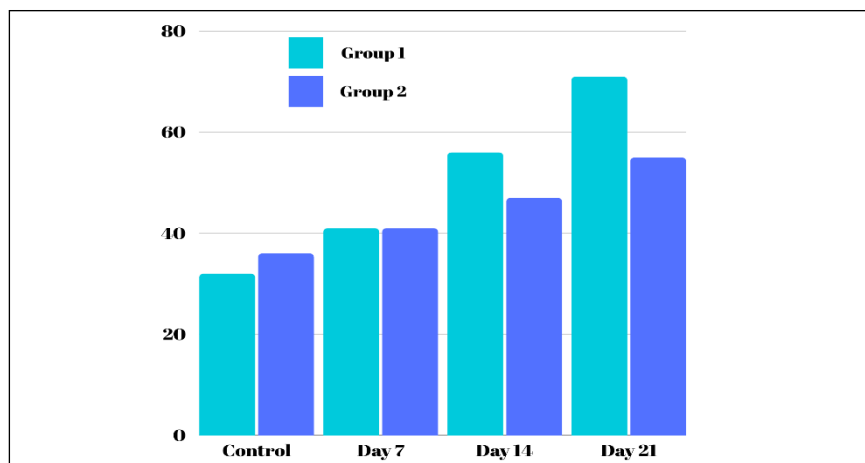


Fig. 3 - Variables between Group 1 and Group 2 for “Self-Perception” measure.

For the “Introspection” measure, the most significant difference was noticed on day 21.

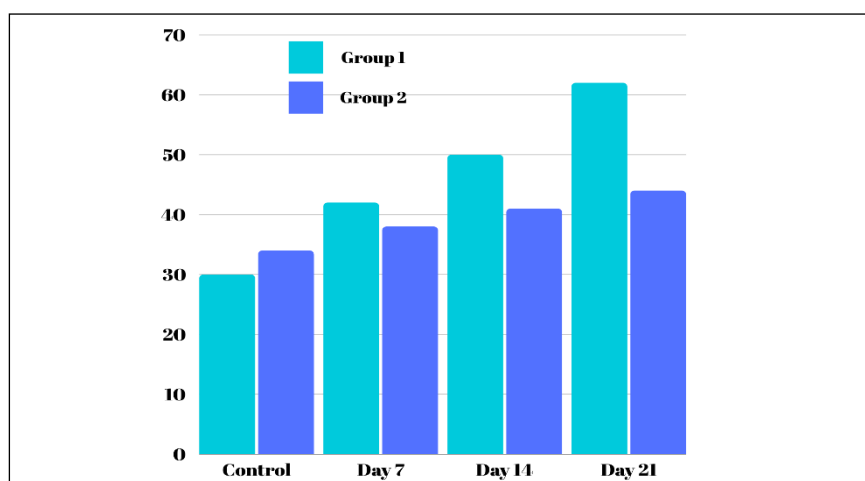


Fig. 4 - Variables between Group 1 and Group 2 for “Introspection” measure.

When comparing the variable between Group 1 and Group 2 for the “Self-esteem” measure an evident improvement was noticed for Group 1.

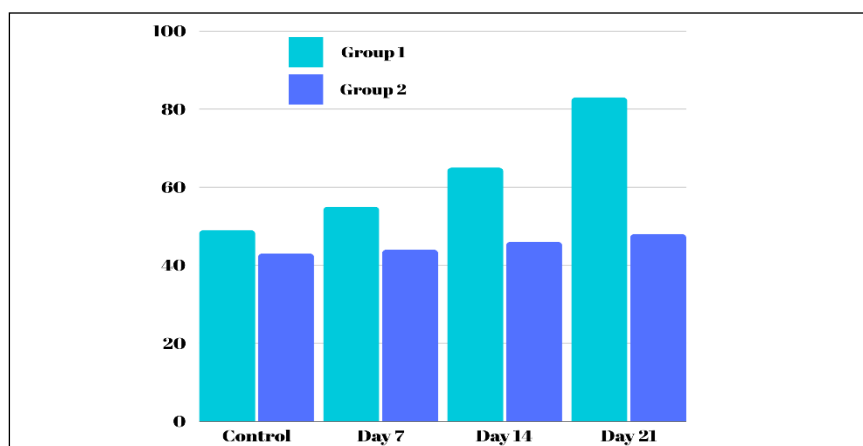


Fig. 5 - Variables between Group 1 and Group 2 for “Self-Esteem” measure.

Self-affirmation Shortens the Grieving Process after Romantic Abandonment and can Increase Self-esteem

For “Life Satisfaction” Measure, moderate differences were found after the 7th day as compared to the control condition, significant changes were found after the 14th and 21st day.

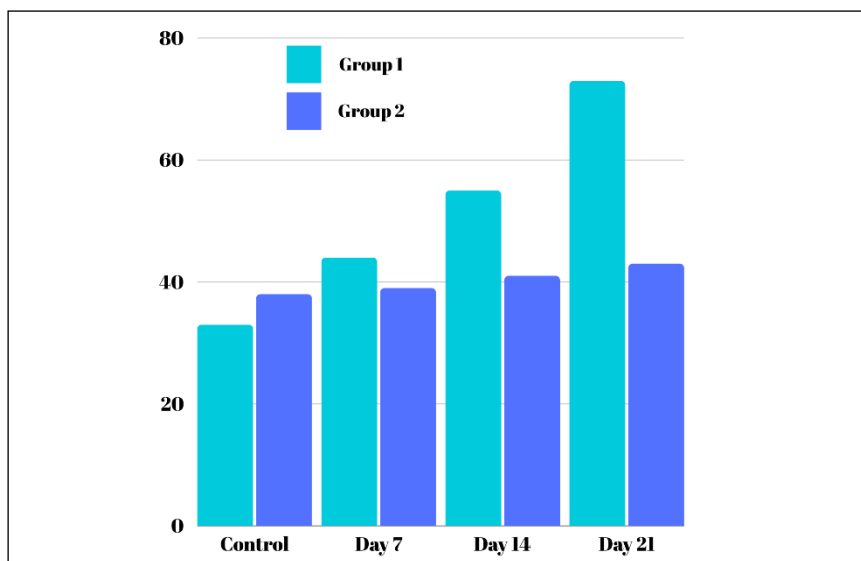


Fig. 6 - Variables between Group 1 and Group 2 for “Life Satisfaction” measure.

For the last measure “Dominant Thoughts”, the scores followed the same dynamic as in the rest of the measures, showing a moderate increase for Group 1 after the 7th day and significant progressive increases after the 14th and the 21st day.

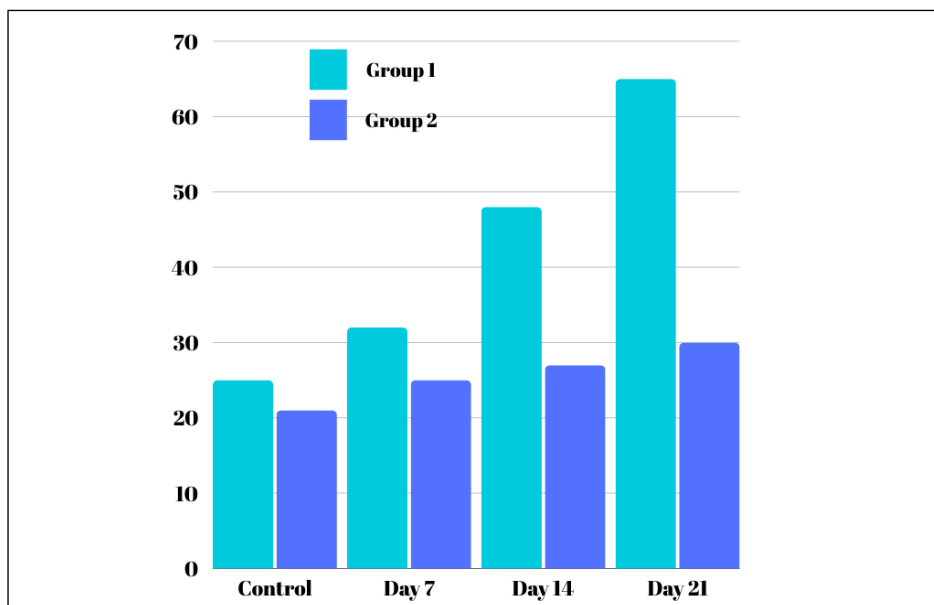


Fig. 7 - Variables between Group 1 and Group 2 for “Life Satisfaction” measure.

When comparing the variables of the total scores between the two groups, it was found that the affirmed group made significant improvement compared with the unaffirmed group, which made only slight improvements.

Self-affirmation Shortens the Grieving Process after Romantic Abandonment and can Increase Self-esteem

Table 3 Data Summary

Groups	N	Σx	Mean	Σx^2	Std. Dev.
Group 1	3	842	280.67	246188	70.2377
Group 2	3	609	203	124173	16.5227
Total	6	1451	241.833	370361	

Table 4 ANOVA Summary

Source	DF	SS	MS	F-Stat	P-Value
Between Groups	1	9048.17	9048.17	3.48	0
Within Groups	4	10412.67	2603.17		
Total	5	19460.84			

DISCUSSION

While some individuals are reluctant to the practice of self-affirmations, due to the lack of trust in the benefits of the process, others are open to using the brain's capacity to restructure cognitively.

Claude Steele originally proposed self-affirmation theory in 1988, focusing on how individuals adapt to information or experiences perceived as threatening to their self-integrity. More recent studies have suggested that self-affirmations can improve education and health, and have a positive impact on relationship outcomes. These benefits are expected to last for several months or years (Cohen and Sherman, 2014).

During periods of high stress, like the ones following romantic abandonment, individuals have difficulty making clear judgments and rational decisions. The period of grief after the break-up is dominated by negative self-talk that can trigger and aggravate symptoms of depression and anxiety. A recent study indicated that negative self-statements significantly predicted anxiety (Treadwell, Kimberli R. H., Kendall, Philip C., 2022). With this conclusion being suggested, it becomes intuitive that replacing internal negative dialogue with positive self-talk can lead to benefits or at least prevent symptoms of depression and anxiety from intensifying.

Other findings illustrate that positive affirmations have a significant contribution on overall self-esteem and well-being. The term "self-esteem" describes the individual subjective assessment including characteristics such as abilities, worth, morals, and value. Self-esteem impacts different aspects of life, such as interpersonal relationships, mental health, career, and academic performance. Self-affirmations have benefits in threatening situations, can increase well-being, reduce stress, and induce positive changes in behavior (Sherman, 2013; Cohen and Sherman, 2014).

Romantic rejection has a significant impact on self-esteem causing long-term grief. After the dissolution of the relationship, the individual has to face a variety of emotions and thoughts that are difficult to manage. Self-affirmations have been reasoned to broaden an individual's overall perspective and reduce the effects of negative emotions (Sherman, 2013; Cohen and Sherman, 2014).

The main objective of this study is to determine whether the practice of self-affirmations is able to shorten the grieving process after romantic dissolution. The findings imply that the

Self-affirmation Shortens the Grieving Process after Romantic Abandonment and can Increase Self-esteem

consistent practice of self-affirmations formulated respecting specific criteria (expressed in Present Tense, self-addressed, instantly memorable, and free of negative words) has a beneficial impact on accelerating individuals' capacity to restore self-esteem, to change negative thinking patterns, and to acquire a positive outlook on life. Repetition and consistency were argued to be important factors in the process. This research brings new information that the brain is prone to changes and capable of producing positive progress in a relatively short amount of time through the restructuring of intrapersonal communication. There were significant differences found from the pre-test to post-test (21st day) on all six variables of self-perception, introspection, self-esteem, outlook on life, judgment clarity, and dominant thoughts.

When comparing the scores between the affirmed group and the unaffirmed group, significant differences were found. While Group 1 has made significant progress in all measured variables (“Dominant Thoughts” - 88,88 %, “Self-perception” - 75,72%, “Life Satisfaction” - 75,47%, “Introspection” - 69,56% and “Self-esteem” - 51,51%), the unaffirmed group reported only slight positive changes during the same time frame. The conclusion was consistent with the hypothesis, meaning that self-affirmations are able to shorten the grieving process in individuals who have recently gone through a romantic breakup (as non-initiators), on the condition that the formulation of the affirmations respects the specific criteria mentioned earlier in the research.

Even if the benefits of the post-affirmation condition could be questioned as purely subjective, so could the pre-affirmation condition. Acknowledging this, the perceived benefits on the individual remain valid, meaning that self-affirmations are able to improve the quality of life overall, increase self-esteem, and shorten the duration of the grieving process following romantic abandonment.

One limitation of this study was the inability to supervise the participants in remaining consistent to the program. An encouraging e-mail was sent once a week as a reminder for the participants in Group 1 to continue the practice.

Another limitation was that 4 people in Group 1 who started the study gave up during the 21 days and were not included in the test results. 4 participants were excluded from the control group (Group 2) to equalize the total number of each group.

When asked why they gave up the affirmation practice, 2 participants responded that the program was too long, 1 responded that he was already feeling the improvements he expected and was no longer motivated to continue, and another responded that he was not trusting the process. This data suggests that people are not willing to engage in practices that are perceived as long and are prone to stop perpetuating the effort when achieving premature results.

Future research has in view a follow-up of the same participants in Group 1 to determine if the effects of the self-affirmations practice have long-term benefits. Group 2 is to be included in a future study to determine the duration of the grieving process in the unaffirmed condition.

CONCLUSION

Self-affirmations formulated in a correct manner may positively influence the cognition process, improving self-image, life satisfaction, and restoring self-esteem. All these improved variables may reduce the duration of the grieving process in individuals who have recently gone through a romantic break-up as non-initiators.

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Self-affirmation Shortens the Grieving Process after Romantic Abandonment and can Increase Self-esteem

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX 1

Week one, day 1:

	Self-Affirmations	Time of day	Number of repetitions
1.	<i>“I wake up every morning feeling happy with myself”</i>	Morning	10
2.	<i>“I deserve love from me and from everyone”</i>	Noon	10
3.	<i>“I go to bed happy with my achievements today.”</i>	Noon	10

Self-affirmation Shortens the Grieving Process after Romantic Abandonment and can Increase Self-esteem

Week one, day 2:

	Self-Affirmations	Time of day	Number of repetitions
1.	<i>"Today I choose myself"</i>	Morning	10
2.	<i>"I am exactly who I want to be"</i>	Noon	10
3.	<i>"I have in me all the love I need"</i>	Noon	10

Week one, day 3:

	Self-Affirmations	Time of day	Number of repetitions
1.	<i>"Today I am free to move on to bigger and better things"</i>	Morning	10
2.	<i>"I feel free, happy and relaxed"</i>	Noon	10
3.	<i>"I forgive everyone because I deserve to live in peace"</i>	Noon	10

Week one, day 4:

	Self-Affirmations	Time of day	Number of repetitions
1.	<i>"I am grateful for all the joyful things in my life"</i>	Morning	10
2.	<i>"I radiate joy everywhere I go"</i>	Noon	10
3.	<i>"I have all the reasons to sleep peacefully"</i>	Noon	10

Week one, day 5:

	Self-Affirmations	Time of day	Number of repetitions
1.	<i>"Today I will excel in everything I have to do"</i>	Morning	10
2.	<i>"I know that the love for myself allows others to love me too"</i>	Noon	10
3.	<i>"I am able to achieve everything I want"</i>	Noon	10

Week one, day 6:

	Self-Affirmations	Time of day	Number of repetitions
1.	<i>"I have in me all the love I need"</i>	Morning	10
2.	<i>"I am worthy, everyone appreciates my value."</i>	Noon	10
3.	<i>"I am wanted by everyone that matters"</i>	Noon	10

Week one, day 7:

	Self-Affirmations	Time of day	Number of repetitions
1.	<i>"The love for myself is a priority"</i>	Morning	10
2.	<i>"I have the capacity to be a successful person in all respects."</i>	Noon	10
3.	<i>"I treat myself with respect and honour and so does everyone else."</i>	Noon	10

Week 2 and 3 used the same affirmation program.