

## **Attachment, Oxytocin, and Cortisol Reactivity in Young Women after Romantic Break-up**

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**INTRO:** Rates of adolescent depression & sexual activity continue to rise in the U.S., particularly among females. Correlational relationships between these phenomena have been identified, including sexual behavior and relational loss to be predictors for early depression. Oxytocin (OT), a neuropeptide secreted by mammals of both sexes, has been an important variable in studies regarding attachment and stress response. Evolutionarily, young women are at the peak of childbearing years and attachment potential. However, sociocultural norms have delayed childbearing and formal pair bonding, as young adults engage in more sexual relationships before formally committing to one partner, which could contribute to more distress when these relationships end. This study will answer, "Does a correlation exist between relationship severance, OT and cortisol secretion, distress, and history of attachment security in young women?"

**METHODS:** A mixed-methods non-experimental exploratory design will look for the existence of a relationship between relationship severance, OT secretion, cortisol secretion, distress, and history of attachment in young women who have recently experienced a romantic relationship break-up. Subjects will participate in a two-part study. First, participants will complete three instruments regarding personal/sexual history, depression/mental health, and parental attachment. At the second meeting, the subject will participate in a structured interview regarding the recently severed relationship. Salivary samples of both OT and cortisol will be collected at set points during the interview questions to examine stress reactivity during reminiscence. Each subject's neurohormonal reactivity, story, and history of attachment security will be studied as an individual case. A subsequent analysis will look for the existence of patterns across cases.

**FINDINGS:** Pilot study is currently underway. This research is intended to advance knowledge in two ways. First, it will add to the body of knowledge of the OT/cortisol relationship in young women dealing with relational distress. Also, it will explore the "goodness of fit" of the attachment context hypothesis to a specific stressor common to young women: severance of a committed, heterosexual, sexual relationship. Collected data will provide possible evidence of a correlation between these factors and identifying early risk factors in and interventions for emotionally vulnerable young women.