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Dreams of Former Romantic Partners: A Critical Narrative Review of Memory, Attachment, And Psychological Closure

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ABSTRACT : This article examines why former romantic partners may continue to appear in dreams long after a relationship has ended, particularly when individuals perceive themselves as having moved forward in their lives. A critical narrative review was conducted to examine existing research on dreaming, autobiographical memory, emotional processing, romantic relationship dissolution, attachment, psychological closure, and traumatic loss. The review indicates that former-partner dreams may arise from the continued accessibility or reactivation of autobiographical memories associated with emotionally significant relationships. Attachment processes, incomplete psychological closure, and distress following particularly difficult relationship experiences may also contribute in some circumstances. However, the occurrence of a former-partner dream alone does not establish unresolved romantic feelings, continuing attachment, or psychological trauma. Greater interpretive value lies in the individual's waking experiences, particularly persistent yearning, rumination, intrusive memories, contact-seeking, or continuing distress. The article therefore argues that former-partner dreams should not be interpreted through a single psychological explanation. Their significance is better understood through the interaction between memory, emotion, attachment, personal meaning, and present psychological functioning. This perspective offers a more cautious and nuanced understanding of why a former romantic partner may reappear in dreams years after a relationship has ended.

KEYWORDS: attachment, autobiographical memory, dreaming, emotional processing, psychological closure, relationship dissolution

INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships often become embedded in the personal histories through which individuals understand themselves, their experiences, and important periods of their lives. When a relationship ends, however, the termination of the relationship does not necessarily mean that its psychological representation disappears. Memories of a former partner may remain accessible long after the relationship has ended, sometimes being evoked by particular places, songs, anniversaries, loneliness, or other experiences associated with the past relationship. Recent research involving 2,203 individuals found that people continued to evoke moderately vivid representations of former romantic partners even years after a breakup, including memories of positive and difficult experiences as well as emotions such as regret, guilt, and shame (Farber et al., 2025). This persistence is important because it highlights a distinction that is often blurred in everyday understanding of "moving on": psychological adjustment does not necessarily require the disappearance of memories associated with a former partner (Hayuni et al., 2023).

One particularly intriguing expression of this persistence is the appearance of a former romantic partner in dreams. An individual may consider a relationship long resolved, have no intention of reconnecting with the former partner, and yet unexpectedly dream about that person years after the relationship ended. Such experiences are commonly interpreted as evidence of unresolved feelings or an unconscious desire to return to the relationship. However, this interpretation assumes a direct relationship between dream content and current romantic attachment that cannot be established from the occurrence of a dream alone. Empirical research has demonstrated that former romantic partners do appear in dreams. In a diary study involving 1,612 dream reports from 425 participants, Schredl and Wood (2021) identified 77 dreams involving former partners, demonstrating that former partner constitute a recognisable category of dream content. The emotional characteristics of these dreams were also not reducible to longing or romantic desire; interactions with former partners were more negatively toned than interactions with current partners, while ex-partner dreams also contained positive emotions and friendliness (Schredl & Wood, 2021).

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Evidence from a larger retrospective study points in a similar direction. Schredl et al. (2020) examined dream experiences among 1,695 participants and found that dreams involving former partners could occur even years after separation. Although these dreams were generally less positive than dreams involving current partners, their occurrence was not restricted to the period immediately following relationship dissolution (Schredl et al., 2020). Taken together, these findings raise a question that is more complex than whether a person has or has not "moved on." The more meaningful question is why a former romantic partner can remain present in dream experiences after the relationship itself has become psychologically distant.

One possible explanation concerns the continuity between waking life and dream content. The continuity hypothesis proposes that dreams incorporate aspects of waking experiences, particularly experiences that are personally significant or emotionally salient. Research has provided evidence that waking experiences can be incorporated into subsequent dreams, although such incorporation does not necessarily involve a literal replay of the original experience. For example, research on waking experience and dreaming has demonstrated that personally relevant experiences may become incorporated into dream content, while individual differences influence the extent to which such experiences are represented during sleep (Wang et al., 2021). From this perspective, the appearance of a former partner in a dream may reflect the continuing accessibility of an important autobiographical experience rather than the continuation of a romantic relationship at the psychological level.

This distinction becomes particularly important because a former partner may represent more than the person themselves. A significant romantic relationship may become associated with a particular period of life, specific places and routines, important emotional experiences, and a particular understanding of the self. Consequently, a former partner may remain part of an individual's autobiographical representation even when the individual no longer wishes to return to the relationship. Recent evidence supports this broader view. Farber et al. (2025) found that representations of former romantic partners could persist for years and were not limited to positive romantic memories; individuals reported reflections concerning both good and difficult experiences, as well as a range of emotions and thoughts concerning the former relationship. This suggests that the psychological persistence of an ex-partner should not automatically be equated with persistent romantic desire.

At the same time, it would be premature to conclude that former-partner dreams are always unrelated to unresolved attachment. Relationship dissolution can involve continuing attachment, longing, distress, and difficulties in achieving psychological closure. Recent research has demonstrated associations between attachment-related characteristics and post-breakup processes, while emerging work on psychological closure indicates that individuals differ considerably in how they integrate a former relationship into their subsequent lives (Eisma et al., 2022; Roe et al., 2026). In particular, research on closure suggests that greater time since relationship termination and involvement in a new relationship are associated with greater closure, whereas attachment anxiety and continued contact-seeking are associated with lower closure (Roe et al., 2026). Thus, unresolved attachment remains a theoretically plausible explanation in some cases, but the presence of a former partner in a dream cannot by itself be treated as evidence of unresolved romantic feelings.

The distinction between memory persistence and emotional persistence is therefore central to understanding this phenomenon. A person can remember a former partner vividly without wanting that person back. Likewise, a person can experience a dream involving an ex-partner without experiencing meaningful romantic attachment during waking life. Treating these experiences as equivalent risks confusing three different psychological phenomena: the occurrence of a dream, the interpretation assigned to that dream, and the individual's current emotional orientation toward the former partner. This distinction is particularly important because the interpretation of a dream may itself become emotionally consequential. If an individual assumes that dreaming about an ex means that hidden feelings must still exist, an otherwise ordinary dream experience may be interpreted as evidence of unfinished emotional business. Conversely, dismissing every former-partner dream as psychologically meaningless would overlook situations in which such dreams occur alongside continuing attachment or unresolved distress.

The present review therefore approaches dreams involving former romantic partners without assuming that they represent either continuing love or complete emotional neutrality. Instead, it considers the phenomenon through several interconnected psychological processes, including dream–waking life continuity, autobiographical and emotional memory, representations of former romantic partners, attachment, and psychological closure. The purpose is not to determine what a particular dream "really means," but to examine what existing behavioural and psychological evidence allows us to reasonably infer from the recurrence of a former partner in dream content.

Accordingly, this critical review examines the psychological mechanisms that may explain why former romantic partners continue to appear in dreams following relationship dissolution, particularly when individuals perceive themselves as having psychologically moved on. The review distinguishes the persistence of a former partner as a memory or autobiographical representation from evidence of continuing romantic attachment and considers unresolved attachment as one possible, rather than inevitable, explanation. By bringing together research on dreaming, memory, romantic relationship dissolution, attachment, and psychological closure, the review aims to provide a more nuanced account of a familiar but poorly understood experience: dreaming about someone from the past without necessarily wanting them back in the present.

1. Conceptualising Dreams of Former Romantic Partners

The persistence of a former romantic partner in dream content is difficult to interpret when the relationship itself appears to have been left in the past. An individual may have accepted the separation, built a different life, and no longer wish to reconnect, yet still encounter the former partner during sleep. This is not an unusual empirical observation. Schredl et al. (2020) reported dreams involving former partners among individuals whose relationships had ended years earlier, while Schredl and Wood (2021) identified 77 ex-partner dreams in a diary study comprising 1,612 dream reports. The emotional character of these dreams also varied. Some interactions were negative, whereas others involved positive emotions or friendliness. The findings therefore make it difficult to treat the appearance of an ex-partner as a straightforward sign of romantic longing.

A more useful starting point is to consider what remains after a relationship has ended. The person may no longer occupy a meaningful place in the individual's present relational life, but the relationship itself remains part of that person's history. Memories of places, conversations, routines, conflicts, affection, and important moments do not disappear simply because the relationship has ended. Farber et al. (2025) found that representations of former romantic partners could remain accessible years after separation and could be brought to mind by experiences such as music, anniversaries, loneliness, and memories of both positive and difficult events. What persists, then, may not be a wish for the person to return, but a representation of something that once mattered.

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This is where the idea of "moving on" needs some care. Moving on does not necessarily mean forgetting, just as psychological closure does not require a former partner to disappear completely from one's personal history. Recent work on breakup closure suggests that people differ in how they make sense of what remains after a significant relationship ends. Time since the breakup, being in a new relationship, and the circumstances surrounding the termination were associated with greater closure, whereas attachment anxiety and continued attempts to maintain contact were associated with lower closure (Roe et al., 2026). These findings make it possible to think of closure as a process of integrating the ended relationship rather than erasing it from memory. A person may therefore have reached a meaningful degree of acceptance while still retaining memories or occasionally dreaming about the former partner.

At the same time, the possibility of unresolved attachment should not simply be dismissed. Research on breakup distress has linked attachment-related characteristics with continued psychological responses to a former partner, including automatic approach tendencies toward the ex-partner (Eisma et al., 2022). Yet this does not mean that every dream involving an ex-partner reflects such attachment. The dream itself cannot tell us whether the former partner appears because of continuing longing, the accessibility of an emotionally significant memory, or some combination of processes. The more useful question is therefore not simply *why does the ex-partner still appear?*, but what makes this particular relationship representation remain psychologically accessible, and what does its presence mean in the context of the individual's current emotional life? For this reason, former-partner dreams are better understood at the intersection of dream experience, autobiographical memory, emotional significance, and relationship representation. This approach leaves room for unresolved attachment where the wider evidence supports it, while avoiding the assumption that remembering or dreaming about someone necessarily means wanting them back. It also provides a more appropriate basis for examining the phenomenon without reducing a complex psychological experience to the simple conclusion that there are "unfinished feelings."

2. Autobiographical Memory and Emotional Processing

A former romantic partner can remain part of autobiographical memory long after the relationship itself has ended. This is understandable when a relationship is viewed not simply as an interaction between two people, but as an experience embedded within a particular period of life. Places, routines, conversations, conflicts, intimacy, and significant events can become connected to the relationship and remain accessible even when its emotional meaning has changed. Recent evidence supports this distinction. Farber et al. (2025) found that representations of former romantic partners remained accessible years after separation and could be evoked by experiences such as music, anniversaries, loneliness, and memories of both positive and difficult events. The finding is important because it suggests that the continued accessibility of an ex-partner may reflect the persistence of a meaningful autobiographical representation rather than an enduring wish to resume the relationship.

Dreaming provides one possible context in which such representations may become activated. Research on sleep and memory indicates that waking experiences can be incorporated into dream content, although this relationship is neither complete nor predictable. A meta-analysis by Hudachek and Wamsley (2023) found a significant but modest association between learning-related dream content and subsequent memory performance, with substantial variation across studies. This variability cautions against treating dreaming simply as a mechanism through which memories are consolidated. Rather, sleep may provide conditions in which elements of previously encoded experiences are reactivated, transformed, or recombined. The processing of emotional memories during sleep is similarly complex, with outcomes depending on characteristics of the memory and the conditions under which it was formed and later retrieved (Cunningham et al., 2022). Thus, the presence of a former partner in a dream should not be understood as a literal replay of the relationship or as evidence that the memory remains emotionally unresolved.

Emotion nevertheless deserves particular attention because romantic relationships often contain experiences that are personally significant in ways that ordinary daily events are not. Attachment, intimacy, rejection, conflict, loss, and major changes in one's sense of self can all become intertwined with memories of the relationship. Such experiences may leave representations that remain psychologically salient even after the relationship has ceased to occupy a central place in waking life (Norshahira et al., 2023). Research on dream affect and memory provides some support for a relationship between emotional experiences during dreaming and memory retention, although the evidence does not suggest that stronger dream emotion directly indicates stronger attachment to the person appearing in the dream (du Plessis & Lipinska, 2023). Emotional intensity, therefore, may tell us something about the significance of the underlying experience without telling us what the individual currently feels about the former partner.

These findings offer a plausible explanation for why an ex-partner may appear in dreams many years after a relationship has ended. A significant relationship can remain represented in autobiographical memory long after the relationship itself has ended. Some experiences may retain their emotional significance even when the relationship no longer carries the same meaning in waking life. During sleep, aspects of these memories may become activated and find their way into dream content. This does not necessarily mean that the individual wants the former partner back. Memory may explain why a former partner remains accessible during dreaming, but it cannot tell us why that representation becomes active at a particular moment or whether unresolved attachment is involved. This distinction becomes especially important when considering individuals who feel that they have moved on but continue to experience occasional dreams involving a former partner.

3. Attachment, Psychological Closure and Traumatic Loss

A former partner may remain psychologically significant even after the relationship has ended. Attachment offers one possible explanation, particularly when the emotional bond has not fully weakened following separation. Recent longitudinal evidence suggests that attachment to an ex-partner generally declines over time, although the process differs between individuals. Chong and Fraley (2026) reported a midpoint of approximately 4.18 years for the decline of affective attachment following romantic separation. Attachment orientation and continued contact with the former partner were also associated with differences in the rate of detachment. This suggests that the passage of time alone cannot determine whether an attachment bond has been fully relinquished.

The persistence of attachment may become more apparent when separation is accompanied by yearning, rumination, or attempts to restore the relationship. Eisma et al. (2022) found associations between attachment anxiety, rumination, breakup distress, and continued attachment-related responses to a former partner. These patterns provide a stronger basis for considering unresolved attachment than the occurrence

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of a dream alone. An ex-partner who appears occasionally in a dream may simply remain accessible within autobiographical memory. A different interpretation becomes more plausible when the dreams occur alongside persistent preoccupation or distress in waking life.

Psychological closure offers another way of understanding what may remain after a relationship ends. Closure does not necessarily mean forgetting the former partner or eliminating every memory associated with the relationship. It may involve developing an acceptable understanding of the ending and incorporating the experience into one's subsequent life. Roe et al. (2026) found that closure was associated with factors such as greater time since termination and involvement in a new relationship. Attachment anxiety and continued attempts to maintain contact with the former partner were associated with lower closure. These findings suggest that moving forward and remembering are not necessarily contradictory. A person may have built a different life while still carrying memories that remain personally meaningful.

The nature of the breakup may also matter. Not every relationship dissolution should be considered traumatic, but some breakups can be psychologically disruptive. Van der Watt et al. (2023) found substantial post-traumatic stress symptoms among young adults following romantic relationship dissolution. Their findings suggest that relationship loss can have effects that extend beyond ordinary sadness or disappointment for some individuals. This possibility may be particularly relevant when a relationship involved severe rejection, betrayal, sudden loss, or other experiences that remain distressing. It would nevertheless be inappropriate to interpret every former-partner dream through a trauma framework. Current evidence does not establish that dreaming about an ex-partner years after a breakup is, in itself, evidence of unresolved trauma.

The number of years since a breakup therefore tells us relatively little about the meaning of a former-partner dream on its own. Six or ten years may seem like a considerable period of time, yet psychological adjustment does not occur according to a fixed timetable. What matters more is the context in which the dream occurs. Persistent yearning, rumination, intrusive recollections, strong emotional reactions to reminders, contact-seeking, or continuing distress would provide stronger grounds for considering unresolved attachment, incomplete closure, or the aftermath of a particularly difficult breakup. An occasional dream in an otherwise well-adjusted individual provides much weaker evidence of these processes. The dream may simply reflect the continued accessibility of an important memory without indicating that the individual remains emotionally attached to the former partner.

4. Interpreting Dreams Involving Former Romantic Partners

Dreams involving a former romantic partner can easily be understood as a sign that some feelings remain. This interpretation is understandable, particularly when the dream feels vivid or emotionally intense. It does not, however, establish that the individual still wants the relationship, misses the former partner, or has been unable to move forward. Dreams may draw upon experiences that remain accessible in memory without reflecting the person's present intentions or emotional priorities. The appearance of a former partner therefore needs to be considered within the individual's broader psychological experience rather than interpreted in isolation.

A former relationship can remain part of autobiographical memory even when it no longer holds the same place in a person's present life. Memories associated with that period may become active when the individual encounters familiar places, music, situations, or other reminders. Farber et al. (2025) found that representations of former romantic partners could remain accessible years after separation and could be activated by different experiences. A former partner appearing during sleep may therefore reflect the reactivation of an older memory rather than a desire to restore the relationship. The fact that a memory remains accessible does not necessarily mean that the person remains emotionally attached to its source.

The emotional intensity of a dream also needs to be interpreted with care. Waking from a vivid dream can create the impression that the experience has revealed something that has remained hidden from conscious awareness. Yet emotional intensity does not, on its own, establish what the emotion means. A past relationship may remain meaningful because of what happened during that period without remaining emotionally unfinished. An individual may remember a former relationship with sadness, affection, regret, gratitude, or discomfort while still being fully engaged in the present. The emotion experienced in a dream may therefore reflect the significance of the memory rather than a continuing desire for the former partner.

The interpretation changes when the dream occurs alongside persistent difficulties in waking life. Yearning, rumination, intrusive memories, attempts to re-establish contact, or continuing distress may indicate that the former relationship still carries unresolved psychological significance. Eisma et al. (2022) found associations between attachment anxiety, rumination, breakup distress, and continued attachment-related responses to a former partner. Chong and Fraley (2026) similarly showed that attachment to a former partner can persist for different lengths of time across individuals. These findings suggest that unresolved attachment is better understood through a pattern of thoughts, emotions, and behaviour than through the occurrence of a dream alone.

The same distinction applies to psychological closure and traumatic loss. A person may accept the end of a relationship while retaining memories that remain personally meaningful. Another person may continue to experience distress long after a breakup, particularly when the relationship ended through betrayal, rejection, sudden loss, or other deeply distressing circumstances. The passage of time cannot therefore be treated as a simple measure of psychological resolution. What matters is whether aspects of the former relationship continue to affect the person's present emotional or relational functioning.

An occasional dream involving a former romantic partner should therefore not be treated as evidence of unresolved love, attachment, or trauma. It may reflect the continued accessibility of an important autobiographical memory or the activation of an older emotional representation by something in the present. The more meaningful question is whether the dream occurs within a broader pattern of emotional or relational difficulty during waking life. Without such evidence, interpreting the dream as proof that an individual has not moved on risks assigning a psychological meaning that the dream itself cannot establish.

5. An Integrative Perspective

The persistence of dreams involving a former romantic partner is unlikely to have a single psychological explanation. Autobiographical memory provides one possible account. A significant relationship can remain represented in memory long after its practical and emotional role in everyday life has changed. Emotional salience may also make some memories more accessible, particularly when the relationship involved

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experiences that were personally meaningful. These processes may help explain why a former partner reappears in dreams without requiring the assumption that romantic attachment has remained unchanged.

Attachment and psychological closure provide another perspective. Some individuals may take longer to disengage from a former attachment figure, particularly when separation is accompanied by yearning, rumination, or continued attempts to maintain connection. Others may accept the end of a relationship while retaining memories that remain meaningful. Remembering a relationship and remaining psychologically attached to it are therefore not equivalent. The same distinction applies to traumatic loss. A particularly distressing relationship or breakup may leave memories that remain emotionally salient, but the presence of a former partner in a dream cannot establish that trauma remains unresolved. The significance of a former-partner dream is therefore better considered in relation to the individual's present psychological life. An occasional dream without accompanying distress may reflect the persistence or reactivation of autobiographical memory. Recurrent dreams that occur alongside yearning, rumination, intrusive recollections, contact-seeking, or continuing distress may point towards a different psychological context. The distinction cannot be made from dream content alone.

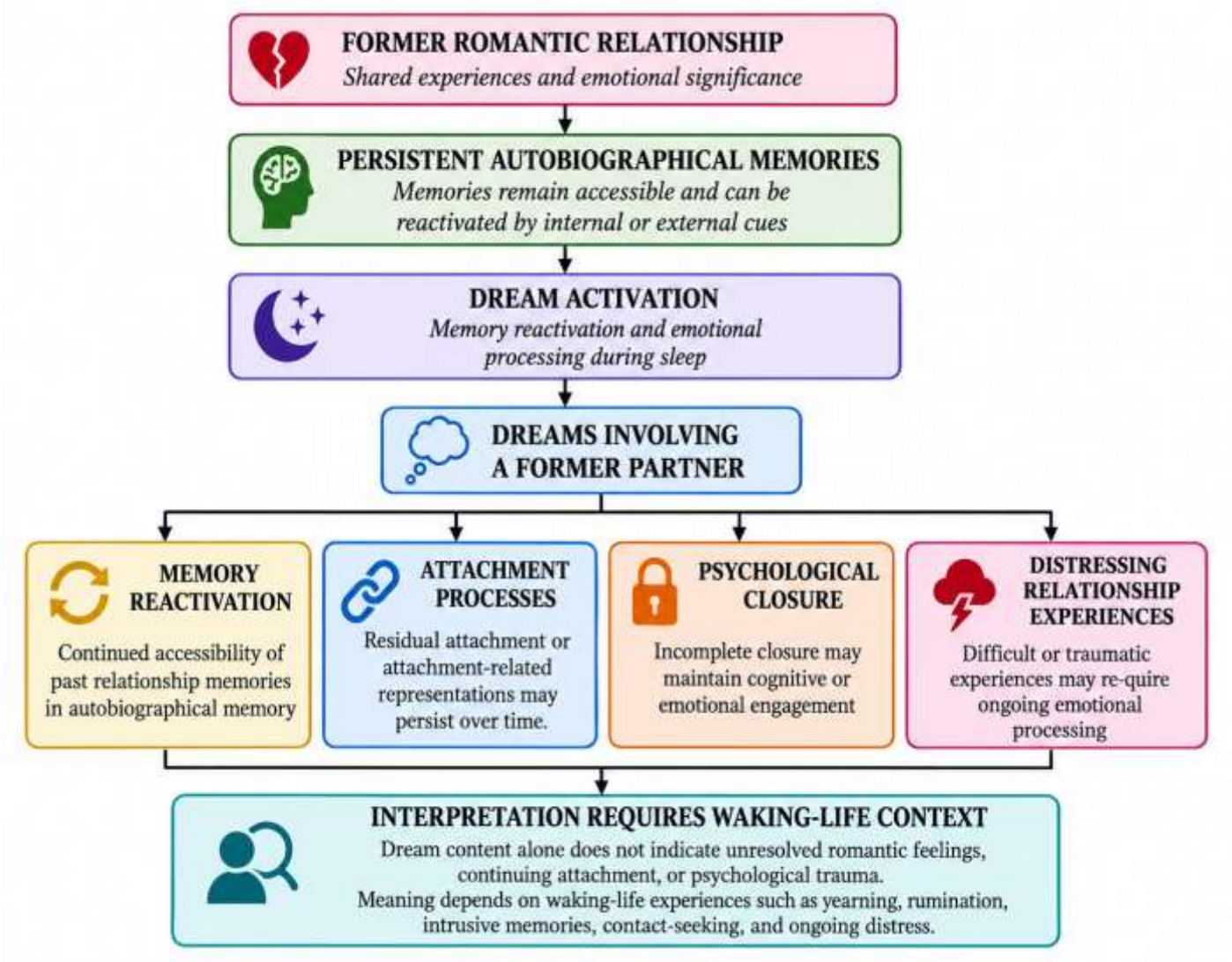


Figure 1 Psychological Processes Underlying Dreams of Former Romantic Partners

Former-partner dreams may be psychologically meaningful without having a single or predetermined meaning. Their interpretation depends on the relationship between the dream, the individual's memories and emotions, and the extent to which the former relationship continues to influence present psychological functioning. This perspective avoids two equally problematic assumptions: that every former-partner dream signals unresolved feelings, and that such dreams are psychologically meaningless. Both positions overlook the complexity of how memory, emotion, attachment, and personal experience interact over time.

CONCLUSIONS

Dreams involving former romantic partners do not necessarily indicate unresolved romantic feelings. The evidence reviewed here suggests that several processes may contribute to their occurrence, including the persistence and reactivation of autobiographical memories, emotional salience, attachment, psychological closure, and the effects of particularly distressing relationship experiences. These processes may overlap, but none can be inferred from dream content alone. The passage of time is similarly insufficient to determine psychological resolution. A former partner may appear in a dream years after a relationship has ended without indicating that the individual remains emotionally attached or unable to move

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forward. The more meaningful consideration is the individual's waking psychological context. Recurrent yearning, rumination, intrusive memories, contact-seeking, or continuing distress may provide stronger grounds for considering unresolved attachment, incomplete closure, or the aftermath of a difficult relationship. In their absence, an occasional dream may simply reflect the continued accessibility of a personally significant memory. Future research should therefore examine former-partner dreams alongside measures of attachment, rumination, psychological closure, trauma-related symptoms, and current relationship functioning rather than interpreting dream content in isolation. A former romantic partner may remain present in memory without remaining present in the person's emotional life.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with the preparation and publication of this manuscript.

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RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT

Ethical approval and informed consent were not required because this manuscript is a narrative review and does not involve human participants, animals, or the collection of primary empirical data.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Hayuni, M. contributed to the conceptualisation, literature review, synthesis of evidence, interpretation of findings, and preparation of the manuscript. Lukman, Z. M. contributed to the development of the conceptual framework and critical revision of the manuscript. Norshahira, O. contributed to the review of psychological and behavioural perspectives and critical revision of the manuscript. Ateerah, A. R. contributed to the critical review and refinement of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for the work.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No primary dataset was generated or analysed in this study. The manuscript is based on previously published literature, which is cited in the reference list.

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