

Divorce and the Heart By Dr. Whitney Wall

The emotional impacts of divorce are undeniable. Individuals going through the divorce process report high levels of stress and experience consuming emotions such as guilt, sadness, fear, hopelessness, and confusion. The widely used Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory ranks divorce as the second most stressful life occurrence - second only to the death of a spouse. Divorce inherently involves many life transitions. Primarily, there is the loss of a significant relationship. Secondly, the redefining of other important relationships with family, children, community, and self. Even when divorce results in personal growth and greater life fulfillment (as it often does), the process of getting there is undoubtedly arduous and stressful.

Stressful life events impact not just our emotional selves, but our whole selves - mind, body, and spirit. With a growing understanding and appreciation of the mind-body connection, research has explored the physical impacts of stress on the body. Findings to date suggest that chronic stress is more damaging to our physical and psychological selves than acute stress, or a one-time stressful event (e.g. witnessing a crime). Divorce is not a one-time event. It often involves a series of events, conversations, disputes, and arrangements that create an experience of persistent stress. The repetitive nature of chronic stress, as opposed to acute stress, taxes the body's neurological response system and is associated with illness.

Chronic stress is a widely known risk factor for heart disease - the number one cause of death in the United States. A recent study by Duke University provides more evidence of this and identifies a direct association between divorce and the probability of experiencing a heart attack. In a sample of over 15,000 ever-married adults, women who had experienced a single divorce were 24% more likely to experience a heart attack when compared to married women who had never been divorced. With two or more divorces, women were 77% more likely to experience a heart attack. Men had a 30% higher heart attack risk after two or more divorces. Furthermore, the longitudinal nature of the study showed that the increased risk of heart attack persisted long after divorces were finalized and even after remarriage among women.

While heart disease is the number one cause of death among both men and women - the onset of the disease traditionally occurs later for women. As a result, research suggests that women are less likely to receive important heart-related education during healthcare visits and are less likely to be referred for heart-related screenings and treatments when compared to their male counterparts. Therefore, it may be especially important for women who are divorced to inform their doctors of this risk factor and advocate for heart-related care.

At first, this news may feel discouraging, especially for women who are divorced. However, knowledge is power. While the experiencing of major life stressors, such as divorce, may render one more susceptible to heart attacks, heart disease itself is still largely considered to be preventable with diet, exercise, preventative screenings/treatments, and stress management. In addition to utilizing traditional coping skills for stress management, such as exercise, meditation, and social support, it can also be helpful to use evidenced-based problem solving techniques when stressful obstacles arise, such as brainstorming, decision balancing, and active communication.

These tools may be most productive when implemented collaboratively with a therapist who specializes in divorce. Additionally, co-parenting workshops offer psychoeducation and support without an extensive time commitment and can provide a good foundation for approaching problems in a more productive way. Finally, co-parenting therapy or family therapy can help ease the stress associated with childrearing during and post divorce by incorporating a neutral professional into the decision making processes and providing additional emotional and logistical support.

With greater awareness, steps can be taken to control stress and mitigate the damaging effects of divorce - making more space for the positive transformation that often emerges from our most difficult life experiences.