When A Spouse Dies: Keeping Your Emotions To Yourself May Hinder Health

The death of a spouse can take a sobering toll on the health of the surviving partner: Within six months of their wife’s death, widowers are nearly twice as likely as similar married men to die themselves while widows have a 10% to 20% higher death rate than comparable married women. Bereaved spouses are more likely than the married to have heart attacks, strokes and to be diagnosed with cancer in the first six months after their mates have passed away.

So what helps and what hurts the body in the aftermath of a spouse’s death?

A unique new study suggests that freely expressing emotions in the few months following loss may promote better health for surviving spouses; on the other hand, keeping one’s feelings bottled up—showing “a stiff upper lip” to the world—correlates with biological signs of a significantly greater inflammatory response. Such high inflammation levels raise the risk for heart attacks, strokes and cancer. The paper appears in the January issue of *Psychosomatic Medicine*, journal of the American Psychosomatic Society.

The study included 99 participants, averaging about 69 years old, who had lost a mate in the previous three months; it had to be someone they’d been married to for at least three years. Researchers asked about whether they controlled their emotions by changing the way they think about a situation, and also the extent to which they express their emotions or keep their emotions to themselves. Everyone rated how they tended to handle their emotions on a seven-point scale. There also was a blood draw. Researchers administered a test to the blood, inducing molecules secreted from immune cells that promote inflammation.

To beat down infections or rev up the body to deal with genuine threats, a very activated inflammatory response is helpful, says study author Christopher Fagundes, PhD, Associate Professor of Psychology at Rice University. But otherwise it’s not healthy to have an over-active immune system reflected in increased markers of inflammation in the blood, he adds.

Whether or not participants said they dealt with emotions by changing how they thought about a situation made no difference in their markers for inflammation. But surviving
spouses who said they tended to conceal their emotions from others had a significantly higher level of inflammatory markers in their blood. And the more they reported suppressing their emotions, keeping feelings to themselves, the greater the signs of inflammation, notes Fagundes. The findings held even after controlling for an array of other conditions that could account for these results.

The evidence so far does not prove that those who conceal feelings constantly will develop major diseases linked to inflammation in the future, he adds. That would require longer-term study, which he plans to do.

“But this does suggest that going to one of those grief groups where you can share your feelings may be helpful for health. In general, it can help to not bottle up your emotions,” says Fagundes. Earlier research found that lots of ruminating about a departed spouse is linked to amplified grief and depressive symptoms—not conducive to good health. It may be that bereaved people who keep their feelings bottled up are prone to more internal brooding. However, additional research is needed on this.

Study Link: https://journals.lww.com/psychosomaticmedicine/Abstract/2020/01000/Emotion_Regulation_and_Immune_Functioning_During.2.aspx?context=FeaturedArticles&collectionId=1

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