

# How to mend a broken heart? Attention must be paid to the survivor

By ACSH Staff — April 8, 2014



The period immediately following the death of a spouse or

other loved one has traditionally been associated with the concern that a similar fate is imminent for the survivor. To some degree, this concern is justified: bereavement has been shown to be a risk factor for increased mortality, particularly from cardiovascular disease, with grief leading to potential [adverse physiological responses](#) [1]. (One recent meta-analysis showed an astounding [41 percent increase](#) [2] in all-cause mortality within the 6 months following the loss!).

A new study appearing in the current *JAMA Internal Medicine* [3], performed by researchers based at the St. George's University of London and the School of Health Sciences and Social Care, Brunel University, Uxbridge, England, gives support to the broken heart theory of increased risk among the survivors. Researchers performed a matched cohort study, evaluating more than 30,000 patients over the course of 7 years, all of whom were between 60 and 89 years old and had sustained the loss of a partner. Their health outcomes were compared with 83,500 similarly-profiled patients who had not sustained any immediate-family loss.

Focusing on heart attacks or strokes within 30 days of bereavement, they found a slightly more than doubled risk of such an event among the bereaved 0.16 percent MI or CVA compared to 0.08 percent in the control group which calculated out to a 2.2-fold increase after confounding factors were controlled for. The study evaluated the subjects over the course of 30, 90 and 365 days post-loss, and found that the increased incidence of events dropped off rapidly after one month.

The authors concluded that this study provides further evidence that the death of a partner is associated with a range of major cardiovascular events in the immediate weeks...after bereavement. Understanding psychosocial factors associated with acute cardiovascular events may provide opportunities for prevention ;

ACSH's Dr. Gil Ross added this comment: There is, sadly, only one way for a long-term loving relationship to end. While rationally accepting this inevitability, the death of a loved partner clearly has an impact on the survivor's health, and not just emotional health, as this study and its predecessors make clear. The real lesson here is: the weeks and perhaps months after such a

loss is a time to shine a harsh light on the health habits and care of the survivor, who may well wish more than anything to just be left alone. Don't do that close relatives and especially caregivers must use the loss as an opportunity to enhance potential improvements in behaviors and to redouble efforts to diagnose and treat ailments that have been ignored for too long.

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**Links**

[1] <http://eurheartj.oxfordjournals.org/content/34/4/300>

[2] <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0023465>

[3]

[http://archinte.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleID=1832196&utm\\_source=Silverchair%20Information%20System](http://archinte.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleID=1832196&utm_source=Silverchair%20Information%20System)