

Is there really such a thing as a broken heart?

February 8 2012

On Valentine's Day, people who have been unlucky in love are sometimes said to suffering from a "broken heart."

It turns out that a broken heart is an actual medical condition. Broken heart syndrome occurs during highly stressful or emotional times, such as a painful breakup, the death of a spouse, the loss of a job or extreme anger, said Loyola University Health System cardiologist Dr. Binh An P. Phan.

Broken heart syndrome also is called [stress cardiomyopathy](#). Symptoms are similar to those of a heart attack, including chest pain and difficulty breathing. The good news is that, over time, the symptoms go away. And unlike [heart attack patients](#), people with broken heart syndrome do not suffer lasting damage to their hearts, Phan said.

"Most people will get better in a few weeks without medical treatment," Phan said.

During an extremely [stressful event](#), the heart can be overwhelmed with a surge of adrenalin and other [stress hormones](#). This can cause a narrowing of the arteries that supply blood to the heart. It's similar to what happens during a heart attack, when a blood clot in a coronary artery restricts blood supply to [heart muscle](#). But unlike a heart attack, broken heart syndrome is reversible, Phan said.

But it's difficult to distinguish between broken heart syndrome and a heart attack, Phan said. Thus, if you experience symptoms such as chest

pain and difficulty breathing, don't assume you're having [broken heart syndrome](#) -- call 911.

Phan is director of Loyola's new Preventive Cardiology and Lipid Program, which helps prevent heart attacks and other cardiac-related disorders and provides advanced treatment of cholesterol disorders.

Phan has received advanced fellowship training in cardiology and is a board-certified lipidologist. His special interests include lipidology (the study of cholesterol), preventive cardiology and noninvasive atherosclerosis imaging.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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