

After death of a spouse, friends might help more than relatives

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Family relationships can feel obligatory, not reduce stress, researcher explains.

(HealthDay)—When a spouse dies, the surviving husband or wife often will deeply feel the loss of a close confidant.

But a new study, published in the June issue of *Health Psychology*, finds that they may be better off in terms of their [future health](#) by turning to a close friend rather than a close relative.

"Friendships are discretionary while [family relationships](#) are obligatory, and past research shows that obligatory relationships can be less beneficial than discretionary relationships during times of stress," study co-author Jamila Bookwala said in a news release from Academy Communications.

Bookwala, a psychology professor at Lafayette College in Easton, Pa., and her team tracked nearly 750 Americans—mostly older women—from 1992 to 2004. The researchers looked for connections between better [physical health](#) and the presence of a close confidant.

Those who received emotional support from relatives didn't fare as well in terms of health as those with friends, the investigators found.

What's going on?

"Family relationships are more likely to be characterized by ambivalence than are friendships," Bookwala said. "Such ambivalence—feeling both close and bothered by the person—may occur even within confidant relationships with [family members](#). This ambivalence may reduce the likelihood of health benefits from confiding in a family member."

But a close relationship with a friend "is likely to be less emotionally complex, less ambivalent," she said.

"As a result," Bookwala explained, "having a friend to confide in may be more conducive to protecting health in the face of stress, such as becoming widowed. And this may explain why having a family member to confide in resulted in no protective [health benefits](#) for those whose spouse died, but having a friend to confide in did."

More information: For more about mourning the death of a spouse, visit the [U.S. National Institute on Aging](#).

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