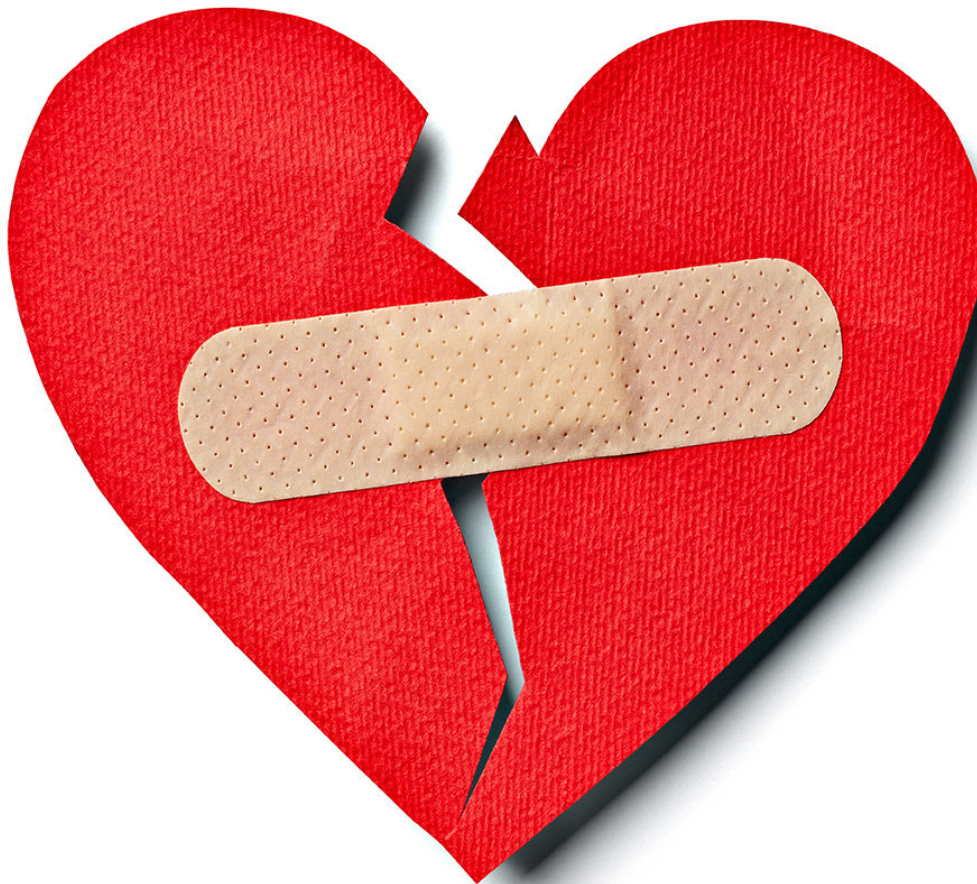


Can you die of a broken heart?

February 14 2018



Credit: Florida International University

Throughout the ages, art, architecture, music and literature have often

been inspired by the broken-hearted. In William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, it appears that Lady Montague died of a broken heart due to her son Romeo's banishment. According to Lord Montague, "grief of my son's exile hath stopp'd her breath."

But can you really die of a broken [heart](#)?

"The answer is yes, but fortunately, death is very rare," says Dr. Jonathan Fialkow, a cardiologist and assistant professor at FIU Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine (HWCOC).

A different kind of heart attack

Signs and symptoms of [broken heart syndrome](#), also known as stress-induced cardiomyopathy or takotsubo cardiomyopathy, mimic a classic [heart attack](#)—shortness of breath and chest pain. But tests reveal patients don't suffer from the usual blockage of the arteries that supply the heart with blood. Takotsubo is the Japanese word for a pot-like octopus trap that resembles the shape of the stricken heart.

"It's not exactly known what the cause is, but clearly adrenaline and other hormones associated with stress are factors," Fialkow says. Because more than 90 percent of those afflicted are post-menopausal women, Fialkow says there is speculation that it may be due to a lack of estrogen protection.

A broken heart

Oftentimes, the stress involved is the result of an emotional loss. "We see it when there's been a real heartache," says Dr. Eugenio Rothe, HWCOC professor of psychiatry. "It could be the loss of a business, the loss of a dream, a job, a relationship, the loss of a loved one."

Rothe points out that is not unusual to see couples married for a long time who die within days, weeks, or a few months of each other. In 2015, the parents of former NFL quarterback Doug Flutie passed away within an hour of each other, both from heart attacks. There are also cases of parents bereaved at the death of a child, who follow soon after them. Recently, many wondered if actress Debbie Reynolds—who died the day after her daughter, Carrie Fisher—may have died of a broken heart.

"It's almost like nature equipped us so that when situations are unbearable you self-destruct instead of having to face the painful reality," says Rothe.

Scared to death

Sudden shock can also produce the kind of stress associated with broken heart syndrome.

"So, the expression you're going to kill me or scared to death has legitimacy because an unpleasant situation can lead to a heart attack," Rothe says. However, the shock can also result from sudden, unexpected, but highly welcomed news like winning the lottery.

The good news is that broken heart syndrome is usually treated with various heart medications and most people recover.

Provided by Florida International University

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