

Researchers find low resilience puts men at risk for depression

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Brittany King, lead author and graduate student in the Department of Sociology.
Credit: FSU /Bill Lax

Men who lack resilience are exponentially more vulnerable to becoming severely depressed after their spouse dies, according to a new study from

Florida State University researchers.

Brittany King, a graduate student in the Department of Sociology, along with Assistant Professor Dawn Carr and Associate Professor Miles Taylor, examined the symptoms of depression in older men and women before and after they experienced the loss of their spouse.

Their findings were recently published in *The Gerontologist*.

"People are living longer," King said. "Successful aging is important, and these findings add to the knowledge base that will help us have a more robust and healthy older adult population."

The research team used data from the Health and Retirement Study which surveyed married people, ages 51 and older, between 2006 and 2012. They examined the changes in [depressive symptoms](#) among men and women who lost their spouse and those who remained married. Their survey sample included 2,877 women, 335 of whom became widowed, and 2,749 men, 136 of whom became widowed, within a four-year time span.

Researchers used survey responses to give each participant a Simplified Resilience Score based on 12 questions, such as "if something can go wrong for me it will," or "I have a sense of direction and purpose in my life."

They found that if a man became widowed and had a high resilience score, they experienced no increase in depressive symptoms. Despite the loss of a spouse, their level of well-being almost mirrored that of their married counterparts.

However, men with a low resilience score fared much worse. Males who became widowed and had low levels of resilience experienced an

increase of about three additional depressive symptoms—their married counterparts only experienced about one additional depressive [symptom](#) over a four-year period.

For women it was different.

They found women who had a low resilience score of four or below experienced a slight increase in depressive symptoms whether they became widowed or stayed married. Widowed [women](#) with high resilience scores also experienced a slight increase in depressive symptoms.

"For [widowed women](#), high levels of resilience did little to reduce increases in depression following spousal loss," Carr said. "In contrast, men with these high levels of internal resources overcome all of that, they recover really well within a four-year period and move on. Yet having low resilience appears to be particularly bad for men who on average experienced three additional depressive symptoms out of eight."

Women who were continuously married with high levels of resilience experienced a small decrease in depressive symptoms within four years.

Researchers speculate external resources, such as social networks, could be one explanation for the gender divide. Women tend to have more external resources in terms of social support such as friends and family. On the other hand, older men may be more vulnerable after losing their main social contact and source of care.

FSU scholars suggest additional research could examine gender differences following the loss of a spouse, specifically examining internal resources that may aid in the absence of social resources. They also said finding ways to bolster resilience earlier in life should be explored further.

"It's becoming increasingly evident through our research on [resilience](#) that the things that happen to us early in our lives play an important role in influencing how we respond to difficult life events over our life course," Carr said. "Our early life experiences seem to have a persisting influence on our psychological resources, ultimately shaping how well we handle the loss of a spouse even 50 years later. In future research, we are hoping to learn more about whether we can improve [psychological resilience](#) in later life to help people who are especially vulnerable to a major loss."

More information: Brittany M King et al, Depressive Symptoms and the Buffering Effect of Resilience on Widowhood by Gender, *The Gerontologist* (2018). [DOI: 10.1093/geront/gny115](https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gny115)

Provided by Florida State University

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