

Keeping a stiff upper lip can hurt your health following death of a loved one

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Some people facing the loss of a loved one try to maintain their composure, but it's healthier to ditch the stiff upper lip and freely express your emotions, according to a new study from Rice University.

"Emotion Regulation and Immune Functioning During Grief: Testing the Role of Expressive Suppression and Cognitive Reappraisal in Inflammation Among Recently Bereaved Spouses" examined 99 people who had recently lost a spouse.

"There has been work focused on the link between [emotion regulation](#) and health after romantic breakups, which shows that distracting oneself from thoughts of the loss may be helpful," said Christopher Fagundes, an associate professor of psychology at Rice and the principal investigator for the grant that funded the study. "However, the death of a spouse is a very different experience because neither person initiated the separation or can attempt to repair the relationship."

The researchers surveyed grieving [spouses](#) to assess how they were coping with the loss of a loved one. Specifically, participants rated, on a scale of one to seven, how closely they agreed with statements about certain coping strategies. (For example, they were asked to agree or disagree with a statement saying, "When I'm faced with a stressful situation, I make myself think about it in a way that helps me stay calm.")

Meanwhile, they had their blood drawn so the researchers could measure the levels of inflammatory markers called cytokines.

"Bodily inflammation is linked to a host of negative health conditions, including serious cardiovascular issues like stroke and heart attack," Fagundes said.

The researchers determined people who generally avoided expressing their emotions suffered more bodily inflammation than those who expressed their emotions freely.

"These findings really highlight the importance of acknowledging one's

emotions after the death of a spouse rather than bottling them up," Fagundes said.

"The research also suggests that not all [coping strategies](#) are created equal, and that some strategies can backfire and have [harmful effects](#), especially in populations experiencing particularly intense emotions in the face of significant life stressors, such as losing a loved one," added Richard Lopez, an assistant professor of psychology at Bard College and lead author of the study.

Future work from the Fagundes laboratory will examine the characteristics of people who do not have the considerable and prolonged physical and [mental health problems](#) at six months and 12 months following the death of a spouse. The researchers said expressing emotions immediately after the loss may promote better physical and mental health outcomes; however, after a certain amount of time has passed, if one is still doing so, it may reflect severe and prolonged mental and physical health problems, they said.

More information: Richard B. Lopez et al. Emotion Regulation and Immune Functioning During Grief, *Psychosomatic Medicine* (2019). [DOI: 10.1097/PSY.0000000000000755](https://doi.org/10.1097/PSY.0000000000000755)

Provided by Rice University

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