

Balancing spousal loss and career is a one-two punch for health of widowed individuals

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Coping with the loss of a spouse while dealing with the 9-to-5 grind can take a serious toll on the health of widows or widowers, according to new research from the Biobehavioral Mechanisms Explaining Disparities

Lab (BMED) at Rice University.

"Employment and Family Income in Psychological and Immune Outcomes During Bereavement" published in *Psychoneuroendocrinology* examines the mental and physical health of individuals who lost a spouse three months prior to being surveyed for the study. The researchers were specifically interested in how employment status and income affected health outcomes of surviving partners.

The researchers found that surviving spouses who worked had overall higher perceived [stress levels](#) and bodily inflammation (tracked through blood work looking at levels of specific markers of inflammation) than retirees who had lost their partner. High levels of stress and [chronic inflammation](#) are a good indicator of risk for negative physical [health outcomes](#) in the future, according to Jensine Paoletti, a postdoctoral research fellow in the BMED lab and the study's lead author.

The researchers also found a negative relationship between [family income](#) and [mental health](#) among widows and widowers who were working—and the lower the income, the worse the mental health effects. However, income had no impact on the mental health of retired widows and widowers.

Chris Fagundes, a professor of psychological sciences at Rice and director of the BMED lab, was the study's senior author. He said the findings suggest the "secondary stress" of losing a spouse—like dealing with daily tasks previously handled by the deceased partner and settling affairs—is an enormous burden for survivors who must continue working. He said higher earners are more likely to outsource such tasks and have better physical and mental health because of it.

The researchers hope the study will encourage future examination of how employment status impacts the health of widowed adults.

More information: Jensine Paoletti et al, Employment and family income in psychological and immune outcomes during bereavement, *Psychoneuroendocrinology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.psyneuen.2023.106024](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psyneuen.2023.106024)

Provided by Rice University

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