

Study: Childhood trauma survivors with high heart rate variability are more resilient when grieving spouse

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While childhood trauma is often linked to mental and physical health problems later in life, a new study from Rice University finds that

individuals who have faced mistreatment in their youth but have high heart rate variability—variation in the time between heartbeats—are more resilient emotionally and physically when grieving the loss of a spouse.

"Resilience to Stress Across the Lifespan: Childhood Maltreatment, Heart Rate Variability, and Bereavement" appears in a recent edition of *Psychology and Aging*. The authors are Michelle Chen of Northwestern University; Robert Suchting of the University of Texas Health Science Center; Julian Thayer of the University of California, Irvine and Ohio State University; and Christopher Fagundes of Rice University.

The researchers examined heart rate variability, grief symptoms (such as shock, sadness, denial, anger, guilt and depression) and [childhood trauma](#) (defined as [physical abuse](#), [emotional abuse](#), sexual abuse, physical neglect and/or emotional neglect) in 130 survey participants between three and 6½ months following the death of a spouse. High levels of heart rate variability were linked to a greater ability to manage stress and its resulting negative health issues, such as cardiac problems.

"These findings suggest that [heart rate variability](#) may be an important factor in mitigating the relationship between [childhood maltreatment](#) and adjustment to stressors later in life," said Chen, the study's lead author and a postdoctoral fellow at Northwestern who completed her doctorate in psychological sciences at Rice.

"The ties between childhood trauma, physiology and adjustment after the death of a spouse is incredibly complex," Fagundes said. "This study adds to our understanding of the risk and resilience factors that underlie these relationships."

More information: Michelle A. Chen et al, Resilience to stress across the lifespan: Childhood maltreatment, heart rate variability, and

bereavement., *Psychology and Aging* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/pag0000738](https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000738)

Provided by Rice University

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