

Spouses sharing friends may live longer after widowhood

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The "widowhood effect"—the tendency for married people to die in close succession—is accelerated when spouses don't know each other's friends well, new Cornell University sociology research finds.

Analyzing the first longitudinal data detailing older adults' social networks along with demographic and health measures, the researchers found that over a 10-year study period, the probability of death was five times greater among widows whose [friends](#) weren't close to their partner.

For spouses who kept different friendship circles, the researchers speculate, grieving processes involving many unfamiliar contacts could be more stressful, and the surviving spouse may lose access to valuable social resources they can't easily replace.

"When one of them dies, the other loses something extra," said Benjamin Cornwell, professor and chair of the Department of Sociology in the College of Arts and Sciences. "It is a double loss, of both a spouse and a network."

Cornwell is the lead author of "'I Love You to Death': Social Networks and the Widowhood Effect on Mortality," published June 28 in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. Tianyao Qu, doctoral student in the field of sociology, is a co-author.

Cornwell and Qu analyzed nearly 1,200 participants in the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project (NSHAP), a nationally representative study on which Cornwell is a co-investigator. The sample included Americans aged 57 to 85 who were married or partnered and living at home when the surveys began in 2005, and followed those who reported being widowed over the next decade.

Study participants named up to five confidants with whom they discussed important matters over the previous year, and how often their spouses interacted with those contacts.

The data confirmed a "significant" widowhood effect. Controlling for age, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, relationship quality

and health, the risk of death in the next five years among study participants whose spouses died was nearly twice that of participants who remained married.

Prior research has identified physiological and social factors thought to contribute to the phenomenon. Some cases could involve heart failure resulting from stress hormones flooding the body, known as "broken heart syndrome" or "takotsubo syndrome." Longer-term effects of grieving and social isolation could also play a role. In addition, couples sharing similar backgrounds and lifestyles may inevitably share similar health trajectories.

Cornwell and Qu asked if the way partners are socially intertwined matters as well. Would losing a spouse closely embedded in your social network pose a greater risk than losing one who is not?

In the former case, the researchers said, one might expect that coping with the loss of an equal within a shared social network could be harder. Being exposed to many grieving friends might also amplify a widow's stress. Meanwhile, spouses with few or no overlapping friends might be accustomed to living independently and better equipped to handle a partner's loss.

But the data suggested otherwise. The chance of death in the next 10 years was significantly higher for widowed study participants whose spouses didn't talk with their friends—28%, compared to 5% for participants whose [spouses](#) communicated regularly with their friends.

"If you've lost a partner who essentially served as your bridge to another social world, then you've lost something very special," Cornwell said.

"You've lost access to a social world, not just to your spouse."

The researchers said further study is needed to investigate those and

other possible explanations, and potential interventions. Cornwell speculated that making connections with a partner's close friends or family in advance of a [death](#), when possible, might help offset stressors amplifying the widowhood effect. But often, he said, widows are left "feeling their way through the dark with contacts that they don't know."

More information: Benjamin Cornwell et al, "I Love You to Death": Social Networks and the Widowhood Effect on Mortality, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/00221465231175685](https://doi.org/10.1177/00221465231175685)

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