

Measuring broken hearts: Divorce has negative effects on physical and mental health

30 November 2020



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Going through a divorce is extremely challenging and previous research has highlighted the adverse effects that it can have on divorcees. A recent study in open-access journal *Frontiers in Psychology* is the first to examine health impacts immediately after a divorce. The study found that the mental and physical health of recent divorcees was worse than that of the background population and that higher levels of conflict predicted worse mental health, regardless of other factors. Understanding these effects could assist researchers in designing interventions that help divorcees to get back on their feet and avoid long-term repercussions.

Researchers have been examining the mental and physical effects of [divorce](#), but may have missed an opportunity to accurately characterize these effects, until now. Divorce is often a protracted process, with many countries requiring a separation period before couples can apply for divorce. However, a long separation may allow psychological wounds to heal and assessing divorcees after such a period may underestimate

their impact.

"Previous studies have not investigated the effects of divorce without extensive separation periods occurring before the divorce," said Prof Gert Hald, of the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. "We were able to study divorcees who had been granted a so-called 'immediate' divorce in Denmark and on average, these divorcees obtained a divorce within 5 days of filing for it."

This allowed Hald and colleagues, including Dr. Søren Sander of the University of Copenhagen, to obtain '[real-time](#)' data on 1,856 very recent divorcees, who completed questionnaires about their background, health and their divorce.

Unsurprisingly, the study showed that a recent divorce takes an emotional and physical toll. "The mental and [physical health](#) of divorcees was significantly worse than the comparative background population immediately following divorce," said Sander.

However, some interesting trends emerged from the data. For instance, among men, earning more and being younger predicted better physical health, while having more children, having a new partner and even having more previous divorces was associated with better [mental health](#). Among women, earning more money, having a new partner and having fewer previous divorces was associated with better physical health, while initiating the divorce and having a new partner predicted better mental health.

However, one factor had a big influence on the divorcees—conflict. "Across gender, higher levels of divorce conflict were found to predict worse mental health, even when accounting for other socio-demographic variables and divorce characteristics,"

said Sander.

So, how can the findings help people to navigate a divorce with their health intact? Targeted interventions early during the process may be key. "We need evidence-based interventions that can help divorcees immediately following divorce," said Hald. "These might include face-to-face or digital interventions that are designed to reduce the specific adverse mental and physical health effects of divorce. Not only would this be beneficial for divorcees, but it could also save money by countering the negative impacts of divorce on workplace productivity, sick days, doctor visits and use of health care facilities."

In another recent study, the researchers developed an online digital solution called 'Cooperation After Divorce' that helps divorcees to significantly reduce such adverse mental and physical health effects. The results of this latest study will help them to refine such approaches in the future.

More information: *Frontiers in Psychology* (2020). DOI: [10.3389/fpsyg.2020.578083](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.578083) , www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.578083/full

Provided by Frontiers

APA citation: Measuring broken hearts: Divorce has negative effects on physical and mental health (2020, November 30) retrieved 5 September 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-11-broken-hearts-divorce-negative-effects.html>

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