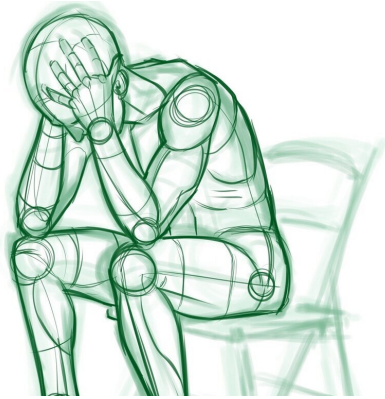


Body chemistry can predict severity of depression after death of spouse

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A new study from researchers at Rice University has found that bodily inflammation after the death of a spouse can predict future depression.

"Inflammation and future depressive symptoms among recently bereaved spouses" will appear in the June 2021 edition of the journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology*. Lead author Lydia Wu, a Rice psychology graduate student, and Christopher Fagundes, associate professor of psychology and principal investigator for the Biobehavioral Mechanisms Explaining Disparities (BMED) lab at Rice, led the study. The research team evaluated 99 people who lost their spouses within 2-3 months of the study on a number of factors, including physical and [mental health](#), across a three-month period.

"Prior research has already linked bodily inflammation to a host of health issues, including cancer, memory issues, heart problems and [depression](#)," Wu said. "We were interested in how systemic inflammation affects the mental health of spouses after losing a loved one. In particular, can inflammation help us identify who will experience clinical levels of depression at a future point in

time?"

The researchers found that widowed [spouses](#) who had higher levels of bodily inflammation right after the loss of their partners showed more severe symptoms of depression three months later than those with lower [inflammation](#), especially if they didn't experience significant depression initially.

Fagundes said depression following the death of a spouse is normal, and research shows that undergoing psychotherapy right away can actually interfere with people's natural ability to cope.

"We know that most people are remarkably resilient," he said.

However, when depression is persistent or occurs six or more months after a spouse's death, it may be a sign that clinical intervention is needed, Fagundes said.

"Until this study, it was difficult to know who was at risk for these persistently high levels of depression and grief until the six-month mark," he said. "This study identifies a potential biomarker that could help us predict who is at greatest risk for long-term repercussions of loss."

"This information makes early intervention possible," Wu said. "We can identify at-risk bereaved persons and introduce them to interventions early on to improve their mental [health](#)."

The researchers said more research is needed to determine who might be at greatest risk.

More information: E. Lydia Wu et al, Inflammation and future depressive symptoms among recently bereaved spouses, *Psychoneuroendocrinology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.psyneuen.2021.105206](#)

Provided by Rice University

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