

Emotional grief could lead to heart attack

February 2 2012, By Katie Pence

In the past, suffering from a broken heart was simply a way to describe the emotional pain one felt when dealing with a personal misfortune—a breakup or even the death of a loved one.

There is a physiological condition, known as broken heart syndrome or stress-induced cardiomyopathy, that does exist, says Imran Arif, MD, UC Health interventional cardiologist, but a new study shows that an actual heart attack can result from life tragedy.

"Stress-induced cardiomyopathy is a known temporary heart condition that causes sudden chest pain and feels like a heart attack," Arif says, adding that stress and depression have been linked to heart disease and that sudden emotional stress or bad news has been linked to sudden cardiac death as well.

Arif says the symptoms of broken-heart syndrome may be brought on by the heart's reaction to a surge of stress hormones, and as a result, part of the heart muscle suffers damage.

The newest study by researchers at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston shows that the day following the loss of a loved one, a person is 21 times more likely to suffer a heart attack, and the spike occurs even in people at a low risk for heart attack. The study was published in the journal *Circulation* on Jan. 9.

These researchers reviewed charts or interviewed nearly 2,000 adult

heart attack survivors who suffered heart attacks between 1989 and 1994 and determined that 270 people experienced a heart attack within six months of losing someone important to them; 19 people lost a loved one the day before having a heart attack.

Arif says the same reaction to a surge of stress hormones in the body, leading to changes in the way blood clots, could be the reason that this occurs.

"Stress changes coagulation in the body, which increases the risk of heart attack," Arif says, adding that stress also increases heart rate and blood pressure, which also raise risk for heart attack.

But regardless of whether it's just emotional hurting, [broken heart](#) syndrome or a real heart attack, Arif warns to not ignore symptoms of an impending heart complication.

"Scientists in this study were not sure about how the grief and stress of losing a loved one leads to heart attack," he says. "The same goes for the true mechanisms behind broken heart syndrome, but everyone should know that if you feel like you are having a [heart attack](#)—experiencing symptoms like chest discomfort, nausea, shortness of breath, cold sweats, dizziness or stomach pain—regardless of the cause, call 911 immediately.

"We have no control over tragedy around us, but knowing your risk for certain complications and realizing that you may not just be dealing with grief could save your life."

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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