

Widowhood

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Widowhood is defined as the state or period of being a widow or widower. A widow is a female whose spouse has died, while a widower is a male whose spouse has died. Although both men and women are likely to experience widowhood, research indicates that women are more likely to be widowed than men. Research suggests there are two main reasons why women are more likely to be widowed. First, women in average live longer than men. The second reason consists of the idea that women tend to marry older men. (Now that the USA and many other countries have allowed same-sex marriages, there may be some changes in the current patterns.)

Research has shown that the number of those who are widowed varies whether the individual is in a developed country or in a developing country. Widowhood is more likely to be experienced by older women in developed countries in comparison to developing countries where widowhood is also experienced by younger women. Those who experience widowhood in developing countries are also likely to still be raising children. Although widowhood can occur at any age, research indicates that younger widowed individuals generally have increased difficulty adapting to the change in comparison to older widowed individuals. Those who experience widowhood at a younger age may be less prepared to cope with the loss of a loved one either emotionally or practically. War also increases the likelihood of widowhood at a young age, as do disease and pestilence.

Traditionally, widowhood has been considered one of the most stressful life events. The death of a spouse involves having to adjust to a life without their partner. Some of the adaptations associated with widowhood include but are not limited to financial adjustments,

changes in social relationships, attempts to handle new tasks in the household, and a variety of other major modifications in their lifestyle. Research shows that women are typically impacted more than men when it comes to financial adjustments in widowhood. W, although this is lessened some by the increased presence of two working parents. Women are more likely to receive social support from others such as children in comparison to men. However, men are more likely to have difficulty managing household tasks after their spouse has passed in comparison to women. These factors can exacerbate problems associated with widowhood.

Research has indicated that there are a variety of problems associated with widowhood, which can include loneliness, difficulty responding to loss and overcoming grief, increased risk for mental illness and physical health problems. Loneliness can be a direct result of widowhood. Individuals who become widowed may end up living alone. Living alone can increase feelings of loneliness which can result in individuals withdrawing from other social contexts outside the home. Men tend to be more vulnerable to feelings of loneliness in comparison to women because men are less likely to have a close confidant. In terms of increased risk for mental illness, there is a higher likelihood of experiencing depressive symptoms following the death of a spouse in comparison to those who are married.

Depressive symptoms associated with widowhood generally remain prominent for a majority of time following widowhood but it is likely that the depressive symptoms will eventually reduce or return to their baseline over time among the widowed. The impact that widowhood has on the individual can depend on the individual's age. Younger adults who are widowed may have a more difficult time adjusting to the loss of their spouse or increased psychological distress in comparison to older adults who have become widowed. This is likely a result of those who lose a spouse early on, it may be sudden or even unexpected. In terms of

gender differences, the evidence is inconsistent in depression following widowhood. Some studies have found that there are strong detrimental impacts on men and fewer studies find greater impacts on women, while other studies have found there are no gender differences in regard to depressive symptoms during widowhood. However, the studies that do find gender differences argue that they are present prior to widowhood rather than following widowhood. Not only are there increased risks of mental illness following widowhood in reference to depressive symptoms, there are also increased anxiety symptoms and traumatic grief.

Widowhood has been found to be associated with higher rates of morbidity and mortality. Research suggests that becoming widowed can increase the risk of mortality by 48%. The increased risk of mortality can be a result of widows who are disadvantaged in terms of socioeconomic status. Widowhood may cause higher mortality when caregiving for a sick spouse. Suggesting that caring for a sick spouse can cause “wear and tear” resulting in the individual putting less attention towards their own health and partaking in poor health behaviors in general.

Further Reading

- Sasson, I., & Umberson, D. J. (2014). Widowhood and Depression: New Light on Gender Differences, Selection, and Psychological Adjustment. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 69B(1), 135–145.
<http://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbt058>
- Sullivan, A. R., & Fenelon, A. (2014). Patterns of Widowhood Mortality. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 69B(1), 53–62.
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Trivedi, J. K., Sareen, H., & Dhyani, M. (2009). Psychological Aspects of Widowhood and Divorce. *Mens Sana Monographs*, 7(1), 37–49. <http://doi.org/10.4103/0973-1229.40648>