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A Bad Relationship Can Cause Heart Attack: Study

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LONDON (Reuters) - It has been the stuff of great romantic novels and blockbuster films. Doctors have long suspected it. A study of 9,000 British civil servants has at last established it is possible to die of a 'broken heart'.

The study, reported in the Archives of Internal Medicine, found the stress and anxiety of hostile, angry relationships can boost the risk of developing heart disease. Chances of a heart attack or chest pain rose by 34 percent compared to people on good terms with a spouse or partner.

"A person's heart condition seems to be influenced by negative intimate relationships," researchers wrote. "We showed that the negative aspects of close relationships...are associated with coronary heart disease."

Other research has shown more social connections can mean a healthier life -- the "protective effect" -- but few studies have looked at how close friendships or marriages affect health, said Roberto De Vogli, an epidemiologist at University College London, who led the study.

The researchers studied civil servants who completed questionnaires about negative aspects of their relationships -- which included a spouse or close friend -- between 1989 and 1990 or between 1985 and 1988.

BAD EXPERIENCES "REPLAYED"

The questions asked whether people had emotional support, a chance to talk with someone about problems or whether they could count on a partner or close friend for something as simple as a ride to the grocery store, De Vogli said.

The team followed up over a 12-year period and found that people who reported that arguments, criticism and other types of conflict were common had a 34 percent greater risk of heart attacks or chest pain.

When the researchers stripped out risk factors such as obesity, smoking, drinking and family history, the chance of a heart attack was still 23 percent higher, De Vogli said.

"If you have good people around it is good for your health, he said in a telephone interview. "If you have negative people around it is much worse for your health."

The study did not look at whether a bad relationship played a role in the severity of a heart attack.

"It seems clear from this analysis that no matter if positive aspects of social relationships are having a significant protective effect, the negative impact seems far stronger," De Vogli said.

"People continually replay negative experiences."

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