

Is a Broken Heart a Real Thing?

Carrie Fisher, of Star Wars fame, died on December 27, four days after suffering a massive heart attack. When Fisher's mother, Debbie Reynolds, 84, unexpectedly died just one day later, many were left wondering if her broken heart was to blame.

Broken Heart Syndrome, known medically as ***stress-induced cardiomyopathy***, is likely caused by a sudden surge in stress hormones. The spike in stress can cause the heart's arteries to constrict, reducing blood flow, or cause the heart muscle to weaken.

"While the details of Reynolds' death have not been released, it's been reported that she suffered a stroke the day she died," says Dr. David Looyenga, a cardiologist on staff at Advocate South Suburban Hospital in Hazel Crest, IL. "It is possible that the grief in losing her daughter played a role, however. Sudden and unexpected stress can put a great strain on the heart, though it's not usually fatal."

The symptoms of Broken Heart Syndrome often mimic a heart attack and can include chest pain, shortness of breath and an irregular heartbeat. Unlike heart attack, however, it is a temporary condition, usually treatable and typically lasting from a few days to a few weeks.

Despite its name, this condition can be caused by any number of things. Any significant stress – either emotional or physical – can increase risk. Prolonged illness or stroke can stress the heart, as can intense emotional life events like divorce or even happy surprises, like winning the lottery.

"Broken Heart Syndrome isn't something you can prevent, really, as it usually happens after unexpected stress," says Dr. Looyenga. "When going through a stressful life situation, however, it's important to prioritize self-care. Once the initial shock wears off, try to get enough sleep, eat well and care for your emotional health as best you can."

Dr. Looyenga suggests checking in with your physician if you are experiencing any concerning symptoms.

Prayer: In times of shock or crisis, may my heart be protected by the love of God, family and friends.

Social Support Promotes a Long Life

Bestselling author and National Geographic Fellow Dan Buettner has studied the habits of people who live in blue zones for years. Blue zones are the five places in the world where a disproportionately high number of residents live to 100.

Based on his research one of the key practices that he recommends is: Have a solid social circle and believe in a Higher Power. There are numerous studies that bear this out. Social relationships lead to longer and more fulfilled lives. Part of that socialization often includes religion. Buettner found that regardless of denomination or religious affiliation, people who attend faith-based services four times a month add up to 14 years to their life expectancy.

"Diverse faith traditions support the importance of community and of seeking meaning beyond oneself," says Chaplain Corky DeBoer, manager of Spiritual Services at Advocate Christ Medical Center. "Spirituality embraces supportive relationships, which in turn helps to reduce the sense of pain and anxiety often experienced when isolated or cut off from such support," says Chaplain DeBoer.

Chaplain DeBoer says that believing in a Higher Power often shifts the focus off of oneself and can result in living more out of a sense of gratitude. "As people reach out to others or join others to make a difference in their communities or in our world, they experience more fulfillment and meaning in their lives, which also seems to increase longevity."

As people of faith we can embrace this news as one of the many natural ways that we promote the health and well-being of our members. Whether we have formal health programs or not, paying attention to the ways that we bring people together and offer support in times of need is profound health promotion activity.