

Fighting with spouse hard on the arteries

Hostile and controlling behaviours increase risk of heart disease. Couples in study asked to argue in lab, then given coronary CT scans.

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Next time you feel like screaming at your wife or bawling out your husband, remember this: Your heart really -REALLY- isn't into it. Indeed, if your spousal relationship resembles an episode of Everybody Loves Raymond, your coronary arteries could be paying a lethal price, according to a new study from the University of Utah.

The study, which looked at the psychosomatic effects of spousal bickering on the heart, suggests that both aggressive and controlling behaviour can lead to an accelerated hardening of the arteries, Utah psychologist Tim Smith says. "People get heart disease for lots of reasons: says Smith, listing smoking, lack of exercise and poor diet as prime culprits. "But somewhere on that list would be 'Pay attention to your relationships, " he said in a media release. Smith, who studied 150 couples over three years, says both hostile and controlling behaviour can lead to a heightened risk of arterial disease. He says, however, that these two major irritants affect men and women quite differently. In particular, Smith says. women's hearts seem to suffer when there's an excess of hostility expressed in a marriage - by either party. Husbands, meanwhile, can run an increased risk of coronary disease when either spouse tries to place a partner under their thumb. "Women who are hostile are more likely to have atherosclerosis (hardening of the coronary arteries), especially if their husbands are hostile too," Smith says.

The levels of dominance or control in women and their husbands (however) 'are not related to women's heart health." Conversely, Smith says, men's hearts do not seem to suffer from hostility, no matter which camp it's coming from. "But their dominance or controlling behaviour -or their wives' dominance - was related to atherosclerosis in husbands."

Smith, who presented his findings at a meeting of the American Psychosomatic Society in Denver yesterday, could not be reached for comment.

But University of Toronto psychologist Gerald Devins says the new research would likely mesh well with current thinking on the mind-heart connection. "It (Smith's work) makes sense and it fits with what we know; says Devins, who is also a senior scientist at the University Health Network.

'A low-quality relationship is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease.'

Tim Smith. Psychologist

"There is a growing and robust literature (connecting) stress and heart disease; he said "Hard driving. critical, impatient people for example, tend to be much more likely to develop heart disease than those who are more laissez-faire and . relaxed about things.

Devins also says that marital conflict in particular is of growing interest to researchers probing the stress-coronary combo. He says that men and women tend to combat stress in different ways, and that Smith's research would fall neatly in line with the current understanding of those sex-based strategies.

Men, he says, typically prefer to exert personal control over external forces and situations, bringing a "take charge, hard-driving" mentality to their reactions.

Women, on the other hand, are more prone to form emotional bonds and peaceful compacts with others, and bring a group effort to bear on the world around them.

"So verbal aggression might be something that is particularly stressful for women. . . whereas - for men (outside control) might be something that constrains their desire to (personally) influence important outcomes," he says.

Smith's study was conducted by bringing dozens of married couples into a lab setting where they were asked to argue over a contentious issue. Psychology students observed these six minute encounters, and graded them on their degree of hostility or control.

The couples, most of them in their 60s, were then given coronary CT scans to determine what, if any, hardening of the arteries they possessed. Smith concludes that "a low-quality relationship is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease."