

MailOnline

Are YOU suffering from divorce stress syndrome?

Panic attacks. Insomnia. Crippling back pain. Scientists now believe break-ups take a worrying toll on our health

By [Tanith Carey](#)

Last updated at 12:09 PM on 16th February 2012

Opening a bottle of wine, Rachel Boyd settled down on the sofa beside her husband Paul, ready to spend a relaxing Sunday evening in front of the television.

When he turned to her and announced he had something to say, she wondered what it could be. News about work? Plans for an evening out?

They'd just come back from a romantic weekend away and they'd had a lovely time, so I had no reason to suspect anything was wrong, says Rachel. But then Paul said he'd met another woman in a nightclub on a trip away nine months earlier, and that he was leaving me.





Deteriorating health: Actress Demi Moore has looked gaunt, left, and a shadow of her former self since her break-up from Ashton Kutcher

That night in September 2010, while her company director husband (slept like a baby beside her, Rachel, now 53, lay wide-awake in a state of shock.

For 24 hours after that exchange on the sofa, she didn't sleep at all. She survived the first day on autopilot, unable to comprehend that life as she knew it had been pulled from under her like a flimsy rug.

But by the time she had driven the 20-minute journey home from her job as a slimming consultant, her body was no longer able to support the extreme emotional stress she was suffering.

I had to stop the car about five times. I was suffering constant flashbacks to the moment my husband told me he was leaving me. My chest felt tight as if I was going to suffocate or it was as if I was going through post-traumatic stress.

For the next month, Rachel, from Tunbridge Wells, Kent, who married Paul in 1979 and has four children with him, experienced terrifying panic attacks.

Her throat felt so constricted she was unable to eat solid foods, and she lost a stone-and-a-half in weight. Her lips were parched from continual hyperventilation and she had to sleep upright: if she lay down, she felt she could not breathe enough air into her lungs.

Rachel is just one of countless women to experience how debilitating the physical effects of a break-up can be.

'For my husband to suddenly say he wanted someone new and sparkling was devastating'

Actress Demi Moore, 49, has suffered seriously deteriorating health since her marriage to Ashton Kutcher hit the rocks last November. Her weight apparently fell to a worrying six-and-a-half stone, and she is now reported to be in rehab.

Meanwhile, Loose Women presenter Andrea McLean, 42, recently suffered a panic attack minutes before she was due to appear live on television. She collapsed backstage, crying uncontrollably, as she struggled with the emotional aftermath of the collapse of her second marriage to builder Steve Toms after two years.

Researchers at Michigan State University, in the U.S. followed people over a 15-year period and this month revealed that those who divorced experienced a more rapid decline in their health than those who remained married.

Other studies have found that while men suffer more long-term health problems after divorce if they don't remarry, women tend to suffer more seriously in the short-term because of the sudden loss of status, financial support and the emotional safety net provided by marriage.

Recognising that she needed help, Rachel Boyd went to see a counsellor.

(She told me I was in such shock that she wouldn't be able to get through to me unless I took medication first, Rachel recalls. So I saw my GP, who prescribed antidepressants, sleeping tablets and anti-anxiety drugs.)



Under strain: Andrea McLean recently suffered a panic attack minutes before she was to appear live on television due to the collapse of her marriage

Rachel now believes she was suffering from an overwhelming fear of being alone. (I'd thought my

husband and I were the ideal couple, she says. Friends used to say that if they had half the marriage we had, they'd have been so happy.

For my husband to suddenly say he wanted someone new and sparkling was devastating.

Looking back, Rachel believes she was suffering from divorce stress syndrome, a little-recognised but widespread condition which can follow traumatic marital breakdown.

In a recent book on the syndrome, U.S. legal professor Dr David Pastrana argued that the newly divorced go through the same stages of emotional readjustment as those coming to terms with bereavement, namely, denial, anger, depression and acceptance.

He believes it is vital for women to accept they may go through a difficult transitional stage, and seek help and support.

Divorce can affect us emotionally, mentally and physically, beyond our expectations, she says. As you mourn the death of a loved one, so you encounter divorce grief. Recognising these feelings and acknowledging that you must go through a transitional healing process is a good place to start. Once you've understood them, you're on your way to overcoming them.

Experts say that little professional attention has been paid to the health consequences of an emotional blow like divorce and to helping people avoid them.

Family therapist Charlotte Friedman runs divorcesupportgroup.co.uk, a service offering therapy to people going through a marriage break-up.

While it is relatively easy to get a divorce, Charlotte says coping with the emotional effects of it can be much more difficult. Anger, grief and stress are often inevitable.

Nearly all of the people I see experience symptoms like stress, low mood, depression and insomnia, she says. Around 60 per cent of people also suffer physical symptoms, which might include migraine, eczema or back trouble, usually the result of muscular tension.

Psychologist Dr James Lynch, author of *The Broken Heart: The Medical Consequences Of Loneliness*, believes the links between emotional stress and physical illness are only beginning to be recognised.

Studies show that psychological stress increases the damage caused by free radicals, or unstable molecules which attack healthy cells and are believed to play a part in heart disease, cancer and other serious diseases.

Under duress, the body produces more of the fight-or-flight hormone cortisol, which destabilises the body's immune system and makes it less able to fight off illness. Last year, researchers at the University of Illinois studied 989 women diagnosed with breast cancer over a three-month period, and found an association between stress and the disease.

According to the paper presented at the American Association for Cancer Research, women suffering from stress were more likely to have a more aggressive form of breast cancer.



Time to heal: Failed relationships can cause physical as well as emotional pains

In a study of more than 10,800 women published in the *American Journal Of Epidemiology* in 2002, researchers found that stressful life events like divorce were associated with an increased risk of breast cancer.

Jackie Smith, 54, found out her husband Terry was having an affair when she picked up his mobile phone and found a text from a woman joking about a sexual liaison they had the previous day.

Initially Jackie, a voluntary worker from Watford, Hertfordshire, managed to cope with the shock of separation in 2002, but she now believes the effects of stress were cumulative and contributed to her deteriorating health.

In 2007, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and had a mastectomy four years ago.

I'd been with my husband for 39 years, so he was all I knew, she says. The stress of separating and selling our home was unreal, and I believe the divorce was a contributing factor to my illness.

Therapist Charlotte Friedman says the issues facing women post-divorce are different according to their life-stage.

For women in their 30s, the worry is often about how they will manage if there are children, she explains.

For older women in their 50s and 60s, their anxiety is more likely to be about being on their own as they head into old age. They feel invisible in the outside world, and they can't take it for granted that they will meet someone else with whom to share the rest of their life.

'I thought my life was set, and this was not the life I saw for myself'

Rosemary Pruvost was 36 when she and her husband divorced in 2000. At first, the split was amicable but when Rosemary's ex remarried, she found herself sinking into depression. She eventually took 12 months off from her job as a school administrator.

My ex-husband and I had four children, then aged between six and 12. My husband's job as an engineer meant we were constantly on the move, and the pressure on our relationship became too much.

Initially, Rosemary and her ex-husband got on well after their divorce, and both embarked on new relationships. But then he remarried, and when he phoned my 13-year-old daughter one day to tell her she was going to be getting a new baby brother, I found the news extremely hurtful,

My own relationship broke up around the same time, and I couldn't cope with the fact my ex had made a new life for himself while my life was a mess.

It was 2005 and, before long, Rosemary, now 49, developed a fear of going outside. For months I couldn't leave the house or go shopping, she says. There were days when I'd see my daughter off to school on the bus, then crawl back under my duvet where no one could hurt me. I lost two stone that year, and I didn't even bother to get dressed some days.

It was only when I started having counselling that I realised I was always looking back at my divorce, but I needed to move forward.

Rosemary, from Dudley in the West Midlands, now works for The National Council for the Divorced, Separated and Widowed.

She says: Divorce doesn't go away. If there is a bereavement, it is terrible, but it is final. With divorce, there are custody arrangements or new partners on the scene. Nothing is final, and the after-effects can hit you when you least expect it.



After-effects: Divorced women are twice as likely to suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Indeed, in America high-conflict divorces are seen as so stressful that they have been reclassified as one of the causes of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a condition usually associated with accident victims or soldiers in war zones.

Women are twice as likely to suffer from PTSD, suffering symptoms which include flashbacks, unsocial behaviour, heightened anxiety, insomnia and psychosomatic illness.

Even if it is the wife who has made the decision to leave her marriage, guilt and emptiness can still take their toll. Charlotte Friedman explains: The marriage may have been unhappy, but it is still a loss you have to deal with.

WHO KNEW?

Single women die seven to 15 years earlier than those who are married

Accountant Jacqui Westerman, 63, from Chelmsford, Essex, met a man with whom she thought she would spend the rest of her life in 1999.

She was already a divorcee after discovering that her husband, David, had been having an affair with a colleague. Within weeks of leaving him in 1975, when she was 27, Jacqui suffered a severe outbreak of hives and started taking antidepressants.

When Jacqui divorced again in 2008 at the age of 59, her skin problems flared up again, this time in the form of eczema and psoriasis. She also suffered irritable bowel syndrome and stress incontinence.

The physical side of my second marriage was not good, and I fell out of love with my husband. I knew that leaving him was the right thing to do, but still I felt I was letting him and everyone else down.

I felt a deep disappointment and sadness which didn't surface until much later. Even if you're the one who left, you still have to learn to forgive yourself.

When I divorced the first time, I knew I could make a new life for myself. Now, at my age, I feel the disappointment of a lost future.

Eighteen months after Rachel Boyd's husband told her their marriage was over, the support of friends and family means Rachel is finally enjoying life again.

She has started a new job as a retail administrator, travelled to Australia, won a place volunteering at the Olympics in London this summer and has started dating again.

There is life after divorce, but the shock remains, she says. I thought my life was set, and this was not the life I saw for myself.

Rachel, who now meets other divorced women through the divorce support group Hens Dancing, believes the corrosive impact of divorce often goes unrecognised. I have other friends going through post-divorce shock, including one who is self-harming. Others, like me, have had panic attacks and lost dramatic amounts of weight, she explains.

I have never felt anything like the physical symptoms I experienced after divorce, and I hope I never experience them again. I wouldn't wish them on my worst enemy.

But, if you give yourself time and support, the body and the mind can repair themselves.

Some names have been changed

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It is so interesting how men can behave like nothing is wrong and break really devastating news like they don't love you anymore without batting an eyelid - usually they will have been having an affair and you will have seen some signs of something wrong but didn't want to believe that your partner was capable of betraying you in this way. They have a strange ability to change so rapidly - their likes and dislikes change radically to fit in with their new partner's and anything you offer them or do is no good at all because it is yours - that is so perplexing. It really is like having a rug pulled out from under you because they have not told you they wanted out before they embarked on the affair (if they had you would have wanted to find out why and what could be done) and treat you in a heartless way. If they truly loved you they would talk about things and leave you before they get into a new relationship - not commit adultery.

- Lesley, UK, 17/2/2012 20:41

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Kate Victoria bc, what a lovely comment so true x

- Emily Jane, Northants England the world!!, 17/2/2012 19:23

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Heartbreak is seriously the worst thing I have EVER had to endure. I'm going through it right now. My partner of 5 years

left me and our home about 6 weeks ago, it wasn't to do with anyone else. I don't get it. We had it all. Unbelievable. For someone to say they'd 'die without you' etc then act like nothing's happened afterwards and that you basically don't exist, strips all self confidence and esteem. I refuse to let him destroy me. I may be down, but I am not beaten. Men and women out there going through this, just know when you cry, I probably am too, and when you lay awake at night anxious, so am I. You are not alone. He had nose bleeds, and I kept being sick randomly. Horrible. I feel like I am raining inside, and that I mean nothing.

- X.O, London, 17/2/2012 18:07

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An excellent article. Divorce changes you as a person and you are never the same again. My experience has helped me advise and support others going through the same horrendous pain.

- Jane, Derbyshire, 17/2/2012 16:43

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Men actually go through worse as a GENERAL rule.....both sexes suffer the stress emotional loss as mentioned above BUT men usually lose a lot of money ; house as well in the divorce.....this is womans paper so red arrows coming no doubt

- Robbie Fowler, Brighton, England, 17/2/2012 13:53

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Now divorced, i had panic attacks and all associated when i was ACTUALLY married but then thats because my ex wife turned out to be a right dog!

- Phil, UK DEVON, 17/2/2012 11:47

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Rita, it's all well and good to idealize ow families handled stress and yes, it is all in perspective but there are also many things which have changed along the way. Our parents' and grandparents' generations often didn't get divorced because women often had no recourse and many were primarily homemakers. They often drowned their sorrows in uppers which drs often prescribed under the guise of 'headache' pills, drank themselves silly, no one spoke about things as openly as people do now. The list is very long. Those were also generations where family issues were whispered about and buried, mentally disabled children were sent away to institutions, many scientifically proven physical ailments were claimed to be 'all in her head' and thousands of medical studies had not happened. Yes, the stoic good old days of solid family units were only those from afar. You are being flagrantly dismissive.

- victrola, virginia, USA, 17/2/2012 09:03

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Amazingly, our parents went through the second world war, watched family members die, lived for years with bombs falling from the sky and constant fear but got on with their lives, had children, worked, supported their familes and did not go running to doctors and clinics for "support"!! What has happened with the baby boomers generation, we seem to have brought up a load of children who cannot cope with anything. Nope I am not a woman who has never experienced heartbreak but you just get on with it and be an adult!! We seem to have given birth to children who never mature from their teen years who need constant support from medical staff to cope with life's problems.

- Rita ex pat, Bonn, Germany, 17/2/2012 07:02

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Kate, Victoria BC, 16/2/2012 23:35 - I partially agree with what you wrote. It is refreshing (if a correct word?) to have medical community recognize that the emotional trauma does impact one's physical state often at a much deeper level. It

is not uncommon for a doctor (not a psychiatrist but a GP) to wave off the patient's physical state and blame age, eating habits, etc. for some of the many ways it may show the body not healing, jacked up cortisol, etc. All of these things do impact one's quality of life long after some emotional scars are healed. "Aren't you glad it's over and don't with' is the common attitude and sometimes makes a full recovery through an open conversation with non-clinical folks somewhat tricky. Sure, living well is the best revenge, but it's not so simple.

- Valory, !, 17/2/2012 04:50

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I feel very sorry for the people here posting about years, decades of still grieving for old relationships. Please get help! One day your life will be over and you will have wasted it over something that was not meant to be. Remember to live well is the best revenge. I have been there and I know.

- Kate, Victoria BC, 17/2/2012 04:35

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