

Parental divorce linked to suicidal thoughts

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Adult children of divorce are more likely to have seriously considered suicide than their peers from intact families, suggests new research from the University of Toronto

In a paper published online this week in the journal *Psychiatry Research*, investigators examined gender specific differences among a sample of 6,647 adults, of whom 695 had experienced parental divorce before the age of 18. The study found that men from divorced families had more than three times the odds of suicidal ideation in comparison to men whose parents had not divorced. Adult daughters of divorce had 83 per cent higher odds of suicidal ideation than their female peers who had not experienced parental divorce.

The link between divorce and suicidal ideation was particularly strong in families where childhood stressors like parental addiction, [physical abuse](#), and parental unemployment also occurred. For women who had not experienced these adverse childhood experiences, the association between parental divorce and suicidal ideation was no longer significant. However, even in the absence of these childhood stressors, men who had experienced parental divorce had twice the odds of having seriously considered suicide at some point in their life compared to men from intact families.

"This study suggests that the pathways linking parental divorce to suicidal ideation are different for men and women. The association between parental divorce and [suicidal thoughts](#) in men was unexpectedly strong, even when we adjusted for other childhood and adult stressors, [socioeconomic status](#), depression and anxiety," says lead author Esme Fuller-Thomson, Sandra Rotman Chair at U of T's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work and Department of Family and Community Medicine. "Females whose parents had divorced were not particularly vulnerable to suicidal ideation if they were not also exposed to childhood physical abuse and/or parental addictions."

Explanations for why men might be more negatively impacted by parental divorce are varied. However, researchers believe it could be due to the absence of close contact with a father which may occur post-divorce. Previous studies have linked the loss of father-figures with adverse developmental outcomes in boys. "It may be that the link between parental divorce and suicidal ideation in men is mediated through factors we cannot control for in our analyses such as childhood poverty or parental depression, both of which are more prevalent in divorced families," says U of T masters graduate and study co-author Angela Dalton.

Fuller-Thomson cautions that "these findings are not meant to panic divorced parents. Our data in no way suggest that children of divorce are destined to become suicidal."

Researcher's note that the findings need to be confirmed by others using prospective data before any public health recommendations can be made. However, if confirmed, they would have significant clinical implications for professionals working with families experiencing parental divorce.

Provided by University of Toronto

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