



## Exploring the resilience of heartbroken divorced individuals at a university in London

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**Abstract**— This study explored how resilience was achieved and experienced among individuals who experienced heartbreak from divorce. If individuals experience resilience, the study will further explore how resilience was achieved. A sample of (n = 10) participants aged between 42 and 61 years underwent hour-long online interviews. Participants answered a series of open-ended questions, explaining their experiences of divorce and heartbreak. Through a qualitative thematic analysis, three main themes were identified: mental health, support of others, and positive and negative activities. There were noticeably high levels of common responses from shared experiences of the divorce process and how resilience was achieved. Results of the study found that while heartbreak and poor mental health conditions arise from divorce, overcoming them resiliently was achievable through positive activities and social support.

**Keywords:** Divorce, Resilience, Heartbreak, Qualitative Thematic Analysis, Online Interview

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### I. INTRODUCTION

HEARTBREAK is something that has been around since the beginning of time. While it may not have been referred to as heartbreak initially, it is something human beings have been dealing with for thousands of years. Even though heartbreak has been around for that long, there still seems to be limited knowledge on how individuals overcome that painful feeling. This study will seek out the behaviours and methods more commonly used for dealing with a broken heart, specifically after a broken marriage. While marriage is still extremely popular today, it is not as “mandatory” as it has seemed to be in the past. Marriage does not begin with choosing a partner one loves or likes. Marriage began as a legal and economic arrangement usually chosen by the spouses' families (Westermack, 1927). While it still is common in some cultures to get married this way, marriage has progressed to individuals choosing a partner they love. Romantic love has been known to be “the most powerful sensation on earth”. If romantic love is that powerful, then it can be just as powerful to lose that romantic partner, especially a romantic partner they chose to marry and spend the rest of their life with. “Till death do us part” is a frequently used term during a wedding ceremony of matrimony, yet almost half of marriages end in divorce and do not make it to the end of their lifetimes. In the United States, almost 50 percent of all marriages will end in divorce or separation and 42% in the United Kingdom (Wilkinson & Finkbeiner, 2022). There are countless reasons for married couples to decide to get a divorce, such as an affair, addiction, and toxicity. It may not even be a mutual decision; in many cases, one of the spouses wants the divorce while the other wants to remain married. Whether it was a mutual decision or not, divorce leads to devastation and heartbreak. The current study explores the topics of heartbreak,

resilience, and divorce. The “broken heart” or heartbreak syndrome has been described as the physical pain of the heart after losing someone (Wittstein et al., 2005). The term heartbreak is used quite often. For this study, Wittstein et al. definition of heartbreak will be used. Heartbreak can also occur in different ways; for example, a spouse, friend's death, or home loss. It is important to note that for this study's purpose, the term heartbreak will be used when referring to a romantic breakup or a divorce. Heartbreaks are found to be extremely common; over 80% of individuals have had their hearts broken at some point in their lives (Emamzadeh, 2021). In a past study, a 5,000 online response survey found that romantic breakups were linked with high emotional and physical distress. Some of these distressful emotions and behaviours included anger, vengeance, and the use of alcohol and/or drugs (Bryant, 2007). Alcohol and drugs have been a coping mechanism for hardship for decades. It has been a way of “easing” the pain of physical or emotional suffering. As it is more commonly known now, the use of alcohol and drugs only creates more problems for individuals (Britton, 2004). It has also been proven that the brain releases dopamine and serotonin chemicals when individuals experience romantic breakups. As dopamine levels increase, serotonin levels decrease, and these changes are associated with increased heart rate, sleeplessness, and loss of appetite (Fisher, Aron, and Brown, 2006). It has been found that extensive physical, physiological, and negative behavioural changes occur in individuals who have experienced a romantic breakup and heartbreak. Being in a state of heartbreak has been associated with singlehood, loneliness, neurotic tendencies, and anxious/avoidant attachment (Emamzadeh, 2021). Divorce is a transitional period in which individuals face a series of adjustments and restructuring from the life they once had to their new lives as a divorcee. Divorcees' psychological well-being can be an important indicator of the adjustment process. Several studies have found that men are more vulnerable to the unpleasant effects of divorce, including more

significant health declines and a decrease in subjective well-being after the breakup (Shor et al., 2012; Stack and Eshleman, 1998). Men have also been found to be more vulnerable to a higher risk of adopting bad health habits (Umberson, 1992). A reason for this may be that in most marriages, women traditionally take care of the cooking and well-being of their spouses. Therefore, when men no longer have their partners to rely on for healthy home-cooked meals, they may turn to unhealthy alternatives such as fast food. However, women also experience negative factors from the divorce process. Divorce is very stressful for both men and women, which may contribute to poor health behaviours such as increased smoking and drinking (Cohen, Schwartz, Bromet, & Parkinson, 1991). A study found that divorced individuals consume more alcohol than married individuals (Zahl-Olsen, 2022). In a 10-year longitudinal study, women were also found to have persistent anger and feelings of loneliness throughout the entire research following the divorce (Wallerstein, 1986). Loneliness can be an understandable response for divorcees as they lose an important person with whom they have been sharing most of their time and effort. The state of the relationship after divorce plays an important role in the well-being of the individuals; ongoing conflict with the ex-spouse damages mental health (Symoens, Colman, & Bracke, 2014). Results from a study found that perceived social support partially mediates the relationship between the sense of loss associated with divorce and the psychological well-being of individuals after a divorce (Kołodziej-Zaleska, & Przybyla-Basista, 2016). It is plausible to assume that divorcees need to fill the void of losing their partner in another form, such as gaining support from a friend or family member. Interestingly, a study researched the characteristics of the divorce process and well-being in men and women after a divorce. The study found that gaining a new romantic partner is the key to achieving greater well-being after a divorce (Symoens, Bastait, Mortelmans, & Bracke, 2013). Thus far, in literature and research, it has been found that gaining social support from another person or gaining a new romantic partner are the two main ways to increase well-being after divorce. While divorce, at times, can be a positive experience, it is a devastating and heartbreaking process that often leads to many negative implications. There has been debate on defining the term resilience in past literature. There has also been some controversy in the literature on whether resilience is a characteristic quality, a process, or an outcome (Ahern, Ark, & Byers, 2008). An empirical review conducted in 2016 found no universal definition for resilience. However, common themes were identified when describing resilience: rising above, adaptation, and adjustment (Aburn, Gott, & Hoare, 2016). Another frequently used expression when discussing resilience in literature is "bouncing back". Despite the different definitions, there has been some agreement on this topic that to determine if someone is displaying resilience, two elements must be present: adversity and successful adaptation (Luthar et al., 2000; Masten, 2001; Schilling, 2008). Adversity can be understood as hardship or a negative life circumstance (Schilling, 2008). Adaptation is the act or process of changing to better deal with a situation or even adversity. The American Psychology Association defines resilience as adapting well to adversity. Not only is it the act of "bouncing back" from these difficult experiences, but it can also involve profound personal growth (2020). This study uses resilience as a state of achievement, overcoming and adapting to adversity healthily. Some individuals become shattered by life challenges and unpredictable/undesirable events. Unfortunate life events can weaken their self-esteem, making them harsh, annoyed, and dispirited about their lives. It is much easier to give up and surrender when faced with adversity. Most people will say "There is nothing I can do" or "It is out of my control". While most hardship is out of people's control, resilient individuals overcome those hardships and bounce back. Findings show that resilience positively affects mental health, well-being, and physical health throughout a person's lifespan (Van IJzendoorn et al., 2011; Walsh, Dawson, & Mattingly, 2010; Windle, 2011). A study found that for resilience to be achieved "assets" or "resources" must be present. These assets or resources have been

identified within three categories: individual, social, and community. The individual category would describe an individual's psychological and neurological factors. The social category would describe the support gained from family and friendships. Lastly, the community category would emphasize support systems, such as church groups or counseling (Windle, 2011). However, measuring resilience is not simple; it cannot be measured without adversity. If someone is lucky enough not to face adversity, measuring their resilience is impossible (Konnikova, 2016). A study conducted in 2011 explored how college students "bounce back" after a breakup through an online survey of 1,404 university students aged 18–25 who reported experiencing recent breakups. This study found that "future relationship orientations" can influence students' resilience after a breakup. A future relationship orientation is a strong desire for relationship commitment and permanency. A strong desire for relationship orientation has been found to lead to more distress after a breakup and less resilience. These individuals were also found to have a strong glorification of their romantic partner and high anxiety over a possible breakup because losing the partner would mean the loss of love itself (Gilbert & Sifers, 2011). An abundance of research and literature has been conducted on the three main topics: resilience, heartbreak, and divorce. There is also an enormous amount of literature and research on the effects of divorce on children. A research review explored different ways divorce negatively affects children: lack of trust, less effort in education, lack of relationships, poorer occupation, behavioral problems, and lower levels of well-being (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). Also, several studies have been done over the years on resilience in children after their parents' divorce. However, limited empirical research focuses on the spouse's resilience after a divorce. Most psychologists over the years have focused on how divorce affects resilience in children but not on how it affects the parents. Since heartbreak or a divorce, or even both, are likely to occur in one's lifetime, knowing how to handle that devastating experience healthily and overcome that pain is important. Finding appropriate ways to overcome hardship is an extremely useful tool. Resilience has been another widely studied topic, especially in Positive Psychology, yet there is still very limited published research on resilience to heartbreak or divorce. There is a lack of literature on achieving resilience from heartbreak, specifically heartbreak resulting from a divorce. Since divorce rates are so high and heartbreaks are usually experienced at least once (Emamzadeh, 2021) in most individuals' lives, it seems prudent to conduct further research on this topic. There is a great need in literature to explore resilience after heartbreak further, specifically after a heartbreaking divorce. Therefore, this current study aimed to engage divorcees who have experienced heartbreak due to a divorce, and whether they achieved resilience from it. If resilience was present, the study further explored the methods and factors used to reach that point. The study is intended to gain insight into the achievement of resilience in this specific circumstance of heartbreak and divorce. The findings from this study are intended to help both men and women gain some knowledge on overcoming heartbreak, divorce, or both in a resilient way.

## II. METHODS

### Participants

Ten (n=10) participants were recruited through an online advertisement on Facebook and the University of East London research page. The advertisement stated that interested participants must have started the divorce process within the previous 2-12 years. Any interested participants outside of this time frame were excluded from the study. The participants of this study were between the ages of 42 and 61. Eight of the participants were female, and two were male. Nine participants were from different cities on the east coast of the United States, and one participant was in the United Kingdom. All participants were in heterosexual marriages and identified as being heterosexual. The length of participants' relationships with their ex-partners ranged

from 10-25 years, and the duration of marriage ranged from 1 to 21 years.

#### Procedure

Ethics approval was first gained before recruiting participants for the study. The University of East London School of Psychology gave ethics approval. Participants were contacted through a University of East London email account. The email contained an information sheet, a consent form, and a step-by-step tutorial on downloading Microsoft Teams. Once consent forms were signed and emailed back to the University of East London email account, a secondary email was sent out for scheduling. A list of available times was emailed to participants to participate in an interview via Microsoft Teams. Each interview ranged from 45 minutes to an hour. The interviews were a question-based session, and each participant was asked the same order of questions. Participants were informed they did not have to answer every question if they felt uncomfortable.

#### Materials

A list of questions was developed to gain insight into heartbreak, divorce, and resilience. The following are some examples of questions asked:

1. Would you consider yourself heartbroken at any point in the divorce process?
2. (If yes) Which part of the divorce process was most heartbreaking?
3. (If yes) How would you describe overcoming this heartbreak?
4. (If yes) How long ago would you say you achieved resilience from heartbreak?
5. Were there any positive activities that took place when dealing with this heartbreak that you think you benefited from? (Examples: working out, meditating).

The interview questions were designed to elaborate more on the emotions that the participants experienced when healing from a heartbreaking divorce. Interview questions were also fact-based to learn about the length of divorce and recovery. There was also a focus on questions to enable participants to elaborate more on what factors played a role in the healing process.

#### Data Analysis

A Qualitative research design was utilized followed by Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was used to identify major themes across the interview responses. The analysis was based on an inductive, exploratory approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, transcripts were examined independently to become familiar with the data responses. Second, coding began by reviewing and searching for segments that appeared to be relevant. Third, codes were then reduced into grouped themes that captured a shared pattern of meaning. The themes were reviewed during the fourth phase of Braun and Clarke's (2012) approach, and potential sub-themes were constructed. Lastly, sub-themes were analyzed and reviewed to ensure they correctly represented the data.

### III. RESULTS

Participants' demographics and divorce data are shown in Figure 2. Half of the participants' marriages ended due to infidelity, while the other half stated that their marriages ended because they and their ex-partners grew apart. Seven participants decided to get divorced, two made it a mutual decision, and one stated they were "completely blindsided" by the spouse's decision to file for divorce. Four of the seven participants who filed for divorce realized their partner was unfaithful and felt they had to file for divorce, even though they were still in love with their partner. Every participant said they were heartbroken at some point in the divorce. All the participants claimed to be resilient individuals before the divorce occurred; however, when asked "Did you think you would be able to get over the pain of the heartbreak?", seven participants responded, "No, I did not think I would be able to get over the pain". Three main themes were identified from the responses to the interview questions. Among those three themes, twelve sub-themes

were established. Those themes included Mental Health, Positive/Negative Activities, and Social Support.

#### Mental Health

The theme of mental health expanded into three sub-themes. Mental health before the divorce occurred, mental health during the divorce, and mental health after the divorce. Mental health before the divorce was split 50-50 between the participants. Half of the participants claimed to have no noticeable issues with mental health, while the other half mentioned high levels of stress and depression. Six participants stated their mental health stayed the same from before the divorce occurred to during the divorce process. Four participants stated that their mental health became increasingly worse during the divorce. Those four participants noticed an increase in their stress levels and depression. During the interview process, 9 out of the 10 participants claimed that their mental health at this current stage of their life was the best it had ever been. Only one participant expressed that they were still experiencing high-stress levels and depression due to their ex-partner being present. 100% of the participants claim not to miss their ex-partner and are now fully content with the divorce occurring. It is important to note that many participants were unhappy that the divorce occurred at some point. One participant even expressed how divorce is completely against their religious beliefs.

#### Positive and Negative Activities

Every participant said they jumped into physical activity once the divorce started. Most went to the gym, others began yoga, and one participant played golf. Four participants also began meditating to help clear their minds during the stressful divorce experience. All participants spent more quality time with friends, such as having a glass of wine or traveling on trips together. While drinking was mentioned as a positive activity, 90% of participants admitted drinking more heavily when asked if they thought it had a negative impact. Three participants mentioned that they began dating too soon after the divorce began, believing it played a negative role in their healing process. None of the participants explored the use of drugs as a coping mechanism during the divorce process.

#### Social Support

When responding to the question, "What were the top three things that you feel helped you the most when dealing with the heartbreak?" every participant indicated that having support from friends and family was one of their top three. Social support was found not only among friends and family but also within religious affiliations, children, and new romantic partners. Children had a noticeably high impact during the divorce process. All participants who had children mentioned that "staying strong" for their kids played a huge role in bouncing back from the divorce. Nine participants gained a new spouse or serious long-term partner after the divorce. Only three out of the nine participants proclaimed that gaining a new partner helped them recover from the divorce.

### IV. DISCUSSION

The present study's findings provide insight into how to cope with heartbreak from a divorce. The findings discovered various factors that play a role in the divorce process. Mental health, Positive and Negative Activities, and Social Support were the main themes that were discovered from the findings. While some results aligned with past research and literature, many new findings were discovered. A previous study on divorce and mental health found that women are more likely to suffer from mental health conditions when divorced (Zulkarnain & Korenman, 2019). The same study found that while women suffer more mental health concerns, men are more likely to suffer from physical health conditions. There was no noticeable distinction between the mental health conditions of men and women in this current study. There was also no mention of changes in physical health conditions during the divorce process from male and female participants. Even though all participants mentioned the start of exercising during the divorce

process, they did not go into further detail about whether exercising affected their physical health. Both the process of divorce and the experience of heartbreak have been linked to increasing levels of depression. In a study conducted on heartbreak, the subjects reported having severe symptoms of depression (Verhallen, Renken, Marsman, & ter Horst, 2019).

Similarly, a previous study found that individuals who experienced divorce have been associated with multiple psychological changes, including increased anxiety and depression (Hald et al., 2020). These findings correspond with the results found in this current study. Anxiety and depression were reported to be present among several of the participants at some point in the divorce process. The attachment theory has been studied frequently regarding relationships among individuals. The attachment theory explores individuals' relationships with other human beings (Bowlby, 1969). One of the most common forms of attachment bonds in an individual's adulthood is with a romantic partner or spouse (Feeney & Monin, 2016). In a previous study on divorce and attachment theory, feelings of attachment to an ex-partner were found to be stronger when the decision to divorce was the spouse's decision (Kitson, 1982). This was not noticeably found within the current study, as most participants either made the decision themselves or mutually agreed with their spouse for the divorce to occur. Having a wider variety of individuals who wanted the divorce and those who did not want the divorce to occur would have been beneficial to the results of this current study. It is also important to note that some participants had decided to file for divorce due to infidelity on their partner's part. Therefore, the decision for divorce may not have been truly wanted, but at times, unforgivable actions may lead to a termination of the relationship. Future research and literature on individuals who decided to file for divorce but did not genuinely want the divorce to occur could be explored further.

While both positive and negative activities were found to be a common theme within this study, there is a lack of research on the relationship between divorce and activities that take place to cope with that difficult life-changing event. There have been past studies conducted on the levels of alcohol consumption and divorce status. The results of one study found that individuals increased their levels of alcohol consumption in response to going through the transition of a divorce (Magura & Shapiro, 1989). The findings from this current study align with those results, as 90% of participants mentioned drinking noticeably more alcohol during the divorce process. It is important to note that while alcohol is typically viewed as a negative form of coping, the participants claimed it was a positive activity for them. All the participants who had consumed alcohol expressed that their extra drinking was not considered harmful at the time, but they may have been drinking more than they should have. There is extensive literature on how physical exercise can improve mental health. Results of a previous study found that exercising can help alleviate poor mental health conditions such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Mikkelsen, Stojanovska, Polenakovic, Bosevski, & Apostolopoulos, 2017). The study also found that exercise can be seen as an alternative treatment option for those with poor mental health conditions. While exercise has been proven effective with these conditions, there has been a lack of literature directly relating to the benefits of exercise when dealing with divorce. Exercising was a coping method expressed by all participants.

Interestingly, very few participants mentioned going to therapy to cope with the divorce. It may be plausible that exercising worked as an alternative method for therapy or other forms of professional help. Future research exploring divorce and alternative coping options for therapy and counseling would benefit the literature on divorcees.

The results found on social support in this current study align with previous research that social support plays a role in the well-being of individuals who feel a sense of loss from a divorce (Kołodziej-Zaleska & Przybyła-Basista, 2016). Both studies found that friends and children were two main sources of perceived social support. The previous study also found parents to be a top source of social support. However, in this

current study, there was no mention of parents during any interview sessions regarding social support. In a small qualitative study on four divorced males, social support was also a key contributor to achieving resilience after a divorce (Baloyi, 2011). Another key factor in that small study showed that gaining a new environment helped achieve resilience after a divorce. This aligned with a statement made by a participant in this current study "Getting out of the old environment and moving to a new place with my son was my favorite thing about the divorce process. "I regained my independence and being alone in a new space felt incredible." Another participant responded similarly when asked when they started noticing resilience, "During the divorce, I moved in with a friend for a while; once I left that environment and got into my place, I started achieving resilience from the breakup".

Achieving resilience after an extremely difficult life event can be seen as a feeling of relief and ease. All participants self-reported that they were resilient individuals before the divorce. In a previous study regarding resilience workshops and divorce, the results showed that levels of self-reported resilience before the workshops began positively contributed to divorce adjustment (Quinney & Fouts, 2004). Both the findings of the previous study and current studies' findings support the view that individuals who already identify as resilient remain resilient after the hardship of divorce. Future research regarding individuals going through a divorce who do not already view themselves as resilient could be explored to support these findings further.

## V. IMPLICATIONS

For individuals going through a divorce, the heartbreak and stress of this life-changing event can lead to poor mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. Sharing the common themes identified in the present study can aid in understanding the challenges that can arise from the divorce process. Some of the challenges may be the division of belongings and assets, the breakup of the family, and the loss of a romantic partner. Most participants reported they wanted to learn more about how other divorcees got over their breakup, and if it was similar or different from their own experience. All participants agreed that divorce and heartbreak are extremely common life events, and there should be more knowledge on overcoming them in the best possible way. Therefore, it is important to make note of the most commonly used methods found in this current study. Gaining social support from friends, family members, and children has been expressed as one of the most effective coping methods for getting over a divorce. Working out was also a top coping strategy, as well as spending time with friends. It is important to highlight these top strategies mentioned as all participants expressed their importance.

## VI. STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

Four main limitations of this study should be addressed. Firstly, most participants were female, with only two male participants. It would have been more beneficial to have a closer ratio of genders to compare the differences between male and female divorcees. Secondly, having almost all the participants either make the decision themselves for the divorce to occur or mutually agree to it with their spouse can pose another limitation within this study. Having more participants who did not initiate the divorce may have affected the study's results regarding getting over their ex-partner and achieving resilience. Thirdly, all participants identified as heterosexual for their sexuality and were in heterosexual marriages. While this aligns with the research and literature that has been done on divorce in the past, which can be seen as an indication of its reliability, it is also a limitation that future research can investigate. Non-heterosexual marriages are becoming increasingly more common today, and there is a need in literature and research to incorporate more of the LGBTQ community in future studies. It should be noted that the advertisement for this study stated that all sexualities and types of marriages were welcome to participate. Even though no non-heterosexual individuals participated in the study, it is worth

noting that the advertisement welcomed all types of sexuality. Lastly, this study was conducted through interview sessions of past experiences. Self-reporting past experiences may be seen as a limitation in studies, due to possibly inaccurate recollection of those past experiences.

## VII. CONCLUSION

While all the participants identified as being heartbroken at some point during the divorce, all those participants have also reported gaining resilience from that heartbreak. The time it took to achieve that resilience varied from participant to participant. Regardless of the time it took, it is important to note that all divorcees reported achieving resilience. While the literature has proven that divorce is seen as a stressful and heartbreaking experience, it does not mean that the stress and heartbreak cannot be overcome. The data from a previous study was analyzed, and the results showed that while divorce produces emotional concerns, such as insecurity, it also provides feelings of promise and options. Divorce is often viewed as a negative experience due to the heartbreak and stress that arises. However, although those negative experiences may be present, divorce can also be a positive and empowering experience. 90% of participants stated they have never been happier than this current point in their lives after overcoming the divorce. Life is filled with challenges and hardships, but those hardships may bring out a stronger and happier version of oneself. Through thematic analysis, the present study found the impact of mental health, positive and negative activities, and social support on achieving resilience through a heartbreaking divorce.

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