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Letters

Love, loss and self-esteem

It is not emotional strength or the view that the world is "predictable and safe" that makes bereavement stressful ("Bereavement: How strength saps coping," SN: 6/22/91, p.390). A loving marital relationship is a primary source of nurturing to sustain feelings of security, trust, self-confidence and self-worth against the damaging effects of life's negative experiences. The loss of this source is very stressful, and time is required to recoup and develop a substitute source or sources.

On the other hand, the individual in a conflict-ridden marriage has often already acquired substitute sources to compensate for the marriage's failure to nurture these feelings. Moreover, the unloving marital relationship often has a negative impact on these feelings, and the end of the relationship can bring release from this negative effect. There is much less stress, therefore, in the loss of the partner in a tumultuous relationship.

Marilyn Kramer
Lake Tomahawk, Wis.

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Cover: Legally available during the 19th century, cocaine provided the main ingredient in a variety of elixirs. The now-illegal drug still exerts a powerful hold on many Americans, including women of childbearing age. Scientists who study birth defects are just beginning to understand what may happen to an embryo or fetus whose mother uses cocaine during pregnancy. (Illustration: National Library of Medicine)



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From your characterization of Vicki Glushki's findings regarding bereavement, it would seem that possessing a high degree of self-worth, self-confidence and other assets is detrimental since it disrupts one's sense of predictability and safety. Those in tumultuous relationships who also had fewer intellectual and emotional resources reported less depression, especially in comparison with those who made the highest incomes.

Other factors may, however, have a significant impact on whether one judges these findings as negative or positive.

Those high in assets may experience more grief or depression not because of a disruption in locus of control but because a good, solid marriage might be considered a much higher value than one characterized by constant fighting.

Moreover, those in conflict-ridden relationships often are unable to resolve these conflicts because of an avoidance of reality. Such a perspective might also lead them to deny — to themselves or others — that they experienced any substantial depression. People with

healthy personalities, however, allow themselves the freedom to experience fully even negative feelings.

A problem with many psychological instruments designed to measure such traits as self-confidence and self-worth is that they tend to classify together those with unhealthy, false "high" self-esteem (precisely those with inflexible outlooks who believe they can control the uncontrollable and who may substitute external success, such as earning large incomes, for valid internal standards) and those with healthy, true self-esteem (people who have confidence in themselves and their self-value while remaining flexible to both the positive and negative aspects of life).

Denial of self and reality, inability to establish deep, stable and meaningful relationships, and a sense that one is controlled by "fate" or circumstances may seem to be "adaptive" when viewed through the tunnel vision of one life event, but a longer, more integrative perspective would conclude otherwise.

Russell Madden
Iowa City, Iowa

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