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HEARTBREAK CAN KILL

Losing money in a scam,
undergoing an operation or even
winning the lottery can trigger
broken heart syndrome



Amrita Kaur

While the idea of dying from a broken heart seems straight out of a romance novel, it can happen.

Mr Joe Garcia, 50, suffered a heart attack last month while preparing the funeral rites of his wife Irma Garcia, 48. She was one of two teachers killed along with 19 children in a shooting incident at Robb Elementary School in Texas, the United States.

On a crowd-funding platform to raise money for the couple's surviving four children, Mrs Garcia's cousin Debra Austin wrote: "I truly believe Joe died of a broken heart, and losing the love of his life of more than 25 years was too much to bear."

Broken heart syndrome, also known as Takotsubo cardiomyopathy, occurs when a traumatic event triggers a surge in stress hormones, especially adrenaline, weakening the heart muscles and potentially causing heart failure.

Dr Rohit Khurana, a senior consultant cardiologist with The Harley Street Heart & Vascular Centre at Gleneagles Hospital, says when one experiences a stressful event, the body produces a high amount of adrenaline to help one cope.

However, too much adrenaline can cause the small arteries which

supply blood to the heart to narrow, causing a temporary decrease in blood flow to the heart.

Broken heart syndrome is unlike a heart attack, where there is a blockage in an artery supplying blood to the heart.

The effects of broken heart syndrome also differ from those of an anxiety attack.

Professor Tan Huay Cheem, a senior consultant cardiologist at National University Heart Centre, says an anxiety attack is an intense emotional response to a perceived threat.

The patient experiences a rapid heart rate, quick breathing and a sense of distress, with differing intensity and severity of symptoms. There is no physical damage to any organ system, he adds.

Broken heart syndrome, on the other hand, can cause an actual failure of heart function and there is a risk of death, notes Prof Tan, who is the chairman of the Singapore Heart Foundation.

The condition was not well recognised in Singapore until the last one or two decades, he says.

"We reported our first case in 2005 at the National University Hospital, and then we have been seeing about two to three cases a year, among the 600 heart attack cases we see at NUH," he adds.

The condition stems from an emotional or physical trigger. This could be the death of a loved one, a fierce argument or fear, surprise or extreme anger.

Prof Tan has seen several patients with the syndrome.

One developed it after losing

money in a scam; another was frightened by a barking dog in the neighbourhood; and a third suffered the condition while undergoing cataract surgery as he had intense fear about the operation.

IT CAN BE 'HEARTBREAKING' TO WIN THE LOTTERY

Happy occasions can also lead to broken heart syndrome.

Citing figures from a study published in 2016 in the European Heart Journal, Prof Tan says about 4 per cent of cases were triggered by pleasant events such as winning the jackpot or witnessing a win by a favourite sports team.

"I would call it a happy heart syndrome instead of a broken heart syndrome. But this is rare and it occurs mainly in men," he adds.

Physical triggers of broken heart syndrome include going for major surgery and suffering a stroke.

The symptoms of broken heart syndrome are similar to those of a heart attack and can include chest pain, shortness of breath, sweating and dizziness. These symptoms can occur immediately or a few hours after an emotionally or physically stressful event, says Dr Khurana.

Although broken heart syndrome has been reported in men and even children, middle-aged women are most at risk, he says.

A study published in October last year in the American Journal of Cardiology shows that more than 88 per cent of all cases occurred among women, especially among those aged 50 to 74.

While it is unclear why post-

menopausal women are most affected, Dr Khurana says it may be linked to lower levels of oestrogen, which helps protect the heart from the harmful effects of adrenaline.

He recently saw an 80-year-old woman who was diagnosed with broken heart syndrome. The woman, who lives alone in India, was travelling on her own to visit her family in Singapore.

"It caused her a great deal of anxiety. On the flight to Singapore, she got so distressed that she became disorientated, requesting the cabin staff to ask the pilot to turn back," says Dr Khurana.

On arrival here, the patient was admitted to the accident and emergency department with severe chest pain, shortness of breath and sweating. After some checks, she was diagnosed with broken heart syndrome, given her acute distress and the emotional upheaval caused by her journey.

Besides age and gender, chronic stress and a history of mental health disorders, such as anxiety or depression, are also risk factors.

Prof Tan says to differentiate

4%

The percentage of broken heart syndrome cases that were triggered by pleasant events such as winning the jackpot or witnessing a win by a favourite sports team, reported a study published in the European Heart Journal in 2016

between a heart attack and broken heart syndrome, doctors perform coronary angiography to rule out a heart attack. They also do a left ventriculography to check the lower chambers of the heart, which may point to broken heart syndrome.

Patients are usually treated with medication to reduce blood pressure, slow the heart rate and reduce the effects of adrenaline and other stress hormones.

They usually recover in two to four weeks, says Prof Tan.

However, up to 5 per cent of patients may go into a cardiac shock and die, he adds, citing figures from a study published in 2018 in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology.

Since broken heart syndrome can be triggered by emotional or chronic stress, Dr Khurana says people can take steps to prevent the condition.

One way is by doing stress-relieving activities such as meditation, progressive muscle relaxation or deep breathing.

Where possible, avoid or reduce encounters with people or situations that may trigger negative emotions, he adds.

Exercise is also a good stress-reliever because it releases endorphins, which are also known as "feelgood" hormones.

"To make exercising a habit, you have to enjoy it. If pounding on the pavement or treadmill is not your cup of tea, have a go at yoga, cycling or even dancing," says Dr Khurana.

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