

## **Is a Broken Heart a Real Thing?**

Carrie Fisher, of Star Wars fame, died on December 27, four days after suffering a massive heart attack. When Fisher's mother, Debbie Reynolds, 84, unexpectedly died just one day later, many were left wondering if her broken heart was to blame.

Broken Heart Syndrome, known medically as stress-induced cardiomyopathy, is likely caused by a sudden surge in stress hormones. The spike in stress can cause the heart's arteries to constrict, reducing blood flow, or cause the heart muscle to weaken.

"While the details of Reynolds' death have not been released, it's been reported that she suffered a stroke the day she died," says Dr. David Looyenga, a cardiologist on staff at Advocate South Suburban Hospital in Hazel Crest, IL. "It is possible that the grief in losing her daughter played a role, however. Sudden and unexpected stress can put a great strain on the heart, though it's not usually fatal."

The symptoms of Broken Heart Syndrome often mimic a heart attack and can include chest pain, shortness of breath and an irregular heartbeat. Unlike heart attack, however, it is a temporary condition, usually treatable and typically lasting from a few days to a few weeks. Despite its name, this condition can be caused by any number of things. Any significant stress – either emotional or physical – can increase risk. Prolonged illness or stroke can stress the heart, as can intense emotional life events like divorce or even happy surprises, like winning the lottery.

"Broken Heart Syndrome isn't something you can prevent, really, as it usually happens after unexpected stress," says Dr. Looyenga. "When going through a stressful life situation, however, it's important to prioritize self-care. Once the initial shock wears off, try to get enough sleep, eat well and care for your emotional health as best you can."

Dr. Looyenga suggests checking in with your physician if you are experiencing any concerning symptoms.

*Prayer: In times of shock or crisis, may my heart be protected by the love of God, family and friends.*

Wishing you joy and good health,  
Mary Bohlen RN  
SJParishNurse@comcast.net