

Study examines phenomenon of women caring for ex-husbands

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The aging population, 65 years and older, includes nearly 3.8 million divorced men and women, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Illnesses and end-of-life issues can be particularly difficult for singles without spouses or designated caregivers. A new study from the University of Missouri provides insight into the experiences of exes who care for their former spouses, offering support, assistance with daily tasks and management of health needs.

"The concept of women as [caregivers](#) for their ex-husbands is largely unexplored," said Teresa Cooney, associate professor in the College of Human Environmental Sciences. "To date, our study is the first to examine this form of caregiving. Initial findings suggest that it is more common than expected and that the experience is highly variable for caregivers."

Cooney and Christine Proulx, MU researchers in the MU Department of Human Development and Family Studies, are examining the experiences of women who provide care for their ex-husbands. In the study, the researchers conducted a series of telephone interviews with caregivers throughout the U.S. and identified unique characteristics and motivations of these women and how caregiving affected their relationships.

"Compared to traditional caregiving, there are unique issues involved with providing care for former spouses," Proulx said. "A surprising number of the women reported continued involvement with their ex-

husbands post-divorce. A strong motivator for women to become caregivers is related to their desire to maintain relationships, not with ex-husbands, but typically with their children. It appears that having shared children with an ex might facilitate emotional attachment. Women also might try to shield their children from the demands of caregiving."

Emotional attachments among women and their exes, including post-divorce relations or [positive feelings](#) toward former spouses, facilitated their caregiving relationships. Additionally, the study revealed that some women experience "uplifts" or emotional rewards for caregiving.

"Some women reported caregiving as a turning point in relationships with their ex-husbands," Cooney said. "These women experienced positive interactions as they helped their former husbands, which seemed to buffer the challenges of caregiving. Although pleasant interactions are common among more traditional caregivers and their recipients, we didn't expect to find this in a study of ex-wife caregivers. Several [women](#) noted that their ex-husbands had 'softened' during illness and there was less conflict."

Continued exploration to determine why and how former spouses become caregivers will expand current ideas about families and relationships, Cooney said. Cooney and Proulx will further examine relational changes, support for caregivers of former [spouses](#) and males as caregivers.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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