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Men who lose social status much more likely to suffer depression than women

MEN who slide down the social ladder during their lifetime take the blow much harder than women in the same position, a new study shows.

Women were twice as likely to be downwardly mobile but generally avoided the depression and poor psychological wellbeing that researchers found in men in the same position.

Men who experienced a downward social shift were four times more likely to experience depression than men who improved their social status, whereas there was no marked difference in mental health between women who had moved up or down the social ladder.

In the study, researchers from the University of Newcastle upon Tyne used the occupation of the head of the household as the marker for social status, and surveyed men and women born in 1947 in Newcastle from childhood to age 50.

Their findings could be explained by the fact that men born in this era gained much of their self-esteem from their careers, whereas women found fulfilment from other social pursuits outside work, such as children and friendships. It's also possible that women are more emotionally resilient in this type of situation, say the researchers.

The study is published today in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*. Lead researcher, Dr Paul Tiffin, who also works as an NHS psychiatrist, said: "The Newcastle Thousand Families Study gave us an opportunity to try and understand more about how socioeconomic circumstances throughout life might be linked to mental well-being in middle age. With an increasing emphasis on the promotion of good health, findings such as these are likely to challenge those involved in health and social policy."

The study used data from 224 men and 283 women in the Thousand Families Study, a Newcastle University project which has examined the health and social circumstances of children born in Newcastle upon Tyne in May and June 1947 throughout their lives.

Information on participants' mental health was gained from a 28-part questionnaire which probed stress and anxiety levels, general mood, and tendency to suicidal thoughts, amongst other markers.

Study co-author and Director of the Thousand Families Study, Dr Mark Pearce, of Newcastle University's School of Clinical Medical Sciences, said:

"It's possible that this reaction is typical of this post-war generation, where the man expected to be the main breadwinner of the household and took a significant knock to his self-esteem when he was not able to achieve this. Women, on the other hand, perhaps viewed having a successful family life as more important than their careers.

"Having robust mental health is just as important as good physical health - the two are often interdependent. Depression can lead to a vicious circle where poor mental health and lack of engagement with society becomes the norm for an individual.

Dr Tiffin added "Whilst we must be cautious in generalising our findings to other populations, our findings do suggest that it's important for governments and other agencies to consider the wider effect of mass redundancies and drastic economic changes. The tendency is to focus on the financial losses that workers and their families experience but this research shows that the psychological effects should equally be taken into account and acted upon."

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MEDIA INFORMATION

Interviews:

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Case studies: We are unable to provide these on this occasion

INFORMATION FOR BROADCASTERS:

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Source information: Social mobility over the life course and self reported mental health at age 50: prospective cohort study J Epidemiol Community Health 2005; 59: 870-2.

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