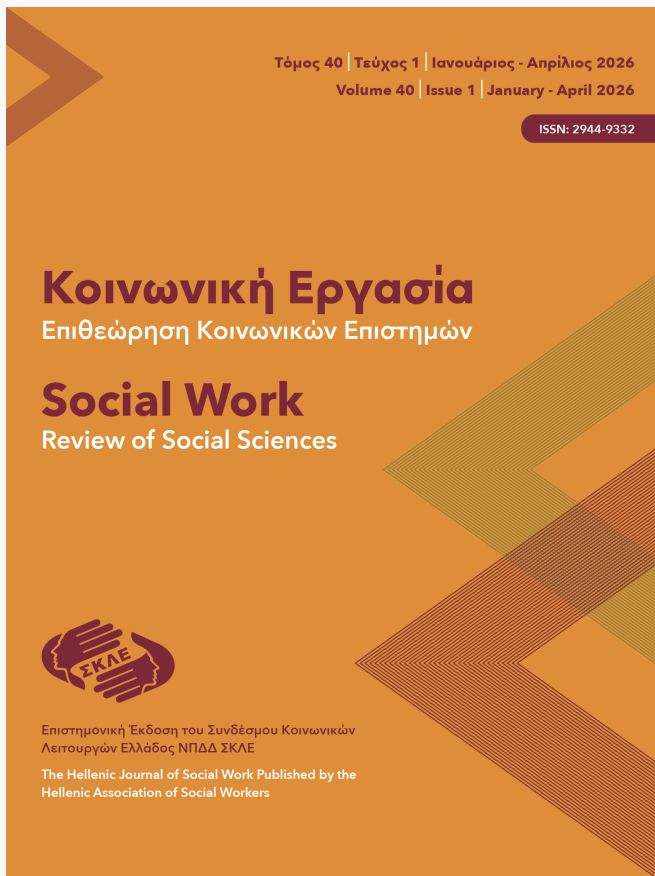


# Κοινωνική Εργασία. Επιθεώρηση Κοινωνικών Επιστημών

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**Γκρι Διαζύγια: οι επιπτώσεις στην ψυχική υγεία και οι παράγοντες κινδύνου που επηρεάζουν την προσαρμογή μετά το γκρι διαζύγιο.**

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## **Grey Divorce: the impact on mental health and the risk factors influencing post grey divorce adjustment. A narrative Review**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Grey divorce, or divorce that occurs in middle-aged and older adults (usually 50 years of age and older), is a phenomenon of increasing importance in many Western societies, among which Europe and the USA. Demographic change, shifting social norms, and increased life expectancy have contributed to the increase in divorces in midlife. At the same time, the impact of grey divorce on the mental health of middle-aged divorcees is significant and multidimensional, affecting not only the individual but also their social environment. This narrative literature review attempts to summarize and compare the recent findings on grey divorce and its effect on mental health in Western countries. It focuses on mental health factors such as stress, depression, loneliness and mental resilience and also examines social stigma, gender and social support. The review results indicate that social support is a protective factor for the mental health of grey divorcees. The literature also suggests that grey divorcees experience gender differences and social stigma, especially in Europe, with women carrying a heavier burden in terms of long-term psychological stress after a grey divorce. In all, this review showcases a wide range of mental health risk and protective factors for the grey divorcees and suggests directions for future research and practical interventions.

**Key-words:** grey divorce, mental health AND grey divorce, grey divorce AND social stigma, grey divorce AND mental resilience.

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## Introduction

Demographic changes and increased life expectancy have led to a growing number of divorces over the age of 50, known as “grey divorce”. In the USA grey divorce rates have doubled since 1990 for those between 50 and 64 years, and tripled for adults over 65 (Brown & Lin, 2012) making grey divorce an increasingly common experience for older adults and the primary cause of later life singlehood. Between 1990 and 2010 grey divorce rates reached 10.1% of the total number of divorces in the USA (Brown & Lin, 2012) and a similar increasing trend is observed in Europe and Australia (ABS, 2023; Alderotti et al., 2020; Amato & Previti, 2003; Leopold, 2018). Overall, today nearly 40% of divorced individuals in western societies are adults aged 50 and over making marital dissolution among older adults synonymous with grey divorce and no longer with widowhood (Brown & Lin, 2022). These growing numbers are linked to changes in social norms, behaviors and systems. The main factors associated with grey divorce in the literature are: a) demographic changes, b) increased life expectancy, c) shifting family roles, d) increased autonomy of older adults, e) shifting social and cultural attitudes regarding marriage and divorce, f) the empty nest syndrome and g) growing apart within the marriage (Brown & Lin, 2012, Brown et al., 2016). In Western societies where marital dissolution has traditionally had high rates, the grey divorce phenomenon is shaping individual lives, social structures and historical events by effecting not only psychological but also financial and social issues, i.e. retirement plans, social security, health benefits, splitting assets and home ownership (Brown et al., 2016). Apart from its increasing prevalence the significance of grey divorce also lies in the unique challenges it presents to 50+ adults compared to younger divorces. Grey divorce is accompanied by significant challenges in mental health and well-being, mainly depression, anxiety and loneliness and associated with elevated mental and physical health risks, greater losses in social and psychological resources, and risks of a cognitive decline onset (Brown et al., 2021; Brown & Lin, 2012; Leopold, 2018; Wright et al., 2020).

While transitions out of marriage, i.e. divorce and widowhood, are linked to high stress levels and poor health, compared to married or widowed, divorced 50+ adults have significantly higher mortality and morbidity rates, probably linked to losses in social and financial support and overall unhealthier behavioral patterns after the divorce (Manzoli et al., 2007). The chances of grey divorce increase in the face of retirement, mental illness and financial difficulties and decline in the face of physical illness and dependent children and/or grandchildren. Grey divorcees also have increased chances to experience the echo effect of “multiple grey divorces”, partly because of their emerging need to alleviate the post-divorce psychological burden (Alderotti et al., 2020). Although the motives behind grey divorce can be the same as in any age, i.e. infidelity, financial difficulties, substance abuse, domestic violence etc (Payne et al., 2024; Williamson et al., 2016,), 50+ adults have usually gone through the phase of emotional separation first (Amato, 2000; Koren et al., 2025).

The divorce-stress-adjustment perspective (Amato, 2000) indicates various factors related to the individual's adjustment after divorce making the mental health consequences multifaceted. The consequences of grey divorces on mental health extend to all family members and are exacerbated by factors such as resignation, loneliness and loss of social and financial support (Sbarra & Whisman, 2022). Literature views the consequences of divorce both as a “Temporary Crisis” and as a persistent “Chronic Strain”. In the “Crisis Model” individuals gradually adjust to divorce and their stress and depression levels decrease over time. The “Chronic Strain Model” views factors such as financial difficulties, loneliness and single-parenting as chronic post-divorce strains able to indefinitely increase mental strain and decrease well-being. Personal resources, social and financial support are main determinants of whether the problems will be persistent or more short-termed taking into account that individuals have an innate tendency to mental recovery (Amato, 2000). Given that literature has so far examined the dissolution of later life marriage mainly in terms of widowhood, this narrative literature review aims to offer a comprehensive overview of the most current research on grey divorce and its effects on mental health. With global population aging, the number of 50+ grey divorcees will continue to increase by a third even if the rate of grey divorces does not change (Brown & Lin, 2012). Therefore,

this review aims to explore the consequences of grey divorce on mental health. Through the synthesis of the existing literature this review intends to identify and describe the factors influencing the mental health of grey divorcees and how it connects to their physical health and well-being. The findings of this review can also offer insight into the physical and financial consequences of grey divorcees and their families. Thus, this review aims to contribute to future research direction and practices for effectively managing the adverse mental health consequences of grey divorce. In short, in short, by identifying studies that could provide data on the short-term and long-term effects of grey divorce on mental health this review has the potential to lay the foundation for further research and designing of tools and strategies for the development of preventive interventions on a private and public level.

## **Method**

The present narrative review followed the criteria of the guidelines for writing narrative reviews by Green et al., (2006). The qualitative and quantitative studies included in the present review were evaluated based on methodological rigor, the clear research objectives, relevance to the aims of the study and appropriate statistical analysis. The research articles included in the present study derived from a thorough literature search performed on multiple electronic databases: APA Psycnet, PubMed and Google Scholar. The search approach for the selection of articles employed a combination of keyword combinations related to mental health and grey divorces. Specifically, the key word combinations used were: \*"grey divorce", "mental health after grey divorce", "grey divorce AND social stigma", "grey divorce AND mental resilience"\* and we also applied the logical operator "AND" to combine the search terms. The literature search was limited to articles published in English and it was also time limited to relevant articles published from 2000 to 2025. To choose studies investigating the effects of grey divorce on mental health we applied the following inclusion criteria: a) original or review articles of quantitative or qualitative studies, b) studies written in English for ages 45+, c) publication year from 2000 to 2025. The exclusion criteria were: a) studies on younger than 45, b) articles without full texts or with inadequate methodology, c) publication year before 2000, d) language other than English, e) studies concerning Eastern societies. Quantitative studies were selected for offering objectivity and generalizability allowing for statistical comparisons. Qualitative studies were chosen to provide in-depth understanding of the psychological, social and cultural dimensions through rich descriptive data. The research was limited to studies from the USA, Europe and Australia available as full-text articles.

The initial literature search on the specified databases and based on the specified keywords yielded 57 research articles. After excluding duplicates and screening the article titles and their abstracts, these research articles were later screened based on the inclusion criteria to select studies investigating the challenges of grey divorces for mental health in Western countries and the socioeconomic factors and/or physical health risks associated with them. The remaining articles were also screened according to the exclusion criteria. Thus, we excluded studies irrelevant to mental health, studies prior to 2000 and studies regarding the mental health of grey divorcees in Eastern countries. Based on relevance to the purpose of the study and a more detailed evaluation of the research article methodology rigor, 18 articles were selected that most fully covered the study criteria and provided quantitative or qualitative data for the analysis (Table 1). According to the narrative review criteria and guidelines (Green et al., 2006), we thoroughly explored the rigor of the research validity, the design and the measurement tools reliability. The selected articles were analyzed using a thematic approach, in order to highlight trends and differences in the experience of grey divorce. Through the synthesis of the extracted data we attempted to offer a holistic view of the challenges of grey divorce for mental health in Western countries. After identifying the main themes, the findings, the discrepancies and the commonalities in the selected studies we developed the current comprehensive narrative review. While we followed the proposed quality assessment criteria and made every effort to ensure a thorough and accurate literature search, the included studies which are only in the English language may be open to bias. This is because this literature review may potentially exclude other possibly significant literature findings and/or overlook other relevant studies.

**Table 1**

*Grey divorce consequences on mental health, review of key findings*

<b>Author, Year, Country</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>Main Findings</b>	<b>Mental Health Findings</b>	<b>Social/Gender Factors</b>	<b>Method</b>
<b>Amato &amp; Previti (2003)</b> HΠΑ	Adults 18-65+	Divorce consequences begin within marriage	Increased levels of stress/depression immediately after divorce	Women experience more long-term emotional distress	Quantitative study
<b>Bourassa, Sbarra, &amp; Whisman (2015)</b> HΠΑ	Middle-aged adults wide sample	The quality of marriage influences Life Satisfaction after divorce	Women in low quality marriages have higher levels of satisfaction after divorce	There is no correlation between quality of marriage and Life Satisfaction after grey divorce for men	Quantitative Analysis of National Data
<b>Bowen, &amp; Jensen (2015)</b> HΠΑ	Adults 50+	Adjustment after grey divorce is influenced by factors after divorce	Personality traits influence Life Satisfaction after grey divorce	50+ divorced women with adult children adjust more quickly	Quantitative Analysis of National Data
<b>Brown &amp; Lin (2012)</b> HΠΑ	Adults 50+ (national sample)	Doubling of grey divorce 1990-2010	50+ divorcees have high rates of social isolation and loneliness	Women 50+ have higher grey divorce rates	National Data analysis (quantitative)
<b>Brown, Lin, Hammersmith, Wright, (2016)</b> HΠΑ	Adults 50+	Repartnering: very often	gender asymmetry in divorce and widowhood	Half of 50+ single men come from divorce not widowhood	Quantitative National Data Analysis
<b>Brown, Lin, Marino &amp; Mellencamp (2025)</b>	Adults 50+	Reconciliation -repartnering both potential outcomes after grey divorce	Age in grey divorce: negative association with repartnering	Men Resources: positive association with repartnering	Quantitative Analysis of National Data
<b>Brown, Lin, Vielee, &amp; Mellencamp (2021)</b> HΠΑ	Middle-aged adults wide sample	Grey divorce: risk factor for cognitive impairment onset	cognitive levels of 50+ men and women divorcees who remarried the same as married couples	50+ women divorcees with fewer, inner, economic, social resources: higher chance of cognitive impairment onset	Quantitative Analysis of National Data

<b>Carr &amp; Springer (2010)</b> ΗΠΑ	Adults wide sample	Grey divorce associated with worse mental and physical health for adults over 50	Age plays role in the severity of mental and physical consequences of divorce	Social support diminishes negative consequences of divorce	Systematic Meta-Analysis
<b>Crowley, (2019)</b> ΗΠΑ	Adults 50+	Both men and women 50+ divorcees found positive aspects in grey divorce	Right after grey divorce: more negative emotional-mental state	Freedom, Autonomy, pursuit of own desires: basic positive aspects of grey divorce	Qualitative study
<b>Ding, Gale, Bauman, Phongsavan, &amp; Nguyen (2021)</b> Αυστραλία	Adults 45+	Lower mental and emotional strain of grey divorce for higher education divorcees	45-59 divorcees suffer more in quality of life and mental distress	50+ men more vulnerable when issuing a divorce	Quantitative study
<b>Gloor, Gonin-Spahni, Znoj, &amp; Perrig-Chiello (2021)</b> Ελβετία	Adults 50+	Life Satisfaction after grey divorce increase over time. repartnering brings a surge	Increase in Life satisfaction after repartnering, unconnected to socio-economic circumstances	Similar increase on Life Satisfaction through repartnering for men and women	Quantitative Analysis of National Data
<b>Grey, de Vaus, Qu, &amp; Stanton (2010)</b> Αυστραλία	Adults 55-74 years	Long -term negative consequences of grey divorce diminish after repartnering	Grey divorce consequences on women's mental and physical health increase budget for public health services	Energy levels, physical and mental health: women more impaired after grey divorce.	Quantitative study
<b>Leopold (2018)</b> ΗΠΑ & Γερμανία	Adults 50+	Greater divorce Social Stigma in Germany compared to the USA	Social stigma more severe on women	Men have more transient strain after divorce and women more chronic	Qualitative study
<b>Lin, Brown, Wright, &amp; Hammersmith, (2019)</b> ΗΠΑ	Adults 50+	Depression levels after grey divorce associated with the choice for later life marital break-up	50+ levels of depression: higher for divorced compared to widowed	Depression levels of 50+ decreased faster for divorcees and more slowly for widowers	Quantitative Analysis of National Data

<b>Perrig-Chiello, Hutchison, &amp; Morselli (2014)</b> ΕΛΒΕΤΙΑ	Adults 45-65 years	Adjustment after divorce depends on personal-interpersonal resources	Grey divorce after long marriage: more feelings of resignation	Gender differences not prominent in the adjustment after grey divorce	Quantitative Study
<b>Tosi &amp; van den Broek (2020)</b> HB	Adults 50+	Grey divorce associated with temporary decrease in mental health	Depression levels rise 1 year before grey divorce and decline gradually each year after divorce	Both men and women show decreased depression in the years after grey divorce	Quantitative study
<b>Williams &amp; Marino (2024)</b> ΗΠΑ	Adults 50+	“Multiple Grey divorce” phenomenon	Decrease in grey divorces during COVID-19	People who remarry after one grey divorce have higher chance of multiple grey divorces	Comparative quantitative demographic analysis of grey divorce rates in the USA
<b>Wright, Hammersmith, Brown, &amp; Lin (2020)</b> ΗΠΑ	Adults 50+	50+ men divorcees without a partner have diminished social support compared to women	Men 55+ loneliness levels: higher for grey divorcees than widowers	Divorced and widowed 50+ women have similar levels of loneliness	Quantitative Analysis of National Data

### The Impact of Grey Divorce on Mental Health

Grey divorce among 50+ adults is an increasingly common occurrence accompanied by significant mental health challenges. In particular 25%-60% of 50+ divorcees experience significant mental difficulties, such as depression, anxiety, social isolation and a decrease in life satisfaction (Brown & Lin, 2012; Leopold, 2018). The highest levels of depression usually occur before the divorce and/or on its decision, and they gradually begin to decrease after it (Lin et al., 2019). Compared to younger aged divorcees, grey divorce is associated with heavier financial losses, exacerbated levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness and social isolation. Also, there is increased risk of cognitive decline and greater losses in social and psychological resources indicating that later life marriage dissolution bares its own distinctive challenges (Brown et al., 2021). Ding et al., (2021) point out that recently divorced 50+ adults have approximately twice the rates of poor health and poor life quality compared to their married peers, they present decreased physical activity and higher rates of smoking and alcohol consumption. 50+ divorcees have the same depression levels as their peer widowers -higher than their married peers-, but they decrease more slowly than their widowed peers (Lin et al., 2019). While Tosi & van den Broek, (2020) indicate that the psychological burden after grey divorce is mainly temporary, Bowen, & Jensen (2015) show that new stressors, (i.e. financial difficulties, lack of social support) do not allow strain to subside even after an average of 9.32 years post-divorce leading to persistent and long-term stress.

Depending on personal and societal factors for some 50+, divorce has a more detrimental impact. Grey divorce is also strongly related to feelings of resignation and vulnerability, possibly because of fewer resources and choices. However, age is not per se related to low psychological adjustment after divorce, increased vulnerability and resignation (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2014). The ability to adjust after

divorce does not decrease as age increases, but it is time that makes the negative feelings subside for both younger and older divorcees, men and women (Tosi & van den Broek, 2020). When feelings such as resignation, loneliness and vulnerability are stronger immediately after grey divorce, personal resources, i.e. tolerance, financial stability, professional situation, educational level and social support can lessen or even eliminate these feelings over time (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2014).

Although the studies agree that 50+ divorcees experience greater negative consequences immediately after grey divorce, Crowley (2019) indicates that a portion of grey divorcees report positive feelings shortly after marital dissolution, i.e. liberation from anxiety and stress, independence and optimism for exploring new aspects of themselves they had repressed and zero concern about changes in their parental role. Brown et al., (2016) indicate that since grey divorce is not unpredictable and involuntary as widowhood, for some individuals, e.g. the initiators, it may have more positive effects as a new awaited beginning.

### **Risk and Protective Factors for Mental Health and Adjustment after Grey Divorce**

Two studies indicate that the risk factors of grey divorce for mental health and well-being are mainly associated with individual differences, social and economic factors. Loneliness is a critical risk factor for mental disorders after grey divorce, as it negatively affects the overall quality of life (Crowley, 2019; Lin et al., 2019). Other risk factors are insufficient social support, financial difficulties and children. The care for underaged children increases stress and depression for the parents who exhibit slower post-divorce adjustment due to the multiple bond dissolutions. Independent adult children increase resilience and decrease loneliness, as children form part of the supportive social network (Tosi & van den Broek, 2020). Leopold (2018) indicates that the parent who does not take custody of underaged children experiences greater psychological burden, (i.e. loneliness, isolation), but the financial obligations for the child add to the psychological and practical difficulties of the parent with custody. Ding et al., (2021) show that adults who divorced between 45-59 years, regardless of gender, had lower quality of life after the divorce, decreased mental resilience and higher stress levels compared to the 59+ group. Two studies indicate that marital duration also influences resilience after divorce and the motive to repartner, especially for men. The level of education is also linked to mental health and adjustment after divorce. Two studies indicate that middle-aged divorcees with a higher education show increased mental resilience and lower levels of mental strain compared to their widowed peers. 50+ individuals with lower education either divorced or widowed show lower levels of mental health and resilience. Brown et al., (2021) stress the association between low financial resources and increased risk of cognitive decline after grey divorce making the economic situation a critical variable for post-divorce adjustment. More prone to grey divorce are middle-aged than older adults, high school diploma graduates than university graduates and non-Whites than Whites making grey divorce also a matter of ethnicity and race (Brown et al., 2016).

Social support is closely linked to the well-being and mental health of grey divorcees' (Leopold, 2018), while some studies associate marital quality with post-divorce adjustment. Bourassa et al., (2015) support that middle-aged women from low-quality marriages experience higher levels of life satisfaction after grey divorce. In contrast Perrig-Chiello et al., (2014) show that marital quality is not related to better adjustment after divorce, since in most long-term marriages the causes of separation are not unexpected events but mainly stem from long-term incompatibilities and disagreements. Post-divorce adjustment and mental health is also associated with personal and interpersonal resources, the individual's own conceptualization of the divorce and the relationship with the ex-partner. For instance, higher levels of emotional stability, extraversion, openness, resilience and low neuroticism prevent a decline in well-being and are linked to better adjustment and increased life satisfaction (Gloor et al., 2021; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2014). As time heals all wounds, three studies indicate that 50+ divorcees face more psychological difficulties and temporary decrease in mental health in the first years after grey divorce, but these gradually fade over time. Two studies show that depression and stress are more increased in the period leading up to grey divorce, as it is a broader process that includes confrontations and painful decisions. Studies vary regarding the adjustment time of grey divorcees to offset the adverse

consequences and return pre-divorced levels. The English need approximately three years, the Australians almost five and the Americans almost four. Time after grey divorce also affects repartnering. 50+ divorcees -men and women- are less likely to repartner shortly after grey divorce, compared to their widowed peers, but they are twice as likely to repartner in the long term compared to widowed peers (Brown et al., 2016). Four studies indicate that a new partner after grey divorce, either through remarriage or cohabitation, increases life satisfaction, reduces vulnerability, offsets the negative effects on mental and physical health age and is associated with reducing or even eliminating depressive and stress symptoms, reduced morbidity and mortality, greater social and financial support and healthier psychological patterns. Five studies show that repartnering, regardless of when it occurs, more often occurs through remarriage. It contributes to reducing the likelihood of cognitive decline, especially in men, for whom well-being is more associated with companionship than women, compared to single grey divorcees who have worse mental and physical health profiles compared to their widowed or married peers. Two studies highlight that men repartner more often than divorced or widowed 50+ women who are deterred to repartner by the notion of taking up the caregiver role once again, while the men are inclined to repartner in order to ensure they are cared for. The quest to satisfy the needs mainly covered by a partner (i.e. intimacy, close bonds, companionship, change in social role) is also evident in the "multiple grey divorces phenomenon" (Gloor et al., 2021).

### **Gender Differences and Grey Divorce**

Two studies show that most divorces after the age of 50 are initiated by women, who more feel relieved shortly after as opposed to men who experience increased discomfort. Most of the studies support the prevailing view that there are big differences between men and women in terms of divorce consequences, with women facing more challenges. Women experience increased psychological burden and report lower life satisfaction and higher levels of stress than men. Two studies indicate the increased risk of losing income, taking on the sole responsibility of raising children without additional income and facing the risk of poverty as a permanent situation. Brown et al., (2021) highlight that socio-political practices that leave 50+ women divorcees economically behind the rest of the population have a direct negative affect on their physical, cognitive and mental health. Although three studies show that there are no gender differences in the period shortly after the divorce, the rest of the studies agree that the gendered differences are greater in this period. Three studies indicate that during this time, men experience a greater decline in life satisfaction and family life satisfaction, have higher rates of depression and worse general health. They also experience greater loss of social support and support from their children and face bigger difficulties in re-establishing social networks. In contrast, women have a more developed social network which protects their mental health, but not completely offsets the difficulties they face. Family bonds after grey divorce are also gendered. Grey divorce often strengthens the mother-adult child bond thus increasing women's social support and facilitating better adjustment after grey divorce. However, fathers have difficulty maintaining close bonds with their adult children and this further weakens their social support network depriving men of its benefits (Bowen & Jensen 2015). Middle-aged male divorcees are more at risk of a cognitive impairment onset which is linked to higher levels of morbidity and mortality. (Brown et al., 2021). However, three studies indicate that divorce strain is more often transient on men and chronic on women as the long-term economic difficulties faced by women and linked to various negative implications for their well-being. In all three western societies studied in this review, grey divorce affects men more severely in the perceived social support and life satisfaction but not on their general health, energy and mental health. On the other hand, women are affected by all of the above and in addition they are less satisfied with their financial situation, feel less secure and less part of their local community. According to four studies, these gender differences do not have a lasting effect. If women's coping styles are more internalized and men's more externalized, then the average negative effects of post-divorce stress do not differ. Also, objective factors (i.e. financial situation, unemployment) are common for both genders, while the tendency to return to pre-divorce levels of well-being is an innate need of individuals regardless of gender. Studies agree that repartnering after grey divorce has gender differences. Age, the empty nest syndrome, good health, unemployment

and financial strains are basic motives for women to repartner, whereas unemployment and the lack of financial security deter men from repartnering. The percentage of men repartnering (through marriage or cohabitation) immediately after grey divorce is higher and it has per se greater benefits for men identified in reducing stress and depression symptoms, increasing life satisfaction, social integration and the need to be cared for and assisted with immediate needs.

### **Social Stigma and Grey Divorce**

Social stigma surrounding grey divorce varies significantly depending on the cultural context. In Germany it is clearly more intense than in the US, particularly for women, who face greater social rejection, isolation and feelings of shame (Leopold, 2018). In contrast, in the USA, where divorce is more socially acceptable, this psychological burden is reduced, although not completely abolished (Brown et al., 2012; Lin et al., 2019), since 50+ divorced American women experience reduction in their economic standard of living and are more likely to lose their home and social security. This diminished status may be socially stigmatizing and motivate women, especially the unemployed ones, to remarry in order to buffer the disadvantages linked to singlehood. As cohabitation does not offer economic benefits, i.e. home ownership, health insurance or spousal retirement benefits, women prefer to remarry (Brown et al., 2016). Studies both in Europe and the US show that social stigma affects men more in social acceptance and access to social support networks. Overall, men have a reduced ability to access and benefit from the family network, as they do not have strong lifelong bonds with their children as women do (Leopold, 2018; Wright et al., 2020). Social bonds and economic resources are related to social stigma and the ability of individuals to adjust and form new unions after grey divorce. Older adults with greater resources are more likely to form new relationships after grey divorce compared to poorer peers who may be more inclined to reconcile with their spouse to avoid the risks related to poverty, (i.e. poor health care, housing, health insurance costs). Higher education, homeownership and employment may also reduce social stigma as they make individuals more secure and attractive (Brown et al., 2025). Crowley (2019), stresses that men's greater financial security after grey divorce puts them in an advantageous position by increasing their chances to repartner and thus their levels of life satisfaction. In contrast, the greater financial insecurity of women forces them to choose to remain single thus excluding them from the benefits of a new relationship. The intense concern about their future financial survival is more permanent and chronic for German women, as it is linked to social rejection, economic and political practices, i.e. unemployment (Leopold, 2018). Studies in Switzerland and Australia link the socioeconomic level of divorcees to mental resilience. The higher it is, the greater independence, support and resources it provides. Mental strain is lower for the educated and wealthy 50+ divorcees, while the opposite is true for the poorer and lower educated adults. Two studies link poor social and economic level of 50+ divorcees to the risk of cognitive decline (Brown et al., 2021), while the socioeconomic level and the level of education are also linked to the "multiple grey divorces" phenomenon. Middle-aged and older divorcees, especially men, with a high school education are more likely to experience multiple grey divorces, whereas higher education reduces these chances (Williams & Marino, 2024).

### **Social Support After Grey Divorce**

According to Carr & Springer (2010) a strong social support network after the divorce is crucial for a healthy mental state and adjustment, as it can reduce feelings of loneliness and depression, helping divorcees adapt to their new situation. In American society, where there is a greater variety of social support forms, the mental health of divorcees over 50 seems to benefit the most. In contrast, in European countries where the social stigma is stronger, social isolation is more common limiting opportunities for support (Leopold, 2018). Friends, and especially those who live nearby play a benefiting role as they decrease social isolation and the associated negative consequences (Wright et al., 2020). Perrig-Chiello et al., (2014), highlight that although interpersonal resources play a primary role in the psychological adjustment after divorce, a new relationship brings far greater reduction in the levels of depression, loneliness and stress. The new partnered social role limits negative thoughts about

the old relationship and the future, relieves stress and increases healthier and more positive behaviors. These include social interaction, which often flourishes through the new partner. In particular, 50+ divorced men have fewer friendships than women and lack family support to help them regulate the post-divorce stress and strain. Thus, they mainly rely on their partners to support them and offset the losses from the family and the social environment (Brown et al., 2021). Also, having adult children living close to the divorced 50+ parents is associated with less loneliness for women but not for men. Men's ties to their adult children almost disappear after divorce increasing their mental and psychological burden and their need to counterbalance it through a new partner (Wright et al., 2020). Finally, middle-aged or older divorcees are more likely to have greater demands on their children for social support, i.e. to act as caregivers instead of their spouses. The pressure of such intense obligations can weaken intergenerational family ties reducing the quality of the relationship especially between divorced fathers and their adult children. Compared to 50+ divorced mothers, adult children are particularly unlikely to provide care to their divorced fathers, whereas when the adult children live far or are less available, their support to both parents is limited (Brown & Lin, 2012).

## Discussion

The included studies examining the effects of grey divorces on mental health reveal similarities but also significant differences between Europe, USA and Australia. The methodological approach of the studies is diverse, with most American and Australian studies being based on large quantitative databases, and European studies also utilizing qualitative methods for a deeper understanding of social and cultural contexts. The present review highlights an increase in grey divorce rates in Western societies over the last two decades, associated mostly with increased life expectancy, shifts in family roles and social and cultural perceptions around marriage and divorce and increased autonomy of older adults (Brown & Lin, 2012). Marital dissolution after the age of 50 emerges as a distinct process that does not conform to traditional models, with unique impacts on psychological well-being that differ from both divorce at younger ages and widowhood (Carr & Springer, 2010; Lin et al., 2019). The different social implications of grey divorces in Europe compared to the USA and Australia are linked to cultural and social differences mainly concerning the social stigma of divorce, welfare services and the social role of women. Two studies show that in Europe women face greater negative consequences, while three studies indicate that in the USA the greater social acceptance of divorce is linked to lower levels of social isolation. All studies agree that the mental effects of grey divorce are primarily associated with increased rates of depression, anxiety, feelings of loneliness and reduced satisfaction in life, while the mental state of divorcees is under greater pressure in the period immediately after the divorce and as time progresses, rates of depression and anxiety decrease regardless of gender. Specifically, repartnering after grey divorce is associated with a reduction in depressive symptoms and other negative consequences linked to it. The negative effects become chronic in cases where there are financial difficulties and a lack of a support network. These findings are common for Europe, USA and Australia differentiating only in intensity and expression since social and cultural conditions can exacerbate or mitigate these differences. Also, three studies agree that in all three Western regions divorce is more psychologically straining for women who experience chronic negative consequences and increased rates of depression and anxiety compared to men who have higher levels of loneliness due to limited social networks but a more transient adjustment to divorce.

Regarding the first research question, four studies indicate that grey divorce is associated with more adverse mental health compared to divorce at younger ages and with an increased risk of cognitive decline and greater losses in social, economic and psychological resources. However, age is not per se related to low psychological adjustment, but it can exacerbate mental health effects and reduce life satisfaction rates. Age plays a role within the group of grey divorcees, with 45-59 adults exhibiting greater stress and decline in quality of life compared to 59+. Recently divorced show increased levels -they can be even higher before the divorce- of depression, anxiety, social isolation and vulnerability which decrease over time, although not for everyone (Ding et al., 2021; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2014). Financial difficulties, lack of social support and social isolation can maintain the initial stress levels,

causing long-term strain particularly for the 50+ divorced women (Bowen & Jensen, 2015), while people initiating the divorce also report positive feelings of liberation from anxiety (Leopold, 2018). Concerning the second question, the research showed loneliness to be a critical risk factor for mental disorders affecting the overall quality of life (Lin et al., 2019). Underaged children affect post-divorce adjustment as they require more investment in time and money. While adult children can reduce stress and loneliness and increase life satisfaction and social support, this is true mostly for women as adult children are particularly unlikely to provide care to their divorced fathers (Tosi & van den Broek, 2020; Brown & Lin, 2012). Seven studies indicate that repartnering, through either marriage or cohabitation, is a main protective factor reducing stress, loneliness, depression, the likelihood of mental decline and the negative effects on mental health as a whole. It also increases life satisfaction and the chances of a faster adjustment. Personal and interpersonal resources are directly linked to the patterns of adjustment to grey divorce, i.e. mental resilience prevents a serious decrease in well-being and increases life satisfaction. A poor relationship between ex-spouses, a poor personal conceptualization of grey divorce, low economic status and lack of social support increase stress levels and impedes post-divorce adjustment and life satisfaction that can continue indefinitely. As time heals all wounds, time after grey divorce is associated with mental health improvement and stress reduction (Gloor et al., 2021). According to region, adverse consequences subside from three to five years, while adjustment depends on subjective and objective factors, such as mental resilience levels, education, financial security and social support (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2014).

Regarding gender differences, all but three studies agree that there are significant gender differences in mental health after grey divorce, while women face greater challenges after grey divorce, greater psychological strain, higher levels of stress and lower levels of life satisfaction especially in Europe. Men in Australia and Germany have higher rates of depression and poorer general health than women shortly after the divorce and these rates weaken over the years. Men's negative consequences are more transient and women's more chronic (Ding et al., 2021; Leopold 2018). Family bonds are also gendered with grey divorce strengthening the mother-adult child bond -thus increasing social support- and weakening the father-adult child bond -thus depriving men of the support network benefits- (Bowen & Jensen 2015). Repartnering also has different motives according to gender. Age, the empty nest syndrome, good health and financial strains are basic motives for women to repartner, whereas the lack of financial security deters men from it. More men repartner, whereas women often prefer to remain single as they do not wish to take on the caregiver role again (Brown et al., 2016). Men's repartnering is associated with compensating for the losses on the support network and the need to strengthen it after divorce, as they rely mainly on their partners to support and care for them, (Brown et al., 2021). Social stigma still exists and it is more intense for European women who face greater social rejection, isolation and feelings of shame (Leopold, 2018). In the USA the relatively wider social acceptance of divorce reduces social stigma and the related strain, although it does not completely eliminate it, with women bearing the brunt of it (Brown & Lin, 2012, Lin et al., 2019). Crowley's (2019) research links social stigma to differences in financial security between men and women. Middle-aged men divorcees feel more financially secure than women and this increases their chances of starting a new relationship and puts men at an advantage due to the association of a new relationship with increased levels of life satisfaction. Five studies indicate that the absence of social support significantly exacerbates the negative mental and physical effects of grey divorce for both men and women further reducing the sense of well-being. Studies agree that strong social networks are protective factors of mental health, they reduce loneliness and social isolation and increase post-divorce adjustment, but this mainly favors women, as men have more difficulty re-establishing social networks. They generally have fewer friendships and a greater lack of family support, which could help regulate the stress and strain from a grey divorce. Repartnering also increases social support, improves mental health and adjustment levels, limits loneliness and meets basic needs of intimacy and sharing thus contributing to positive behaviors (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2014). According to Brown & Lin (2012), the increase in grey divorces may ultimately burden the entire society as many middle-aged divorcees will be forced to turn to public institutions rather than family sources of support. Grey divorce can exacerbate the natural decline in

health of middle-aged and older adults by increasing their physical and mental needs. Furthermore, the decline in the economic well-being following grey divorce is associated with greater reliance on public rather than private forms of support, i.e. public health and insurance, which can increase the burden on public funds allocated for insurance and health (Brown & Lin, 2012). Therefore, the growing grey divorces have broad implications that may require coordinated responses through public health or policy initiatives.

## **Limitations**

One of the limitations of this review is related to language, as studies in languages other than English were excluded. Secondly, as the data came from studies conducted only in the USA, Australia and some European countries, the findings cannot fully reflect the grey divorce trends in the West. Canada for instance is not included in this review because of limited access to data. Also, due to the limited number of articles in English within the time frame set for this review and the heterogeneity of the populations – not only between countries but also within the same country e.g. the USA - the quality of the selected studies may vary thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. However, despite the abovementioned limitations, this review contributes to the understanding of the multidimensional effects of grey divorce on mental health in Western countries, while highlighting the need for further research.

## **Conclusions**

Grey divorce is a growing phenomenon with significant impacts on mental health and increasing social importance in the West. The mental health impacts include increased levels of depression, anxiety and loneliness, especially in cases where social support is limited. There are gender differences and social stigma in grey divorce, especially in Europe, while women more often experience greater and long-term psychological stress after grey divorce. Cultural differences affect how grey divorces are experienced, while repartnering is an emerging theme increasing life satisfaction in both men and women 50+ divorcees independently of the surrounding circumstances and the objective obstacles. Low social support and financial abilities are basic risk factors for chronic mental strain after grey divorce. This review highlights that, while the trends and core mental health impacts of grey divorce are common across Western countries, personal, cultural, social and gender factors differentiate the experience and mental health consequences of grey divorce. Finally, the number of grey divorces will continue to increase because of the demographic changes and the later life marriages highlighting that researchers cannot ignore its role in studies of mental well-being.

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## Γκρι Διαζύγια: οι επιπτώσεις στην ψυχική υγεία και οι παράγοντες κινδύνου που επηρεάζουν την προσαρμογή μετά το γκρι διαζύγιο.

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### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Τα γκρι διαζύγια ή διαζύγια ενηλίκων μέσης και μεγαλύτερης ηλικίας (συνήθως 50 ετών και άνω) αποτελούν ένα φαινόμενο αυξανόμενης σημασίας σε πολλές δυτικές κοινωνίες, ιδιαίτερα στην Ευρώπη και την Αμερική. Η δημογραφική αλλαγή, η μετατόπιση κοινωνικών προτύπων και η αύξηση του προσδόκιμου ζωής έχουν συμβάλει στην αύξηση των διαζυγίων αυτής της ηλικιακής ομάδας. Οι συνέπειες στην ψυχική υγεία των ατόμων που βιώνουν γκρι διαζύγιο είναι σημαντικές και πολυδιάστατες επηρεάζοντας όχι μόνο το άτομο αλλά και το κοινωνικό του περιβάλλον. Σκοπός της παρούσας ανασκόπησης είναι να συνοψίσει και να συγκρίνει τα επιστημονικά ευρήματα από τις χώρες της Δύσης σχετικά με τα γκρι διαζύγια και τις επιπτώσεις τους στην ψυχική υγεία των ενηλίκων άνω των 45 ετών εστιάζοντας σε παράγοντες όπως το κοινωνικό στίγμα, οι προστατευτικοί και επαπειλητικοί παράγοντες για την ψυχική υγεία, το φύλο και η κοινωνική υποστήριξη. Η ανασκόπηση αυτή επιδιώκει να αναδείξει τις τάσεις του φαινομένου και να προτείνει κατευθύνσεις για μελλοντική έρευνα και πρακτική παρέμβαση.

**Λέξεις-κλειδιά:** γκρι διαζύγιο, ψυχική υγεία, κοινωνικό στίγμα, ψυχική ανθεκτικότητα

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