

Late-Life Divorce and well-being of older people: A systematic review[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Background: As the global population of older people continue to increase, Late-Life Divorce has emerged as an important public health concern. This systematic review aimed to explore the impact of Late-Life Divorce on the well-being of older people.

Methods: The review was conducted according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis. Five databases (PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO) were searched for articles published between January 1, 2005, and July 31, 2024. Both quantitative, qualitative and mixed method studies were included in the review. The findings were synthesized using Schlossberg's transition theory as a framework.

Results: The search for literature yielded 468 papers. Seven studies conducted in four countries among 13,878 older people were included in this review. Late-Life Divorce had a significant impact on older people across multiple domains. Women were disproportionately affected, particularly regarding financial losses and economic insecurity. The coping strategies adopted varied among men and women. Women engaged in problem-focused techniques, while men engaged in maladaptive strategies. Social support emerged as an important factor in mitigating the negative effects of divorce, though those facing estrangement or health issues experienced greater challenges in accessing support.

Conclusion: There is the need for gender-sensitive interventions, financial counselling, and expanded social support services to promote post-divorce well-being of older people. Further research is required to understand the experiences of older divorced men, and individuals in Lower- and Middle-Income settings, where cultural norms and economic systems may shape different outcomes.

1. Introduction

The institutions of marriage and family are often considered as foundations on which society is built. These institutions are believed to shape people's identity, enhance social organization, and promote intergenerational continuity. Also, marriage and family provide structure to personal relationships, regulate social roles, and establish expectations regarding emotional, financial, and caregiving responsibilities (Jabbari et al., 2024). Traditionally, marriage is seen as a

lifelong commitment, particularly in older generations, serving as the foundation and pillar of family stability and social cohesion. In recent years, societal transformations, including increased individualism, changing gender roles, and the evolving nature of personal relationships, have prompted a reconsideration of marriage and its place within modern societies (Furstenberg, 2019; Pessin, 2018). As these transformations continue to unfold, the family unit is increasingly becoming fluid, with a large proportion of older people experiencing divorce, a phenomenon that was once rare in later life (Brown et al., 2023; Pearce

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et al., 2018).

Late-Life Divorce (LLD), also known 'Grey divorce' often defined as divorce occurring after the age of 50 years, has emerged as an increasingly significant social phenomenon in recent years (Brown & Lin, 2012; Lin et al., 2018). Unlike younger divorcees, older people face unique challenges that make the consequences of divorce particularly complex and far-reaching. Older people undergoing divorce are more vulnerable than their younger counterparts, due to the unique psychosocial changes that accompany aging (Charles & Carstensen, 2010). Retirement, declining health, and the death of close friends or family members are common in later life. These changes can amplify the challenges faced during divorce, making older people more susceptible to adverse outcomes such as frailty, falls, and hospitalization (Brown & Wright, 2017). Divorce in later life can also lead to significant challenges, including financial instability, social isolation, and a disrupted sense of identity (Charles & Carstensen, 2010; Thomas et al., 2017). Financially, older people may face the loss of retirement savings or the need to divide assets that were accumulated over many years. Socially, they may lose contact with mutual friends or experience strained relationships with adult children, which can further exacerbate feelings of loneliness and isolation (Craigs et al., 2014).

The prevalence of divorce among older people has increased significantly in the past three decades, especially in high-income countries. Recent evidence suggests for instance that, about 36 percent of all adult divorce cases in the United States of America are among people aged 50 years and above, a significant increase from about 8.7% in the 1990s (Brown & Lin, 2022). In Australia, divorce rates among people who have been married for over 20 years accounted for a quarter of divorce cases in 2021 (Divorces in Australia, n.d.). This trend highlights a shifting dynamic and present a public health and social challenge, especially with the current global increase in life expectancy (Schumacher et al., 2024). Many people are likely to live longer, which may lead to a proportionate increase in older people seeking divorce. This phenomenon has implications for public health and social planning as the world races to improve the lives of older people (Chen, 2024; Ping, 2024). The current literature on LLD and its impact on the wellbeing of older people remain fragmented, with few studies examining the specific effects on health and well-being among older people in specific countries. To the best of our knowledge, there are no systematic reviews that have explored divorce among older people. This systematic review, therefore, aimed to explore the impact of LLD on the health and well-being of older people 50 years and above. We aim to synthesize the existing literature to identify patterns, trends, and gaps in current research. Findings from this review will provide invaluable global perspective on LLD, as well as shape public health strategies to improve the quality of life of older people who may experience divorce in later life.

2. Theoretical framework

This systematic review was conducted using the transition theory by Nancy Schlossberg as a framework (Schlossberg, 2005). Transition, according to Nancy Schlossberg is any event, or non-event that causes a change in relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Schlossberg, 2005). The transition, therefore, can potentially be a life event that can result in gains, losses or both. In determining whether an individual is transitioning, it is important to first determine their perception of change, because events or non-events can be a transition if it leads to change. The model emphasizes the significance of considering the type, context, and impact of a transition to understand its meaning for an individual (Schlossberg, 2007). Transition can include the most obvious life changes such as marriage, graduation, starting a new job, as well as subtle changes like non-occurrence of anticipated events such as promotion at work (Schlossberg, 2005).

To understand transition better, Schlossberg defined three types of transition namely anticipated, unanticipated and non-events transitions. The Anticipated transition occurs when the transition process is

predicted to happen (for example: getting married). An unanticipated transition happens unexpectedly or without prior planning (for example: loss of employment or divorce). Non-events are transitions which are expected to happen but don't happen (for example not having children after several years of marriage) (Schlossberg, 2005).

The transition model therefore provides a framework for understanding the impact of LLD, and how this affects people differently. Furthermore, the model provides an understanding that transitions, such as LLD, involve changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles, with perception playing an important role in defining these events (Bowen & Jensen, 2017).

For this, Schlossberg (2005) noted that individual differences exist in the way people cope with the same change due to what she described as the "4S" (Situation, Self, Supports and Strategies) (Schlossberg, 2007). Situation refers to the external circumstances or events that people encounter, such as life changes, challenges, or opportunities. In assessing the impact of LLD on older people, the context in which the divorce occurred (environmental factors, social influences, and subjective experiences) may influence an older person's circumstances post-divorce (Schlossberg, 2011).

Self, according to Schlossberg, encompasses individuals' perceptions about their own identity, beliefs, values, and capabilities. This also include how individuals may interpret and make meaning of their own experiences, emotions, and roles during the transition period (Schlossberg, 2011). This is often facilitated by factors such as an individual's self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy which can shape the transition and adjustment to new situations.

Schlossberg (2005) described support as the resources, relationships, and networks that individuals mostly rely on at the time of transition to cope with changes and challenges. This may include social support, community resources, and interpersonal connections which help individuals to go through transitions successfully. The support systems that are available to individuals during transition may include emotional, information, instrumental, and appraisal support, all of which can contribute to older people's well-being post-divorce (Schlossberg, 2011).

Finally, strategies, according to Schlossberg (2011) include the actions, behaviors, and coping strategies adopted by individuals to effectively manage the transition period. The theory highlight the importance of adaptive mechanisms that individuals may utilize to navigate life's changes, uncertainties, and challenges during the transitional period (Schlossberg, 2011). The strategies, which often include coping mechanisms, problem-solving approaches, and decision-making processes can help individuals address transition-related stressors and obstacles which have the potential of setting individuals apart during the transition process.

In this review, the 4s of transition served as a lens through which we evaluated the risks and protective factors that influence post-divorce life, including the health and wellbeing of older people experiencing LLD.

3. Methods

3.1. Study design

We employed a systematic review of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method studies following the guidelines proposed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses (Page et al., 2021). Primary studies that reported on LLD were included in this review. The protocol for this systematic review was prospectively registered in The International Prospective Register of systematic Reviews (PROSPERO Registration ID: CRD42024563238).

3.2. Identifying research question

The Condition, Context, and Population (CoCoPop) was adopted for

identifying the research question as recommended by the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Evidence Implementation Group (Munn et al., 2018). The research question for this review was: What is the impact of LLD on the health and well-being of older people? The application of CoCoPop and the associated key words are presented in Table 1.

3.3. Eligibility criteria

1. Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method studies that report on LLD among older people (50 years and above).
2. Studies that explored the effects of LLD on physical or mental health, such as chronic illnesses, mental health conditions (like depression or anxiety), or overall emotional and social well-being.
3. Only peer-reviewed journal articles were included.
4. Only articles published in English were included in the review.
5. We included articles published between January 1, 2005, and July 30, 2024.

3.4. Search strategy

The search strategy was developed in consultation with a research librarian. An initial scoping search was conducted to locate published articles related to the topic, and to identify relevant terms, keywords, and descriptors. We also checked Open Science Framework and PROSPERO to ensure that no similar reviews have been registered or completed recently. A structured search strategy was then designed using a combination of keywords and synonyms to represent each concept, and this was translated across relevant databases (PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO). Where a database had a unique thesaurus of subject terms (for example: PubMed) these additional terms for each concept were combined with the relevant keywords. The keywords and key terms used were: (Keywords: "Late-Life Divorce", "Grey divorce" "Marital dissolution", and "Separation in old age"); (Keywords: "Health", "Mental health", "Well-being", "Physical health", "Psychological health", "Social health"); (Keywords: "Older people", "Elderly", "Aged", "Geriatric population", "Older persons", "Seniors", and "older adults"). The search was conducted iteratively to refine, adjust, and refocus the search in the light of sets of preceding results which optimised the identification of eligible studies. The reference lists of all the included studies were consulted for leads to further literature. The sample search strategy for each database is presented in Appendix 1.

3.5. Selection of studies

The studies identified from the initial search across the databases were uploaded to Zotero version 6.0.26 (Vanhecke, 2008) and duplicates removed by one author (GD). The remaining articles were exported into Rayaan (Ouzzani et al., 2016) for further screening. Two authors (DA and SS) independently screened the abstract and titles of the studies. Disagreements with study selection were resolved by a third author (GD). Subsequently, the full text screening was independently completed by two authors (VNS and KAS). All discrepancies were resolved through consensus. Both screening phases were monitored by the rest of the authors and the process was discussed at regular review meetings.

Table 1
Identifying the research question.

Condition	LLD: Divorce that occurs in older adulthood (at 50 years of age or older).
Context of interest	Health and well-being: This includes both physical and mental health outcomes, such as chronic illnesses, psychological health (e.g., depression, anxiety), emotional well-being, and social consequences.
Population	Older people: Adults aged 50 years and above.

3.6. Assessment of methodological quality/ risk of bias

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed using two validated appraisal tools, each tailored to the study type. For cross-sectional studies, the JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies (Moola et al., 2020) was employed. This tool assesses the methodological rigor of the studies, ensuring that confounding factors are identified and reported to minimize bias. The JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Analytical Cross-Sectional Studies evaluates eight key criteria, including study inclusion criteria, study setting, exposure measurement, confounding management, the validity and reliability of outcome measures, and the use of suitable statistical analysis methods. For the qualitative studies, the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) tool (CASP, 2018) was utilized. Widely recognized in the literature (Noyes et al., 2018), the CASP tool is a robust framework for assessing qualitative research quality. It evaluates essential aspects such as study design, data collection methods, data analysis, and the interpretation of findings, ensuring the integrity and validity of qualitative studies in the review. The quality appraisal of the cross-sectional studies and the qualitative studies are presented in Tables 2 and 3 respectively.

3.7. Data extraction

Data extraction was carried out by three authors (SY, JPA and KSA) using a pre-determined data extraction form which was designed and approved by all the authors. Data extraction was monitored by the rest of the authors and discussed at regular author meetings. Data were extracted iteratively, and the extraction form was modified to accommodate any new relevant information. The data extraction form included essential components such as author details and citations, country and location of study, participant characteristics, objectives, methodology, and key findings. The data extraction process was discussed at regular review meetings. The data extraction form and the included studies are presented in Table 4.

3.8. Data analysis

We employed an iterative, theory-driven narrative synthesis approach (Lisy & Porritt, 2016) to analyse and integrate findings from both qualitative and quantitative studies on the impact of LLD on the health and well-being of older people. Narrative synthesis allows for the systematic identification, comparison, and synthesis of patterns across diverse studies that are unsuitable for meta-analysis due to heterogeneity in methodologies, populations, and outcomes (Campbell et al., 2020). In this synthesis, we categorized findings related to emotional, social, and physical health outcomes following LLD, with particular attention to variations in study results. To structure this process, we applied Nancy Schlossberg's 4S Transition Theory, which informed the identification of key themes. The four constructs of the theory (Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies) were used to frame and explore how these dimensions shaped the experience of LLD, as well as the impact on health outcomes of older people. The synthesis process involved extracting findings related to emotional, social, and physical health outcomes from the included studies, mapping these findings to the four constructs of the 4S transition theory, and iteratively refining themes within each construct to identify patterns, variations, and relationships across studies. The theme extraction and mapping process was carried out by three authors (SY, GD and KSA) who were involved in the initial data extraction process. Discrepancies in theme identification were resolved through team discussions, with the theoretical framework serving as a guide to ensure consistency and alignment with Schlossberg's 4S constructs.

Table 2
Quality Appraisal of cross-sectional studies.

Author(s) and year	Inclusion criteria	Study subjects and setting	Measured exposure	Standard measurement criteria	Confounding factors	Dealing with confounding factors	Measurement of outcome	Statistical analysis	Score
Tosi and van den Broek (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unable to tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	87.5%
Pudrovskaya and Carr (2008)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	100%
Sharma (2015)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	100%
Bowen and Jensen (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	100%

Table 3
Quality appraisal of qualitative studies.

Author(s) and year	Aims	Method	Design	Recruitment	Data collection	Relationship	Ethical issues	Analysis	Findings	Score
Crowley (2019)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	77.8%
Canham et al. (2014)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Can't tell	Yes	Yes	Yes	77.8%
Koren et al. (2024)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	100%

4. Results

4.1. Study characteristics

The search for literature across the databases yielded 468 results. A total of 125 duplicates were removed, and 343 articles were screened. Seven studies met the eligibility criteria and were included in the review. The results of the database search and screening process is presented in Fig. 1. Overall, data on 13,878 older people from 4 countries (The United States of America, Canada, The United Kingdom, and Israel) were reported in the review. Details about study characteristics and data extraction table is presented in Table 4.

4.2. Themes

4.2.1. Situation

Older people reported varied experiences with divorce in later life, which was often shaped by ongoing situational factors such as marital history, gender, parental status, and financial circumstances. These situational elements align with Schlossberg's emphasis on the influence of external circumstances on transitions, where factors like financial strain and familial responsibilities act as immediate stressors during and after divorce.

Divorce in later years often led to mental health and financial challenges for older people. Tosi and van den Broek (2020) found that depressive symptoms increased before and during the divorce process but were not evident post-divorce, illustrating the situational role of time in emotional recovery. Familial responsibilities also delayed adjustment where older people with children experienced slower recovery than their childless counterparts, highlighting the compounding effect of caregiving expectations during transitions.

Financial strain, particularly for women, emerged as a critical situational factor. Women faced significant economic losses post-divorce, leading to long-term financial insecurity (Sharma, 2015). This phenomenon reflects how the 'Situation' component interacts with gender roles, amplifying the vulnerability of older women who go through divorce. Additionally, Canham et al. (2014) noted that the emotional baggage and impulsive decisions accompanying grey divorce often exacerbated well-being challenges, illustrating how situational pressures influence older people's coping mechanisms.

Interestingly, not all experiences were negative. Crowley (2019) reported that while some older adults faced loneliness and financial worries, others celebrated newfound independence and happiness

post-divorce. Life satisfaction and recovery were influenced by personal context and time. Bowen and Jensen (2017) found that those who remarried after divorcing experienced improved life satisfaction, underscoring the evolving nature of situational factors as older people adapt to the transition.

4.2.2. Self

Older people's personal characteristics, including gender, age, resilience, and coping strategies, played an important role in shaping older people's experiences of LLD. These align with Schlossberg's Self component of transition, which emphasizes internal factors such as psychosocial resources and personality traits in navigating transitions. While mental health outcomes after divorce did not significantly differ between genders, other personal factors such as parental status and coping mechanisms influenced recovery rates.

Gender differences were particularly evident in life satisfaction post LLD. Bowen and Jensen (2017) reported that older women with children (especially grown-up children) and those who remarried experienced better life satisfaction than men in similar circumstances. This suggests that resilience and the ability to reframe relationships post-divorce were key personal resources for women to live meaningful lives post LLD. However, women also faced greater economic vulnerability, which exacerbated stress and created long-term challenges (Sharma, 2015). Self, therefore, interacts with situational factors like financial strain, suggesting that the ability to maintain resilience can be context dependent for older people.

Resilience was also evident in the value many older people placed on maintaining familyhood after divorce. Koren et al. (2024) observed that preserving meaningful family connections was a critical coping mechanism, providing emotional stability and support. This underscores the dynamic interplay between Self and Support, where personal commitment to relationships fosters stability during the LLD transitions.

Personality traits and coping strategies further shaped post LLD experiences. Pudrovskaya and Carr (2008) found that problem-focused coping mechanisms were associated with fewer depressive symptoms, particularly among women, highlighting the importance of resilience and proactive approaches in managing emotional strain. In a sharp contrast, men were more likely to adopt avoidant coping strategies such as alcohol use. This reflects gender differences in how older people navigate transitions. This divergence suggests that Schlossberg's framework could benefit from deeper consideration of gender-specific coping resources as part of the Self component. Overall, these findings reveal that while Self plays a central role in the LLD transition process,

Table 4
Characteristics of the included studies.

Authors/ year	Country	Population/ sample size	Research objective (s)	Study design	Main Findings
Tosi and van den Broek (2020)	The United Kingdom	909 older adults aged 50 or over divorcees.	To analyze the effect of divorce on the mental health of older adults aged 50 years or over, focusing on depressive symptoms. To distinguish between pre-and post-divorce effects using longitudinal data. To test the crisis model and chronic strain model of divorce by examining the adjustment patterns of older adults after marital breakup.	Longitudinal study design using nine waves of data from the UK Household longitudinal study.	Depressive symptoms increase a year before divorce and rapidly return to approximately the baseline level after divorce. Men's depressive symptoms increase by 0.89 points in the year of divorce but not strong enough to draw conclusion on systematic gender differences in late life divorce on depressive symptoms. Childless older adults experience faster adjustments after divorce compared to parents thus adjustment to gray divorce varies per parenthood. Although inconclusive, older people who divorce for the second time adjust much slower compared to first time divorcees.
Crowley (2019)	The United States of America	66 gray divorcees.	To examine the subjective life assessment of heterosexual late life divorcees within the first 3 years of divorce.	Grounded theory using qualitative research designs	A mix of challenges and opportunities are experienced post-divorce.Gray divorce brings about negative consequences including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediate financial worries • Feelings of loneliness It also has positive aspects such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased level of happiness • A sense of liberation from their ex-spouses • Enhanced independence and freedom
Bowen and Jensen (2017)	The United States of America	309 (164 men and 145 women) late life divorcees.	To assess the risk and protective factors [situation, self, support and coping strategies] that may influence life satisfaction after Late-Life Divorce.	Quantitative research design using ordinary least square regression analysis.	The four sets of risks and protective factors had little predictive power on postdivorce life satisfaction. Time covariates such as years since divorce and age at the most recent divorce were statistically significant predictors for life satisfaction. Ongoing stress, strain or pressure was associated with a decrease in life satisfaction. Being female and having children 18 years or more at the time of divorce had favorable impact on life satisfaction postdivorce. Participants experienced a mix of emotions and factors leading to the divorce decision. Varied emotional responses reported including feelings of relief, sadness, and uncertainty about the future. Participants experienced stress and anxiety related to their new circumstances. Concerns about financial challenges particularly economic instability associated with division of assets and potential loss of shared income. Adjustment to social networks and living arrangements impacts the overall well-being and quality of life of divorcees.
Canham et al. (2014)	Canada	10 (7 women, 3 men) divorcees aged 58 to 68 years.	To gain in-depth understanding of the experiences of marriage dissolution, among late life divorcees after 20 years of marriage. To explore the divorce process, including factors that determined or delayed the decision to divorce. To examine the coping mechanisms of divorcees during and after the divorce, focusing on their well-being and quality of life post-divorce.	Qualitative research design using in-depth interviews.	Participants experienced a mix of emotions and factors leading to the divorce decision. Varied emotional responses reported including feelings of relief, sadness, and uncertainty about the future. Participants experienced stress and anxiety related to their new circumstances. Concerns about financial challenges particularly economic instability associated with division of assets and potential loss of shared income. Adjustment to social networks and living arrangements impacts the overall well-being and quality of life of divorcees.
Koren et al. (2024)	Israel	72 [44 late life divorcees aged 60-81 and 28 adult children of late life divorcees]	To examine how familyhood is experienced after Late-Life Divorce, in the context of long-term marriages in Israel, and to understand the continuity or change in familyhood before and after divorce.	Qualitative research design using in-depth interviews.	Familyhood remains meaningful after divorce, whether it was present or absent before the divorce. The study identified a fourfold typology of familyhood continuity and change and familyhood is reconstructed and maintained post-divorce. Adult children, especially daughters, were found to play a key role in maintaining familyhood. Familyhood was associated with

(continued on next page)

Table 4 (continued)

Authors/ year	Country	Population/ sample size	Research objective (s)	Study design	Main Findings
Pudrovska and Carr (2008)	The United States of America	5,873 [2,814 men and 3,059 women] in their 50s and early 60s.	To examine how widowhood and divorce in mid- and later life affect psychological distress, specifically focusing on depressive symptoms and alcohol use. To determine whether coping strategies and personality traits provide protection against or exacerbate psychological distress in individuals who have experienced marital dissolution in their 50s and 60s.	Data from two waves (1993 and 2004) of the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS), focusing on a long-term analysis of individuals in their late 60s.	maintaining a positive relationship during family gatherings, such as holidays and birthdays, and involved expressions of affection and mutual aid. Divorce did not significantly affect depressive symptoms but had a major impact on men's alcohol use. Neither problem-focused nor emotion- focused coping strategies substantially mediated the effects of marital dissolution on mental health. Only certain coping styles, like problem-focused coping among women, moderated depressive symptoms to some extent. Personality traits like neuroticism, extraversion, and openness influenced how individuals adjusted to marital disruption. Neuroticism was associated with increased distress.
Sharma (2015)	The United States of America	6,639 participants aged 50 and over.	To understand the impact of divorce or separation on the total wealth of older men and women in the United States with focus on gender differences in the economic effects of marital dissolution. To offer recommendations to improve the financial well-being of older divorced or separated individuals.	Longitudinal panel study using 2004 and 2010 waves of the RAND Health and Retirement Study. Quantitatively analyzed using fixed effects (FE) regression model.	Women experienced a much larger financial setback following divorce or separation, primarily due to lower earnings and fewer assets. Older women who transitioned to divorced/separated status lost an average of \$376,000 in total wealth, while older men lost \$146,000. Delaying Social Security benefits and increasing earnings were recommended as strategies for divorced/separated individuals, especially women, to improve their financial outlook. At the macro level, policy changes like equal pay for equal work and financial literacy could help reduce the financial burden on divorced/separated older women.

the impact of self was mostly shaped by interactions with situational factors and available support systems. For instance, while resilience and effective coping strategies promoted recovery, economic vulnerabilities and cultural expectations, particularly for women, complicate the transition process.

4.2.3. Support

Social and familial support played a pivotal role in the adjustment process for older people navigating LLD. This aligns with Schlossberg's Support component, which emphasizes the importance of external resources during transitions. Counselling and new relationships served as sources of emotional and financial support which helped older divorcees navigate the challenges associated with divorce (Canham et al., 2014). More importantly, Koren et al. (2024) highlighted the role of maintaining a sense of familyhood, characterized by mutual aid and affection, even for those who lacked strong familial bonds prior to divorce. This suggests that support networks can be built or redefined during the LLD transition process, thereby providing significant resources for older people's well-being.

Social support was particularly significant in buffering the psychological effects of divorce. Pudrovska and Carr (2008) found that older people with stronger social and familial ties healed quicker than those without social connections. This underscores the importance of accessible support systems in facilitating emotional adjustment. While this may align with the broad social perspective of life, the efficacy of social support during LLD transition was often contingent upon situational factors such as health, family dynamics, and financial stability (Sharma, 2015), suggesting an interplay between Support and Situation in

shaping the recovery journeys of older divorcees.

Interestingly, Tosi and van den Broek (2020) reported that childless individuals adjusted more quickly to divorce, potentially due to fewer familial responsibilities and the associated stress. While this finding highlighted the potential burden of caregiving, it also revealed gaps in support for those with greater familial obligations, suggesting the need for targeted interventions to address this disparity. These findings demonstrate the significant role of Support in the LLD transition process. While robust support systems can promote faster recovery, their effectiveness may depend on both situational factors and individual characteristics, emphasizing the interconnectedness of the 4S framework. For instance, resilient individuals (Self) may actively seek and utilize social support, while those facing financial strain (Situation) may find it more difficult to access or sustain supportive relationships.

4.2.4. Strategies

Older people adopted a variety of coping strategies following LLD, aligning with Schlossberg's Strategies component, which emphasizes the actions individuals take to manage transitions. These strategies were highly individualized, reflecting the influence of personal circumstances and resource availability. Canham et al. (2014) identified avoidance, acceptance, and the pursuit of new relationships as essential mechanisms to navigate the emotional and financial challenges associated with divorce. Such strategies demonstrate how individuals tailor their responses to the demands of their Situation, highlighting the dynamic interplay between Schlossberg's 4S components.

Financial stability emerged as a critical factor influencing strategy selection and effectiveness. Sharma (2015) noted that older women,

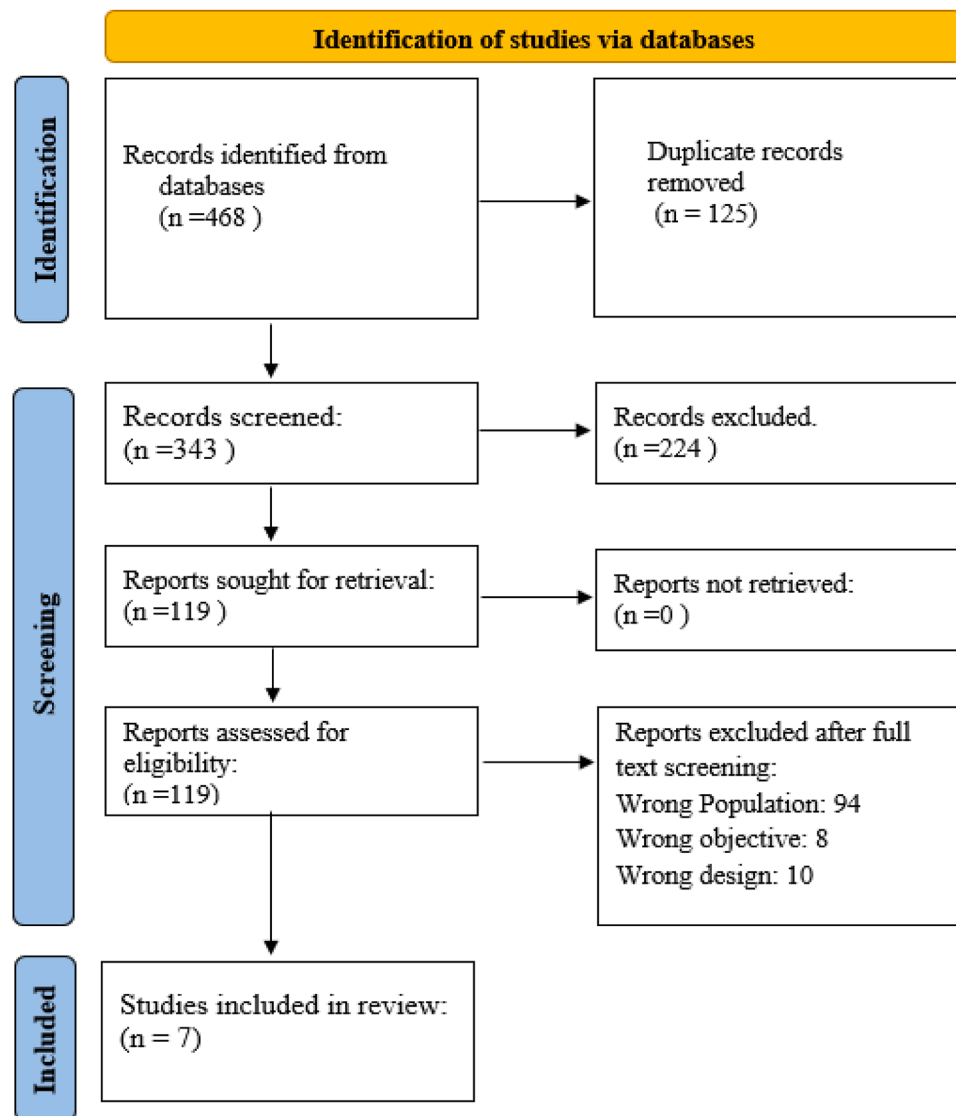


Fig. 1. PRISMA diagram for screening and study selection.

despite being more disadvantaged financially post-divorce, benefited from proactive financial strategies such as increasing earnings or engaging in financial planning. This highlights how Support, such as access to financial resources or counselling, can bolster the effectiveness of strategies. Pudrovská and Carr (2008) further emphasized the value of problem-focused coping, which significantly reduced depressive symptoms, particularly among women. In contrast, some men relied on avoidance strategies, such as alcohol use, to manage stress, which underscores the varying effectiveness of strategies based on personal resilience (Self) and available support systems.

Effective strategies for managing LLD often required a combination of emotional adjustment, financial planning, and social support (Canham et al., 2014; Sharma, 2015; Tosi & van den Broek, 2020). For instance, acceptance and emotional adjustment were facilitated by counselling or strong social networks, while financial planning was dependent upon access to resources and personal resilience. These findings suggest that the Strategies component of Schlossberg's framework interacts closely with Self and Support, revealing the need for an integrated approach to promoting well-being post-divorce. The reliance on unhealthy strategies by some older people, particularly men, indicates potential gaps in the framework's ability to address maladaptive coping and highlights the need for targeted interventions to support healthier coping mechanisms.

5. Discussion

The aim of this systematic review was to synthesize available literature on the impact of LLD on the health and wellbeing of older people through the lens of Schlossberg's transition model (Schlossberg, 2005). By applying the 4S framework (Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies) this review sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of how older people navigate the overlapping challenges of divorce in later life, including emotional, social, and financial consequences. The findings indicate that LLD is a complex process that affects older people across multiple domains, including mental health, financial stability, social relationships, and overall well-being which have implications for public health and social planning. Older people who experience LLD require social safety nets and economic opportunities to improve their quality of life.

Marriage as an institution had been traditionally viewed as a protective socio-economic arrangement, offering physical and psychological benefits in later life, while divorce has been linked to negative health outcomes, such as increased rates of depression, anxiety, and financial distress (AL-shahrani & Hammad, 2023; Grundström et al., 2021). Evidence from this review confirms these patterns, with divorced older people, especially women, often predisposed to heightened vulnerability due to financial insecurities. These vulnerabilities may stem from early

life experiences, especially in societies where gender stereotype pushes women into home keeping roles and limiting their earning potentials. Also, gender gaps in pay policies, and the general role of childbearing and childrearing responsibilities for women can put them at higher risk for financial challenges post-divorce. Women often take time off work to raise their children, which may reduce their earning potentials and pension contributions. Gender-sensitive financial policies and social safety nets that support divorced older women, particularly in countries with gender pay gaps are needed to improve the well-being of older people post-divorce (Leopold, 2018; Perera et al., 2022).

Additionally, social support emerged as a crucial factor in mitigating the negative effects of LLD. Social support is reported across the ageing literature as a protective factor in preventing loneliness and social isolation, which are important to the well-being of older people (Donovan & Blazer, 2020; Mehrabi & Béland, 2020). As noted in this study, older people with robust social connections through family, friendships, community engagement tend to fare better emotionally and psychologically post-divorce. In contrast, as noted in this review and consistent with emerging literature, chronic illness and existing alienation can worsen risk of social isolation (Hounkpatin et al., 2024; Mehrabi & Béland, 2020), which can exacerbate the challenges of adjusting to life after divorce. This is particularly relevant in developing countries where formal support systems may be limited, and older people may be more dependent on family and community networks for care and emotional support (Devkota et al., 2023).

The findings from the review also reveals disparities in coping strategies. Generally, older people develop coping mechanisms throughout their lives to manage stress, adversity, and life transitions (Charles & Carstensen, 2010). As noted in this review, these coping strategies vary among individuals, and are often shaped by their life experiences, accumulated wisdom, and the ability to adapt to change. Consistent with existing literature (Cholankeril et al., 2023; Swannell, 2020), women in this review reported higher life satisfaction post-divorce, particularly those who repartner or maintain strong social networks. In contrast, men often experienced more emotional difficulties and turned to less adaptive coping mechanisms such as alcohol use. These coping strategies employed by older people following divorce were mostly shaped by personal resilience and social resources. Women benefitted from problem-focused coping strategies, including financial planning, which mitigated the economic toll of divorce. However, men's emotional needs remain underexplored, underscoring the need for gender-specific mental health interventions to address loneliness and less effective coping mechanisms.

This systematic review has several strengths and limitations. Firstly, we utilized the transition theory as a guiding framework, which provided valuable insights into the varying impact of LLD on the well-being of older people. By applying this theory, our review effectively captured the dynamic nature of LLD, and how it shapes the well-being older people. The inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative studies offered a comprehensive analysis, incorporating a wide range of perspectives and experiences. Additionally, despite the dearth of research on this subject, our findings provide a solid foundation for further public health research, acknowledging that, while societies may view marriage and divorce with different lenses, the impact of LLD may be universal.

Despite these strengths, our review has several limitations. First, the included studies were conducted in high-income countries, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to older people in other socio-economic or cultural contexts. Also, our findings presented in this review were the results from the included primary studies. We cannot therefore assume the accuracy of the findings. Finally, we included only journal articles which might have influenced the limited number of studies included in this review.

6. Conclusion

The findings from this review provide an understanding of the

challenges older people face following LLD, especially in high-income. Divorce disrupts not only their emotional and social well-being but also their financial stability. Public health and social care systems must be reoriented to provide targeted support for older people experiencing divorce, including counseling, financial planning, and opportunities for social engagement. Given the global aging population and the increasing rates of divorce among older people, future research must address the cultural and economic differences that shape the experiences of LLD across diverse regions. Marriage and divorce may vary across countries and regions and may be influenced by culture and societal structures. Filling these knowledge gaps is crucial for developing comprehensive and culturally sensitive interventions that can mitigate the adverse effects of divorce on older people's health and well-being. We also recommend future longitudinal studies to capture the evolving impacts of Late-Life Divorce over time, including its causal pathways, cohort-specific differences, and adaptive mechanisms in diverse sociocultural contexts to understanding the dynamic nature of LLD and its implications for the well-being of older people.

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Gideon Dzando: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Dennis Asante:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Solomon Yabila:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Vitalis Mwi-nyuri Suuron:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Investigation, Data curation. **Johnpaul Amenu:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Investigation, Data curation. **Seidu Salifu:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Sherrif Kwame Awiagah:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Supplementary materials

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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