To understand this effect, we need to distinguish two terms: marital status (married or single) and marital quality (happily married or unhappily married). Figure 11.1 shows that, for men, marital status is more important than marital quality. This is the case because even unhappily married men benefit from being married. The situation is different for women. Happily married women are better off than unmarried women, but unmarried women are better off than unhappily married women (Orth-Gomer et al., 2000). In short, although both men and women benefit from a happy marriage, only men benefit from an unhappy one. Undoubtedly, this is one reason why women are more apt to dissolve a marriage than men are (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; see also Hill, Rubin, & Peplau, 1976).

4. Adjustment to the Dissolution of a Relationship

Gender differences are also found when we consider how people cope with the dissolution of a relationship. Irrespective of who initiates the breakup, men react more poorly than women to separation and divorce; they also react more poorly to widowhood (Helgeson, 1994; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). For example, following the death of their mate, men are more apt than women to become depressed, get sick, and die within a relatively short time. Although the reasons for these gender differences are not entirely clear, two processes seem to be at work. First, men tend to be less socially active than women, so their involvement in social activities is more affected when their romantic relationship ends. Second, men experience greater losses in intimacy when their romantic relationship dissolves. This loss of intimacy occurs because women’s interactions tend to be more intimate than men’s. Women share more and disclose more and are generally more supportive and understanding than men are. Moreover, this is true in both same-sex and opposite-sex interactions, and both men and women disclose more when talking to a woman than when talking to a man (Dindia & Allen, 1992; Fritz, Nagurney, & Helgeson, 2003).

An investigation by Reis, Senchak, and Solomon (1985) illustrates this effect. In this investigation, men and women kept a diary of every interaction of 10 minutes or longer they had over a four-day period. Soon after the interaction ended, they...