

The Importance of Being -- Married

There are many reasons to choose wisely and carefully when picking a spouse, but here's one you may not know: New research suggests that a good marriage is good for your health -- and that a bad one can be a real heartbreaker.

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There are many good reasons to choose wisely and carefully when picking a spouse -- not the least of which is that you'll be spending an awful lot of time with them in both the near and distant future, possibly even raising children together.

So you want to find someone with whom you are compatible, share values -- someone who makes you happy. But perhaps one of the most compelling reasons to make an informed choice is that your spouse can affect your physical health in very direct, measurable ways.

"The choice of spouse is one of the most significant you'll make in your life; it is more serious than choosing a house or anything," says Brian Baker, a psychiatrist at the University of Toronto. "There is nothing like a good, solid marriage."

The Heart of the Matter

Baker should know: He has spent the past decade conducting studies that look at the effect of marital strain on cardiovascular health. In one of his most recent studies, he followed both men and women with borderline high blood pressure for three years and found that blood pressure is directly linked to what he calls "marital cohesion" -- how much couples do and share together.

"We found that if you had a bad marriage, it was best to avoid your spouse -- because if you are with your spouse, your blood pressure went up, and if you weren't with your spouse, your blood pressure went down," says Baker. "In a good marriage the opposite was the case."

An earlier study found that couples in good marriages had thinner heart walls than those in bad marriages. A thicker heart wall means higher blood pressure, "so that is an interesting finding," says Baker.

While the majority of studies so far have looked at cardiovascular effects, the plusses and minuses of marriage don't appear to be limited to that system.

In fact, they could be tied to how your body handles stress, says Baker, and the way that stress manifests itself could control the system most affected.

"It could be the immune system, or depression, gastrointestinal problems, rashes, or emotional disorders like anxiety conditions," he says.

The Benefits of Wedded Bliss

Baker's research joins a small but growing number of studies pinpointing the varied health effects of marriage. One study, for example, showed that marital stress can double a person's risk of developing diabetes. Another study, out of Sweden, showed women in marital distress had a three times greater risk of a second heart attack. And a third showed that positive marital interactions can boost immunity and reduce the risk of heart disease by keeping stress hormones low.

"The benefits are better physical health, more resistance to infection, fewer infections, and a reduced likelihood of dying from cancer, from heart disease, from all major killers," psychologist and author John Gottman, PhD, tells WebMD. "The other health benefit is longevity: People live longer if they are in marital relationships, particularly if they are in good, satisfying relationships." Gottman, considered by many to be a pioneer in the field of marriage research, is the James Mifflin Professor in the department of psychology at the University of Washington in Seattle.

"There are physical benefits and mental health benefits," says Gottman. "You have less depression, less anxiety disorders, less psychosis, less posttraumatic stress disorders, fewer phobias. You also have fewer injuries due to accidents."

"The process gets reversed when relationships dissolve," he points out. This is especially true when one spouse dies. Oftentimes the surviving partner will die of what some call the "broken-heart syndrome."

"There is a bereavement process that is really well-documented," says Gottman. "People really go through [physical] grief and they secrete [the stress hormone] cortisol, and a lot of systems really shut down. [The grieving spouses] become more vulnerable to all kinds of infectious agents; their immune systems aren't working. So a person will get something like pneumonia and die very quickly. And they also lose the will to live."

In this scenario, men are more likely to be the one who dies of broken-heart syndrome, Gottman notes. But then again, men also typically reap the greater health benefits from being married while alive.

For Guys, for Better or for Worse Is Mostly for Better

"If it is a good marriage, the benefits are equally as great for women as for men; for men, just *being* married confers a tremendous amount of benefits," Gottman says. "One of the major ways in which marriage confers effects is to reduce risk: Men stop engaging in risky behavior like bungee jumping and driving drunk. ... [They start] getting their health looked at on a regular basis and eating well. Single men really don't do that; they sort of fall apart.

"Women are less prone to risky behavior, more likely to go to doctor when they are sick, and they take care of themselves better," he says. "The other big, big difference is men have lousy social support systems, and women have great support systems."

This just goes to show you how much men get taken care of in a marriage, says David Woodsfellow, PhD, director of the Center for Relationship Therapy in Atlanta.

"While the traditional role has man as the provider, that role is really as the *provider of money*," he says. "In that traditional role ... the woman is the provider of nurturing comfort, home, and often food, clothing, and furnishings. I think it is those roles and their vestiges that account for the finding that marriage is better for men."

Bridging the Differences

So being married can benefit your health. How can couples get the maximum benefit for both parties involved?

Woodsfellow offers these four tips for bridging the inevitable differences and keeping a marriage healthy and happy.

1. Talk to each other every day. "Make a point of learning what the other one's day was like," he says. "That becomes one type of quality time: undivided attention."
2. Say nice things to one another; give one another compliments. "Do this frequently," he says.
3. Try not to reject each other. "Be aware of the little moments when your partner is reaching out to you and try to respond to them rather than turn your back to them, even if you are busy," says Woodsfellow.
4. Develop your own little habits, rituals, secret words, or secret signals. "Little, special things become special bonds, special moments of intimacy," he says.

It's All About Commitment

"That's one of the great things about love: When people really love and they make a commitment, they become enormously vulnerable and enormously powerful -- because they care so much and it connects them to the world in such a big way," says Gottman. "That's the amazing thing about all of these benefits: They are conferred by commitment. The commitment is like falling over backward and translates into making you a mensch and a concerned human being -- somebody who is involved in the community of mankind."

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