

Marriage provides health benefits, especially for men

Studies show that those who are married tend to live longer than their unmarried counterparts, and women usually take the lead in encouraging healthy behaviours in their partners

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The new year is traditionally a time when many people feel a renewed commitment to create healthy habits, such as exercising regularly, drinking more water or eating more healthily.

It turns out that when it comes to health, married people have an edge, especially married men. But surely the act of walking down the aisle is not what provides this health advantage.

So what exactly is at play?

As a team, we study how relationships affect health. One of us is a nursing professor who studies how social support influences health behaviours. One is a social health psychologist who explores how stress affects couples' relationships and health, and one is a social psychologist who researches how relationships influence health behaviour changes. Together, we examine how partners influence each other's health, taking gender into account in this equation.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF MARRIAGE, FOR MEN AND WOMEN

It is important to note that most marriage and health studies have been limited to married men and women. But more recent studies are examining these relationships in partners who have the same gender identity or the same biological sex, or are gender diverse.

One theory that seeks to explain the link between marriage and health is the act of self-selection. Simply put, people who are wealthier and healthier than average are more likely not only to get married, but also to find a partner who is wealthier and healthier than average. Men and women with poorer health and wealth than average are less likely to marry at all.

While this may be part of the story, marriage also provides partners with a sense of belonging, more opportunities for social engagement and reduced feelings of loneliness. This social integration, or the extent to which people participate in social relationships and activities, can greatly influence health – from reducing the risk of hypertension and heart disease to lowering one's risk of death or suicide.

Another important connection between marriage and health involves the body's inflammatory process. Research links loneliness and lack of close relationships with inflammation, or the body's way of reacting to illness, injury or disease. Though inflammation is needed for healing, chronic inflammation is associated with heart disease, arthritis, cancers and autoimmune diseases. While single adults undoubtedly have very meaningful

close relationships too, a healthy marriage by nature provides more opportunities for closeness and socialisation, supporting the link between marriage and inflammation. When you dig deeper, gender seems to play a role as well. One study related to marital quality, gender and inflammation found a connection between lower levels of spousal support and higher levels of inflammation for women, but not men. In another study, if couples used negative communication patterns, such as one partner making demands while the other partner withdraws, women but not men experienced heightened inflammation.

MARRIAGE AND LONGEVITY

Married men and married women live, on average, two years longer than their unmarried counterparts. One reason for this longevity benefit is the influence of marital partners on healthy behaviours. Study after study shows that married people eat better and are less likely to smoke and drink excessively. All of these healthy behaviours help explain why married people tend to live longer. However, men married to women tend to see additional longevity benefits compared with women married to men, for several possible reasons. For example, female spouses may be looking out for their male partners, reinforcing healthy behaviours and providing more opportunities for healthy choices. On the flip side, married men are less likely to attempt to influence their wives' health behaviours. Women tend to take the lead in promoting healthy behaviours, benefiting their husbands. Data suggests that men and women in same-gender relationships tend to engage in teamwork to mutually promote positive health behaviours. Further, married men and women are more likely to want to change their partners' health behaviours, such as exercise, especially if the spouses' habits are worse than their own. These findings suggest that both the person and the partner's gender matters.

Relationship quality can also influence health behaviours. For example, in the context of exercise, both men and women who reported higher levels of marital support were more likely to walk for exercise. However, as men aged, the association between marital support and walking became even stronger for them, but the same was not true for married women.

CULTURAL NORMS AND CAREGIVING

To further understand how men's health benefits from their wives, consider cultural norms which foster expectations that women will be the primary caretaker in committed relationships.

Middle-aged people, and in particular women, have been described as the "sandwich generation", since they are often "sandwiched" between taking care of growing children and ageing parents. Caregiving can take a toll on the immune system and one's overall health. Additionally, invisible labour related to childcare and household duties, which often disproportionately fall to women, can leave them with less time for self-care, such as being physically active.

Women also take on more responsibilities in terms of coordinating doctors' appointments and promoting adherence to medical advice for their husbands than husbands do for their wives. However, men often increase their time spent caregiving when their wives are ill.

Of course, not all marriages are created equal.

RELATIONSHIP MATTERS

Relationship quality and relationship conflict also play important roles when it comes to marriage and health. Gendered socialisation and power differences often lead to women thinking and caring about their relationships more than men, causing women to take primary responsibility for managing relationship issues, while men take on less of the burden.

Research shows that women are also more likely to base their identities on their relationships, so when they go through marital conflict or other relationship issues, they experience more negative emotional and physical health effects than men. This can include increased risk of metabolic syndrome, inflammation and cardiovascular disease.

Does this mean that all men should get married to protect their health, or that unmarried people cannot enjoy the same health benefits as those who have said “I do”?

Not at all. Unmarried people can, of course, enjoy good health and longevity. Creating and maintaining strong social ties and engaging with one’s community go a long way when it comes to health. Further, making the best lifestyle choices available, seeking preventive healthcare and reducing stress can help everyone live a longer, healthier life.

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