

## Why being in a long marriage could lower the risk of getting dementia

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If you have been married for a long time, and especially if you have remained married through midlife, you might have a slightly lower risk of suffering from dementia, a recent study suggests.



There seems to be some relationship between marriage and dementia, says Vegard Skirbekk at the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (NIPH/FHI); this has been shown over the years by a number of other studies.

Skirbekk and team analysed the marital status of people aged from 44 to 68 over 24 years, to understand whether this status bore any relation to a clinical diagnosis of dementia or mild cognitive impairment after the age of 70.

Their results showed that those subjects who remained continuously married throughout the period had the lowest incidence of dementia. The highest incidence was found among divorced and single people.

My mother was married to my father for just shy of 21 years. She was widowed at 44, missing those key years of companionship between her fourth and sixth decades, which are known to be the vulnerable years when cognitive decline, if it is going to happen, begins to sneak in.

She never remarried or shared her life with a significant other after that. We – her children – grew up and left home, so the singledom of a stay-at-home mother was made lonelier by an empty nest.

Being married, Skirbekk says, means we are not alone in the face of life's stressors. We have somebody to share our burdens with, somebody to talk to.

"You cope better with adversity and as a result you're less subject to stress. A partner represents a security that provides a buffer," he says.

Unrelenting stress can leave our brains awash with the inflammatory stress hormone cortisol. So without that security, if the stress of coping with life alone overwhelms us, we could predispose our brains to damage.

Some stress is good for us, but a permanent state of stress may be very damaging to cognition in the long term.

It is not just for that reason that a long marriage might offer protection from dementia. If you live with a partner long term you are more likely to develop healthy daily patterns, says Skirbekk – to eat well, to exercise more.

Skirbekk's is not the first study to suggest the protective role of a long romantic partnership.

A 2018 meta study – of 15 studies with a total of 812,047 participants – drew the same conclusion: that being married was associated with reduced dementia risk.

A 2020 investigation by researchers at Michigan State University, in the US, concluded that the association between being divorced/widowed and an increased risk of dementia was stronger for men than for women.

A 2019 survey of 120,000 American men found that married men are healthier than men who were never married or whose marriages ended in divorce or widowhood.

Even in the face of other factors that could affect dementia risk – levels of education, for example – the Norwegian study still linked long-term marriage to an element of protection. Divorced and unmarried adults were 50 per cent to 73 per cent more likely to be diagnosed with dementia. Having children within the union of marriage – or a longterm partnership – also seemed to offer protection. It could be, the researchers conclude, that if you have children you are forced to remain cognitively engaged by helping with maths homework, or keeping ahead of the tech curve.

Research seems to suggest that people who remain cognitively engaged throughout their lives build up more cognitive reserve.

Harvard describes cognitive reserve as “your brain's ability to improvise and find alternative ways of getting a job done; it is developed by a lifetime of education and curiosity”.

Postmortem analysis of brains have found that the pathology of Alzheimer's, for example, does not necessarily mean symptoms are present in life.

But dementia is very complicated, its causes are not wholly understood, nor are its attendant risks, with the best will in the world, easy to mitigate. Just being married is not going to absolutely protect you from it. Many marriages are damaging and unhappy.

The primary messages about protecting yourself from dementia are to remain physically and socially active, to look after your physiological health, your heart, your blood pressure, your weight, and to make healthy lifestyle choices. Do not smoke. Do not drink too much. And you can do all that whether you are single or married.

My mother's dementia is – I believe – the result of many things. Maybe becoming a widow at 44 was just one cruel card in a whole hand.

This is the seventh instalment in a series on dementia, including the research into its causes and treatment, and the quest to prevent or delay its onset; advice for carers on helping dementia patients while protecting their own well-being; and stories of hope.