

Center for Marriage and Families

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Marriage and Mental Health in Adults and Children

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Studies that follow people as they marry, divorce, or remain single strongly indicate that marriage on average boosts the mental health of both adults and children. Adults who marry experience higher levels of emotional well-being and lower levels of mental illness than do adults who are single or divorced (although the research on African American marriage and emotional well-being is more unclear). Children whose parents don't get and stay married have increased risk of mental illness that extends long into adulthood, even after controlling for pre-divorce marital conflict. Cohabitation does not typically appear to provide the same mental health benefits as marriage. Overall, research strongly supports the idea that marriage matters for women's, men's, and children's mental health.

Emotional Well-Being

IN NUMEROUS INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, married people on average report fewer signs of psychological distress and higher rates of emotional well-being than do unmarried or divorced individuals. A study following 14,000 American adults over a ten-year period found that marital status was one of the most important predictors of happiness. Married Americans were more than twice as likely as divorced or separated Americans to say they were very happy with life in general. Cohabiting, never-married, and widowed individuals' happiness resembled that of divorced and separated people more than married people. At the other end of the happiness scale, just 7 percent of married Americans say they are "not too happy" with life in general, compared to 13 percent of singles, 18 percent of the divorced, and 27 percent of those currently separated. Another study that looked at emotional health among Americans in their fifties and early sixties found that just 17 percent of older wives and 14 percent of older husbands characterized their emotional health as fair or poor, compared to 28 percent of unmarried older women and 27 percent of unmarried older men.

When it comes to protecting emotional health cohabitation is not the functional equivalent of marriage. Instead, international research suggests that cohabitators more closely resemble single individuals in their mental health profiles. In one recent seventeen-nation study of marriage and happiness, researchers found that in every country but one, married people were considerably happier than singles. Cohabitators were slightly happier than singles without live-in partners, but cohabitators received only a small fraction of the boost to happiness that married couples enjoyed. A study of 100,000 Norwegians found that married people were happier than individuals who were widowed, divorced, never married, or cohabiting. Divorced people who cohabited immediately following divorce reported very high levels

of happiness. But the study found that if cohabitation did not lead to marriage the initial burst of happiness passed, with cohabitators eventually having lower levels of well-being similar to other single people.

However, the effects of marriage on the psychological well-being of Black adults in particular are somewhat unclear. On the one hand, numerous studies, many of which control* for variables that affect marital status, find that married African Americans report more happiness, life satisfaction, and fewer emotional problems than their unmarried peers. On the other hand, several of these same studies suggest that it is not so much that marriage promotes mental health but rather that divorce, separation, and widowhood harm it. Never-married Black adults appear to do about as well as their married peers on most outcomes. Yet a significant body of literature still makes the compelling case that marriage promotes psychological well-being for Black adults. More research on this important topic is clearly needed.

Mental Illness

Women and Men

Married men and women report fewer symptoms of mental illness and psychological distress than do otherwise similar individuals who are not married. Longitudinal research shows that it is not merely that mentally healthy people are more likely to get or stay married. Instead, marriage itself appears to boost mental health. Remaining unmarried or getting divorced seems to result, on average, in a deterioration in mental well-being.

For example, one longitudinal study followed almost 1,400 young men and women over a seven-year period as they entered marriages, divorced or remained single. Even after taking into account the mental health and other demographic characteristics of people prior to marriage, marriage boosted the mental health and emotional well-being of young adults. Those who got married experienced sharp drops in their level of depression even after accounting for selection effects.

Another study investigated the mental health of 13,000 men and women in older middle age. After controlling for race, education, family structure, income, and living arrangements, married people were less depressed and emotionally healthier than singles. Married women were only half as likely to say their emotional health was “poor.”

Another longitudinal study following a nationally representative sample of 13,000 men and women over five years found that, after controlling for initial mental health status, the mental health of all singles (never married, separated, divorced, and widowed) declined compared to those who remained married over the entire period. Singles who never married, however, became more depressed and less happy.

Children

Divorce doubles the risk that children will experience serious psychological problems later in life, even after controlling for pre-divorce characteristics. A large Swedish study found that as adults, children raised in single-parent families were 56 percent more likely to show signs of mental illness than children from intact married homes. Two recent studies followed identical and

non-identical twins in Australia who married and had children, enabling the researchers to control for genetic factors that might play a role in mental health outcomes. Some of these twins went on to divorce. The researchers found that the children of divorce in this sample were significantly more likely to suffer from mental illness, addictions, and thoughts of suicide. Another important study that followed more than 11,000 British children from birth through age 33 concluded that part of the higher incidence of mental illness among children of divorce is caused by problems that existed before their parents divorced. But the results also indicate that divorce itself has further negative effects, and that children and teens who experience parental divorce are more likely to have adverse mental health effects even into their twenties and thirties. A study of 534 Iowa families found that divorce increased the risk of depression in children. Part of the negative effect of divorce on children's risk of depression stemmed from the impact of divorce on mothers' and fathers' parenting skills. However, even when mothers and fathers remained involved and supportive and did not engage in conflict post-divorce, boys whose parents divorced were at increased risk for depression.

Remarriage does not improve the psychological well-being of children, on average. Children of cohabiting couples show poorer emotional health than children in married, two-parent families, and their emotional health closely resembles children in remarried and single-parent families. There is some evidence that the psychological effects of divorce differ depending on the level of conflict between parents prior to the divorce. When marital conflict is high and sustained, children benefit psychologically from divorce. When marital conflict is low, children suffer psychologically from divorce. Currently, about two-thirds of U.S. divorces appear to be taking place among low-conflict couples.

Suicide Risk

High rates of family fragmentation are strongly linked to an increased risk of suicide among both adults and children. One study of 80,000 suicides in the United States found that widowed and divorced people were about three times as likely to commit suicide as married people. Overall, married men are only half as likely as single men, and one-third as likely as divorced men, to take their own life. Widowers face about the same suicide risk as the divorced, except for younger widowers, who face sharply elevated rates. They are up to nine times more likely than married men to commit suicide. Married women were also substantially less likely to commit suicide compared to divorced, widowed or never married women.

In the last half-century, suicide rates among teens and young adults (ages 15 to 24) have tripled. According to an important study by David Cutler, Edward Glaeser, and Karen Norberg, the single "most important explanatory variable...is the increased share of youths living in homes with a divorced parent." The effect, note the researchers, "is large" explaining "as much as two-thirds of the increase in youth suicides" over time.

Substance Abuse

Longitudinal research from the *Monitoring the Future* study confirms that when young men and women marry they typically adopt healthier lifestyles: They smoke less, drink less, and use illegal drugs less frequently. By contrast, men and women who move in together without marrying do not reduce their levels of tobacco or illegal drug use and do not reduce their alcohol consumption to the same degree as newly married couples.

Single men drink almost twice as much as married men of the same age. In a recent national survey, one out of four young single men (ages 19 to 26) say their drinking causes them problems at work or problems with aggression, compared to about one in seven married men the same age. Divorced and widowed men also show substantially more problems with alcohol than similarly aged married men.

Another study looked at the psychological well-being of young adults over a seven-year period, including problems with alcohol. Young adults who married experienced sharper drops in levels of problem drinking than young adults who stayed single.

Twice as many young teens in single-mother families and stepfamilies have tried marijuana (and young teens living with single fathers were three times as likely to do so). Young teens whose parents stay married are the least likely to experiment with tobacco or alcohol.

Depression in Mothers

One way in which marriage protects children's well-being is by protecting mothers' well-being. Maternal depression is both a serious mental health problem for women and a serious risk factor for children. Mothers who are not married face substantially higher risks of depression. One study of 2,300 urban adults found that, among parents of preschoolers, for example, the risk of depression was substantially greater for unmarried than married people. Marriage protects even older teenage moms from the risk of depression. In one nationally representative sample of 18- and 19-year-old mothers, 41 percent of single White mothers having their first child reported high levels of depressive symptoms, compared to 28 percent of married White teen mothers in this age group. However, marriage did not appear to protect Black 18- and 19-year-old mothers or teen mothers of either race who are younger than 18.

How Marriage Boosts Mental Health

MARRIAGE PROTECTS the mental health of women, men, and children in a variety of ways. Married people on average have better physical health and experience less economic hardship, which reduces many sources of stress that lead to psychological problems. Married people also have a source of social support, someone to talk to about the troubles of life. A surprising body of research suggests that talking over problems boosts mental health and personal well-being in a variety of ways. Married people have promised to take care of each other in sickness and in health, in good times and bad. The knowledge that one has a ready source of support contributes to mental health and emotional well-being. Of course, friends, parents, and the community help out in times of need. But the help of a spouse is unique; it is not an imposition, a favor, or an act of charity. Finally, unlike cohabitators or singles, married people have made a public, permanent commitment to another human being. Marriage increases married peoples' sense of meaning and purpose in life, protecting against suicide, depression, and anxiety and encouraging healthy habits.

Marriage boosts children's mental health by giving them access to the time, energy, and personal and economic resources of two parents. Marriage boosts parents' mental health and reduces their

emotional and economic distress, leading to more effective parenting by both mothers and fathers. Married parents on average are more likely to create and sustain parenting bonds with children than men and women who attempt to parent outside of marriage. As adults, children whose parents divorced are about 40 percent less likely than children of intact marriages to say they see either their mother or father at least several times a week, and they rate their current relationships with both their mother and father less positively than do children from intact marriages.

While further research is needed regarding African American marriages and emotional well-being, the overall findings reported in this brief clearly demonstrate the importance of marriage in protecting the mental health of women, men, and children. It is appropriate for public policy, as one among many of its tasks, to assist young people and couples in nurturing healthy, lasting marriages.

Note

*Controls are statistical methods by which scholars seek to estimate the causal effects of a particular variable. Employing controls can help scholars avoid the error of suggesting that one phenomenon is the main or important cause of another phenomenon, when in fact the correlation being proposed is partially or wholly spurious. For example, a scholar might find a correlation between height and intelligence. But both height and intelligence are strongly affected by other factors, such as prenatal and early childhood care and nutrition. Using controls, a scholar can determine that the correlation between height and intelligence is more spurious than causal. When studying marriage, scholars similarly control for issues such as income or education that could affect individual and couple well-being. The studies to which we refer in this brief typically control for such variables and generally find that marriage in and of itself, after other possibly confounding variables have been “controlled” for, seems to improve individual and couple well-being.

About This Research Brief

This research brief summarizes findings about marriage and mental health for adults and children. Full citations are found in these sources: Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Healthier, Happier, and Better-Off Financially* (Doubleday, 2000); *Why Marriage Matters, Second Edition: Twenty-Six Conclusions from the Social Sciences* (Institute for American Values, 2005); and *The Consequences of Marriage for African Americans: A Comprehensive Literature Review* (Institute for American Values, 2005).

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