

# *Healthy Marriages, Healthy Lives*



*Research on the  
Alignment of Health,  
Marital Outcomes and  
Marriage Education*



A comprehensive review of research since 1990 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services shows that “married people are healthier than those who are not married across a wide array of health outcomes... Most researchers conclude that the association between marriage and health represents a combination of selection and protection.”

Wood, Robert G., Brian Goesling and Sarah Avellar. (2007) *The Effects of Marriage on Health: A Synthesis of Recent Research Evidence*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Office of Human Services Policy, p. 1. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/07/marriageonhealth/index.htm>

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Many links between marriage and better health in children and adults “have been documented in hundreds of quantitative studies covering different time periods and different countries.”

Ribar, David C. (2003) *What Do Social Scientists Know about the Benefits of Marriage? A Review of Quantitative Methodologies*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, p. 1.

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“Marriage is associated with benefits for health and well-being, but also... that such advantages depend, in part, on marital quality.”

“Marital Status: Links to physical and mental health”. (2004) MIDUS—Midlife in the United States. A National Study of Health and Well-Being. [www.midus.wisc.edu](http://www.midus.wisc.edu)

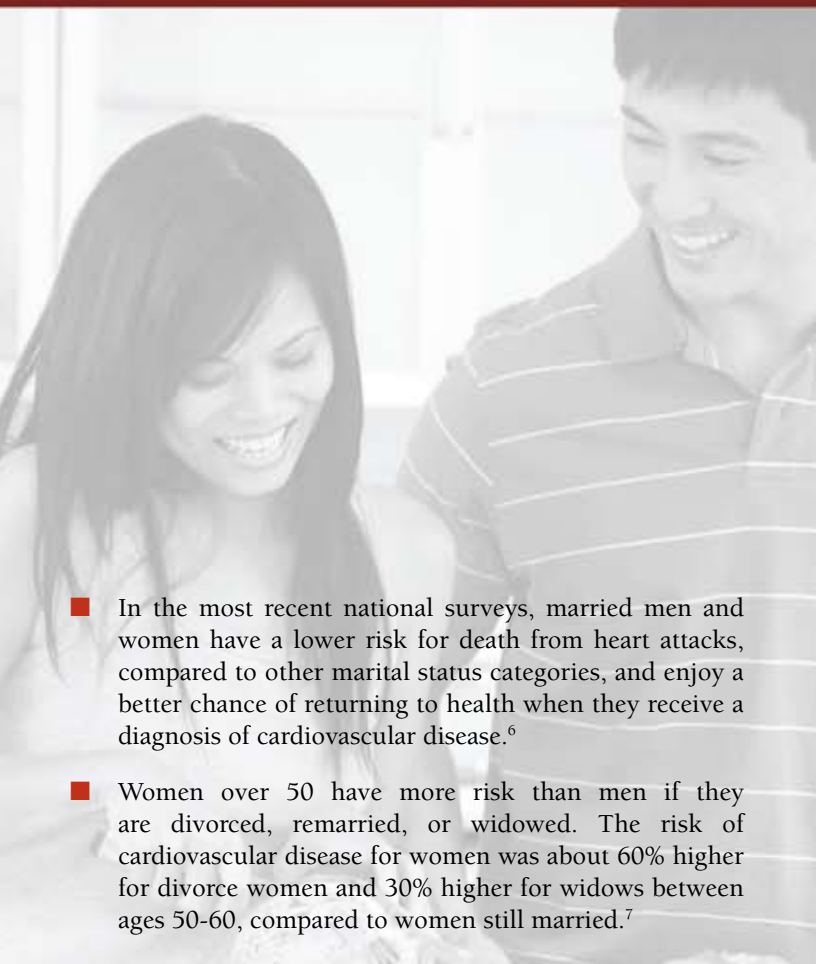
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## Links Between Marriage & Health

- “A burgeoning literature suggests that marriage may have a wide range of benefits, including improvements in individuals’ economic well-being, mental and physical health, and the well-being of their children. ... A focus on the most rigorous recent evidence reveals that marriage has positive effects on certain health-related outcomes.”<sup>1</sup>
- A review of 130 empirical studies... about the relationship between marriage and well-being found “an intimate link between marital status and personal well-being.”<sup>2</sup>
- An unhappy marriage can increase the chance of illness by 35% and shorten life by four years; happily married people live longer, healthier lives than divorced or unhappily married couples;<sup>3</sup> non-married women have 50% higher mortality rate than married women; non-married men have 250% higher mortality rate than married men.<sup>4</sup>
- Virtually every study of mortality and marital status shows the unmarried of both sexes have higher death rates, whether by accident, disease, or self-inflicted wounds, and this is found in every country that maintains accurate health statistics.<sup>5</sup>



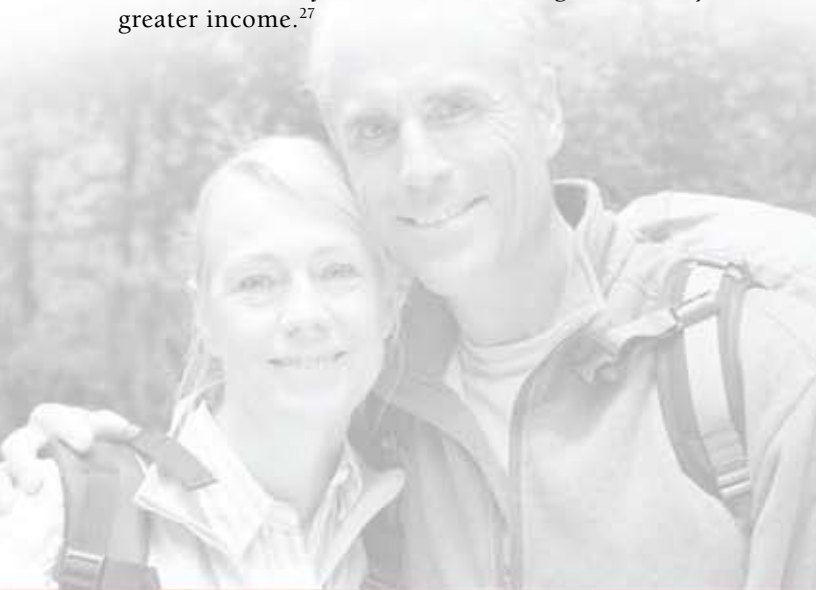


- In the most recent national surveys, married men and women have a lower risk for death from heart attacks, compared to other marital status categories, and enjoy a better chance of returning to health when they receive a diagnosis of cardiovascular disease.<sup>6</sup>
- Women over 50 have more risk than men if they are divorced, remarried, or widowed. The risk of cardiovascular disease for women was about 60% higher for divorce women and 30% higher for widows between ages 50-60, compared to women still married.<sup>7</sup>
- Higher marital relationship quality predicted long-term survival (over 4-year period) in a study of 189 heart disease patients, independent of other known risk factors including initial severity of the diagnosis. The most seriously ill patients, if they were in satisfied, low-conflict marriages, lived significantly longer than much healthier patients in less-satisfying marriages;<sup>8</sup> follow-up results on patients with Heart Failure continued to predict survival during an 8-year period ( $p>0.001$ ), especially when the patient was a woman, and did so substantially better than individual (patient-level) risk and protective factors.<sup>9</sup>
- Women who reported “keeping their mouths shut” during conflict with their spouse—an indication of resentment over buried issues—had 4 times the risk of dying from heart disease over a 10-year follow up study.<sup>10</sup>
- Couples in conflict-ridden marriages take longer than the happily married to heal from all kinds of wounds, from minor scrapes or athletic injuries to major surgery; hostile couples healed the slowest, taking 40% longer to heal.<sup>11</sup>
- There is “substantial research evidence suggesting that, for young adults, marriage reduces heavy alcohol consumption for both men and women, as well as substantial evidence for young men of a reduction in marijuana use associated with marriage.”<sup>12</sup>

- Higher stress hormones—epinephrine, norepinephrine, and cortisol—and three related hormones are associated with higher probabilities of husband's withdrawal in response to wife's negative behavior during a conflict;<sup>13</sup> abrasive arguments between husbands and wives are linked to a weakening of certain immune responses and increase in levels of stress hormones, increasing susceptibility to illness, particularly infectious diseases, and perhaps cancer. The more negative behaviors couples show toward each other, the more their immune measures are weakened.<sup>14</sup> Couples who demonstrated negative behaviors toward each other during discussions—sarcasm, putdowns, overt nastiness and dismissals—show indications of a weakened immune system compared to other couples who behave more positively; these results are found both for newlyweds as well as older couples married for many years;<sup>15</sup> happily married people also show greater proliferation of white blood cells when exposed to foreign invaders than do other subjects.<sup>16</sup>
- A spouse's use of negative language and angry tone of voice can have a detrimental effect on the other's immune function; marital arguments cause changes in the endocrine and immune systems, with epinephrine, cortisol levels and staying elevated for more than 22 hours afterward.<sup>17</sup>
- High levels of family problems are related to an increased risk of developing angina.<sup>18</sup>
- Men and women in unhappy marriages have higher cortisol levels after waking up and higher self-reported stress and blood pressure throughout the day than those who are generally happy with their marriage;<sup>19</sup> the marital relationship provides support for healthful behaviors such as exercise and proper eating, which is also correlated with reduced levels of stress and depression, due in part to the benefits of physical exercise and other positive benefits linked with the control of stress.<sup>20</sup>



- Happily married adults report fewer depressive symptoms than all other marital groups. Separated and divorced adults report more depressive symptoms and more trips to see a mental health professional than other unmarried groups.<sup>21</sup>
- Having unequal decision-making power in marriage is associated with a higher risk of death for women; physiological effects of marital stress are stronger and last longer in women. In a study of congestive heart patients, seven out of eight women with the poorest quality marriage died within two years....Marital quality predicts recovery from congestive heart failure as well as measures of the heart's pumping ability; heart patients evaluated as "negative" with their spouses are 1.8 times more likely to die within four years than those with more positive evaluations.<sup>22</sup>
- Unmarried people spend twice as much time as patients in hospitals as their married peers.<sup>23</sup> The effect of marriage in shortening hospital stays may also lead to reductions in health care costs. Research indicates that the effect of marriage on health care costs exists independent of the effect of marriage on physical health.<sup>24</sup>
- A married man with heart disease can be expected to live, on average, 1,400 days longer (nearly four years) than an unmarried man with a healthy heart. This longer life expectancy is even greater for a married man who has cancer or is 20 pounds overweight compared to his healthy, but unmarried counterpart. The advantages for women are similar.<sup>25</sup>
- Cures for cancer are significantly more successful (8-17%) when a patient is married, and being married is comparable to being in an age category 10 years younger.<sup>26</sup>
- Using pooled cross-sections for the U.S. and the UK, the size of the marriage effect upon mental well-being is assessed as equal to that of having \$100,000/year greater income.<sup>27</sup>





- For couples in an unhappy marriage, the relationship can cause significant stress with related health consequences—most frequently, chronic, diffuse physiological arousal that manifests in physical ailments including high blood pressure, heart disease, anxiety, depression, suicide, violence, psychosis, homicide and substance abuse.<sup>28</sup>
- 70% of chronic problem drinkers are divorced or separated, 15% are married; single men are more than three times as likely to die of cirrhosis of the liver.<sup>29</sup>
- Researchers have consistently found the highest rates of mental disorder among the divorced and separated, the lowest rates among the married, and intermediate rates among the single and widowed. A cohabiting partner does not replicate these benefits of marriage.<sup>30</sup>
- Marital distress leads to depression and reduces immune system functioning in adults; in children, chronic marital conflict harms the emotional and physical well-being of children.<sup>31</sup>
- A large body of research shows that being unmarried—and especially living with a man outside of marriage—is associated with a considerably higher risk of domestic violence for women; married men are less likely to commit domestic violence because they are more invested in their wives' well-being, and more integrated into the extended family and community.<sup>32</sup>
- Husbands commit only about 5% of all rapes against women, compared to 21% by ex-spouses, boyfriends, or ex-boyfriends.<sup>33</sup> The victimization rate for women separated from their husbands is about 25 times higher than that of married women.<sup>34</sup>





“...Marriages can do more than merely survive: They can also thrive when couples learn the skills to make their relationship work.”

Fagan, Patrick F, Robert W. Patterson & Robert E. Rector. “Marriage and Welfare Reform: The Overwhelming Evidence that Marriage Education Works”. The Heritage Foundation: *Backgrounder* #1606, 2002.







- First-time psychiatric admission rates for males suffering from all forms of psychosis are 5.4 times greater for non-married men than married men.<sup>35</sup>
- A stable, happy marriage is the best protector against illness and premature death; for children, such a marriage is the best source of emotional stability and good physical health.<sup>36</sup>
- Marriage is as protective of health for low-income couples as for those with higher incomes. Low-income married couples are healthier on all measures than their never-married or divorced low-income peers.<sup>37</sup>
- Longitudinal evidence from studies across a variety of literatures indicates that marriage makes people far less likely to suffer psychological illness; marriage makes people live much longer; marriage makes people healthier and happier; both men and women benefit; these gains are not merely because married people engage in less risky activities; marriage quality can influence the size of the gains.<sup>38</sup>

## Links Between Marriage Outcomes & Children's Health

- Growing up with married parents is associated with better physical health in adulthood and increased longevity<sup>39</sup> .... (These) “intergenerational health effects are especially strong for men and operate equally for African American and white men.”<sup>40</sup> Health effects during childhood from divorced families include a doubling of the risk of asthma and a significant increase in injury rate.<sup>41</sup>

- Children who experience a parental divorce have their life expectancy shortened by an average of four years, according to a fifty-year longitudinal study. These effects are comparable to those of cigarette smoking.<sup>42</sup> Those whose parents divorced before the children were 17 years old grow up to have more acute and chronic health conditions, compared to children of continuously married parents.<sup>43</sup>
- A longitudinal study that tracked over 1,500 privileged middle-class children with high IQs over their life span found a significantly higher mortality rate for those whose parents divorced, compared with those from intact families;<sup>44</sup> these mortality rates increase when the divorce occurs before the child's fourth birthday.<sup>45</sup>
- Children who use drugs and abuse alcohol are more likely to come from family backgrounds characterized by parental conflict and parental rejection, and because divorce increases these factors, it increases the likelihood that children will abuse alcohol and begin using drugs.<sup>46</sup>
- Drug use in children is lowest in intact married families.<sup>47</sup>
- Children living in households with unrelated adults are nearly 50 times as likely to die of inflicted injuries as children living with two biological parents.<sup>48</sup>
- Children two years of age and younger are 70-100 times more likely to be killed at the hands of their stepparents than by their biological parents.<sup>49</sup>
- When parents divorce, most children suffer; for some, this suffering turns into long-lasting psychological damage. Neglect of children, which can be psychologically more damaging than physical abuse,<sup>50</sup> is twice as high among separated and divorced parents.<sup>51</sup>
- Fatal abuse of children of all ages occurs three times more frequently in stepfamilies than in intact married families.<sup>52</sup>





## Links Between Marriage Education & Marital Outcomes

- A meta-analysis of over 100 studies on the impact of Marriage Education found clear evidence that Marriage Education programs work—“to reduce strife, improve communication, increase parenting skills, increase stability, and enhance marital happiness.”<sup>53</sup>
- A meta-analysis of 20 different Marriage Education programs across 85 studies involving 3,886 couples found an average positive effect size of 0.44, indicating that the average couple participating in any one of the Marriage Education programs studied improved their behavior and quality of relationship so that they were better off than more than two-thirds of the couples that did not participate in any Marriage Education program.<sup>54</sup>
- A meta-analysis of 16 studies observed meaningful program effects with regard to gains in communication skills, marital satisfaction, and other relationship qualities. The average couple after taking the Marriage Education training was able to out-perform 83% of couples who had not participated in the program in the critical area of marital communication.<sup>55</sup>
- A longitudinal study on a well-known Marriage Education program found that, compared with couples without the training, participating couples maintained high levels of relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction and lower problem intensity three years after training; they also demonstrated significantly greater communication skills, less negative communication patterns, and greater conflict-management skills up to 12 years after instruction, and reported fewer instances of physical violence with their spouses three to five years after training.<sup>56</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Wood, Robert G., Brian Goesling and Sarah Avellar. *The Effects of Marriage on Health: A Synthesis of Recent Research Evidence*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Office of Human Services Policy, June 2007.

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<sup>7</sup> Zhang, Zhenmei and Mark D. Hayward (2006). "Gender, the Marital Life Course, and Cardiovascular Health in Late Midlife." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 68, no. 3, pp. 639-657.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Gottman, John M., Ph.D. (1999) *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*. New York: Crown Publishers, pg. 5-6.

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