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Why Marriage Is Good Medicine for Men

By Gail Sheehy

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The biggest fiction behind James Bond is that the fantasy master spy and world-class heartbreaker lived past 40-something. It's not just the death traps and vodka martinis, or even the three packs of cigarettes a day, that would have shortened his life. His naked ring finger would have too. Because real men need wives.

Consider the data: Married men—regardless of age, sex, race, income or education—consistently have been found to be healthier than men who are single, divorced or widowed. This so-called “marriage benefit” begins to kick in right after the wedding, then builds. Husbands ages 18 to 44 are strikingly healthier than bachelors of the same age. At every age, in fact, marriage not only protects men's health but also prolongs their lives. So, what's behind this marriage benefit?

Touch Therapy

It starts with the simple act of holding hands and hugging—long and loving embraces, several times a day, according to the latest science.

In the first study of how human touch affects the body's response to stress and threatening situations, Dr. James Coan, a psychologist in the departments of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Virginia, recruited married volunteers, slid them into MRI machines and warned them to expect an electric shock on their ankles. When spouses reached into the machines to hold their respective partner's hand—a simple yet loving gesture of support—the part of the brain that registers the anticipation of pain “turned off.” The volunteers also said that they felt less distress.

The hand-holding also reduced agitation in the hypothalamus, the area of the brain that controls the release of stress hormones, which turn off our immune function. Eventually, a weakened immune system can make us sick.

“We can't see what our spouses are doing to our brains and emotions until a stressful event arises, but it's going on all the time,” says Dr. Coan. “When a wife holds or caresses her husband, she is really reaching into the deepest parts of his brain, calming down the neural-threat response.”

Can it be that easy access to a wifely hug after a fallout with a neighbor or a pounding on the golf course is as potent as a tranquilizer or a beta-blocker?

Men Need Nudging

Our proclivities are as old as Adam and Eve: Left to their own devices and vices, men are inattentive to physical symptoms. Even when they do notice, they try to deny them. Women are the health sentries. They pay careful attention to their husbands' well-being, pick up signals and symptoms, and get their men to the doctor. Put simply, most men depend exclusively on their wives to monitor, medicate, nurse and *nudge* them—in the here-and-now and through their waning years.

Having a partner helps men with cancer—specifically, cancer of the prostate or bladder—survive longer and with a better quality of life, according to studies at the Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center at UCLA. The same is true for men hospitalized with heart disease: In a study at the University of California at San Diego, coronary-bypass patients whose wives visited them early and often in the intensive-care unit required less pain medication and recovered more quickly than men without a spouse. Conversely, the patients whose wives did not provide much emotional support fared worse. Which leads us to a harsh reality: Not every marriage is good medicine.

Love Is the Key

Evidence is mounting dramatically that the quality of a marriage is strongly related to health. In fact, a man who has a secure marriage and who continues to be sexually active lives longer, succumbs to illness less often and heals from wounds and surgery faster. Why? It all comes down to insulating a spouse from chronic stress—regardless of whether the stress is physical illness or emotional distress, such as anger and anxiety.

The wiring circuits for emotion in the brain turn out to be sitting directly next to—and are deeply connected to—the circuits that control heart rate, blood pressure and how much adrenaline one secretes. “You can see the two circuits talking to each other on imaging machines,” says Dr. Harry Lodge, an internist in New York City and co-author of *Younger Next Year*. “A bad emotional state makes needles jump. A really good marriage is harder to measure—it’s an absence of those jumps.”

If a couple is accustomed to fighting and blaming and retreating from each other under duress, the dynamics of the relationship can seriously compromise their bodies' ability to heal. In an experiment conducted by Drs. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and Ronald Glaser at Ohio State University, long-married couples were given minor blister wounds, then asked to discuss a disagreement. Compared to the harmonious couples, the hostile couples took up to two days longer to heal.

Likewise, cardiologists report that if there is an undercurrent of hostility or resentment in a marriage or a suspicion of extramarital affairs—in short, marital discord—the whole cardiac recovery process slows down. Only secure and happy marriages reap the rewards of better health and longevity.

Sex Matters

When all is said and done, a solid marriage with regular and enthusiastic sex can be the best preventive medicine of all. In a woman, repeated affectionate hugs release the “bonding hormone” oxytocin and reduce blood pressure, which helps to protect her heart. No surprise: Men need more than snuggling. In men, the levels of oxytocin can and do surge up to five times above normal, but only immediately before he reaches orgasm. In a study at Queen’s University in Belfast, the mortality of about 1,000 middle-aged men of comparable health was tracked over the course of a decade. The men who had sex three or more times a week had a 50% reduced risk of heart attack or stroke. And those who reported the most frequent orgasms had a death rate one-half that of the less sexually active men.

Presumably, the longer a man spends in a contented marital state, the greater the cumulative benefit: Studies show that long-married men live up to five years longer than their contemporaries.

In his practice at Columbia University Medical Center, Dr. Lodge says that he finds it easy to recognize people with truly good marriages: “They cuddle a lot and are deeply affectionate. There’s a luminescence to them—a deep, calm, subtle glow.”

A good marriage, then, gives men—as well as the women they love—good reason to stay alive.

RX for The Good Life

Don’t go it alone! The stress of divorce and its aftermath have health consequences that may not show up for years, according to a 2005 study by researchers from the University of Chicago and Duke University.

The longer a man spends in a divorced or widowed state:

- the higher his likelihood of developing heart or lung disease or cancer.
- the greater his risk of high blood pressure, diabetes and stroke.
- the more difficulties he will have with mobility, such as walking or climbing stairs.

PARADE Contributing Editor Gail Sheehy has written extensively about men and women in the different stages of life. Her latest book is “*Sex and the Seasoned Woman.*”

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holding hands, cuddling, and then sex

By mnelson on 6/25/2006 12:36:PM

Yesterday my wife walked out. We have a sexless marriage she says stems from being molested 25 years ago. It wasn't always like that, but over the last 7 years it has just gotten worse. She is in therapy, but I do not believe she has a clue how hard it is to go six months without sex. I am a very sexual and touchy=feely type of person, but there is nothing I get back. I try to explain to her but she gets upset. I love her and don't want to be without her. I will give her this article and hopefully it will shed some light on my pain and suffering.

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men & marriage

By clagr1 on 6/23/2006 1:12:PM

Wow, this article is so true. Each time my dad divorced (3 times), he went down-hill physically, mentally and emotionally. He would go into severe depression, stop taking care of himself (bathing, shaving, changing clothes), and basically totally altering his living style. His last divorce finally happened around last November. during his seperation family noticed early signs of dementia, then after the divorce he suffered a stroke and a heart attack and is now in an assisted living facility. He is once again not himself; depressed, won't bathe and generally lousey to be around. While some of this can be related to the stroke, I would say most of it is from the divorce. sad gretchen

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