

By Melissa Erickson
February 2019

The marriage benefit

Happy wedded couples thrive compared with unmarrieds, experts say



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Is your marriage a reward? It is if you consider the many ways marriage benefits a couple.

Some of the surprising positive aspects of strong wedded partnerships include longevity and wealth, increased sexual satisfaction and better health.

"The big picture is that people who are connected long-term socially, legally and religiously are better off in a variety of ways," said Linda Waite, professor of urban sociology and chairwoman of the University of Chicago Department of Sociology, and author of "The Case for Marriage."

The marriage benefit is real, and simply living together isn't the same thing, Waite said. While there are many exceptions to the marriage benefit, "on average married people do better" than people who are not, she said.

"The marriage benefit describes the facts that married adults live longer, rate their health better and report fewer chronic conditions and functional limitations compared to their non-married counterparts. And, this is specific to marriage," said Tamara Goldman Sher, clinical professor at the Family Institute at Northwestern University. "While it is also good to be in a romantic relationship and have friends in terms of our health, married people still get more of the health advantages than even those

living with a romantic partner."

The health benefit

"It has long been understood that there is a connection between long-term relationships and health. There is a robust finding across time, illness and investigators that it is better for health overall to be in a long-term committed relationship," Sher said. "Marital quality has been linked with outcomes such as better rate of survival over eight years in congestive heart failure, whereas marital strain has been shown to place women with heart disease at greater risk for recurrent coronary events over five years."

The health benefit is especially true for men, who live longer if they're married, Waite said. Unmarried women can rely on sisters and friends, but "if a man doesn't have a wife he often has no one to assist him," she said.

Married "people may take better care of themselves when they have somebody else holding them accountable or noticing illness cues that they may not see for themselves," Sher said.

Married men are also more likely to undergo common health screenings such as colonoscopies, Waite said.

What shouldn't be forgotten is that marriage works the other way, too.

"The illness process impacts the marital relationship," Sher said. "Living with a sick person is a chronic stressor that can lead to poorer health for the

caregiver. It also changes the nature of some relationships in that one person is focused on being sick and getting better while the other might have to take on more responsibilities around the house or more financial responsibilities."

The wealth benefit

The old saying that two can live as cheaply as one is pretty accurate, Waite said. While some of the same benefits can be achieved with a roommate, being married leads people to live differently.

"Married people buy a house together. They tend to eat at home rather than go out to dinner. They're less likely to spend their nights and money in a bar," Waite said.

The romantic benefit

"Long-term partners also have more sex and report being happier about sex," Waite said. People in positive long-term marriages report greater happiness and emotional well-being, she said.

Of course, the marriage benefit depends on having a good marriage. "It doesn't have to be a fantastic marriage, just not a terrible one," Waite said.

"In terms of a healthy marriage, it is one that feels balanced in that both people generally believe that what they put into the marriage is balanced by what they get out of it," Sher said. "This is over the course of the relationship, and not on a 'one person's turn, the other person's turn' basis."

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