

**To:** Students of the Family

September, 2012

**From:** Andrew Hess and Glenn T. Stanton

**Re:** The Health Benefits of Marriage

The pursuit of health has become a cultural phenomenon. Diet, exercise, supplements, relaxation and medications have all been touted as *the* way to achieve health. It's surprising, then, that one of the most powerful predictors of health and well-being remains largely ignored by the health and wellness community. For the last 35 years, family sociologists contributed to compelling research suggesting married people enjoy significantly greater health than the unmarried of every category.

University of Chicago sociologist Linda Waite spent much of her career studying the effects of marriage on various demographics, leading to her book, *The Case for Marriage*. She observed, "The evidence from four decades of research is surprisingly clear: a good marriage is both men's and women's best bet for living a long and healthy life."<sup>1</sup>

The health benefits are so significant; in fact, one sociologist described them as being as "large as the benefit from giving up smoking."<sup>2</sup>

The current body of research consistently finds married men and women are:

- More likely to live longer
- More likely to be physically healthier
- More likely to be mentally healthier
- More likely to be happier
- Recover from illness quicker and more successfully
- Generally, take better care of themselves and avoid risky behavior

### Longevity

Many studies have shown that married adults have a greater likelihood of living longer than their unmarried counterparts.<sup>3</sup> The association between marriage and decreased mortality has even been established in studies conducted in a wide variety of cultures.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, UCLA Professor Robert Coombs found, "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>

The reasons married people tend to live longer are not fully understood, but researchers hypothesized that the benefit could be a result of the economic advantages of marriage. However, they found no significant link between income level and probability of death.<sup>6</sup> When it comes to extending life, marriage - not money - consistently predicts the benefit.

<sup>1</sup> Linda J. White and Maggie Gallagher. *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 64.

<sup>2</sup> Chris M. Wilson and Andrew J. Oswald, "How Does Marriage Affect Physical and Psychological Health? A Survey of the Longitudinal Evidence," *Institute for Study of Labor Study Paper* 1619 (Bon, Germany: Institute for the Study of Labor, May 2005), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Kaplan and Richard G. Kronick, "Marital status and longevity in the United States population," *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 60 (2006): 763.

<sup>4</sup> Yuareng Hu and Noreen Goldman, "Mortality differentials by marital status: an international comparison," *Demography* 27 (1990): 233-50.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Gardner and Andrew Oswald, "How Is Mortality Affected by Money, Marriage and Stress?" *Journal of Health Economics* 23 (2004): 1181-1207.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Coombs, "Marital Status and Personal Well-Being: A Literature Review," *Family Relations* 40 (1991): 97-102. Robert Coombs, "Marital Status and Personal Well-Being: A Literature Review," *Family Relations* 40 (1991): 97-102.

**Physical Health**

Married people live longer because they are more likely to enjoy better physical health. The various ways marriage protects the health of married adults run the gamut, "The protective influence of marriage applies not only to more minor illnesses like colds, flu, and migraine headaches but also to serious health issues like cancer, heart disease, and heart attacks – as well as the need for any kind of surgery."<sup>7</sup>

Researchers studying marital health in seventeen different nations observed married persons are more likely to recognize symptoms, seek medical treatment, avoid risky behavior, recover quicker, and eat a healthier diet.<sup>8</sup>

One significant reason marriage has such strong health benefits is that spouses are intimately aware of and impacted by their spouse's choices. In a sense, couples have a significant vested interest in watching out for one another and encouraging healthy choices and behavior.

Wives tend to discourage drinking, smoking, unnecessary risk-taking, and also improve their family's diet.<sup>9</sup> In fact, men actually decrease many self-destructive patterns up to a year before their actual wedding date.<sup>10</sup> It seems even planning to get married improves a man's health.

Another health benefit comes from emotional support. Researchers found emotional support from a spouse can help people recover from both minor and major illnesses and even help cope with chronic diseases.<sup>11</sup> Some studies even suggest that marital relationships actually boost the immune system,<sup>12</sup> making sickness less likely in the first place.

**Mental Health and Happiness**

Married men and women also have less likelihood of developing any form of mental illness. A 1991 study of the mental health in America found that married people have significantly lower rates of severe depression and at least half the likelihood of developing any psychiatric disorder than never-married, cohabiting and divorced people.<sup>13</sup>

These mental health benefits are a good reason for married couples considering divorce to work at staying together. Divorce and separation are associated with a much higher risk of mental illness—and most of all—depression.

In addition to mental health, married people are more likely to describe themselves as happy. Men in nations with higher rates of marriage are happier than men in nations with lower rates of marriage.<sup>14</sup> Some researchers have compared the overall increased happiness experienced by the married to the boost experienced after receiving a \$100,000 annual pay raise.

**Marriage, Not Cohabitation**

The health benefits enjoyed by married people do not exist in other types of intimate relationships. Several studies have explored whether cohabiting couples or singles with close relationships enjoy similar health benefits to those enjoyed by married people. They do not. The mechanisms causing the increased likelihood of longevity and health are not shared by cohabiting couples.

<sup>7</sup> Janice K. Kiecolt-Glaser and Tamara L. Newton, "Marriage and Health: His and Hers," *Psychological Bulletin* 127 (2001): 472-503.

<sup>8</sup> Steven Stack and J. Ross Eshleman, "Marital Status and Happiness: A 17-Nation Study," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 60 (1998): 528.

<sup>9</sup> Waite, *et al.*, 2000, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Waite, *et al.*, 2000, 54-55.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine E. Ross, John Mirowsky, and Karen Goldsteen, "The Impact of Family on Health: Decade in Review," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 52 (1990): 1064.

<sup>12</sup> Sheldon Cohen, William J. Doyle, David P. Skoner, Bruce S. Rabin, Jack M. Gwaltney Jr., "Social Ties and Susceptibility to the Common Cold," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 277 (1997): 1940-44.

<sup>13</sup> Lee Robins and Darrel Regier, *Psychiatric Disorders in America: The Epidemiologic Catchment Area Study* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 64, 334.

<sup>14</sup> Steven Stack and J. Ross Eshleman, "Marital Status and Happiness: A 17-Nation Study," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 60 (1998): 527-36.



Unlike marriage, cohabitation is negatively associated with both financial satisfaction and health.<sup>15</sup> Several researchers have noted that cohabiters have poorer psychological well-being compared to married individuals, "suggesting that the protection effects of marriage are not as applicable to cohabitation."<sup>16</sup>

### Selection or Protection?

So why the benefit of marriage over other romantic and domestic relationships? Many in the research community have questioned whether marriage itself offers a health safeguard (protection) or whether healthy people are simply more likely to marry in the first place (selection). Can't we just boil these findings down to people looking for and marrying healthy people in the first place? Not quite.

Glenn Stanton explains that married people benefit from "social control," or that regular advice to "Eat your vegetables," "Get a good night's sleep," "Don't drive so fast," and "How many donuts have you eaten today?"<sup>17</sup> Children receive this guidance from their parents, but even adults benefit from regular motivation to make healthy choices. Many might call this "nagging," but Stanton suggests that this can play a key role in keeping us healthy. In fact, spouses have a power of persuasion toward healthier choices that not even one's own mother can match.

### Conclusion

The research is clear, diverse and consistent. Those who marry have a much higher likelihood of living longer, being healthier and being happier. These benefits are exclusive to marriage. For better or worse, married people tend to enjoy longer, healthier lives than those who never marry or dissolve their marriages. Anyone interested or concerned about the health and well-being of themselves, their families and their neighbors cannot over-look marriage as a leading determinant. The Christian's command from Jesus to love our neighbors must recognize the importance of encouraging and supporting marriage as a personal and societal good. Finally, marriage and its health benefits should be recognized for the role in our nation's important health care debate. Marriage matters in important and profound ways.

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<sup>15</sup> Stack, *et al.*, 1998, 535.

<sup>16</sup> Hyoun K. Kim and Patrick C. McKenry, "The Relationship Between Marriage and Psychological Well-Being: A Longitudinal Analysis," *Journal of Family Issues* 23 (2002), 905.

<sup>17</sup> Glenn T. Stanton, *The Ring Makes All The Difference: The Hidden Consequences of Cohabitation and the Strong Benefits of Marriage* (Chicago: Moody Publishers 2011), 98-99.