

Study Finds More Reasons to Get and Stay Married

Claire Cain Miller

New York Times

January 8, 2015

A new economics paper has some old-fashioned advice for people navigating the stresses of life: Find a spouse who is also your best friend.

Social scientists have long known that married people tend to be happier, but they debate whether that is because marriage causes happiness or simply because happier people are more likely to get married. The new paper, published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, controlled for pre-marriage happiness levels.

It concluded that being married makes people happier and more satisfied with their lives than those who remain single – particularly during the most stressful periods, like midlife crises.

Even as fewer people are marrying, the disadvantages of remaining single have broad implications. It's important because marriage is increasingly a force behind inequality. Stable marriages are more common among educated, high-income people, and increasingly out of reach for those who are not. That divide appears to affect not just people's income and family stability, but also their happiness and stress levels.

A quarter of today's young adults will have never married by 2030, which would be the highest share in modern history, according to the Pew Research Center. Yet both remaining unmarried and divorcing are more common among less-educated, lower-income people. Educated, high-income people still marry at high rates and are less likely to divorce.

Those whose lives are most difficult could benefit most from marriage, according to the economists who wrote the new paper, John Helliwell of the Vancouver School of Economics and Shawn Grover of the Canadian Department of Finance. "Marriage may be most important when there is that stress in life and when things are going wrong," Mr. Grover said.

They analyzed data about well-being from two national surveys in the United Kingdom and the Gallup World Poll. In all but a few parts of the world, even when controlling for people's life satisfaction before marriage, being married made them happier. This conclusion, however, did not hold true in Latin America, South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

Intriguingly, marital happiness long outlasted the honeymoon period. Though some social scientists have argued that happiness levels are innate, so people return to their natural level of well-being after joyful or upsetting events, the researchers found that the benefits of marriage persist.

One reason for that might be the role of friendship within marriage. Those who consider their spouse or partner to be their best friend get about twice as much life satisfaction from marriage as others, the study found.

The effect of friendship seems to be the result of living with a romantic partner, rather than the legal status of being married, because it was as strong for people who lived together but weren't married. Women benefit more from being married to their best friend than men do, though women are less likely to regard their spouse as their best friend.

"What immediately intrigued me about the results was to rethink marriage as a whole," Mr. Helliwell said. "Maybe what is really important is friendship, and to never forget that in the push and pull of daily life."

Marriage has undergone a drastic shift in the last half century. In the past, as the Nobel-winning economist Gary Becker described, marriage was utilitarian: Women looked for a husband to make money and men looked for a woman to manage the household.

But in recent decades, the roles of men and women have become more similar. As a result, spouses have taken on roles as companions and confidants, particularly those who are financially stable, as the economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers have discussed.

The benefits of marital friendship are most vivid during middle age, when people tend to experience a dip in life satisfaction, largely because career and family demands apply the most stress then. Those who are married, the new paper found, have much shallower dips – even in regions where marriage does not have an overall positive effect.

“The biggest benefits come in high-stress environments, and people who are married can handle midlife stress better than those who aren’t because they have a shared load and shared friendship,” Mr. Helliwell said.

Overall, the research comes to a largely optimistic conclusion. People have the capacity to increase their happiness levels and avoid falling deep into midlife crisis by finding support in long-term relationships. Yet those relationships seem to be less achievable for the least advantaged members of society.