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Marriage

Several general conclusions can be drawn from the research literature with respect to the relationship between marriage and health. Good marriages are health-protective and perhaps health-enhancing. Bad marriages are harmful to health. Marital disruption, either through divorce or death, increases risk for health problems. Remarriage can benefit health, but not to the same extent as does a first and continuing (good) marriage. Men's health is typically enhanced or harmed by a good or bad (or disrupted) marriage, respectively, more than women's health. Never married persons tend to have poorer health than the continuously married, but do not experience the harmful effects that come from marital discord or marital disruption.

It is important to acknowledge that on average, healthier people are more likely to get married than are unhealthy individuals. Similarly, poor health can be a contributing factor to marital discord or disruption. However, aside from the impact of health on marital status, there are numerous other factors that contribute to the relationship between marriage and health. Compared to single individuals, married persons are typically found to practice healthier behaviors. Married persons tend to have higher socioeconomic status, a variable known to be associated with better health. And one of the very important factors in the marriage/health relationship is stress.

Marital discord is a source of much stress. Hostile behaviors in marital interactions have been found to be associated with impaired immune function, both in the short and long term. Conversely, positive marital interactions are

associated with reduced levels of stress hormones (e.g., cortisol). Marital harmony furthermore appears to help buffer the effects of stress from other sources, such as work-related stress. In essence, being in a good marriage both eliminates one potential (and significant) source of stress (i.e., marital discord), and effectively reduces the impact of stress from other aspects of life.

Getting in and staying in a good marriage functions as a valuable investment in one's health. Because of its value for health, along with its many other benefits, marriage is something to be nurtured, not taken for granted. The health risks of being in a bad marriage are among the reasons to seek intervention to improve the relationship, or to end the relationship. The impact of marital disruption makes stress management crucially important for the divorced or widowed, both in the short and long term, in the interest of minimizing the associated health risks.

One individual alone cannot control the quality or duration of any marriage, and all marriages will eventually end. What an individual can do is to make a thoughtful/careful decision about marrying in the first place, treat the marriage relationship as the valuable investment that it is, take initiative to address marital discord, and put a high premium on self-care and stress management when marital disruption occurs.

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