



Marriage: is it good for you?

Craig Hassed, MBBS, FRACGP, is Senior Lecturer, Department of General Practice, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria.

'The definition of bigamy is one wife too many. The definition of monogamy is the same'.

Oscar Wilde

Marriage, which for the purpose of this article will be taken in its traditional sense, has been the subject of much ridicule over the years and, indeed, if one could be objective enough, there is much to laugh at, for it often has a way of bringing out that which is most ridiculous in us. But marriage, like most other institutions, is under attack in modern times and if one spent time in the family courts and considers the climbing divorce rate and the domestic and economic turmoil which follows in its wake, one could probably be excused for concluding that marriage is under attack for good reason.

But is this the whole story? Is marriage an outdated and primitive throwback to a more conservative period in society's evolution, or is marriage representative of the core human need for emotional, social and economic security?

What does the evidence say?

When one looks at the evidence on marriage, the picture is far from gloomy which, of course, does not preclude the fact that every individual will have occasional negative experiences within marriage and some individuals will have an extremely negative experience of it. One impressive review of nearly 300 references clearly indicated that marriage, and in particular healthy marriage, was profoundly important for good social, mental and physical health.¹ Just having a partner, however, is no protection against illness if the relationship is full of conflict, and in such cases an unmarried person is likely to be happier overall than an unhappily married one.² But on balance, it is clear that marriage, even if it is only moder-

ately happy, is protective for depression and other mental health problems and acts as a buffer against stress.³ Interestingly, one study found that, in terms of recurrence of depression, of the psychosocial variables 'the single best predictor of relapse was a patient's response to one question: 'How critical is your spouse of you?'⁴

If the impact upon mental and emotional health is significant then, as one would expect, the impact upon physical health is also significant. A study controlling for cardiac risk factors found women with coronary heart disease were three times more likely to have a major cardiac event over nearly 5 years follow up if they had a stressful marital or cohabiting relationship.⁵ Other studies have also suggested that relationships are relatively more important for women, whereas work is more important for men.⁶ There are similar connections with marital relationships in terms of immune dysfunction and chronic fatigue⁷ and the experience of acute and chronic pain⁸ with one review finding that, 'social support in the form of marriage, frequent daily contact with others, and the presence of a confidant may all have protective value against cancer progression'.⁹ The potential mechanisms discussed centre around the modulating effect of stress and psychosocial factors on immunity. Other effects include improvements in sperm count for infertile couples who receive CBT¹⁰, to harmonious spousal relationships being associated with lower blood pressure.^{11,12}

It has long passed into medical folklore that one elderly partner is likely to die not long after the other and this seems to be supported by evidence. Some years ago it was noted that recent separation or divorce was associated with a significant increase in

the chance of death from infectious disease with up to a six-fold increased chance from death due to pneumonia.¹³ Plausible mechanisms to explain these observations also focus on the effect of stress and the hostility in negative relationships affecting a clinically significant compromise of immunity.¹⁴

What about the old chestnut that marriage is good for men but not for women? Some studies do report that marriage is more protective for men than for women, although it is significant for both,^{15,16} whereas others suggest it is more protective for women.¹⁷ Part of the positive effect for men is probably related to the role of marriage on modifying lifestyle or health habits in conjunction with improved relationships and mental health. One only has to leave most males alone for a short period of time to see that the maintenance of health habits and clean living environments are among the first things to go out the door! So it may be difficult and possibly unnecessary to exactly define these gender differences that are no doubt part culturally as well as biologically programmed.

Further questions

So where do we go with this information as individuals or health practitioners? Do we simply tell warring couples to stay together? If it was harder to get a divorce, would it help provide an impetus to work through marital difficulties? In this modern world, with its emphasis on short term consumerism and disposable goods, has marriage been unjustly and unwisely treated in the same way? Should men and women be a little more forgiving of their individual foibles and a little more celebratory of their strengths? Do nonmarital long term relationships afford the same benefits as the more traditional marital arrangement?

For an institution such as marriage to have been so widely adopted across various cultures for such a long period of time, one might expect there would be something rather integral about it programmed into the human social, biological and psychological makeup. One might also justly say there are many happy or contented people who choose not to get married for a variety of reasons including those who choose to marry their work, religion, or those who simply prefer solitude. Indeed, there are many valid ways for a person to express their creative, social and emotional selves, for us to say otherwise fails to recognise the individuality which makes us human. But at the same time as we are individuals, it seems we are halves of a whole, and in as much as a marriage may be seen as a whole, it also seems to be the building block of the community.

Perhaps we could finish with a few sage words from Socrates when he was asked by a young man whether he should marry. Socrates replied: 'By all means marry. If you get yourself a good wife, you'll be happy. If you get yourself a bad wife, you'll be a philosopher'.

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AFP

Correspondence

Email: craig.hassed@med.monash.edu.au