



Fact Sheet

Marriage and Mental Health: Coping with Depression and Other Problems

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Introduction

For over a hundred years, social scientists have noted that marriage enhances psychological and physical well-being.¹ Interest in the marriage-health relationship was spurred by the work of William Farr when he published his findings noting that married couples experience lower rates of mortality than their unmarried counterparts.² The question of whether marriage is good for your health continues to spark interest in the research community. A comprehensive study on this subject was conducted by Wood, Goesling, and Avellar. Results from this study indicated that marriage is good for one's physical and mental health and that divorce works in the opposite direction.³ This fact sheet is designed for public service workers who have clients that may be facing marital distress and individuals who are unmarried, but wish to marry in the future. Its purpose is to provide a brief but comprehensive review of the relevant research and offer strategies to assist couples in dealing with mental distress, especially depression.

The Problem in Contemporary Perspective

At any given time, nearly 26.2% or 57.7 million adults are challenged with a mental health problem and as many as 7 million are believed to have symptoms that correspond with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in a given year.^{4,5} During the last year, only half of the population with a mood disorder received treatment. The other half was left vulnerable to suicide and other issues. Depression, according to the World Health Organization, is the top cause of disability worldwide.⁶ Suicide rates are

increasing, particularly among armed forces personnel and educated African American males. Rates of those with mental health issues are greater in certain settings (e.g., hospitalized adults and children) and in certain times (e.g., during economic crises and recessions).^{7,8}

“Natural disasters and violent attacks have combined in recent years to make Americans very much aware of the mental and emotional repercussions of exposure to traumatic events and the importance of providing support, and when necessary, effective treatment to the people who have experienced them.”

Thomas Insel, Director, National Institute of Mental Health⁹

Currently, many individuals are at the point of crisis with feelings of entrapment due to long-term unemployment and underemployment. Among African Americans, unemployment is over 14%, nearly double the rate of the general population. For Hispanics, the rate is 11%.¹⁰

In these challenging times, mental health promotion is surely needed to advance prevention, enhance existing services, and at the same time, reduce the prevalence of mental disorders. Mental health services can be promoted at the community level. An important link between individuals and the nation, the local community is where individuals live and learn rights and responsibilities, to respect and value others as well as community institutions. Basic human needs—marriage, reproduction, production, consumption, and education—are met here.¹¹ Although delivered in many settings and forums, the community level is critical for those with chronic, severe, and persistent

needs as well as for additional, preventive services. Contemporary crises such as the recession and the accompanying high unemployment levels have placed a myriad of challenges on the family. Given that the family is the cornerstone of the community, these family challenges become community challenges if left unaddressed. To remain vibrant as a nation, the mental health needs of families must be addressed.

The Relevant Research Literature

Starting with the good news, research shows that happily married adults report fewer depressive symptoms than all other marital groups.^{12,13,14} Separated and divorced adults report more depressive symptoms and more trips to see a mental health professional than other unmarried groups.¹⁵⁻¹⁸ Longitudinal evidence from studies across a variety of disciplines indicates that healthy marriage makes people far less likely to suffer psychological illness, live much longer, and healthier and happier regardless of gender. To test the gender effect of marriage on mental health, de Vaus conducted a study investigating the mental health of 13,000 men and women in older middle age; after controlling for race, education, family structure, income and living arrangements, he found that married people were less depressed and emotionally healthier than singles and that married women were only half as likely to rate their emotional health as being poor.¹⁹ However, the research is mixed when we take race into consideration.

On the one hand, numerous studies find that married African Americans report more happiness, life satisfaction, and fewer emotional problems than their unmarried peers.^{20,21,22} Studies using marriage as a variable when investigating African American well-being have consistently found marriage to be predictive of happiness and other positive feelings.^{23,24} Also, numerous studies from the 1980s found that marriage promoted psychological well-being for

black adults.^{25,26,27} For example, using a national sample, Broman found a positive association for black adults between marriage and life satisfaction, family life satisfaction, and happiness.²⁹ On the other hand, several of these same studies suggest that it is not so much that marriage promotes mental health, but rather that divorce, separation, and widowhood that harm it. To make this point more salient, researchers have consistently found the highest rates of mental disorder among the divorced and separated, the lowest rates among the married, and intermediate rates among the single and widowed.²⁹⁻³² Further, in a study of 80,000 suicides in the United States, researchers found that widowed and divorced persons were about three times as likely to commit suicide as people who are married. Overall, married men were only half as likely as single men to take their own life. Married women were also substantially less likely to commit suicide compared to divorced, widowed, or never married women.³³ The marriage suicide relationship holds even when controlling for race. Research by Luoma and Pearson and Stack and Wasserman states that blacks are apparently less likely to commit suicide or to express support for suicide.³⁴ Married African Americans also appear to be more outgoing than their unmarried peers. A significant body of literature makes a compelling case that marriage promotes psychological well-being for black adults.³⁵



A key for the positive mental health of married individuals, regardless of race, may reside in their ability to draw from other resources (e.g., friends, church, extended family) in ways that make their lives meaningful and afford them a sense of belonging. Previously-married adults have suffered both emotional trauma and the loss of a primary source of emotional support and often withdraw from support networks. This withdrawal from supportive networks works against both the individual and their children.

Children and Living Arrangements

Research summarized by Wilcox, Waite, and Roberts³⁶ has the following to say about the effects of divorce and marital conflict on the mental health of children:

- Divorce doubles the risk that children will experience serious psychological problems later in life, even after controlling for pre-divorce characteristics.
- A large Swedish study found that as adults, children raised in single-parent families were 56% more likely to show signs of mental illness than children from intact married homes.
- Two studies followed identical and non-identical twins in Australia who married and had children, enabling the researchers to control for genetic factors that might play a role in mental health outcomes. Some of these twins went on to divorce. The researchers found that the children of divorce in this sample were significantly more likely to suffer from mental illness, addictions, and thoughts of suicide.
- Another study that followed more than 11,000 British children from birth through age 33 concluded that part of the higher incidence of mental illness among children of divorce is caused by problems that existed before their parents divorced. But the results also

indicate that divorce itself has further negative effects, and that children and teens that experience parental divorce are more likely to have adverse mental health effects even into their twenties and thirties.

- A study of 534 Iowa families found that divorce increased the risk of depression in children. Part of the negative effect of divorce on children's risk of depression stemmed from the impact of divorce on mothers' and fathers' parenting skills. However, even when mothers and fathers remained involved and supportive and did not engage in conflict post-divorce, boys whose parents divorced were at increased risk for depression.
- Children of cohabiting couples show poorer emotional health than children in married, two-parent families, and their emotional health closely resembles children in remarried and single-parent families.
- There is some evidence that the psychological effects of divorce differ depending on the level of conflict between parents prior to the divorce. When marital conflict is high and sustained, children benefit psychologically from divorce. When marital conflict is low, children suffer psychologically from divorce. About two-thirds of U.S. divorces appear to be taking place among low-conflict couples.

Often overlooked or downplayed in the literature are the mental health needs of grandparents raising children and the needs of children in these non-traditional family structures. Senior couples play important roles in their families and communities. Increasingly, they are parenting their grandchildren because of many factors related to divorce, mental and physical health, violence and subsequent incarceration, military duty, and economic

stressors. Ten percent of African American children live in a household maintained by their grandparents; the percent is 0.03 for white children.³⁷ Of these, 65% are households headed by grandmothers. This is not surprising given that women outlive their husbands. What this means is that in over 720,000 homes grandmothers are providing care for their grandchildren as head of the household.³⁸



Grandparents have already raised their own offspring. They have faced stressors, including depression and other mental health challenges. The happy-burden of caring for new charges can be overwhelming. Additionally, many help others negotiate both family and neighborhood disputes and conflicts. Seniors have been and are viewed as sources and reservoirs of strength and knowledge. Preventive mental health initiatives should build in appropriate outreach to those who provide front line child care despite their increasing age.

The emergence of younger grandparents³⁹ must be acknowledged; some are just thirty years old. They seem unprepared for the complex set of roles and responsibilities that confront them as parents and grandparents.⁴⁰ They are at increased risk for mental health issues. Younger grandparents often find their own marriages at risk with the addition of the grandchild creating additional challenges for both the child and the couple.

Practitioners must be aware of the changing demographics as well as the demands and needs that correspond with parenting and

grand-parenting roles at specific age ranges. Grandparents in their thirties need different supports than those who are sixty plus. All need help based on differential assessment from caring mental health institutions and practitioners.

Marital Mental Health Risk Factors

What, then, are the mechanisms that explain the link between marriage and adult well-being among married Americans? As a social institution, marriage confers to men and women a set of norms that provide them with new meaning, order their lives together, and signal to the outside world that their status in life has changed. Men who become husbands may come to see themselves as providers, especially after children are born, in a particularly powerful way; this change, in turn, may motivate them to work longer and smarter at work, which helps boost their wages. Women and especially men may also engage in less risky behavior and overspending after they marry, insofar as marriage is associated with settling down and acting responsibly. However, there are forces at work today which may threaten the mental health of married individuals.

- If married men take the provider role and pride themselves in providing for their families, prolonged unemployment may lead to depression. Many men, especially minority males, are trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and are unable, unprepared, and sometimes initially unwilling to admit they are experiencing depression. If the depression is not addressed, it can lead to other problems including drug and alcohol abuse, extra-marital affairs, and mental abuse of the non-depressed spouse.⁴¹



- Childbirth—especially the birth of the first child—can often lead to depression in mothers.⁴² Service providers should be prepared to steer these mothers to the appropriate counseling services. If left untreated, depression of this type can jeopardize the marriage and potentially the safety of the child.
- An often overlooked mental health risk factor among married couples is aging parents. In an aging society, some adults will live as many as 40 to 50 additional years with their parents. When both members of the parent-child dyad are older adults, the pre-morbid process can be a prolonged period characterized by intensive care-giving provided by the child. Prolonged care-giving has negative influences on both physical and mental health of the person delivering the care.⁴³
- America is an aged society and increased life expectancy has brought with it much higher rates of chronic disease. Many people carry non life-threatening chronic conditions such as arthritis, hearing and vision loss, and mental illness with them into their final

years. These conditions don't threaten life expectancy, but can significantly affect a person's well-being and mental health care needs.

- Stress and depression are common mental health issues affecting military personnel.⁴⁴ Frequent deployments, combat conditions, and long separations threaten many military marriages.

Evidence Based Marital Education Programs

Marital conflict has been associated with a number of mental health issues for both children and adults. Mental health will be enhanced if practitioners help start a community-based dialogue and discourse on the utility of services, including healthy marriage education programs that are available.

With regard to marriage there are several excellent programs that are worthy of mention:

- The oldest, ***Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills (PAIRS)***, focuses on communication skills and emotional needs of couples and families. The PAIRS curriculum is ideally suited for military families; its creators have been working in this area for over 25 years and their work has been cited by the Veterans Administration.
- Similar to PAIRS is ***PREP*** which was started at the University of Denver and is currently used in classes around the world. PREP focuses on the mental health needs of individuals and families.
- The ***Couples Communication Program***, developed by Dr. Sherod Miller, is a program which stresses the importance of active listening. Communication is often associated with depression; the depressed spouse will often fail to communicate with the non-depressed spouse, leading to conflict.

There are other marriage education curricula in use around the country; however, these three have been highlighted because of their length of time in service and positive evaluations from both clients and outside evaluators. For more information on these and other related programs visit the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families' website, www.HealthyMarriageandFamilies.org.

Conclusion

As a nation, we have not devoted enough attention to the mental health needs of our citizens, resulting in absenteeism from work and inability to carry out or help with home-based and care-giving responsibilities as well as other areas where productivity is needed. Failure to address mental health needs also results in serious marital conflict impacting the family and especially the children of these unions. Preventive educational campaigns promoting mental health and better use of referrals by practitioners is needed. Mental health is as important as physical health: health is everyone's first wealth.

Notes

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