

Happily married couples consider themselves healthier, expert says

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Research shows that married people have better mental and physical health than their unmarried peers and are less likely to develop chronic conditions than their widowed or divorced counterparts. A University of Missouri expert says that people who have happy marriages are more likely to rate their health as better as they age; aging adults whose physical health is declining could especially benefit from improving their marriages.

Christine Proulx, an assistant professor in the MU Department of Human Development and Family Studies, examined the long-term relationship between self-rated [health](#) and marital quality. She found that, in all stages of marriage, positive or negative relationships affect the individuals' health. Spouses should be aware that how they treat each other and how happy they are in their marriages affect both partners' health, and they should think more about their [personal relationships](#) when thinking holistically about their health, she said.

"We often think about the [aging process](#) as something we can treat medically with a pill or more exercise, but working on your marriage also might benefit your health as you age," Proulx said. "Engaging with your spouse is not going to cure cancer, but building stronger relationships can improve both people's spirits and well-being and lower their stress."

Proulx suggests that health professionals consider patients' personal relationships when designing health promotion programs or treatment

plans.

"Physicians should recognize that the strength of patients' marriages might affect their health," she said. "I suspect we'd have higher rates of adherence to treatment plans for [chronic illnesses](#) if medical professionals placed more of an emphasis on incorporating families and spouses in patients' care. If spouses understand their partners' disease and how to treat it at home, and the couple has a strong marriage, both people's health could improve."

Proulx analyzed data from 707 continuously married adults who participated in the Marital Instability Over the Life Course panel study, a 20-year, nationwide research project started in 1980 with funding from the Social Security Administration's Office of Research and Statistics and the National Institute on Aging.

Most study participants were Caucasian, had more than high school educations, and earned more than \$55,000 in annual family income in 2000. Because of these characteristics, Proulx says the participants probably had some protection against marital and health challenges more commonly faced by people of different ethnicities or with less education or income.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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