

Oldest-old women less happy with husbands

September 26 2013

Having a husband in old age doesn't necessarily make a woman happy, research from Flinders University reveals.

The study, which has just been published online in the international journal *Developmental Psychology*, measured the effect of different types of social interactions on the day to day happiness of 74 Adelaide men and women over the age of 85.

As part of the survey, participants recorded their emotions in the presence of various [social partners](#) – including their spouse, family, friends and carers – six times a day over seven consecutive days in 2010.

The majority (68 per cent) of participants were widowed, however the female respondents who did have a spouse reported feeling more unhappy when they were interacting with their spouse than when they were alone.

While the study did not ask the female respondents to state why they felt unhappy in their partner's company, lead author Dr Helena Chui said the speculation was that they were burdened by the double roles of being a wife and full-time carer.

"Women are more likely to experience [bereavement](#) from [widowhood](#) because men die younger on average but our research shows women are actually not happy when their partners are with them on a day to day basis," Dr Chui, a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Flinders Centre for Ageing Studies and the School of Psychology, said.

"We'd need to conduct another study to find out why but the [assumption](#) is that the husband is usually older than the wife, therefore the wife is more likely to be the [caregiver](#)," she said.

"The male respondents didn't feel particularly happy or unhappy when they were with their wives, yet on average, respondents said they felt happiest when they were with their friends.

"They also reported feeling happy when they were with family members, although on the scale we used to measure emotion they were happiest with friends first, followed by family."

Over the seven day survey period, Dr Chui said respondents spent 70 per cent of their time alone, during which they reported feeling less happy than when they were with other people.

She said those with higher levels of neuroticism benefited most from friendships, while visits from formal carers or service providers made no impact on everyday emotions across all participant types.

"What we know is that 70 per cent of the time the oldest-old are alone and they're not very happy when they're alone.

"We also know they're happiest when they're with their friends, which tells us we need to encourage the oldest-old to go out and meet friends because that's likely to make them happy.

"But it's not that easy to leave the house when you're very old because of mobility and transport issues so governments must take the lead in developing policies that foster social connectedness among the oldest-old."

More information: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23895170

Provided by Flinders University

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