

## Single and happy? Your view on relationships may be key

August 21 2015, by Amy Norton, Healthday Reporter

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(HealthDay)—Single people can be just as happy as those in romantic relationships—but it may depend on their temperament, a new study suggests.

Over the years, research has found that single people tend to be less satisfied with their lives, compared to those with a significant other. But

that reflects only the average experience; and some studies have found that the single life can bring some advantages—like closer relationships with friends and family.

The new study adds another layer: Single people can, in fact, be just as fulfilled as couples—but it may partly depend on how they approach relationships in general.

The key, researchers found, is whether a person prefers to avoid conflict and drama in relationships. In that case, the single life appears just as satisfying as being coupled, on average.

In contrast, people who are unfazed by relationship ups and downs tend to be less happy when they're single, according to the findings, published online Aug. 21 in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

It all suggests that for some people, being romantically unattached removes a major source of stress, according to Yuthika Girme and her colleagues at the University of Auckland, in New Zealand.

"I think this study underscores the point that you can never say one-size-fits-all," said James Maddux, a senior scholar at the Center for the Advancement of Well-Being at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va.

"There are many paths to happiness," said Maddux, who was not involved in the study.

At the same time, though, people who constantly strive to avoid conflict in relationships may tend to be on the neurotic side, said Maddux. And some of them might benefit from changing their perspective.

That's often one of the goals in couples' counseling, he explained. People

learn to better manage the downsides of their relationship and focus more on the positive aspects.

So people who hate conflict should not discount a potentially promising romantic relationship, according to Maddux. "You can change," he said. "You're not stuck."

The current findings are based on more than 4,000 New Zealand adults who were surveyed twice, one year apart. One-fifth were single at both time points, and the rest were married, living with someone, or dating.

Overall, the results mirrored what other studies have shown: People in relationships were happier, on average, than singles. But the picture grew more complicated when the researchers dug deeper.

Single people who valued drama-free relationships were just as happy as people with a significant other. On the other hand, singles who highly valued intimacy—even if it meant conflict—were less happy.

The question of whether singles are happy is becoming increasingly important, Girme's team said. As more and more people postpone marriage, or divorce, single adults make up a growing share of the population in Western countries.

In the United States alone, around half of adults are unmarried, according to recent surveys.

But studies can only "paint broad strokes," Maddux pointed out.

"Life satisfaction is a very complicated issue," he said. "And the more we study it, the more nuances we see."

Importantly, Maddux said, romance—or the lack of it—is just one factor

in overall contentment. Research suggests that genetics accounts for a lot: That is, we are born with certain personality traits, and people who are naturally anxious or pessimistic, for example, are less inclined to feel like life is good.

However, Maddux said, "the things we can control" do make a big difference in life satisfaction. And the goals we pursue—whether in relationships, career or lifestyle—all matter.

"Your status as single or paired actually contributes only a small part to the overall picture," Maddux said.

Patrick Markey is an associate professor of psychology at Villanova University in Villanova, Pa., who studies relationship issues.

He said there is strong evidence that people typically benefit from romantic relationships. "That's especially true for men," Markey said. "We're healthier and live longer if we're married."

He agreed, however, that not everyone is better off being part of a couple and that happiness hinges on more than romance. "Actually, genes are probably most important," Markey said. "People who are pretty satisfied at a young age are usually pretty satisfied later in life, too."

Relationships and experiences change how we feel temporarily, he said, but we generally return to our baseline. "A miserable, grumpy person probably isn't going to suddenly change because they're dating someone," Markey explained.

**More information:** Girme, Y., Overall, N., Faingataa, S., and Sibley, C. (2015) Happily Single: The Link Between Relationship Status and Well-Being Depends on Avoidance and Approach Social Goals, *Social*

*Psychological and Personality Science*, 6(7).

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