

Married LGBT older adults are healthier, happier than singles, study finds

April 13 2017, by Kim Eckart

Same-sex marriage has been the law of the land for nearly two years—and in some states for even longer—but researchers can already detect positive health outcomes among couples who have tied the knot, a University of Washington study finds.

For years, studies have linked [marriage](#) with happiness among heterosexual couples. But a study from the UW School of Social Work is among the first to explore the potential benefits of marriage among LGBT couples. It is part of a national, groundbreaking longitudinal study with a representative sample of LGBT older adults, known as "Aging with Pride: National Health, Aging, Sexuality/Gender Study," which focuses on how historical, environmental, psychological, behavioral, social and biological factors are associated with health, aging and quality of life.

UW researchers found that LGBT study participants who were married reported better physical and mental health, more social support and greater financial resources than those who were single. The findings were published in a February special supplement of *The Gerontologist*.

"In the nearly 50 years since Stonewall, same-sex marriage went from being a pipe dream to a legal quagmire to reality—and it may be one of the most profound changes to social policy in recent history," said lead author Jayn Goldsen, research study supervisor in the UW School of Social Work.

Some 2.7 million adults ages 50 and older identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender—a number that is expected to nearly double by 2060.

Among LGBT people, marriage increased noticeably after a 2015 U.S. Supreme Court ruling legalized same-sex marriage nationwide. A 2016 Gallup Poll found that 49 percent of cohabiting gay couples were married, up from 38 percent before the ruling.

For the UW study, more than 1,800 LGBT people, ages 50 and older, were surveyed in 2014 in locations where gay marriage was already legal (32 states and Washington, D.C.). About one-fourth were married, another fourth were in a committed relationship, and half were single. Married respondents had spent an average of 23 years together, while those in a committed, unmarried relationship had spent an average of 16 years.

Among the study participants, more women were married than men, and of the respondents who were married, most identified as non-Hispanic white.

Researchers found that, in general, participants in a relationship, whether married or in a long-term partnership, showed better health outcomes than those who were single. But those who were married fared even better, both socially and financially, than couples in unmarried, long-term partnerships.

Single LGBT adults were more likely to have a disability; to report lower physical, psychological, social and environmental quality of life; and to have experienced the death of a partner, especially among men.

The legalization of gay marriage at the federal level opens up access to many benefits, such as tax exemptions and Social Security survivor

benefits that married, straight couples have long enjoyed. But that does not mean every LGBT couple was immediately ready to take that step.

According to Goldsen, marriage, for many older LGBT people, can be something of a conundrum—even a non-starter. LGBT seniors came of age at a time when laws and social exclusion kept many in the closet. Today's unmarried couples may have made their own legal arrangements and feel that they don't need the extra step of marriage—or they don't want to participate in a traditionally heterosexual institution.

Goldsen also pointed to trends in heterosexual marriage: Fewer people are getting married, and those who do, do so later.

"More older people are living together and thinking outside the box. This was already happening within the LGBT community—couples were living together, but civil marriage wasn't part of the story," she said.

The different attitudes among older LGBT people toward marriage is something service providers, whether doctors, attorneys or tax professionals, should be aware of, Goldsen said. Telling a couple they should get married now simply because they can misses the individual nature of the choice.

"Service providers need to understand the historical context of this population," she said. "Marriage isn't for everyone. It is up to each person, and there are legal, financial and potentially societal ramifications." For example, among the women in the study, those who were married were more likely to report experiencing bias in the larger community.

At the same time, Goldsen said, single LGBT older adults do not benefit from the marriage ruling, and other safeguards, such as anti-discrimination laws in employment, housing and public

accommodations, are still lacking at the federal level.

Over time, Goldsen and colleagues will continue to examine the influence of [same-sex marriage](#) policy on partnership status and health.

More information: Jayn Goldsen et al, Who Says I Do: The Changing Context of Marriage and Health and Quality of Life for LGBT Older Adults, *The Gerontologist* (2017). [DOI: 10.1093/geront/gnw174](https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnw174)

Provided by University of Washington

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