

Marital harmony—or conflict—accounts for nearly 10% of the variation in mental health self-assessments, study finds

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The study explored how one's marriage or past marital experiences may interact with self-described financial problems and mental health status. Credit: Pexels, Pixabay, CC0 (creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/)

Australian adults who report a good relationship that meets their original expectations tend to score higher in mental health, while adults who report loving their spouse but wished they had never entered the relationship and note relationship problems tend to score significantly lower in mental health, according to a survey of almost 7,000 Australian adults published in *PLOS ONE* by Bernard Kwadwo Yeboah Asiamah-Asare and colleagues.

Many recent studies have examined the possible social determinants of mental health. In this study, Yeboah Asiamah-Asare and colleagues looked specifically at how one's marriage or past marital experiences may interact with self-described financial problems and mental health status.

To assess how these factors may be associated, the authors analyzed data gathered from 6,846 Australian adults responding to the most recent iteration of the Household, Income and Labor Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey.

The respondents were mostly older than 42 (61%), born in Australia (78%), and married (78%), with an almost even gender split (51% women). Approximately 7% had poor mental health as indicated by the survey. Some 2% of the variation in mental health scores could be attributed to demographic characteristics: participants 60 and older tended to have higher mental health scores compared to participants younger than 25 years; being a woman, born outside of Australia, retired, and/or being a student was also associated with poorer mental health scores.

Three percent of the variation in mental health scores could be linked to [financial difficulty](#), with participants who said "yes" when asked if they experienced difficulties paying utility bills on time, pawned or sold some belongings, sought financial help from friends/family, or sought help

from welfare/[community organizations](#) tending to score lower on mental health.

Marriage and relationship perceptions accounted for 10% of the variation in mental health scores, with participants who perceived their relationships as good and meeting their original expectations tending to have higher mental health scores. Conversely, participants who reported many problems in their marriage or relationship, very often wished they had not been married or got in the relationship, and reported loving their spouse very much were less likely to report better mental health status.

The authors note that this finding of love not being enough to boost mental health scores in people experiencing relationship difficulties was surprising and unexpected, and suggest further research to investigate possible confounding factors. They also underscore the importance of [marriage](#) and relationships in understanding mental health more holistically.

The authors add, "There is a need for more policy attention toward the social determinants of poor [mental health](#) especially nuptiality or relationship perceptions, which have received less policy and research attention in Australia."

More information: Associations of nuptiality perceptions, financial difficulties, and socio-demographic factors with mental health status in Australian adults: Analysis of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, *PLoS ONE* (2024). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0296941](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0296941)

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