

Researcher examines effect of marital strain on caregivers

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Caring for a chronically ill family member can impact the caregiver's physical, biological and mental health, according to assistant professor SunWoo Kang of the South Dakota State University counseling and human development department. She analyzed the self-reported health of married, adult caregivers from the National Survey of Midlife in the United States.

More than 65 million Americans care for a chronically ill family member and that is expected to increase, according to the National Alliance for Caregiving. Consequently, this has the potential to become a major public health issue, Kang pointed out.

She examined whether marital quality can mitigate the stress of caring for an ailing family member. Her work is part of a research project for the National Institute on Aging done with professor Nadine Marks of the Center for Demography of Health and Aging at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Using data from 1,080 married adults aged 33 to 83, she compared responses from those who were providing care for biological or adoptive parents with those who were not. Results indicated that caregivers who experienced a high amount of marital strain rated themselves as significantly less healthy than those who had lower marital strain, according to Kang.

"Higher levels of marital strain among family caregivers exacerbate the

negative health impact," she said.

"In contrast, less strain from the spouse buffered this effect."

Parent caregivers with high strain from spouses reported more chronic conditions, such as diabetes, arthritis and high blood pressure, than noncaregivers with high strain from spouses, Kang explained. Results were the same for men and women.

However, when it came to caring for a child with a chronic condition or disability, Kang discovered some gender differences. Though father caregivers reported more chronic conditions, marital strain did not make a difference, she reported. "It neither exacerbated nor buffered the impact of caregiving."

"Mothers were more influenced by [marital quality](#) than fathers," Kang said. Essentially, a supportive husband can alleviate potential caregiving risk and even improve a woman's ability to cope with the stress of caring for a chronically ill child.

However, Kang pointed out that neither study took into account the amount of time a married adult had been giving care or the seriousness of the family member's disabilities. Consequently, she said, "we must be cautious about implications and suggestions."

"Caregiving is a health risk for all married caregivers. My studies provide evidence for the critical importance of programs and policy to support caregivers to protect their own health, particularly as more adults become [caregivers](#)," Kang said. "Husbands, in particular, can help buffer the [health](#) risks for their spouses and reduce the burden of caregiving."

Provided by South Dakota State University

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