

Depressed People Benefit More From Marriage Than Others

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Depressed singles receive greater psychological benefits from getting married than those who are not depressed, new research shows.

While many studies have shown that marriage helps boost well-being, most studies have looked at a general, average population and don't examine whether some people were helped more by marriage than others.

“Our findings question the common assumption that marriage is always a good choice for all individuals,” said Adrienne Frech, co-author of the study and a doctoral student in sociology at Ohio State University.

Frech conducted the study with Kristi Williams, assistant professor of sociology at Ohio State. Williams said the study was the first to compare how depressed and non-depressed people benefit from marriage.

“Those ‘average’ benefits of marriage may be largely limited to people who are depressed before they entered marriage,” Williams said. “There may not be strong benefits for everyone.”

Frech will present their findings Aug. 13 in Montreal at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association.

The researchers used data collected by the National Survey of Families and Households, which interviewed a representative sample of Americans in 1987-88 and then re-interviewed them in 1992-94. They

used data from 3,066 people who were unmarried at the time of the first interview.

They measured depression using 12 questions in the survey which asked respondents the number of days in the last week that they “felt like they could not shake off the blues,” “slept restlessly,” or “felt lonely.”

For those who got married, the researchers also examined measures of marital happiness and marital conflict.

Frech said they were surprised that depressed people in this study benefited the most from marriage.

“We actually found the opposite of what we expected,” Frech said. “We thought depressed people would be less likely to benefit from marriage because the depression of one spouse can put a strain on the marriage and undermine marital quality.”

Indeed, the study confirmed Williams' previous research that found levels of marital quality and conflict were key in determining depression levels in individuals after marriage. As would be expected, people who report marriages that are high in quality and low in conflict are less likely to be depressed.

Also, the study found that depressed people who got married reported overall lower levels of marital quality than did individuals who were not depressed. But even so, depressed people still benefited more psychologically from marriage than did non-depressed people.

The results didn't show any differences between men and women in the links between marriage and depression.

Although the study didn't look at why depressed people benefit more

from marriage, the researchers believe they may have more to gain.

“If you start out happy, you don't have as far to go,” Williams said. “But also, depressed people may just be especially in need of the intimacy, the emotional closeness, and the social support that marriage can provide.

“Marriage may give depressed people a greater sense that they matter to someone, while people who weren't depressed prior to marriage may have always thought that way.”

The researchers noted that the people in this study had been married 5 years at most. There may changes in the psychological benefits as the marriage progresses, and as couples have children or get divorced.

But the results suggest that marriage doesn't have equal benefits for everyone.

“We can't focus just on average effects of marriage on well-being,” Frech said. “As this study shows, there is a great deal of variability in the benefits of marriage.”

Source: Ohio State University

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