

Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science

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Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching Current Directions in Psychological Science offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal Current Directions in Psychological Science. Current Directions is a peer-reviewed bimonthly journal featuring reviews by leading experts covering all of scientific psychology and its applications and allowing readers to stay apprised of important developments across subfields beyond their areas of expertise. Its articles are written to be accessible to nonexperts, making them ideally suited for use in the classroom.

Happy Marriages and Healthy Bodies

by David G. Myers

[Robles, T. F. \(2014\). Marital quality and health: Implications for marriage in the 21st century. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 23\(6\), 427–432, doi: 10.1177/0963721414549043](#)

As social animals, people need people. Like our distant ancestors who lived, hunted, and found protection in groups, we need to belong. We flourish when socially connected in close relationships.

In epidemiological studies tracking thousands of lives over years, people have been at less risk for ill health and premature death when supported by close relationships. When Brigham Young University researchers aggregated data from 148 studies worldwide, they found that those with ample social connections had survival rates (across the average 7.5-year study period) about 50% greater than those with meager connections (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010).

Figure 1. Percent “Very Happy” Among Married and Never Married Americans (General Social Surveys, 1972-2012; N = 52,340)



(Smith, Marsden, Hout, & Kim, n.d.)

Marriage is the prototypical close relationship. Does it predict emotional and physical well-being? In the General Social Survey of Americans, since 1972, 40% of married adults have declared themselves “very happy,” as have 23% of never-married adults (Fig. 1).

Although marital status is a very strong happiness predictor, marital *quality* is an even better predictor. In the General Social Survey, nearly 6 in 10 people who rated their marriage as “very happy” assessed their lives as a whole as “very happy,” compared with only 12% of those with “pretty happy” marriages and 6% of those with “unhappy” marriages. Happy marriages predict happy lives, and miserable marriages predict miserable lives.

Does marital quality similarly predict physical well-being? Some well-publicized individual studies have hinted “yes.” George Vaillant (2002) found that at age 50, healthy aging was better predicted by a good marriage than by a low cholesterol level. On the flip side, in 32 studies of 6.5 million people, divorce has predicted poor health (Sbarra, Law, & Portley, 2011).

More evidence comes from a massive meta-analysis of all available research on the association between marital quality and physical health (Robles, Slatcher, Trombello, & McGinn, 2014), which Theodore Robles (2014) helpfully summarizes in plain English. The bottom line: The association, though modest, “is similar to that of associations between health behaviors (diet, physical activity) and health outcomes” (p. 427).

The finding holds across a variety of marriage-quality measures (both self-report and behavioral observation) and health measures (including self-report, physician ratings, and biological markers such as blood pressure and cholesterol).

But, instructors may ask, does an *association* (correlation) between marriage quality and health indicate that the former is *causing* the latter? Not necessarily. Given the impossibility of experimentally manipulating marriage quality, how would you know? Robles offers a clue: “In longitudinal studies, marital quality generally predicts [health], rather than the reverse” (p. 428).

An obvious follow-up question for class discussion is, “What factors might mediate and explain an effect of marital quality on health?” Students could surely brainstorm some of the possibilities that Robles identifies:

- *Biological* mediators: Cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune systems respond to marital strain.
- *Social-cognitive* mediators: How you think about your spouse, and how your spouse influences your emotional control, affects your vulnerability to anxiety and sadness.
- *Health behavior* mediators: Social support enables healthier eating and lifestyles, including more sleep; marital strain may increase unhealthy eating and likelihood of substance abuse.

The dawn of same-sex marriage in most European countries and US states raises a final question for discussion. The studies cited above were conducted on opposite-sex couples. Will the seeming health benefits of marital quality observed in heterosexual marriages extend to gay marriages? Are there reasons to expect (or not expect) such?

References and Further Reading

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