

Opinion: Single vs. Married -- Who Really Lives Longer?

By Bella DePaulo

"Attention, single people: stay single and die!" Headlines around the nation trumpeted this "finding," based on a study that appeared in the September 2006 issue of the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*. The articles claimed that single people simply will not live as long as married people, or even divorced or widowed people. Reading the original research report, I discovered that the actual findings looked nothing like the publicized ones.

In fact, I've spent the last few years researching claims that people who dare to stay single will be doomed to lives that are nasty, brutish, and short. I always read the original research, and I rarely find that the results are as extreme as the reporting. Single people seem to be fair game these days, the targets of inaccurate media reports that promote hurtful stereotypes.

Good science can be the antidote to bad stereotypes. Here is the truth about the latest study.

The recent longevity study addressed this question: In a sample of Americans 19 and older, who was most likely to die between 1989 and 1997? Media stories reported the following: Compared to people who were married, divorced people were 27% more likely to die, widowed people were 39% more likely, and people who had always been single were 58% more likely. Those sound like meaningful differences among the varieties of unmarried people. They are not. The article in the epidemiology journal concedes that the differences are not statistically significant.

The study reported death rates from different causes, and one of those results truly was striking. People who were single had a 499% greater risk of death from infectious diseases than people who were married. That was for men and women of all ages. The finding was even more stunning for ever-single men between the ages of 19 and 44: They were 908% more likely to die of infectious diseases between 1989 and 1997 than were those who were married. What do you think is the more plausible explanation for this finding -- that many men were dying because they stayed single or because they had AIDS?

If you are still not sure, consider this. Staying single did not bode ill for the men who had already made it to age 65 by 1989. They were no more likely to die by 1997 (regardless of the cause) than were the men who were married.

The 499% greater risk of death from infectious diseases for all ever-single adults (men and women) got averaged in with the death rates from all other causes to produce the widely touted "finding" of the early demise of people who stay single.

Infectious diseases, though, only accounted for about 3% of all deaths in the study. Cardiovascular disease was the biggest killer, but people who had always been single were no more likely to die from it than were people who had been widowed. Cancer was the second most deadly disease; single people were no more likely than anyone to die from it. (If I were to ignore statistical significance, I would say that they were less likely than anyone, including married people, to die from cancer.)

So far, then, here's what the study really did find. In the eight-year period, there were no meaningful differences in the death rates of Americans who were divorced, widowed, or had always been single. The people who were married in 1989 did have a slightly greater chance of making it to 1997, in part because so few of them died of infectious diseases.

But would those married people really end up living the long lives that the headlines suggested? The study ended in 1997, but their lives did not. Going forward, a sizable number of them would divorce. Then their death rate would be the same as that of the other divorced people. What about the married people who never do divorce? Setting aside those who die at the same instant as their spouse, half will become widowed. Then they, too, will have the about same odds of dying early as the other unmarried people. Getting married, then, does not seem to be the key to living a long life.

Studies that excerpt just a slice of people's lives are not the best barometers of the likely length of those lives. More convincing evidence comes from investigations that follow people throughout the course of their lives. Probably the longest-running examination of longevity is the Terman Life-Cycle Study that began in 1921. It was a relatively small study, with 1,528 select eleven-year olds at the outset. That said, the results are noteworthy. Two groups were tied for first place in the longevity sweepstakes. One was composed of people who were consistently married. Did they live longer because they got married? No. People who got married and then divorced did not live as long, regardless of whether they remarried. Does that mean you need to get married and stay married to have the best chances of living a long life?

Time to introduce the other group who lived the longest: People who stayed single for life.

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