Marital Status

Links to physical and mental health

Past studies have shown that marriage is linked to better physical and psychological health for many adults. However, it is not clear whether marriage improves health, or if healthier people are more likely to get married. It is also increasingly recognized that the quality of the marital union matters. With new data from MIDUS, we look at the health and well-being of those who are married compared to those who are not. We also identify subgroups of people who are most likely to benefit from marriage as well as those for whom marriage is associated with increased risk for physical or psychological problems.

The majority (71%) of MIDUS participants interviewed in 2004 were married. An additional 15% were separated or divorced, 7% were widowed, and 8% had never been married. However, there were sizeable gender and age variations.

- On average, men were more likely to be married (78%) than women (64%), while women were more likely to be separated or divorced (17%) than men (12%) and more likely to be widowed (11%) than men (3%).

- Among men, the married percentage grows slightly across adulthood, peaking between ages 65-74 (see Figure 1) and then declining thereafter as more men become widowed. For women, the married percentage peaks between ages 32-44 and then begins to drop, especially when women reach age 75, as 48% of women aged 75-84 are widowed.

- Even when the percentage of married men is at its lowest during later life, it is still higher than the percentage of women who are married at any age. By the age of 75, 74% of men are still married in comparison to only 40% of women (see Figure 1).
More education means more likely to be married or to never marry
Adults with more education are more likely to be married. Among those with a bachelor’s degree or more, 75% are married compared to 69% of those with a high school degree or some college, and 62% of those with less than a high school education.

Interestingly, more education also means a lower likelihood of never marrying. Among those with less than a high school degree, only 4% have never married in comparison to 7% of those with a high school degree or some college, and 10% of those with a bachelor’s degree or more.

Marital quality increases with age
Of MIDUS respondents who are married, the vast majority (76%) report that their marital relationship is excellent or very good, however, there are some interesting differences.

- Among men, 80% rate their marriages as excellent or very good compared to 72% of women. Women are also more likely to report that their marital relationship is fair or poor (11%) than men (6%).
- Older adults are also more likely to report excellent or very good marital relationships (see Figure 2). Among adults under the age of 55, about 70–72% rate their marriages this high compared to about 60% of those aged 55-74 and 85% of adults aged 75 or older.

Who's most likely to report better health?
Many members of MIDUS report that their health is excellent or very good. However, among married adults this rating is given by 58% compared to 51% of those who are separated or divorced and 41% of those who are widowed (see Figure 3). Adults who never married are almost as likely as married adults to rate their health this high (55%). Widowed adults are more likely to report fair or poor health (28%), partly due to their older age.

Happily married people feel healthier
The quality of a marital relationship also has important links with health. Happily married adults are more likely to report excellent or very good health (60%) than the unhealthier 40% (50%) (see Figure 3). In fact, adults who are unhappily married report similar health ratings as adults who are separated or divorced (see Figure 3), suggesting that the protective effects of marriage are evident largely for people who have healthy relationships.

Unhappily married adults report putting less thought and effort into their health than all other marital groups, and they are less likely to feel a high amount of control over their health.

Older widowed adults report worse health
Health ratings tend to decline with age, but this varies by marital status. Among older women (aged 65+), 49% report excellent or very good health compared to 41% of older widowed women who are widowed.

Interestingly, the gap for men is wider, as 45% of older men who are married report excellent or very good health compared to 30% of older men who are widowed. In fact, 30% of widowed men in this age group actually report poor health.

There are also interesting patterns for older adults who never married. The percentage of such women reporting excellent or very good health (55%) is higher than married women (49%). For older men, only 39% of those who never married report such good health.

Unmarried adults are in need of health insurance
On average, 7% of MIDUS participants who are unmarried have no health insurance, but this varies by marital status. Among adults who are married, 5% of those who are happily married have no health insurance compared to 11% of those who are unhappily married. It is possible that a lack of insurance is contributing to poor marital quality.

Interestingly, men in all unmarried groups are more likely than women in the same group to have no health insurance (see Figure 5). In fact, 15% of separated and divorced men do not have health insurance compared to 12% of separated or divorced women and 8% of widowed women.

A happy marriage means fewer chronic conditions
With chronic conditions, both in persisting illnesses or conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease tend to increase with age (see Figure 6) and, in general, are more prevalent among women than men regardless of marital status. Still, marital status and marital quality are also linked to these conditions.

Marital quality is particularly relevant when considering who has four or more chronic conditions. Among younger adults (aged 32-49), only 15% of those who are happily married have four or more conditions compared to 21% of those who are unhappily married (see Figure 6). This gap widens among older adults: for those aged 65+-84, 34% of those who are happily married compared to 48% of unhappily married adults.

For all age groups, those who are unmarried are about as likely to have four or more conditions as previously married adults (separated, divorced, or widowed). Those who are married are less likely than the previously married or unhappily married to report this many conditions.

FIGURE 2
MARITAL RELATIONSHIP QUALITY BY AGE

FIGURE 3
SELF-REPORTED HEALTH BY MARITAL STATUS

FIGURE 4
SELF-REPORTED HEALTH BY MARITAL RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

FIGURE 5
NO HEALTH INSURANCE BY MARITAL STATUS

FIGURE 6
PERCENTAGE WITH FOUR OR MORE CHRONIC CONDITIONS BY AGE

[Graphic representations of figures 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 are not included in the text, but would typically accompany the narrative in a report or publication.]
More education means more likely to be married or to never marry

Adults with more education are more likely to be married. Among those with a bachelor’s degree or more, 75% are married compared to 69% of those with a high school degree or some college, and 62% of those with less than a high school education.

Interestingly, more education also means a lower likelihood of never marrying. Among those with less than a high school degree, only 4% have never married in comparison to 7% of those with a high school degree or some college, and 10% of those with a bachelor’s degree or more.

Marital quality increases with age

Of MDU respondents who are married, the vast majority (76%) report that their marital relationship is excellent or very good, however, there are some interesting differences.

- Among men, 80% rate their marriages as excellent or very good compared to 72% of women. Women are also more likely to report that their marital relationship is fair or poor (11%) than men (6%).
- Older adults are also more likely to report excellent or very good marital relationships (see Figure 2). Among adults under the age of 55, about 78-72% rate their marriages this high compared to about 85% of those aged 55-74 and 85% of adults aged 75 or older.

Who speaks? Separated or divorced adults are more likely to be current smokers (45%) compared to married adults (27%). Adults who have never married also have the same issue with this. Among married adults, the quality of the relationship has important links with health. Married adults have the same or better health compared to those who are never married (see Figure 3).

Happily married people feel healthier

The quality of a marital relationship also has important links with health. Happily married adults are more likely to report excellent or very good health (68%) than the unhappy married (50%) (see Figure 4). In fact, adults who are unhappily married report similar health ratings as adults who are separated or divorced (see Figure 3).

Married people report better health

Many members of MDU report that their health is excellent or very good. However, among married adults this rating is given by 58% compared to 51% of those who are separated or divorced and 41% of those who are widowed (see Figure 3). Adults who never married are almost as likely as married adults to rate their health this high (55%). Widowed adults are more likely to report fair or poor health (28%), partly due to their older age.

Suggesting that the protective effects of marriage are evident largely for people who are happy with their relationships.

Unhappily married adults report putting less thought and effort into their health than all other marital groups, and they are less likely to feel a high amount of control over their health.

Older widowed adults report worse health

Health ratings tend to decline with age, but this varies by marital status. Among older women (aged 65+), 49% report excellent or very good health compared to 41% of older men who are widowed.

Interestingly, the gap for men is wider, as 45% of older men who are married report excellent or very good health compared to 30% of older men who are widowed. In fact, 30% of widowed men in this age group actually report fair or poor health.

There are also interesting patterns for older adults who never married. The percentage of such women reporting excellent or very good health (55%) is higher than married women (49%). For older men, only 39% of those who never married report such good health.

Unmarried adults are in need of health insurance

On average, 7% of MDU participate in no health insurance, but this varies by marital status. Among adults who are married, 5% of those who are happily married have no health insurance compared to 11% of those who are unhappily married. It is possible that a lack of insurance is contributing to poor marital quality.

Interestingly, men in all unmarried groups are more likely than women in the same group to have no health insurance (see Figure 5). In fact, 15% of separated and divorced men do not have health insurance compared to 12% of separated or divorced women and 8% of widowed women.

A happy marriage means fewer chronic conditions

Chronic conditions, which are persistent illnesses or conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease, tend to increase with age (see Figure 6) and, in general, are more prevalent among women than men regardless of marital status. Still, marital status and marital quality are also linked to these conditions.

Marital quality is particularly relevant when considering who has four or more chronic conditions. Among younger adults (aged 32-49), only 15% of those who are happily married have four or more conditions compared to 21% of those who are unhappily married (see Figure 6). This gap widens among older adults: for those aged 65-74, 32% of happily married compared to 48% of unhappily married adults. For all age groups, those who are unhappily married are about as likely to have four or more conditions as previously married adults (separated, divorced, or widowed). Those women with higher levels of stress are less likely than the previously married or unhappily married to report this many conditions.
More education means more likely to be married or to never marry

Adults with more education are more likely to be married. Among those with a bachelor’s degree or more, 75% are married compared to 69% of those with a high school degree or some college, and 62% of those with less than a high school education.

Interestingly, more education also means a lower likelihood of never marrying. Among those with less than a high school degree, only 4% have never married in comparison to 7% of those with a high school degree or some college, and 10% of those with a bachelor’s degree or more.

Marital quality increases with age

Of MIDUS respondents who are married, the vast majority (76%) report that their marital relationship is excellent or very good, however, there are some interesting differences.

Among men, 80% rate their marriages as excellent or very good compared to 72% of women. Women are also more likely to report that their marital relationship is fair or poor (11%) than men (6%).

Older adults are also more likely to report excellent or very good marital relationships (see Figure 2). Among adults under the age of 55, about 70-72% rate their marriages this high compared to about 84% of those aged 55-74 and 85% of adults aged 75 or older.

Who marries?

Married people report better health

Many members of MIDUS report that their health is excellent or very good. However, among married adults this rating is given by 58% compared to 55% of those who are separated or divorced and 41% of those who are widowed (see Figure 3). Adults who never married are almost as likely as married adults to rate their health this high (55%). Widowed adults are more likely to report fair or poor health (28%), partly due to their older age.

Marital status is also linked to health. Education and marital status are associated with health outcomes. For example, married individuals tend to have better health outcomes than those who are not married (see Figure 4).

Unmarried adults are in need of health insurance

On average, 7% of MIDUS participants do not have health insurance, but this varies by marital status. Among adults who are married, 5% of those who are happily married have no health insurance compared to 11% of those who are unhappily married. It is possible that a lack of insurance is contributing to poor marital quality.

Interestingly, men in all unmarried groups are more likely than women in the same group to have no health insurance (see Figure 5). In fact, 15% of separated and divorced men do not have health insurance compared to 12% of separated or divorced women and 8% of widowed women.

Older widowed adults report worse health

Health ratings tend to decline with age, but this varies by marital status. Among older women (aged 65+), 49% report excellent or very good health compared to 41% of older widows who are not married.

Interestingly, the gap for men is wider, as 45% of older men who are married report excellent or very good health compared to 30% of older men who are widowed. In fact, 30% of widowed men in this age group actually report fair or poor health.

Happily married people feel healthier

The quality of a marital relationship also has important links with health. Happily married adults are more likely to report excellent or very good health (60%) than the unhappy married (50%) (see Figure 6). In fact, adults who are unhappily married report similar health ratings as adults who are separated or divorced (see Figure 3).

Happily married adults report higher scores on measures of mental health compared to those who are unhappily married.

A happy marriage means fewer chronic conditions

Chronic conditions, which are persistent illnesses or conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease, tend to increase with age (see Figure 6) and, in general, are more prevalent among women than men regardless of marital status. Still, marital status and marital quality are also linked to these conditions.

Marital quality is particularly relevant when considering who has four or more chronic conditions. Among younger adults (aged 32-49), only 15% of those who are happily married have four or more conditions compared to 21% of those who are unhappily married (see Figure 6). This gap widens among older adults; for those aged 65-74, 38% of those who are happily married compared to 48% of unhappily married adults.

For all age groups, those who are unhappily married are about as likely to have four or more conditions as previously married adults (separated, divorced, or widowed). Those who married at least once are less likely than the previously married or unhappily married to report this many conditions.
Happily married adults report the least depression. It is well known that women suffer from depression more than men, and this is true in MIDS as well (see Figure 7). Still, depression rates differ based on marital status and quality. Happily married adults report fewer depressive symptoms than other marital groups, and unhappily married adults show the most signs, although the percentage of women (27%) is higher than men (13%). Unhappily married adults also report more trips to see a mental health professional than other unmarried groups. However, those who are separated or divorced are more likely to report depressive symptoms (26%) than the divorced (15%).

There are similar patterns with other aspects of well-being. Happily married adults are more likely than those who are unhappily married to report high levels of personal growth and life purpose. Those who are happily married are also more likely to report high levels of positive relations with other people and feelings of greater independence compared to the unhappily married. In fact, about 50% of unhappily married adults report low levels of personal growth (26%) and personal growth (26%) among men, 72% of those who are unhappily married report low levels of positive relations with other people. Men who never married also struggle with relationships, with 60% reporting low levels of positive relations with others.

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The majority (71%) of MIDS participants interviewed in 2004 were married. An additional 15%, 7%, and 8% were widowed, and 8% had never been married. However, there were sizeable gender and age variations.

♦ On average, men were more likely to be married (78%) than women (64%), while women were more likely to be separated or divorced (17%) than men (12%) and more likely to be widowed (11%) than men (3%).

♦ Among men, the married percentage grows slightly across adulthood, peaking between ages 65-74 (see Figure 1) and then declining thereafter as more men become widowed. For women, the married percentage peaks between ages 32-44 and then begins to drop, especially when women reach age 75, as 48% of all women aged 75-84 are widowed.

♦ Even when the percentage of married men is at its lowest during later life, it is still higher than the percentage of women who are married at age 75. By the age of 75, 74% of men are still married in comparison to only 40% of women (see Figure 1).
Happily married adults report the least depression

It is well known that women suffer from depression more than men, and this is true of MIDUS as well (see Figure 7). Still, depression rates differ based on marital status and quality. Happily married adults report fewer depressive symptoms than all other marital groups, and unhappily married adults show the most signs, although the percentage of unhappily married (27%) is higher than men (13%). Unhappily married adults also report more trips to see a mental health professional than other unmarried groups. However, those who are separated and divorced are most likely to report depressive symptoms (26%) than the divorced (15%).

Marital Status

Happily Married
Unhappily Married
Separated/ Divorced
Widowed
Never Married

FIGURE 7

DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS BY MARITAL STATUS

WHAT COMES FIRST?

Findings from MIDUS indicate that marriage is associated with benefits for health and well-being, but also that certain factors can influence these benefits. Two key factors are marital quality and stress. Marital quality is related to health outcomes, and stress can affect both health and well-being. These findings support previous research that has shown the importance of both marital quality and stress in determining health outcomes.

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Even when the percentage of married men is at its lowest during later life, it is still higher than the percentage of women who are married by age. By the age of 75, 74% of men are still married in comparison to only 40% of women (see Figure 1).