

Benefits of Good Marriage Last After Spouse's Death

The benefits of a good marriage appear to last even after a spouse has died. Four years after a spouse's death, widowed men and women who enjoyed good marriages are less likely to experience depression than people whose marriages were bad, according to researchers at the University of Michigan.

"A good marriage seems to have a protective impact on surviving spouses, while a bad marriage just keeps on making the widowed feel bad even after their spouses are gone," said U-M graduate student Nina Rhee in a news release.

How the Study of Good Marriages vs. Bad Was Conducted

After conducting initial interviews with 1,532 older married men and women in the Detroit metro area in 1987 and 1988, researchers tracked participant deaths and conducted follow-up interviews with bereaved spouses six, 18 and 48 months afterward. They also re-interviewed a control group of individuals from the original study who had not lost spouses.

During the initial interviews, researchers questioned participants about the quality of their relationships and their marriages, and their independence from their spouses, among other issues.

Good Marriage and the Adjustment to Widowhood

The researchers found that adjustment to widowhood was a changing process, with bereaved spouses showing considerable differences in their levels of depression in the four years following their losses:

Men and women who described good marriages and had positive views about their spouses at the start of the study showed significantly less depression four years after their spouses' deaths

Those who had more negative views of their marriages at the start of the study showed more depression four years after being widowed

Men and women who were more independent in their marriages showed more depression soon after their spouses died, but less depression than highly dependent widows or widowers four years after the losses.

Finding the Strength to Cope While Grieving

The researchers believe that their findings support the work of the late British psychologist John Bowlby, who maintained that forming, maintaining and grieving the loss of attachment bonds is an integral part of human behavior "from the cradle to the grave."

"We believe that in the case of the widowed who were securely attached to their spouses, this attachment provides them with a secure base with which to face life's problems," Rhee said.

"Those who have a secure base and are less dependent on their spouse are more distraught right after their spouse dies. But they have greater resources to develop long-term coping strategies."

How Bad Marriages Can Contribute to Depression

Having a bad marriage did not predict depression immediately after a spouse's death, according to the researchers, but it did have a significant link with depression four years later.

"One possible explanation is that widows and widowers realized that they did not have a great relationship or that their spouses were not good to them," Rhee said. "These negative views may not have affected their immediate reaction because of other factors associated with grief. But as their grief decreases, the actual reality of their marriage may have a greater impact on their well-being four years later.

"Right after death you tend to focus on the good qualities of the deceased. But by four years later, you're looking at things more realistically."

By Sharon O'Brien

Courtesy: http://seniorliving.about.com/od/marriagedivorce/a/good_marriage.htm