

# *Healthy Marriages, Mental Health*



*Research on the  
Alignment of  
Marital Outcomes  
and Mental Health*



**With the understanding that mental health is created within a bio-psycho-social context, the quality of family relationships emerges as a key determinant of mental health. California's divorce rate continues to hover near 50%, pointing to marital and family breakdown as mental health risk factors of great significance.**

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“A burgeoning literature suggests that marriage may have a wide range of benefits, including improvements in individuals’ mental and physical health and the well-being of their children... Most researchers conclude that the association between marriage and health represents a combination of selection and protection.”

Wood, Robert G., Goesling, Brian & Sarah Avellar. (2007). *The Effects of Marriage on Health: A Synthesis of Recent Research Evidence*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistance Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Office of Human Services Policy, pg. 1.

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“Marriages can do more than merely survive: They can also thrive when couples learn the skills to make their relationship work.”

Fagan, Patrick F, Patterson, Robert W. & Robert Rector. (2002) “Marriage and Welfare Reform. The Overwhelming Evidence that Marriage Education Works.” The Heritage Foundation: *Backgrounder* #1606.

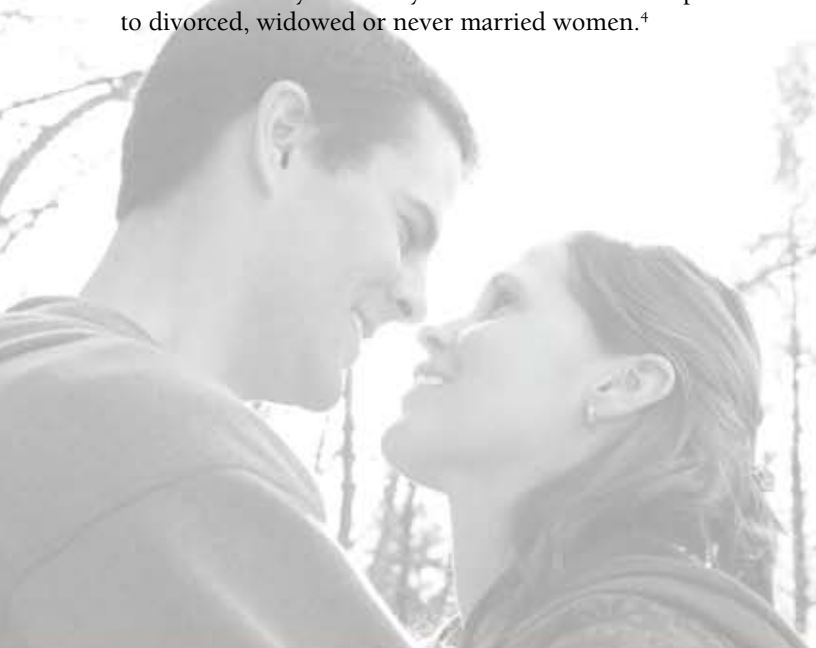
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**Although the size and context of referenced studies differ, the weight of a growing body of evidence supports the difference that marital outcomes make on the mental health of California couples and their children....**

## **Links Between Healthy Marriages & Mental Health for Adults**

- Happily married adults report fewer depressive symptoms than all other marital groups. Separated and divorced adults report more depressive symptoms and more trips to see a mental health professional than other unmarried groups.<sup>1</sup>
- Longitudinal evidence from studies across a variety of literatures indicates that marriage makes people far less likely to suffer psychological illness; marriage makes people live much longer; marriage makes people healthier and happier; both men and women benefit; these gains are not merely because married people engage in less risky activities; marriage quality can influence the size of the gains.<sup>2</sup>
- Researchers have consistently found the highest rates of mental disorder among the divorced and separated, the lowest rates among the married, and intermediate rates among the single and widowed. A cohabiting partner does not replicate these benefits of marriage.<sup>3</sup>
- In a study of 80,000 suicides in the U.S., researchers found that widowed and divorced persons were about three times as likely to commit suicide as people who are married. Overall, married men were only half as likely as single men to take their own life. Married women were also substantially less likely to commit suicide compared to divorced, widowed or never married women.<sup>4</sup>






- A study investigating the mental health of 13,000 men and women in older middle age, after controlling for race, education, family structure, income and living arrangements, found that married people were less depressed and emotionally healthier than singles and that married women were only half as likely to evaluate their emotional health as being poor.<sup>5</sup>
- There is “substantial research evidence suggesting that, for young adults, marriage reduces heavy alcohol consumption for both men and women, as well as substantial evidence for young men of a reduction in marijuana use associated with marriage.”<sup>6</sup>
- For couples in an unhappy marriage, the relationship can cause significant stress with related health consequences—most frequently, chronic, diffuse physiological arousal that manifests in physical ailments including high blood pressure, heart disease, anxiety, depression, suicide, violence, psychosis, homicide and substance abuse.<sup>7</sup>
- Cohabiting mothers are more likely to be depressed because they are much less confident that their relationship will last, compared to married mothers;<sup>8</sup> Single mothers are more likely to be depressed by the burdens associated with parenting alone;<sup>9</sup> The consequences of maternal depression for child well-being are greater in single parent families.<sup>10</sup>
- Physiological effects of marital stress are stronger and last longer in women. In a study of congestive heart patients, seven out of eight women with the poorest quality marriage died within two years.<sup>11</sup>

- The Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing of Adults (n=10,641 Australians) found that married people were the least likely to suffer from any particular class of mental disorder ( $p < .001$  pertaining to mood, anxiety, drug, alcohol, and “any” mental disorder), that divorced and separated adults were the most prone to mood and anxiety disorders, and that never married adults were the most at risk of drug and alcohol disorders. Researchers concluded that “marriage seems to have the same mental health effect on both men and women and that it is in the direction of protecting them against mental disorders.”<sup>12</sup>

## Links Between Healthy Marriages & Mental Health for Children

- When parents divorce, most children suffer; for some, this suffering turns into long-lasting psychological damage. Neglect of children, which can be psychologically more damaging than physical abuse,<sup>13</sup> is twice as high among separated and divorced parents.<sup>14</sup>
- The British National Longitudinal Study, which continuously tracked a national sample of children born in 1958, found divorce to be associated with a 39% increase in the risk of psychopathology.<sup>15</sup> Other researchers have concluded that divorce typically causes children considerable emotional distress and doubles the risk that they will experience serious psychological problems later in life.<sup>16</sup>
- In two studies following identical and non-identical twins in Australia who married and had children, enabling researchers to control for genetic factors that might play a role in mental health outcomes, those twins that went on to divorce were found to suffer significantly greater rates of mental illness, addictions and thoughts of suicide.<sup>17</sup> The results of the modeling of divorce was associated with young-adults offspring psychopathology even when controlling for genetic and common environmental factors related to twin parent studies.<sup>18</sup>



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- When marital conflict is high and sustained, children benefit psychologically from divorce. When marital conflict is low, children suffer psychologically from divorce.<sup>19</sup> Chronic marital conflict harms the emotional and physical wellbeing of children.<sup>20</sup>
  - Children younger than five years of age are found to be particularly vulnerable to the emotional conflicts occurring during the separation and divorce of their parents.<sup>21</sup>



- Children of divorce are at a higher risk for depression and other mental illness over the course of their lives, in part because of their reduced educational attainment and increased risk of having marital problems, divorce and economic hardship.<sup>22</sup>

- Researchers at the National Bureau of Economic Research concluded that the single “most important explanatory variable” regarding suicide is the increased share of youths living in homes with a divorced parent, “amounting to as much as 2/3 of the increase in youth suicides over time.”<sup>23</sup>

- Children who use drugs and abuse alcohol are more likely to come from family backgrounds characterized by parental conflict and parental rejection, and because divorce increases these factors, it increases the likelihood that children will abuse alcohol and begin using drugs.<sup>24</sup>
- A study of 534 Iowa families found that divorce increased the risk of depression in children. Part of the negative effect of divorce on children's risk of depression stemmed from the impact of divorce on mothers and fathers' parenting skills. However, even when mothers and fathers remained involved and supportive and did not engage in conflict post-divorce, boys whose parents divorced were at increased risk for depression.<sup>25</sup>
- In a study of 11,000 British children from birth through age 33, researchers concluded that part of the higher incidence of mental illness among children of divorce is caused by problems that existed before their parents divorced, and also concluded that divorce itself had further negative effects, with children and teens who experienced parental divorce being more likely to have adverse mental health effects even into their twenties and thirties.<sup>26</sup>

## Links Between Marriage Education & Marital Outcomes

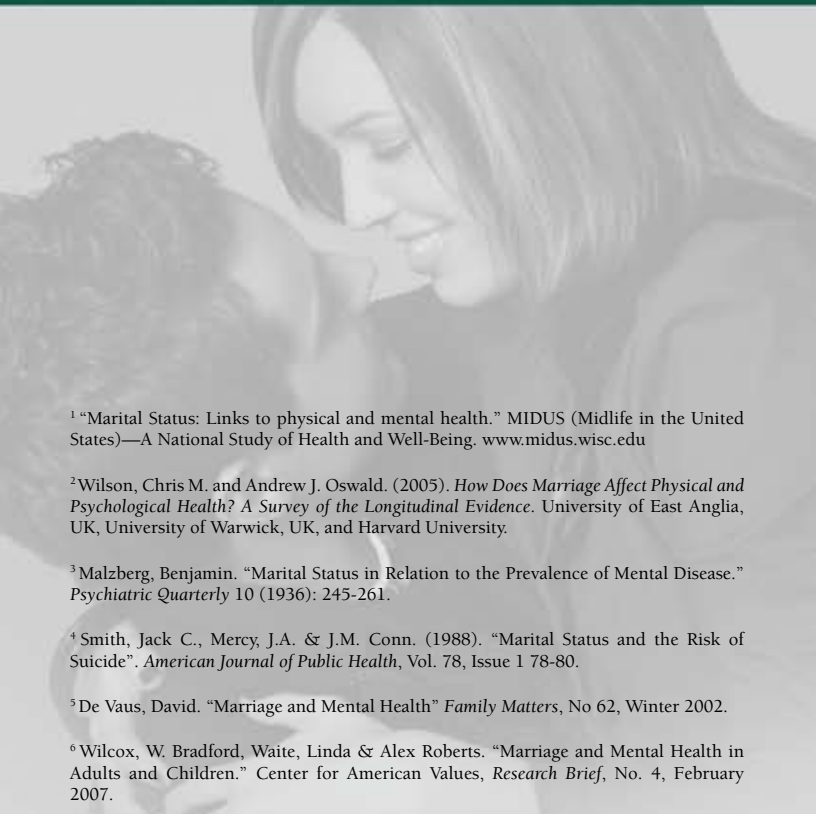
- A meta-analysis of over 100 studies on the impact of Marriage Education found clear evidence that Marriage Education programs work—"to reduce strife, improve communication, increase parenting skills, increase stability, and enhance marital happiness."<sup>27</sup>
- A meta-analysis of 20 different Marriage Education programs across 85 studies involving 3,886 couples found an average positive effect size of 0.44, indicating that the average couple participating in any one of the Marriage Education programs studied improved their behavior and quality of relationship so that they were better off than more than two-thirds of the couples that did not participate in any Marriage Education program.<sup>28</sup>





- A meta-analysis of 16 studies observed meaningful program effects with regard to gains in communication skills, marital satisfaction, and other relationship qualities. The average couple after taking the Marriage Education training was able to out-perform 83% of couples who had not participated in the program in the critical area of marital communication.<sup>29</sup>
- A longitudinal study on a well-known Marriage Education program found that, compared with couples without the training, participating couples maintained high levels of relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction and lower problem intensity three years after training; they also demonstrated significantly greater communication skills, less negative communication patterns, and greater conflict-management skills up to 12 years after instruction, and reported fewer instances of physical violence with their spouses three to five years after training.<sup>30</sup>
- In a meta-analytic study on 117 studies... Marriage and Relationship Education (MRE) was found to produce “significant, moderate effects sizes on two different outcomes that were commonly examined... For relationship quality, those effects range from .24 to .36. For communication skills, the effects were somewhat larger, ranging from .36 to .54. Moreover, when follow-up assessments were employed and evaluated, there was not much evidence of diminishing effects... Thus, it seems reasonable that federal and state policy makers are interested in exploring whether greater availability of MRE services can help more couples form and sustain healthy marriages.”<sup>31</sup>

**There is a strong alignment between healthy marriages and mental health, both for adults and for children. The costs of divorce and family fragmentation are extremely expensive—on individuals and on society. For society, each divorce is estimated to generate a social services burden of \$30,000<sup>32</sup>, and for the State of California, the cost of family fragmentation is estimated to generate a tax burden of \$4.8 billion per year<sup>33</sup>. It is evident that a prudent and cost-effective mental health investment for California will be in helping couples learn the skills for forming and sustaining healthy families that foster positive mental health outcomes. Marriage and Relationship Education classes present a highly cost-effective and proven means for doing so, and as such they represent an important and innovative use of MHSA-Prevention and Early Intervention Funds.**



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- <sup>9</sup> Kessler, Ronald C., Borges, Guilherme & Ellen E. Walters. (1999). “Prevalence of and Risk Factors for Lifetime Suicide Attempts in the National Comorbidity Survey. *Archives of General Psychiatry* 56:617-626.
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- <sup>16</sup> Fincham, Frank D. (2002) “Divorce”, in Salkind, N.J. (ed.) *Child Development: Macmillan Psychological Reference Series*. Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan.
- <sup>17</sup> Wilcox, et al., op. cit.
- <sup>18</sup> D’Onofrio, B.M., Turkheimer, E.N., Emery, R., Slutske, W., Heath, A., Madden, P.A.F. & N.G. Martin. (2006). “A genetically informed study of the processes underlying the association between parental marital instability and offspring adjustment.” *Developmental Psychology* 42, 486-499.

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<sup>20</sup> Emery, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, House of Representatives. (1998) *To Have and To Hold: Strategies to Strengthen Marriage and Relationships*. Parliament of Australia, p. 35.

<sup>22</sup> Ross, Catherine & John Mirowsky. (1999). "Parental Divorce, Life-Course Disruption, and Adult Depression". *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61:1034-1045.

<sup>23</sup> Cutler, David M., Glaeser, Edward L. & Karen Norberg. *Explaining the Rise in Youth Suicide*. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper, No. W7713 (May 2000): <http://papers.nber.org/papers/w7713.pdf>

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<sup>25</sup> Simmons, Ronald, et al. "Explaining the Higher Incidence of Adjustment Problems among Children of Divorce Compared with Those in Two-Parent Families". *J Marriage & Fam* 61, 1020, (1999).

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<sup>32</sup> Schramm, David. "Individual and Social Costs of Divorce in Utah," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, Spring 2006: v. 27 (1), pp. 133ff.

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