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For a Better Marriage, Act Like a Single Person

By STEPHANIE COONTZ FEB. 10, 2018

OLYMPIA, Wash. — Especially around Valentine’s Day, it’s easy to find advice about sustaining a successful marriage, with suggestions for “date nights” and romantic dinners for two.

But as we spend more and more of our lives outside marriage, it’s equally important to cultivate the skills of successful singlehood. And doing that doesn’t benefit just people who never marry. It can also make for more satisfying marriages.

No matter how much Americans may value marriage, we now spend more time living single than ever before. In 1960, Americans were married for an average of 29 of the 37 years between the ages of 18 and 55. That’s almost 80 percent of what was then regarded as the prime of life. By 2015, the average had dropped to only 18 years.

In many ways, that’s good news for marriages and married people. Contrary to some claims, marrying at an older age generally *lowers* the risk of divorce. It also gives people time to acquire educational and financial assets, as well as develop a broad range of skills — from cooking to household repairs to financial management — that will stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives, including when a partner is unavailable.

What's more, single people generally have wider social networks than married couples, who tend to withdraw into their coupledness. On average, unmarried people interact more frequently with friends, neighbors, co-workers and extended family.

Socializing with friends and family and participating in clubs, political organizations, teams, unions and churches are essential components of what sociologists call social integration. And health researchers report that maintaining high levels of social integration provides as much protection against early mortality as quitting smoking. In fact, having weak social networks is a greater risk factor for dying early than being obese or sedentary. One analysis of 148 separate health studies found that people who cultivated a wide network of friends and other social relationships had a mortality risk 50 percent lower than those with weak ties.

Having a large network of friends rather than relying mainly on family is especially beneficial. A long-term study of more than 6,500 Britons found that men and women who reported having 10 or more friendships at age 45 had significantly higher levels of psychological well-being at age 50, whatever their partnership status, than people with fewer friends. And two recent studies of nearly 280,000 people in almost 100 countries by William Chopik of Michigan State University found that friendships become increasingly vital to well-being at older ages. Among older adults, relationships with friends are a better predictor of good health and happiness than relations with family.

Don't get me wrong. Marriage can provide a bounty of emotional, practical and financial support. But finding the right mate is no substitute for having friends and other interests. Indeed, people who are successful as singles are especially likely to end up in happy marriages, in large part because of the personal and social resources they developed before marrying. One representative study of nearly 17,000 people found that almost 80 percent of those who married had reported the same levels of well-being four years *before* their marriage as they reported four years afterward.

It's true that, on average, married people report higher well-being than singles. But mounting research indicates that most of the disadvantages of singles compared with the currently married are accounted for by distress among the *previously* married, especially those most recently divorced or widowed.

This suggests an intriguing possibility, says the Ohio State University sociologist Kristi Williams, editor of *The Journal of Marriage and Family*: Many of the problems experienced by divorced and widowed people may result not so much from the end of their marriage as from having relied too much on their spouse and thus failing to maintain social networks and the skills of self-reliance. In Professor Chopik's research, single older people with solid friendships, whether previously married or never married, were just as happy and healthy as married individuals.

A new study by Daniel Carlson of the University of Utah and Ben Kail of Georgia State finds that the only segment of the population where never-married individuals consistently report worse psychological well-being than the married is among the poorest Americans. This is partly because at this income level, married couples actually maintain higher levels of social integration than their unmarried counterparts.

But as income rises, the advantages of married over never-married individuals evaporate and even reverse. While affluent never-married people continue to multiply their interactions with friends, neighbors and family, affluent married couples don't. This could well be why, at the highest income levels, married people are actually *more* likely to report depressive symptoms than their equally affluent never-married counterparts.

Maintaining social networks and self-reliance after marriage does far more, however, than protect you against depression and ensure against the worst outcomes of divorce or widowhood. It can also enhance and even revitalize your marriage.

Many marriage counselors focus narrowly on improving partners' couple skills without taking into account how the marital relationship is affected by interactions with other people. Yet a 2017 study found that when people socialize more frequently with good friends, they not only report fewer depressive symptoms themselves, but so do their partners.

People feel better when their spouses have good friendships, over and above the effects of their own friendships. In another example of how friendships can benefit a marriage, happily married wives who experience conflicts in their marriage generally

feel closer to their husbands when they can discuss and reframe the issues with a good friend.

As the U.C.L.A. social psychologist Benjamin Karney told me, “‘You are my everything’ is not the best recipe for a happy marriage.” Research his team will present next month at the annual conference of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology found that having supportive friendships is associated with more satisfying marriages, even among couples already content with the support they get from each other. “Even the happiest couples have something to gain by nurturing relationships with people outside their marriage,” he said.

That’s what’s wrong with the pressure put on couples to plan the perfect date night. Aside from having sex, which most of us prefer to do without outsiders around, people enjoy doing activities with their partner and friends together more than with only their spouse.

Socializing with others provides some of the novelty and variety that leading social psychologists call “the spice of happiness.” It also allows partners to show off each other’s strengths. My husband tells great stories, but I’ve heard most of them and am not interested in hearing them again when we’re by ourselves. When we’re out with others, however, I urge him to tell away. Their positive reaction validates me as well as him.

Still, don’t couples need date nights to renew their romantic passion? In one experiment, researchers assigned some couples to spend time by themselves and have deeply personal conversations, while others were set up with a couple they had never met and told to initiate similar conversations. Afterward, all the couples reported greater satisfaction with their relationship, but couples who had been on the “double date” reported feeling *more* romantic passion toward each other than those who had engaged only with each other.

So this Valentine’s Day, if you’re in the throes of early love, by all means plan a romantic evening alone with your partner. But if that first rush of passion has passed, you’re probably better off going on a double date. And if you’re without a romantic partner, why not hone your singlehood skills by organizing a dinner party with friends or inviting over a few people you’d like to get to know better?