

Marital Status

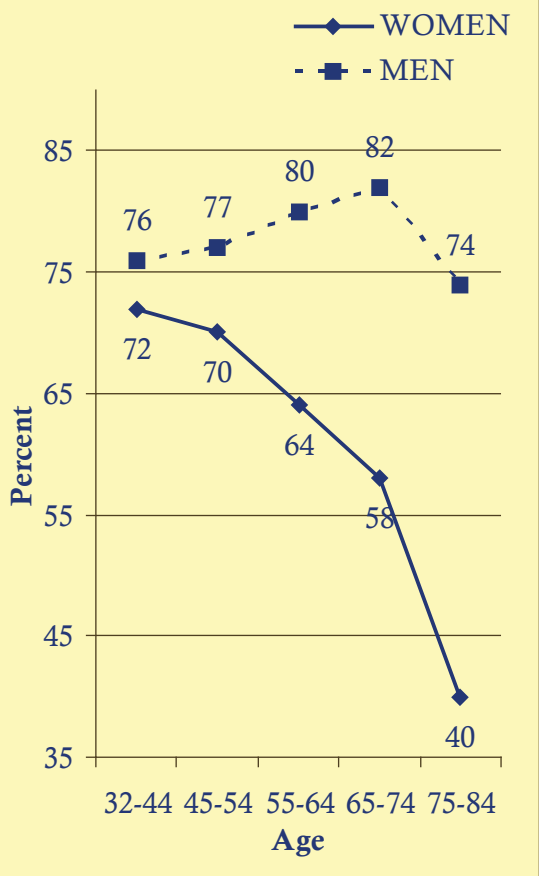
Links to physical and mental health

MIDUS
 Midlife in the United States

A National Study of Health & Well-Being

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.

FIGURE 1
PERCENTAGE OF MARRIED ADULTS BY AGE



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.

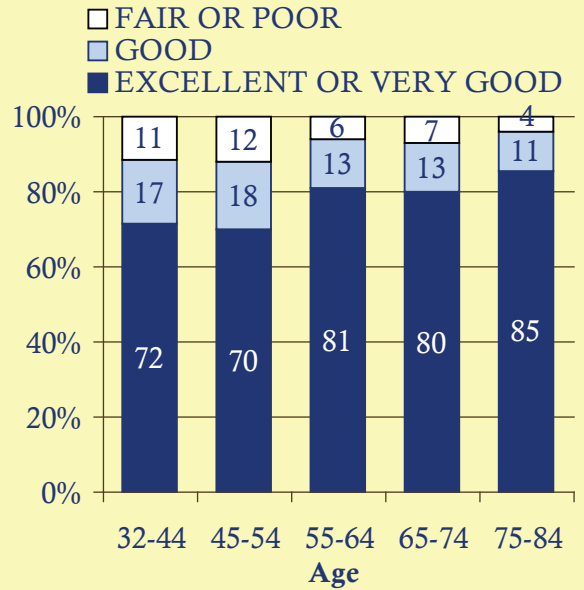
Marital quality increases with age

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 80-81% of adults aged 55-74 and 85% of adults aged 75 or older.

FIGURE 2

MARITAL RELATIONSHIP QUALITY BY AGE



- ◆ Educational status is also linked with reports of marital quality: 69% of adults with less than a high school education report their marital relationships are excellent or very good compared to 79% of adults with a college degree. However, married adults who have a high school degree or GED are almost as likely as adults with a college degree to rate their marital relationship as excellent or very good.

WHO SMOKES?

Separated or divorced adults are more likely to be current smokers (45%) compared to married adults (27%). Adults who have never married also have higher smoking rates (43%). Among married adults, the quality of the marital relationship has important links with smoking behavior. Among those who are unhappily married, 38% smoke compared to 25% of those who are happily married.

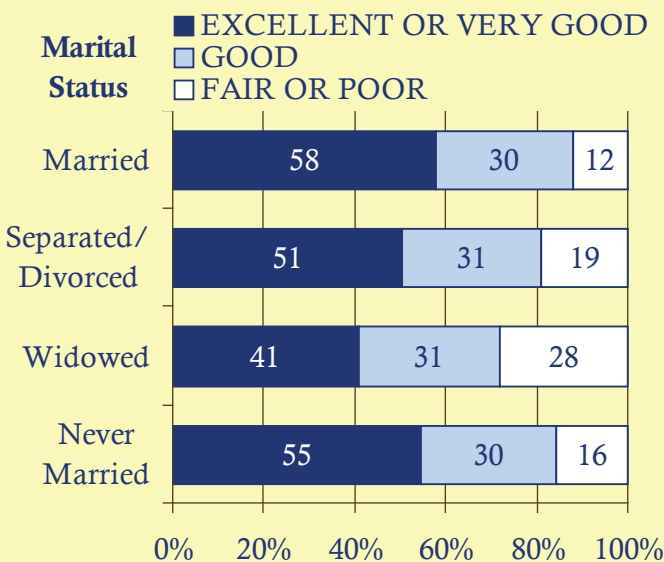


Married people report better health

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 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.

FIGURE 3

SELF-REPORTED HEALTH BY MARITAL STATUS

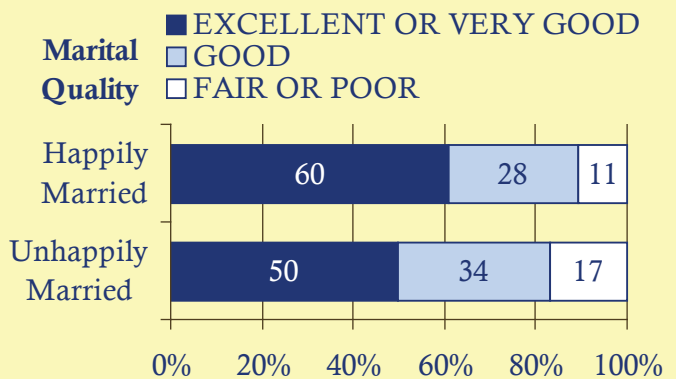


Happily married people feel healthier

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 unhappily 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),

FIGURE 4

SELF-REPORTED HEALTH BY MARITAL RELATIONSHIP QUALITY



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 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 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.



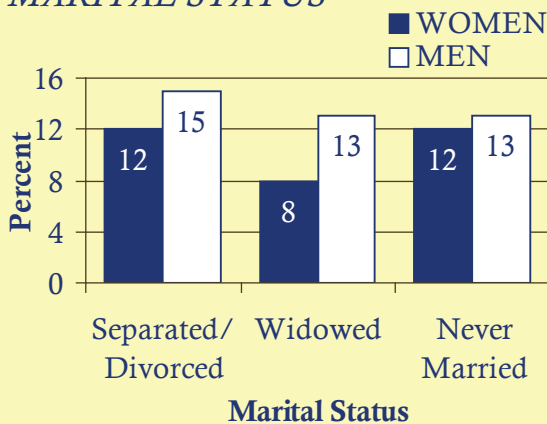
Unmarried adults are in need of health insurance

On average, 7% of 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 groups 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 and 12% of widowed men compared to 13% of never married men and 8% of never married women.

FIGURE 5

NO HEALTH INSURANCE BY MARITAL STATUS



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

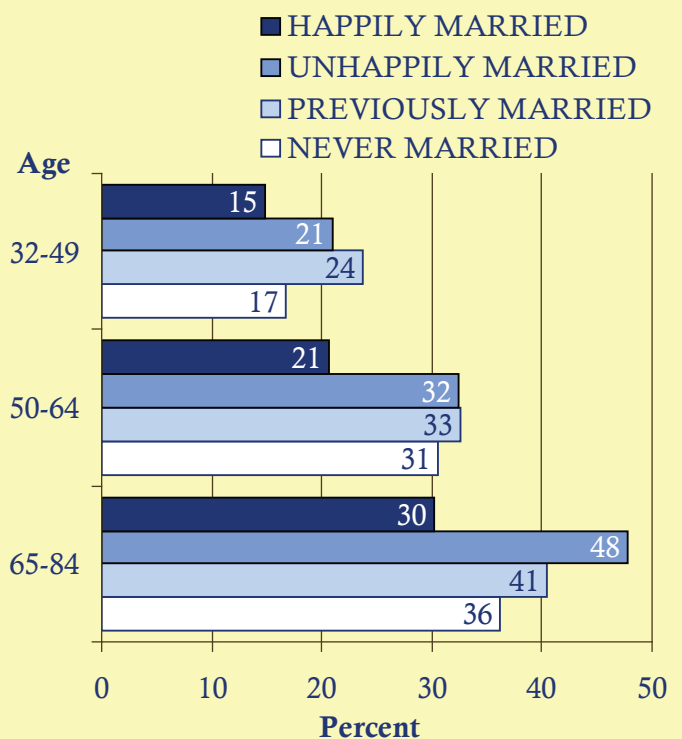
regardless of marital status. Still, marital status and marital quality are also linked to these conditions.

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 to 24% of those who are previously married (see Figure 6). This gap widens among older adults: for those aged 65-84, 30% have four or more illnesses if 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 never married are less likely than the previously married or unhappily married to report this many conditions.

FIGURE 6

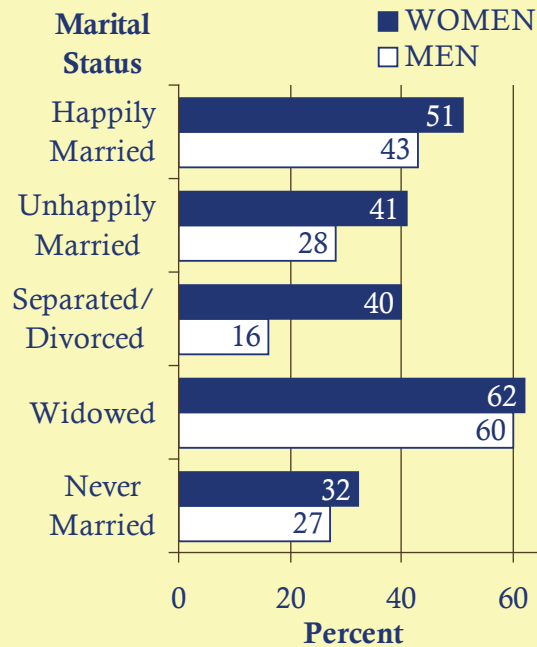
PERCENTAGE WITH FOUR OR MORE CHRONIC CONDITIONS BY AGE



Widowed adults report more religious attendance

Widowed men and women are more likely to attend religious services at least once a week (see Figure 8) than any other marital statuses. For all other groups, women are more likely than men to attend religious services. Only 16% of separated and divorced men attend services at least once a week compared to 43% of happily married men and 60% of widowed men.

FIGURE 8
*RELIGIOUS ATTENDANCE (1+/
WEEK) BY MARITAL STATUS*



Happily married adults report the least depression

It is well known that women suffer from depression more than men, and this is true in 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

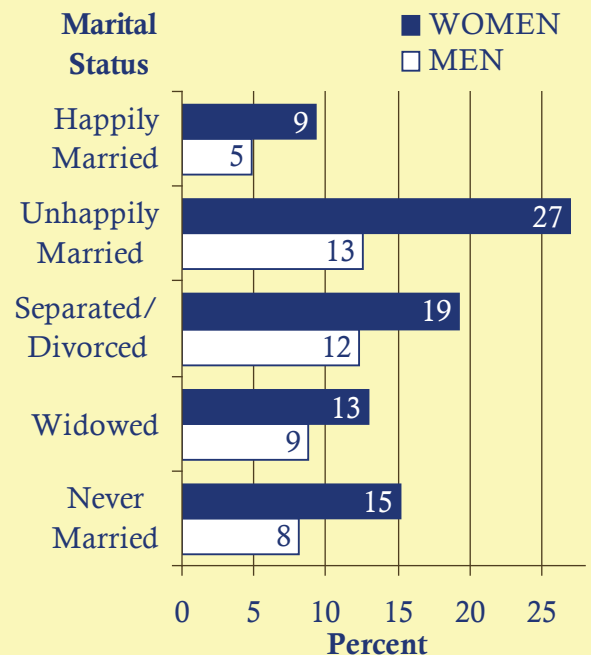
WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

MIDUS respondents were asked about depressive symptoms experienced in the past year, including: loss of interest in things, change in appetite, feeling more tired, trouble concentrating or falling asleep, feeling down on oneself, and thinking a lot about death. These signs do not equal a diagnosis of depression, which requires a clinical assessment.

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 in the last year than the happily married.

Separated and divorced adults report more depressive symptoms and more trips to see a mental health professional than other unmarried groups. However, those who are separated are more likely to report depressive symptoms (26%) than the divorced (15%).

FIGURE 7
*DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS BY
MARITAL STATUS*

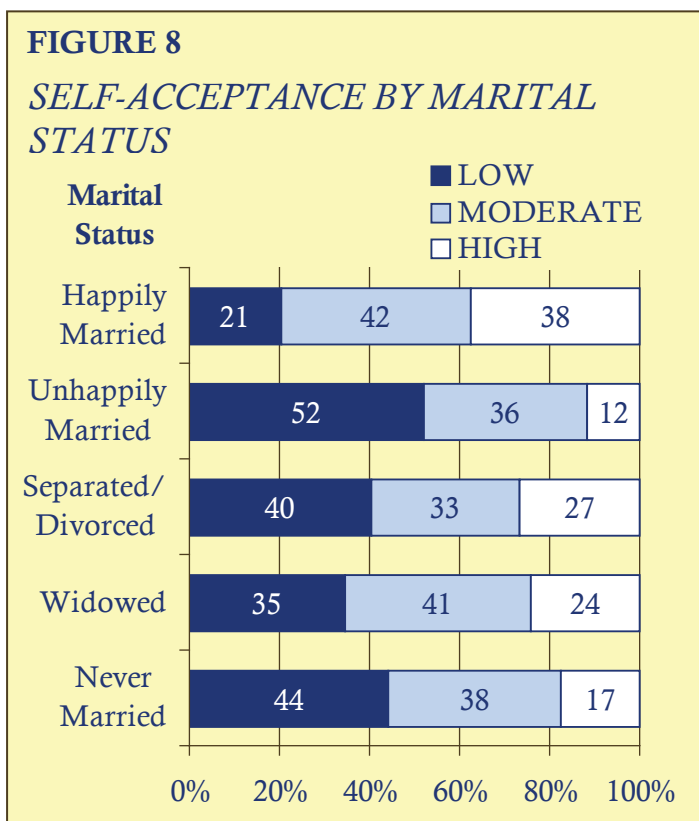


Happy marriage means better well-being

Findings from MIDUS show that married people have better physical health; however, an unhappy marriage eliminates that benefit. This is also true when considering one's well-being.

Happily married adults are more likely to report high self-acceptance (38%) than other marital status groups (see Figure 8). Among the unhappily married, only 12% report high levels of self-acceptance and 52% report low self-acceptance. Individuals who never married are more likely to report low self-acceptance than other unmarried adults.

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 and life purpose. 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.



WHAT COMES FIRST?

Findings from MIDUS indicate that marriage is associated with benefits for health and well-being, but also clarify that such advantages depend, in part, on marital quality. They also show that the never married fare quite well in many areas of assessment. Still, the question remains of whether marriage improves health and well-being or whether healthier people are more likely to marry. MIDUS researchers are currently pursuing further analyses to help clarify this issue by examining changes in marital status that have occurred over time and whether they have led to gains or losses in health and well-being.

MIDLIFE IN THE UNITED STATES

Institute on Aging, 1300 University Avenue, 2245 MSC, Madison, WI 53706

PHONE 608-262-2056 FAX 608-263-6211

EMAIL aging@ssc.wisc.edu WEBSITE <http://midus.wisc.edu>

