

To: Students of the Family

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From: Glenn T. Stanton

Re: The Upside of “Nagging”

For many decades now, it has been shown in sociological, psychological and medical research that married men and women tend to do better in every important measure of physical, social and psychological well-being compared to the unmarried of any category. The literature on this fact is broad, consistent and [well-documented](#).

A 2009 study from the *Journal of Marriage and Family* explains that “a classic social science tenet is that married people face a lower mortality risk than unmarried people” and this “mortality gap between the married and unmarried...raises concern for population health.”¹ Some research indicates that the notable health and mortality gap between the married and unmarried of every category has remained relatively constant over the past two decades.²

Why the Health Premium for Marrieds?

Many scholars have wondered exactly why marriage provides such benefits while cohabitation does not. It has to be more than simply having someone to share life with. Some contend that it's actually the nature of marriage and the state of being married that brings these benefits. Others wonder if it's simply that healthy people are more likely to be a desirable spouse, therefore we find that the married are the healthiest. There is some reasonableness to this idea. However, of those who suddenly face a serious health issue such as cancer, the married tend to recover quicker and more successfully than the single, divorced or cohabiting. Other findings support the protective quality of marriage.

This brings us to the topic of this *FINDINGS*: What is the personal benefit of having someone in our lives who's concerned about us and takes interest in the business of our behaviors, attitudes and general well-being? The answer might surprise you.

“Social control” is the term sociologists use to refer to the activity of one person influencing and directing the behavior of someone else. All cultures and people need this. In the early years of life, it's called parenting. But in later years, it is still needed. In terms of everyday adult domestic relationships, the old fashioned term is “nagging.” And it does keep us healthier. Essentially it involves someone who loves us reminding us of things like “eat your vegetables” “get a good night's sleep” “don't drive so fast” “be sure to wear your scarf and ear muffs!” and “how many donuts have you had today?” These may not always be welcomed questions in our lives, but they do make us healthier.

A scholar who has long studied this dynamic of social control is Debra Umberson, a sociologist at the University of Texas Austin. In one of her first articles on this topic, she concludes, “it appears that social integration via marriage and parenthood has an inhibiting effect on health-compromising behavior.”³ She explains:

¹ Hiu Liu, “Till Death Do Us Part: Marital Status and U.S. Mortality Trends, 1986-2000,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71 (2009): 1158-1173, p. 1170, 1171.

² Hiu Liu, 2009, p. 1171.

³ Debra Umberson, “Family Status and Health Behaviors: Social Control as a Dimension of Social Integration,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 28 (1987): 306-319, p. 316.

Spouses or children may tell or remind an individual to engage in health behaviors or avoid taking risks. For example, an individual might remind his or her spouse to avoid using salt because of its effect on blood pressure. Regulation may also take the form of sanctions or threatened sanctions: an individual might threaten to leave a spouse because of excessive alcohol consumption.⁴

It makes sense. Family members (children, parents and spouse) are typically those most motivated to insert themselves into our business and habits because they love and are tied to us in the deepest ways humans can be linked. And unlike boy/girl friends or cohabiting partners, family members are not as likely to take off when we do encourage them to change behaviors. Spouses, children and parents are more likely to be seen as having such an imposing right.

Research specifically comparing marrieds and cohabitators found, “there was no additional survival advantage for persons who lived with someone other than a spouse...[T]he critical factor for survival was the presence of a spouse.”⁵ Cohabitators were more likely to resemble singles in terms of health outcomes.

Women Have the Power, Wives Even More

A very consistent theme in Umberson’s research is that “respondents are more likely to report women [wives for married men and mothers and sisters for non-married men] as people who attempt to control their behavior.”⁶

Umberson explains, “When asked if they ever told or reminded anyone to protect their health, the female respondents almost always responded affirmatively and provided specific examples.” She cites a 33-year-old married woman her team interviewed who confessed,

My husband, I feel free to nag. He comes from a high risk family for heart disease, and I nag him regularly – about exercise primarily.⁷

Given the difference in married and single men’s health outcomes, it appears -- not surprisingly -- that wives are more powerful in changing grown men’s behavior than even their own mothers. If marriage is indeed the “old ball and chain” it is because it brings people into our lives who tie us down to healthy behaviors and habits and away from the doctor’s and psychiatrist’s office as well as the funeral home.

That is a rich gift that marriage provides to us, our children and the larger community.

Glenn T. Stanton is the Director of Global Family Formation Studies at Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, CO and the author of *Secure Daughters, Confident Sons: How Parents Guide Their Children Into Authentic Masculinity and Femininity* and *The Ring Makes All the Difference*.

⁴ Umberson, 1987, p. 310.

⁵ Maradee A. Davis, et al., “Living Arrangements And Survival Among Middle-Aged and Older Adults in the NHANES I Epidemiologic Follow-up Study,” *American Journal of Public Health* 82 (1992) 401-406.

⁶ Debra Umberson, et al., “The Effect of Social Relationships on Psychological Well-Being: Are Men and Women Really So Different?” *American Sociological Review*, 61 (1996): 837-857, p. 844; Debra Umberson, “Gender, Marital Status and the Social Control of Health Behavior,” *Social Science Medicine*, 34 (1992): 907-917, p. 915.

⁷ Umberson, 1992, p. 915.