

Study finds few well-being advantages to marriage over cohabitation

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A new study, published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* reveals that married couples experience few advantages for psychological well-being, health, or social ties compared to unmarried couples who live together. While both marriage and cohabitation provide benefits over being single, these reduce over time following a honeymoon period.

"[Marriage](#) has long been an important social institution, but in recent decades western societies have experienced increases in cohabitation, before or instead of marriage, and increases in children born outside of marriage," said Dr Kelly Musick, Associate Professor of policy analysis and management at Cornell University's College of [Human Ecology](#). "These changes have blurred the boundaries of marriage, leading to questions about what difference marriage makes in comparison to alternatives."

Previous research has sought to prove a link between marriage and well-being, but many studies compared marriage to being single, or compared marriages and cohabitations at a single point in time.

This study compares marriage to cohabitation while using a fixed-effects approach that focuses on what changes when single men and women move into marriage or cohabitation and the extent to which any effects of marriage and cohabitation persist over time.

Dr Musick drew a study sample from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) of 2,737 single men and women, 896 of whom

married or moved in with a partner over the course of 6 years. The study focused on key areas of well-being, considering questions on happiness, levels of depression, health, and [social ties](#).

The results showed a spike in well-being immediately following both marriage and cohabitation as couples experienced a honeymoon period with higher levels of happiness and fewer [depressive symptoms](#) compared to singles. However, these advantages were short lived.

Marriage and cohabitation both resulted in less contact with parents and friends compared to remaining single – and these effects appeared to persist over time.

"We found that differences between marriage and cohabitation tend to be small and dissipate after a honeymoon period. Also while [married couples](#) experienced health gains – likely linked to the formal benefits of marriage such as shared healthcare plans – cohabiting couples experienced greater gains in happiness and self-esteem. For some, cohabitation may come with fewer unwanted obligations than marriage and allow for more flexibility, autonomy, and personal growth" said Musick.

"Compared to most industrial countries America continues to value marriage above other family forms," concluded Musick. "However our research shows that marriage is by no means unique in promoting well-being and that other forms of romantic relationships can provide many of the same benefits."

Provided by Wiley

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