

Husband's health and attitude loom large for happy long-term marriages

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(Phys.org) —A husband's agreeable personality and good health appear crucial to preventing conflict among older couples who have been together a long time, according to a study from University of Chicago researchers.

The report found that such characteristics in wives play less of a role in limiting marital conflict, perhaps because of different expectations among women and men in durable relationships.

"Wives report more conflict if their husband is in poor [health](#)," said the study's lead author, James Iveniuk, PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology. "If the wife is in poor health, there doesn't seem to be any difference in terms of the quality of the marriage for the husband."

The study, "Marital Conflict in Older Couples: Positivity, Personality, and Health," reports results from a national survey with data analyzed from 953 [heterosexual couples](#) who were married or cohabitating. The study participants ranged in age from 63 to 90 years old and the average length of their relationships was 39 years.

The survey of older adults participating in the National Social Life Health and Aging Project, funded by the National Institute on Aging, compared the characteristics of the husbands to the characteristics of their wives and vice versa based on interviews with each person in which they were asked to describe themselves.

Iveniuk and co-authors found many gender differences when they examined [personality traits](#) including openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and anxiety. They added a new measure called "positivity," an overarching characteristic described as a person's overall desire to be seen in a positive light. "Wives whose husbands show higher levels of positivity reported less conflict. However, the wives' positivity had no association with their husbands' reports of conflict," Iveniuk said.

Co-author Linda J. Waite, Lucy Flower Professor of Urban Sociology and director of the Center on Aging at NORC, says the study's measurement of [marital conflict](#) could be summarized as, "How much

does your spouse bother you?" The clashes are not primarily about fighting or violence, but rather whether one spouse criticizes the other, makes too many demands, or generally gets on the other person's nerves.

Another finding is that men who describe themselves as neurotic or extraverts tend to have wives who complain more about the quality of the marriage. Men with self-described neurotic wives may consider worrying to be a more "gender-appropriate" role for women. Husbands reported more criticism and demands from their wives overall, but also [higher levels](#) of emotional support.

"Several previous studies have been about the implications of marital status on health," Waite says. "This research allows us to examine individual marriages and not 'married people.' We have the reports on the quality of the marriage from each person, about their own personality and their own health."

The researchers suggest that future studies might examine the question of whether low levels of conflict in marriages require not only the absence of frustrating factors, such as [poor health](#) and negative traits, but also a better balance of emotional responsibilities between husbands and wives. They say some of those differences between [husbands](#) and [wives](#) may change as researchers study younger couples entering later life as compared to the current generation of [older couples](#) who may have more conventional gender roles.

The study was published by the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

More information: Iveniuk, J., Waite, L. J., Laumann, E., McClintock, M. K. and Tiedt, A. D. (2014), "Marital Conflict in Older Couples: Positivity, Personality, and Health." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 76: 130–144. doi: 10.1111/jomf.12085

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