

# Wives take problems to heart, husbands get frustrated

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Men and women in long-term marriages deal with marriage difficulties differently.

Husbands and wives married for a long time don't look at marital

problems in the same way. When a marriage has troubles, women worry. They become sad. They get frustrated. For men, it's sheer frustration and not much more.

In a new Rutgers and University of Michigan study, published in the *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, the sociologist who found that 'A Happy Wife, Means a Happy Life' looked at sadness, worry and frustration – among the most common negative emotions reported by older adults – and discovered that men and women in long-term marriages deal with marriage difficulties differently.

"The men don't really want to talk about it or spend too much time thinking about it," said Deborah Carr, a professor in the Department of Sociology, School of Arts and Sciences, who studies marital relationships. "Men often don't want to express vulnerable emotions, while women are much more comfortable expressing sadness or worry."

Men and women have very different emotional reactions to the strain and support they experience in marriage, Carr said. While talking about issues and offering support makes the wives – who traditionally feel responsible for sustaining the emotional climate of a marriage—feel good, this only frustrated the husbands surveyed.

"For women, getting a lot of support from their spouse is a positive experience," said Carr. "Older men, however, may feel frustrated receiving lots of support from their wife, especially if it makes them feel helpless or less competent."

In the study, 722 couples, married an average of 39 years, were asked how their marital experience – and the reactions of their spouse – affected them. They responded to whether they could open up to their spouse if they needed to talk about their worries, whether their spouse appreciates them, understands the way they feel about things, argues

with them, makes them feel tense and gets on their nerves.

The husbands in the study – who more often rated their marriages positively and reported significantly higher levels of emotional support and lower levels of marital strain than their wives – felt frustrated giving as well as receiving support.

"Men who provide high levels of support to their wives may feel this frustration if they believe that they would rather be focusing their energies on another activity," Carr said.

It may also have something to do with the age of the couples, with one spouse in the study having to be at least 60. Men of this generation may feel less competent if they need too much support from their [wives](#), Carr said.

"We don't know if younger generations of men would act differently in this situation," Carr said. "But frustration is an under-researched emotion that needs to be looked at further."

This is particularly important as couples age, become more dependent, less healthy and face the possibility of getting dementia or becoming a caregiver, Carr said.

"If older [men](#) or [women](#) with dementia have reduced impulse control, they could lash out against their spouse if they're feeling frustrated," she said. "It's very important to keep in mind these dynamics even with long married couples who you may not think have any problems."

The bottom line, said Carr, is that there has to be a middle ground between marital suffocation and togetherness. Spouses want to feel loved and supported but not trapped.

"The general message is that [support](#) is good only if one views it as helpful and desirable," she said. "Most people want to feel they're capable of managing their own life."

**More information:** Deborah Carr et al. Marital Quality and Negative Experienced Well-Being: An Assessment of Actor and Partner Effects Among Older Married Persons, *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* (2015). [DOI: 10.1093/geronb/gbv073](#)

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