

A good fight may keep you and your marriage healthy

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A good fight with your spouse may be good for your health, research suggests. Couples in which both the husband and wife suppress their anger when one attacks the other die earlier than members of couples where one or both partners express their anger and resolve the conflict, according to preliminary results of a University of Michigan study.

Researchers looked at 192 couples over 17 years and placed the couples into one of four categories: both partners communicate their anger; in the second and third groups one spouse expresses while the other suppresses; and both the husband and wife suppress their anger and brood, said Ernest Harburg, professor emeritus with the U-M School of Public Health and the Psychology Department, and lead author. The study is a longitudinal analysis of couples in Tecumseh, Mich.

"Comparison between couples in which both people suppress their anger, and the three other types of couples, are very intriguing," Harburg said.

When both spouses suppress their anger at the other when unfairly attacked, earlier death was twice as likely than in all other types.

"When couples get together, one of their main jobs is reconciliation about conflict," Harburg said. "Usually nobody is trained to do this. If they have good parents, they can imitate, that's fine, but usually the couple is ignorant about the process of resolving conflict. The key matter is, when the conflict happens, how do you resolve it?"

"When you don't, if you bury your anger, and you brood on it and you resent the other person or the attacker, and you don't try to resolve the problem, then you're in trouble."

Of the 192 couples studied, 26 pairs both suppressed their anger and there were 13 deaths in that group. In the remaining 166 pairs, there were 41 deaths combined.

In 27 percent of those couples who both suppressed their anger, one member of the couple died during the study period, and in 23 percent of those couples both died during the study period.

That's compared to only six percent of couples where both spouses died in the remaining three groups combined. Only 19 percent in the remaining three groups combined saw one partner die during the study period.

The study adjusted for age, smoking, weight, blood pressure, bronchial problems, breathing, and cardiovascular risk, Harburg said.

The paper only looks at attacks which are considered unfair or undeserved by the person being attacked, said Harburg. If the attack is viewed as fair, say an abused child or woman who believes they deserved the attack, then the victim does not get angry, Harburg said.

Harburg stresses that these preliminary numbers are small, but the researchers are now collecting 30-year follow-up data, which will have almost double the death rate, he said.

The paper, "Marital Pair Anger Coping Types May Act as an Entity to Affect Mortality: Preliminary Findings from a Prospective Study (Tecumseh, Michigan, 1971-88) will appear in January in the Journal of Family Communication.

Source: University of Michigan

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