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Marital Satisfaction and Aging

The term marital satisfaction refers to a person's subjective appraisal of how adequately his or her marriage fulfills personal needs, desires, and dreams. With the growing population of married seniors and the current research findings linking marital satisfaction to several health indicators, the study of marital satisfaction and aging is an important scientific pursuit. Albeit research in this area is in its infancy, and conclusions from the literature are therefore limited, preliminary evidence associates a gratifying marriage in later life with mental, physical, and social health and overall life satisfaction. In short, older persons in satisfying marriages appear to be healthier and happier than their single or unsatisfyingly married counterparts.

One way to organize the empirical conclusions related to marital satisfaction and aging is to categorize them according to "Attitude" and "Action" factors. The attitude of the marriage describes spouse's opinions about the quality of the bond and the overall emotional climate of the relationship. Action characteristics, on the other hand, are the kinds of activities regularly engaged in by satisfied couples. This entry presents the traits of satisfied older couples, provides a brief discussion of gender differences, and concludes with implications based on the scientific findings.

Attitude Factors

The primary vehicle for the expression of attitude factors is through thoughtful and frequent non-verbal and verbal communication processes. These interactions stem from the values and personality traits each member brings to the dyad.

Highly satisfied older couples report experiencing a shared emotional bond that is decidedly valued by both husband and wife. This attitude of mutual valuing is evidenced by respect displayed by thoughtful responses characterized by genuine empathy, caring, warmth, and support. Satisfied duos regularly listen to one another, share dreams and desires, and engage in deep and meaningful friendship. They are also committed to the primacy of their relationship, as demonstrated by the protection of relational time and tending to one another so that each feel esteemed and loved by the other.

The personality/character traits correlated with marital satisfaction reported in the literature include being trusting, agreeable, emotionally stable, secure, even tempered, sensitively available, and quick to forgive and reconcile. The disposition of the satisfied relationship is thus overall compatible and mutual. At the same time, the research shows that satisfied couples argue and fight, but they are also able to skillfully restore the relationship quickly and effectively. In fact, these couples appear to value incompatibility and dissimilarities, are able to confront and work through differences, and accept life's ambiguities and even suffering. When compared to dissatisfied couples, these twosomes report less frequent fighting and their assessment about these uncomfortable interactions is that they generally serve to increase attunement, mutual need meeting, and regard in the long run. As well, exchanges of these types are balanced with a high percentage of positive, over negative, communications, which is another differentiating point from

couples that report being dissatisfied. In short, satisfied couples are skilled at expressing empathy, concern, affection, joy, and appreciation of one another. Interestingly, the literature notes that perceived social support of this nature is more indicative of satisfaction than actual support, a finding that needs further research support. On the opposite side of the spectrum, couples that report marital dissatisfaction describe a relational attitude (of one or both members) marked by moodiness, coldness, detachment, reproach, defensiveness, entitlement, maltreatment, and scorn.

Action Factors

In addition to the attitude of the relationship, there are several things that satisfied marital partners do that promote mutual gratification. These behaviors and activities are reciprocally pleasurable and, at times, include pursuits that promote a shared sense of meaning, purpose, and values (i.e. those that are religious/spiritual, time with grown children, etc.) as well. There is also an agreeable balance of individual interests done apart and ones that are jointly shared. Whether it is travel, card playing, golfing, or any number of other pastimes, satisfied couples regularly engage in activities together that they both enjoy and that promote connection between them.

A noteworthy finding in the literature relates to older couples and their adult children. It appears that having raised children together and sharing life experiences with them now increases marital satisfaction, provided that the children have successfully individuated. Couples report that independent and responsible adult children, and their families, provide much mutual joy and fulfillment. However, couples strained by dependent adult children, and/or their offspring, find that this taxes their marital satisfaction.

Satisfied couples may have or continue to engage in hard work together and many report having a history of surviving difficult trials, ordeals, and losses together. These hardships, however, are perceived as having served to bond them closer together in the long run. Additionally, as noted in the attitude section, aging couples that are satisfied may fight, but the process of resolution and reconciliation in the wake of relationship ruptures is pleasing to both of them and builds rather than tears down the relationship.

In terms of sexual activity, aging does usher in several challenges to physical closeness. However, the research indicates that infirmity, in the form of sickness, disease, or disability, not indifference, may cause sexual activity to decrease in satisfied couples. Even with these limitations, many older pairs report increased, not decreased, satisfaction with physical intimacy and sexuality with age. Although orgasm may be less central, there may be a rise in emotional intimacy that appears to promote relaxed and creative physical expressions of love and lovemaking. Interestingly, satisfaction is generally not decreased when one partner is caregiving the other, unless the marriage had a history of being unsatisfying for the caregiving partner. This is a point elaborated further in the next session on gender differences.

Aspects of Marital Satisfaction Related to Gender

There are some differences cited in the literature regarding what is most satisfying for older male and female spouses. From limited research in this area, it appears that older males are most satisfied with shared activities while older females desire consideration by their partner, quality of communication, resolution of differences, and health of spouse.

One significant finding is that although gender roles may soften in many aging marriages, with retirement bringing a re-distribution of chores in the home, there may be

an unbalanced, unsatisfying burden on some women towards caregiving. This situation is correlated with clinical depression in later life for women. The literature points to the fact that in American culture, women still bear more caregiving burdens than men, with wives upholding the lion's share of caregiving for husbands and husbands receiving more help in caregiving from adult daughters and daughters in law. However, an imbalance such as this appears to lead to depression, increased resentment, and marital dissatisfaction for women only if low levels of satisfaction with the attitudes and actions within the relationship existed prior to the declining cognitive and/or physical health of the husband. Two other fascinating findings that may relate to gender specific cultural pressures on the contemporarily aging are (1) *both* men and women are more satisfied in marriages when the wife is perceived by *both* partners as loving and supporting *the husband* and (2) husband's life satisfaction as a whole is enhanced when he perceives that his wife is pleased with him.

Implications and Conclusions

Preliminary research on marital satisfaction reflects that a satisfying marriage fortifies spouses for the complex losses and pressures ushered in with aging. Whether a lifelong first marriage or a later life marriage, couples with satisfying marriages draw on their relationship for companionship, encouragement, and strength through multiple changes, losses, and debilitations. The research is markedly positive about marital satisfaction and aging, and older couples with a history of marital satisfaction can expect to have marriages that continue to thrive. Additional research exploring this topic and focusing on how to promote these attitude and action factors in aging couples is indicated.

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See Also: Marriage, Family Matters, Sexual Activity and Aging, Sexual Satisfaction, Gender Differences in

Further Readings

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