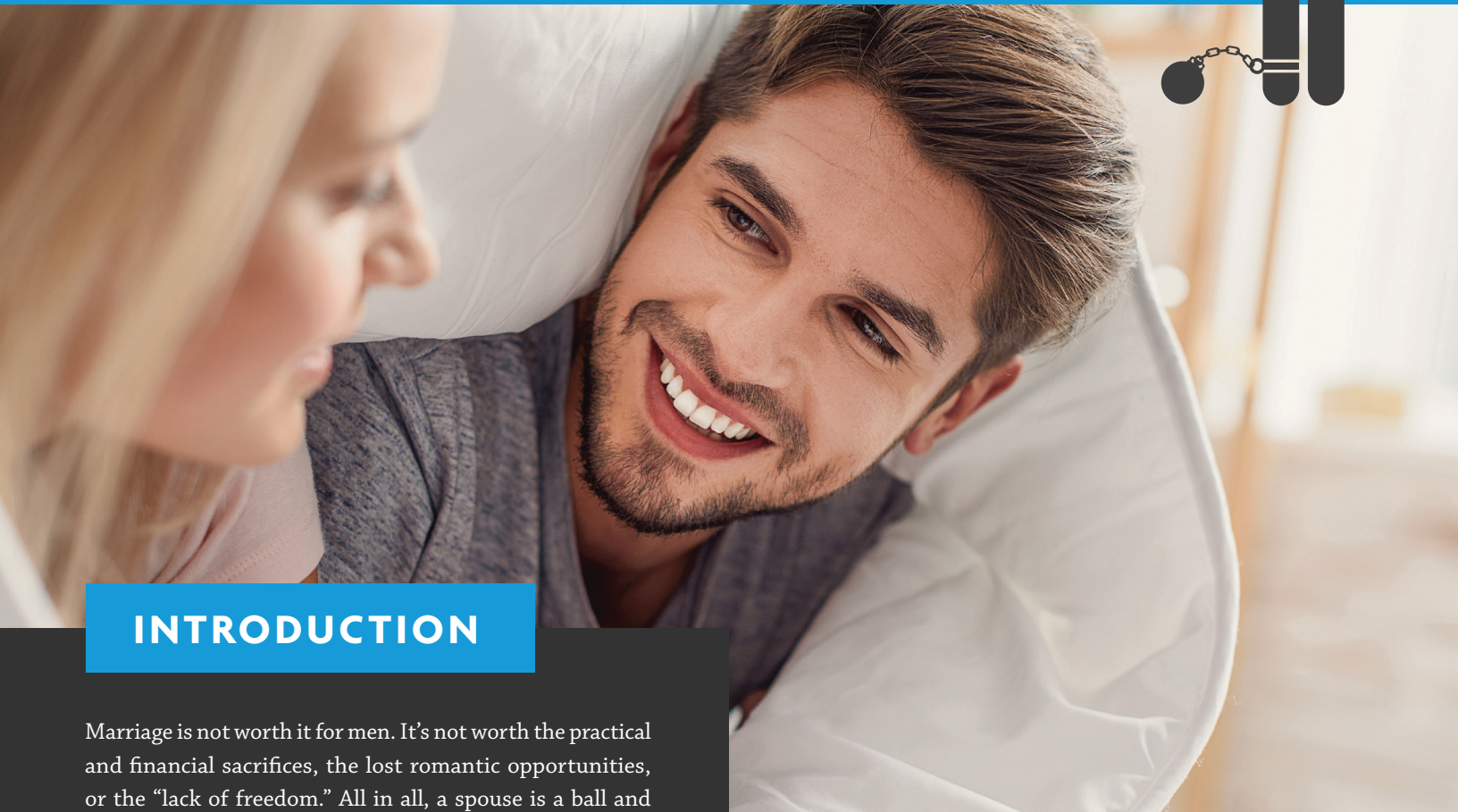


# Men & Marriage: Debunking the Ball and Chain Myth

W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas H. Wolfinger



## INTRODUCTION

Marriage is not worth it for men. It's not worth the practical and financial sacrifices, the lost romantic opportunities, or the "lack of freedom." All in all, a spouse is a ball and chain—of little benefit to any man interested in pursuing happiness and well-being.

Considering both the latest survey data and the continuing decline in the marriage rate, it's fair to say that this viewpoint is becoming more entrenched in our society, particularly among younger men.<sup>1</sup>

**But despite its prevalence, the ball and chain view of marriage is simply not supported by the research.**

Indeed, the benefits of marriage for men are substantial by every conceivable measure, including more money, a better sex life, and significantly better physical and mental health. Yet many men remain ignorant of these benefits, a view seemingly promoted by popular culture.

## Return on Investment

There's no doubt that marriage requires sacrifices, and lots of them. Successful marriages require men to work harder, avoid cheating, spend less time with their friends, and make a good-faith effort—day in and day out—to be emotionally present with their spouses. Being a good husband isn't always easy.

**BUT IT TURNS OUT THAT THESE SACRIFICES PAY FOR THEMSELVES AND MORE.**

## Money

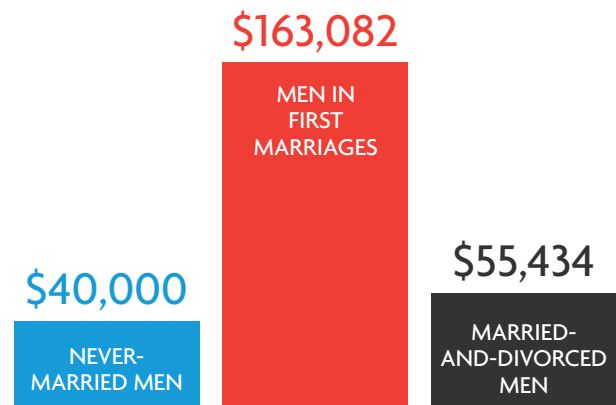
When it comes to work and money, marriage has a transformative effect upon men. Married men typically work harder, smarter, and more successfully.<sup>2</sup> They are less likely to be fired.<sup>3</sup> And they make about \$16,000 more than their single peers with otherwise similar backgrounds.<sup>4</sup>

This is what economists call men's "marriage premium."<sup>5</sup>

A growing body of research, both in the United States and other developed countries, finds that **married men earn between 10 and 40 percent more** than otherwise comparable single men.<sup>7</sup> Is this a selection effect? In other words, does marriage actually increase men's earning power, or are the men with the greatest earning potential most likely to get married in the first place? Selection does account for some of the marriage premium, but the most sophisticated recent research suggests that marriage itself **increases the earning power of men on the order of 10 to 24 percent.** For instance, a study of identical twins—an excellent means of controlling for selection effects—similarly found an earnings increase of about one quarter.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout their lives, men who stay married are in much better financial shape than their peers who divorced, or those who never married in the first place. Married men earn more, save more, and generally have access to a second income. Consequently, they have much greater accumulated wealth than their unmarried peers. In fact, the typical fifty-something married man has three times the assets of his unmarried peer, about \$163,000 compared to about \$40,000.<sup>9</sup>

### MEDIAN WEALTH BY MARITAL STATUS (IN 2004 DOLLARS)



Source: Zissimopoulos, Karney, & Rauer 2013, Table 3

The data clearly show that the **financial return on investment of marriage is substantial for men.** Married men typically end up with a lot more money than their single peers. Even men who weren't successful at their first try at marriage and get divorced are better off than men who never got married in the first place. Marriage seems to be a wealth-creating institution. In monetary terms alone, it's worth the commitment and the sacrifice.

**MARRIED MEN EARN BETWEEN 10% AND 40% MORE THAN OTHERWISE COMPARABLE SINGLE MEN.**

## The Risk of Divorce

The science could not be clearer: on average, men enjoy more money, better sex, and better health when they are married. But of course not everyone who gets married will stay married.

**About 42 percent of first marriages end in divorce**, and the majority of these divorces are initiated by women.<sup>10</sup> This means that a large minority of men who marry will end up unwillingly divorced. These men often don't realize much of a return on their investments in married life.

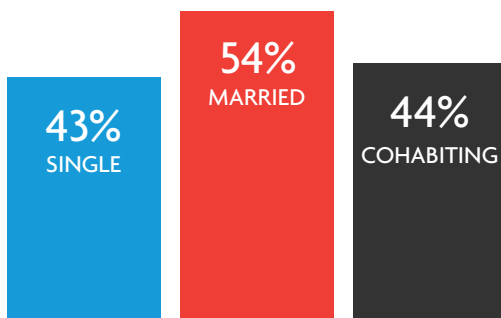
The accumulated wisdom of social science suggests there are a number of things men can do to reduce the risk of divorce. Men who do their best to hold down a stable job, who don't abuse drugs or alcohol, who are sexually faithful, who attend religious services regularly with their wives, and who make a regular effort to be emotionally engaged in their marriage are less likely to divorce.<sup>11</sup> Men seeking to avoid divorce should be aware of these facts.

## Better Sex Lives

When it comes to the quantity of sex, married men do not have an advantage over their cohabiting peers. According to the General Social Survey, 52 percent of cohabiting young men (aged 20-39) have sex at least twice a week, compared to 42 percent of married men. Single men have the least sex, with only 37 percent of single males in their twenties and thirties having twice-weekly sex.<sup>12</sup> Of course, many single men don't have sex partners. This is a problem married men (and cohabiting men) just don't have.

Does that decide the issue in favor of cohabiting men? Not if the quality of sex matters. On average, the **quality of married sex trumps that of unmarried sex**. According to the National Health and Social Life Survey, 51 percent of married men reported they were extremely satisfied with their sex lives, compared to 39 percent of cohabiting men and 36 percent of single men.<sup>13</sup> A majority of married men also found sex extremely physically pleasurable, compared to a minority of men in unmarried relationships, as the figure below indicates.<sup>14</sup> Contrary to all the conventional wisdom, married men find sex more emotionally and physically pleasurable than their unmarried peers.

MEN REPORTING THEY ARE  
"EXTREMELY SATISFIED" WITH PHYSICAL QUALITY  
OF THEIR SEX LIVES



Source: Waite 1995, Figure 10

And why do cohabiting men have sex more often than married men? It's probably because cohabiting relationships aren't as stable as marriage. This means that all of the cohabiting adults at any given point in time are in newer relationships than the average married man. So it's the newness of the relationship that's leading to more sex, not anything special about cohabitation. In other words, sex doesn't become less frequent when a couple gets married. Indeed, psychologists Scott Stanley and Howard Markman have shown that sexual frequency in cohabiting relationships isn't any higher after relationship duration is taken into account.<sup>15</sup>

MARRIED MEN FIND SEX MORE  
EMOTIONALLY AND PHYSICALLY  
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UNMARRIED PEERS.

Although these findings run counter to almost every movie and sitcom ever produced, the research is indisputable.

Why does marriage make sex better? For starters, both spouses are making long-term investments in a good sex life. One of these investments seems to be heightened intimacy. Women are **four times as likely as men** to make love a requirement for having sex, and marriage is obviously a venue in which women are going to feel the love necessary for sexual engagement. Surprisingly, men too are **more likely to experience sexual satisfaction** when they know they're in lasting relationships. So from a sexual perspective, research suggests that marriage is worth the commitment it requires.

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe, *The State of Our Union: Why Men Won't Commit* (New Brunswick, NJ: National Marriage Project, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Robert I. Lerman and W. Bradford Wilcox, *For Richer, For Poorer: How Family Structures Economic Success in America* (Washington, DC: AEL/Institute for Family Studies, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth H. Gorman, "Bringing Home the Bacon: Marital Allocation of Income-Earning Responsibility, Job Shifts, and Men's Wages," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 61, no. 1 (Feb. 1999): 110-122.

<sup>4</sup> Lerman and Wilcox, *For Richer, For Poorer*.

<sup>5</sup> Robert I. Lerman, "Marriage and the Economic Well-Being of Families With Children: A Review of the Literature," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (2002).

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey S. Gray and Michel J. Vanderhart, "The Determination of Wages: Does Marriage Matter?" in *The Ties That Bind: Perspectives on Marriage and Cohabitation*, ed. Linda J. Waite et al. (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2000), 356-67; W. Bradford Wilcox, et al. *Why Marriage Matters, Third Edition* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Avner Ahituv and Robert I. Lerman, "How Do Marital Status, Labor Supply, and Wage Rates Interact?" *Demography* 44, no. 3 (Aug. 2007): 623-47. See also: Robert I. Lerman, "Economic Perspectives on Marriage: Causes, Consequences, and Public Policy," in *Research Handbook on the Economics of Family Law*, ed. Lloyd R. Cohen and Joshua D. Wright (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2011): pg. 72.

<sup>8</sup> Kate Antonovics and Robert Town, "Are All the Good Men Married? Uncovering the Sources of the Marital Wage Premium," *American Economic Review*, 94, no. 2 (May 2004): 317-21.

<sup>9</sup> Julie Zissimopoulos, Benjamin Karney, and Amy Rauer, "Marriage and Economic Well-Being at Older Ages," *Review of Economics of the Household*, March 2015, Volume 13, Issue 1, pp 1-35.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Stanley, "What is the Divorce Rate, Anyway? Around 42 Percent, One Scholar Believes," *Family-Studies.org*, Institute for Family Studies, Jan. 22, 2015; Rosenfeld, Michael J., "The Gender of Breakup in Heterosexual Couples," Paper presented at the 2015 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Chicago, IL.

<sup>11</sup> Wilcox, W. Bradford and Nicholas H. Wolfinger, *Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Love, and Marriage among African Americans and Latinos*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> *General Social Survey*, 2000-2014, for 20-39 year-old men.

<sup>13</sup> Linda J. Waite, "Does Marriage Matter?" *Demography*, 32, no. 4 (Nov. 1995): 483-507

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Waite and Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage*.

## Physical and Mental Health Benefits

Men don't just enjoy a better sex life when married; they are also more likely to experience better physical and emotional health. Research suggests that men who get and stay married live almost 10 years longer than their unmarried peers.<sup>16</sup> What's more, marriage benefits health in numerous and surprising ways. For instance, a recent Harvard study found that even among men diagnosed with cancer, married men live significantly longer.<sup>17</sup>

What accounts for these surprising findings? Simply put, the companionship, the support, and even the nagging that men get from their wives in marriage translate into better physical health.

Married people appear to **manage illness better, monitor each other's health, and adopt healthier lifestyles** than do otherwise similar singles.<sup>18</sup> For example, one recent study finds married men (and married women) have higher serum carotenoid levels than never-married, divorced, or widowed men, suggesting marriage promotes a diet higher in fruits and vegetables.<sup>19</sup>

We know our immune systems function better when we have support from loved ones. Also, wives tend to push doctors and nurses to give their husbands better care when they're in the hospital. Married men are also more likely to be "encouraged" to see a doctor by their wives.<sup>20</sup>

The social and emotional support usually found in marriage translates into better mental health, too. Married men experience less depression and more happiness than bachelors:

<sup>16</sup> Lamberto Manzoli, et al., "Marital Status and Mortality in the Elderly: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis," *Social Science & Medicine*, 64, no. 1 (Jan. 2007): 77-94; Matthew E. Dupre, Audry N. Beck, and Sarah O. Meadows, "Marital Trajectories and Mortality Among US Adults," *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 170, no. 5 (Sept. 2009): 546-55.

<sup>17</sup> Ayal A. Aizer, et al., "Marital Status and Survival in Patients with Cancer," *Journal of Clinical Oncology*, 31, no. 31 (Sept. 2013): 3869-3876.

<sup>18</sup> Bachman et al., *Smoking, Drinking and Drug Use in Young Adulthood* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1997); Miller-Tutzauer et al., "The Effect of Marital Status on Stage, Treatment, and Survival of Cancer Patients," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 258, no. 21 (Dec. 1987): 3125-30.

<sup>19</sup> Jim P. Stimpson and Nuha A. Lackan, "Serum Carotenoid Levels Vary by Marital Status," *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 107, no. 9 (Sept. 2007): 1581-85.

<sup>20</sup> Waite and Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage*.

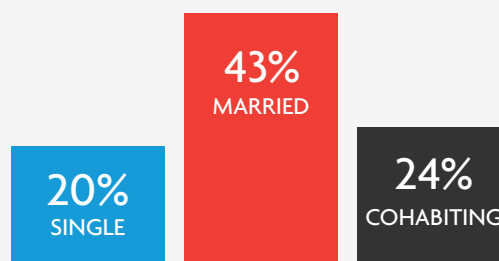
<sup>21</sup> *General Social Survey, 2000-2014 for 20-39 year-old men*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

MARRIED MEN TYPICALLY ENJOY BETTER PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH THAN THEIR SINGLE PEERS.

the General Social Survey tells us that young married men (aged 20-39) are just half as likely to report they are "not happy," with only 6 percent responding that they are unhappy compared to 17 percent of unmarried men. At 16 percent, cohabiting men are more similar to singles than to married men.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, young married men are twice as happy: 43 percent of married men report they are "very happy" with life, compared to 20 percent of single men and 21 percent of cohabiting men.<sup>22</sup>

MEN (AGED 20-39) REPORTING THEY ARE "VERY HAPPY" WITH LIFE



Source: General Social Survey 2000-2014

The evidence is clear: married men typically enjoy better physical and mental health than their single peers. So in this regard too, **marriage is worth the investment.**

## CONCLUSION

Social science confirms that marriage confers enormous benefits for men's wallets, for their sex life, and for their physical and mental health. Yet too many men still believe in the ball and chain myth, viewing marriage as an expensive encumbrance on their freedom and their sex lives. These views are ubiquitous in popular culture, and this has undoubtedly had adverse consequences for men's aspirations to marriage.

We believe these negative perceptions need to change. The first step is ensuring that the next generation knows the truth about marriage. Journalists, social scientists, and policy-makers bear a special responsibility for making the good news about marriage more widely known. This is a priority given some of the adverse consequences men, women, and children have suffered in the retreat from marriage.