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Living Well: Long marriages are good for health



A study published by Taiwanese researchers in 2013 found that stability in marriage and financial security are two factors that reduce stress in life and lead to longer, healthier lives. PHOTO: THE NEW PAPER

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Kanwaljit Soin

SINGAPORE - The recent marriage of former editor-in-chief of The Straits Times Peter Lim, 80, to educator Lindy Ong, 55, was announced in The Sunday Times last month with the headline Never Too Old To Marry. They are both my friends and I wish them every happiness.

The article also reported that the number of men aged 60 and above getting married in Singapore has nearly doubled between 2007 and 2017. This statistic also has been used as...

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Singapore has nearly doubled between 2007 and 2017. This statistic also heightened me because people tend to live longer and be healthier if they are in a happy and romantic relationship. For decades, researchers have observed these "marriage benefits".

A study done by two Taiwanese academics and published in 2013 in the journal Age And Ageing examined around 300 adults aged between 65 and 74, taking blood samples along with details of their marital status, wealth, lifestyle and physical and mental health.



Their study found that unmarried, widowed or single older adults had shorter telomeres while couples and older adults with higher incomes had longer telomeres.

What is the importance of longer telomeres?

Telomeres form the protective microscopic shields at the ends of our chromosomes which contain our DNA or genetic information. They are like the caps on the tips of shoelaces that keep them from fraying over time. Similarly, telomeres protect chromosomes and the DNA they contain.

They are also the timekeepers of the body and it is thought that longevity is associated with longer telomeres. Therefore, as we age, telomeres get shorter.

Longer telomeres limit damage to cells. The study of the Taiwanese academics found that financially secure older couples have longer telomeres and, therefore, tend to be less prone to cancer and heart disease and the effects of ageing. Thus, it seems that the biological clock ticks more slowly in couples because marriage can maintain telomere length in older adults.

The authors warned: "Unmarried older adults or those with lower income may be experiencing accelerated cellular ageing."

The conclusion that one can draw from this study is that stability in marriage and financial security are two factors that reduce stress in life and lead to longer, healthier lives.



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In the book Inside The American Couple, there is a chapter called Marriage In Old Age. The findings were that older married couples were happier than younger couples.

Also, even self-professed unhappily married old couples were less unhappy than they were in their younger days. Old married couples say they have less conflict and fewer arguments with age as gendered roles become less obvious. Erotic bonds are less important, but there is more intimacy and friendship.

Mark Twain expressed the same sentiment in 1894 when he wrote this passage in his notebook: "Love seems the swiftest, but it is the slowest of all growths. No man or woman really knows what perfect love is until they have been married a quarter of a century."

Thus, it seems that longer marriages are an ingredient to a healthier and longer life. So let us look at the contemporary state of marriage and divorce.

In the new millennium, a surge in divorce among long-married older couples is taking place across the developed world including Singapore.

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In 2013, slightly more than 1,000 women aged 50 and older divorced in Singapore - almost six times more than in 1993. In both 2016 and 2017, slightly more than 20 per cent of divorces were between couples who had been married for 20 years or more. These divorces are known as silver divorces in Singapore.

Divorce lawyers here say most silver divorces are initiated by the women. Many have been married for 20-odd to more than 30 years. The lawyers said many older women are prepared to put up with bad marriages as long as the men are not unfaithful, but will not tolerate a cheating husband. When older marriages break down, children tend to take sides.

Often, they encourage or support their long-suffering mothers to get a divorce.

Sociologist Angelique Chan from Duke-NUS Medical School observed that the divorce rise in older people is dramatic. The trend has implications for the long-term care of seniors if significantly more enter old age alone or with a new partner and may not have their children's support.

In Singapore and in many other cultures, most married women will end up as widows in old age. This is because women tend to marry men who are older and a woman's life span is about five to eight years longer than that of a man's.

As a consequence, older men remain married all their lives while women spend about the last 10 years of their lives in widowhood. Widowers tend to get remarried, but that is less common for widows.

Also, due to the gendered nature of ageing, women become "sexually ineligible" much earlier than men and are unable to find partners as they get older. Thus, there are many more old widows than old widowers.

According to experts, "older widows adjust better to the psychological loss of their husbands while the mortality risk increases for older widowers.

"However, the problem for widows involves the cultural and economic process of becoming widowed, which usually translates into being less financially secure and being alone without a partner in old age."

We should note that long-term marriages are relatively new in history because shorter lifespans in earlier eras constrained the length of marriage.

Thus, our current concept of marriage as "till death do us part" worked in earlier times when lifespans were much shorter. Also, in those days, many women died in childbirth and men married again after that, and so marriages were relatively short.

However, lifespans have nearly doubled since the beginning of the 20th century. Therefore, contemporary older couples represent the first cohorts in human history where so many people have married and stayed together for life.

But in the modern globalised, urbanised and technological era, where divorce and serial monogamy are becoming more common, lifetime commitment of decades to one spouse may become outmoded.

One possible solution has come up in South Korea and Japan, where ageing couples look to living apart in marriage as an alternative to a silver or twilight divorce, which is showing a steep rise in both countries.

After decades of what has seemed like a good or passable marriage, one or both spouses feel that they have some unfulfilled dreams they had to put aside while raising their children and shouldering their financial commitments to the family.

They conclude that enough is enough and the husband and wife both agree to live apart in pursuit of other things without breaking their relationship.

Once their separation is realised, they become what is termed *jolhon*, or graduates of marriage, a term first coined by Japanese writer Yumiko Sugiyama in her 2004 book *Recommending The Graduation From Marriage*. In Japanese, graduates from marriage are called *sotsukon*.

The older couple are called graduates from marriage because they are no longer obliged to carry out their duties as spouses.

A poll carried out in South Korea showed that younger unmarried people viewed jolhon as something positive that they could consider in the future.

In other societies like Singapore where there is a big increase in divorce of older couples, could jolhon or sotsukon emerge as a popular alternative to a silver divorce? Time will tell.

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