

# Another Reason to Stay Married

A new study shows that couples who split face health risks.

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Troubled marriages in the news recently have focused our attention on what happens when romance goes sour. First, we have the latest Luv Guv, South Carolina 's Mark Sanford . After confessing to cheating on his wife with his Argentinean mistress, Sanford is now with his family in Europe , where he hopes to reconcile with his wife and four sons. Reality-show superstars Jon and Kate Gosselin made the opposite choice (and became even more famous) when they decided to split after reports—which Jon has denied—that he was cavorting with various young women. The Gosselins say they are working out an arrangement to share custody of their eight children.

These stories are tabloid fodder, but they also raise a provocative question. When a marriage is clearly on the skids, is it better to fold or fight for a future together? A newly published study by University of Chicago sociologist [Linda Waite](#) in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* suggests that the course the Sanfords are pursuing could ultimately work out better for everyone involved.

Divorce, Waite says, is really bad for your health. In fact, she has found that people who suffer marital disruption through either divorce or widowhood are 20 percent more likely to have chronic health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, or cancer than married people. They also have 23 percent more limitations on their mobility, which means they are more likely to have trouble climbing stairs or walking around the block when they get older (which would certainly making future cavorting problematical as well). By some measures, they are even less likely to be physically or mentally healthy than people who never married at all.

Waite's previous research—especially her influential 2000 book, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*—has been used by some conservatives to argue for government-sponsored, pro-marriage policies. Whether or not those policies work in the long run is still controversial. But her new research could very well fuel debate over whether it's a good idea to support public-health programs that aim to repair failing marriages.

In her earlier work, Waite says she basically compared married and unmarried people at one point in time and showed that marriage generally confers a wide array of economic and emotional advantages on couples. She says her new research offers a more nuanced look at the effect of marriage over a lifetime. "What we are doing here,"

she says, "is looking at peoples' history. Given their current status, does their history make a difference?" Other marriage research has shown that people reach adulthood with a basic health "stock" based on their individual genetics and experience. Marriage gain and loss affects this stock positively and negatively, Waite says.

Waite and her coauthor, Mary Elizabeth Hughes of the [Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins](#), used data from 8,652 people ages 51 to 61 who were part of the national [Health and Retirement Study](#). "Pretty consistently," she says, "the worst off are the currently widowed, divorced, or separated." Getting remarried helps, although the remarried may do a little worse than the never married when it comes to certain chronic health conditions because they have already suffered the effects of marital disruption.

So does that mean that every troubled marriage should be saved? No one study could ever answer such a broad question because so much depends on the specific reasons a relationship isn't working. Many psychologists would argue that a marriage filled with a high degree of physical violence is so destructive, especially if young children are involved, that divorce is the best option. Untreated drug and alcohol addiction also make it hard for a couple to repair a bad marriage. (It's important to note that this study was only about husbands and wives, not about children or the effects of divorce on children.)

But what about other cases? Waite says that given the serious health consequences of divorce, "anything we could do to help couples build strong marriages and avoid divorce would be like helping them avoid a terrible acute illness." And, she adds, "anything we can do to help people mitigate the stress if they get divorced, if they become widowed," would be like treating an acute illness.

It's not at all clear, however, whether intervention by the government—either nationally or locally—would be the best way to tackle the problem. In the late 1990s, Oklahoma's high divorce rate prompted officials there to start a statewide effort to strengthen families. According to a 2008 report from the Department of Health and Human Services, the [Oklahoma Marriage Initiative](#) is now the nation's longest-running government program aimed at helping struggling couples, and it's estimated that up to 10 percent of the state's households have taken part in OMI workshops. Other states have begun attempts to emulate Oklahoma. But even OMI proponents say it could be years before they can tell if the effort has an overall effect on the state's divorce rate.

Waite's research does lend support for individual couples who chose to work on their marriages either on their own or with the help of professional counselors. So we hope the Sanfords find what they are looking for in the European trip and, as for the Gosselins, we'll be watching.