

Love: something for the silly season

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I am on my general medical attachment for fourth-year medicine and life is grand. Sadly, for all the patients on my ward life ain't so grand. On the eighth floor of gloom you are tired, sick, depressed and hate the hospital food. It's the rules. That's what sick people do.

Which was why I was so surprised when I met Henry. He is a ray of light. A 77-year-old ray of light with only one and a-half arteries supplying his brain when usually you have four. He has frequent transient ischaemic attacks, COPD, hypertension and peripheral vascular disease, which is enough to make anyone feel unwell. But Henry is profoundly, unrepentantly and irrevocably happy. He expressed no concern whatsoever over his health problems – “what problems?” – except for some regret over not being allowed to help to fold tea towels at his rest home because of his TIAs. So what is it that makes Henry feel so ‘well’?

Henry is deeply in love. He met Mary, the first and only love of his life, when he moved into the same rest home as her two years ago. They were married soon after and have been living in contentment ever since. He acts like a love-struck teenager, talking to her for hours on the phone at the nurses' station. Even the tea towels matter little as long as he can be with Mary. Life is pretty simple. He relishes each minute of each day and the imposition of being forced to stay in hospital is just outrageous. He might miss Housie! If only we could tap into just exactly what it is that makes Henry feel so good and supply it to the rest of the elderly. So I decided to explore this mysterious world: does love make us healthy?

Marital status, morbidity and mortality

For the purposes of this essay I have assumed that “love and marriage, love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage”.¹ While there are many ways people receive love in their lives marriage seems to have been the most thoroughly studied. Love is also somewhat abstract and therefore difficult to measure.

Love makes you live longer! Yay! There is a well-established association between marriage and longevity.²

This benefit is greater for men than for women and some studies show that women can have an increased mortality due to marriage³ suggesting that men act as a kind of incubus, draining the very life fluids from the poor unsuspecting women. Luckily, the majority of studies suggest that love is good for women. In fact, the more the better. Women who are married multiple times have significantly reduced rates of breast cancer with greater numbers of marriages conferring greater benefit.⁴ More love = more health. Divorced women have been found to have a higher rate of remarriage than widowed women.⁵ This suggests that if the love is still alive in the marriage when a husband dies, then it is so powerful that it transcends death so that those who have been widowed don't need anybody else. They are eternally satisfied.

Love has a panacea of health benefits. Married people suffer fewer accidents and assaults, have fewer acute and chronic conditions, fewer activity limitations, a lower probability of becoming disabled, less psychiatric morbidity, and lower physician and hospital use rates than those without love in their lives.³ There is some debate as to whether this is an effect of selection of healthy people into marriage³, but I know better; love is a cure-all. Despite these benefits love is considered to be a chronic disease in Canada, as discussed in their National Longitudinal Mortality study.³

It is not just the feeling of love that confers benefit. A healthy sex life gives improved quality of life,⁶ even taking into account the psychological trauma placed on the extended family with the knowledge that Gran and Pop have sex. Quality of sex is important though, and women are eternally cursed by the ineptness of men because the quality of intimacy has been proved to be a significant factor influencing older women's physical health.⁷ Fortunately not just sex, but all non-violent touching

makes you healthier. Simple physical contact has been found to make you less likely to suffer from depression and better able to cope with stress. People will go crazy just for a touch (Higher rates of psychological illness with inadequate physical contact).⁸

With the sexual revolution have come new ideas regarding sex and it is now much more acceptable for elderly people to have sex. They are encouraged and can even get detailed sex and romance advice books.⁶ However, despite this open-minded attitude the elderly are still denied or discouraged from dating or remarriage.⁶ A travesty! Love, the greatest of all health benefits and the purpose of existence being discouraged in a significant proportion of the population! We as health professionals have an obligation to spread this love.

Love brings direct health benefits and thereby can reduce the health budget but love can be employed in other ways to further reduce the health budget. If people would only love the elderly more they would invest more energy in caring for them and decrease institutionalisation.⁹ This is the power of love according to Diane Wilson from Toronto. The Toronto conventions bureau even agrees, believing that love is good business practice.

In considering Henry, love is extremely important, but he also likes to fold his tea towels and I don't think he should be denied this pleasure. In fact, lying idle is likely to cause Henry's death because there are higher mortality rate among unemployed people than those in employment when all other confounding factors are controlled for.¹⁰

Love can adversely affect your health

Love confers some outstanding benefits but the marriage side of it all does have some downfalls.

- Wedding rings despite being a poignant symbol of the deep connection between two people in a loving relationship are also a significant source of hospital acquired infection because large amounts of grossness and bacteria are stored under the band.
- Eating food at weddings seems to be an extremely dangerous pastime. There are a huge number of papers documenting food poisoning of guests at weddings including one called: Tape worm infection resulting from pork eaten at a wedding banquet. Conclusion: your marriage may improve your health but your wedding will balance the benefit by making sure you get good and poisoned. See Murphy's Law.

Conclusion

1. Love is grand and everybody should have some.
2. My Arthur is lovely.

Disclaimer: On reading this essay you may have found that some parts of what I have written are true. This is purely unintentional and I apologise for any inconvenience it may have caused you. No elderly citizens were harmed during the making of this essay, although my Grandma has a sore hip and we should all feel very sorry for her. These references should not be taken seriously.

Rachel Highton is a trainee intern studying at the Dunedin School of Medicine, having entered Health Sciences after high school. This essay was the final in a series case write ups appreciation required in fourth year. This particular essay was an attempt at a vaguely humorous case appreciation. She is a die-hard socialist with crazy anthropological and feminist ideas that may have led to this topic: love. She is currently IN love with a House Surgeon, which has confirmed for her the findings in her essay but led her to other new hypothesis: Men are crazy. Women are also crazy. Love spells evol backwards.

References

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