

What No One Ever Told You about People Who Are Single

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*[This is a summary of my address.
A more complete version will be made available later this summer.]*

For as long as most of us can remember, one particular way of thinking about single people has prevailed. In the media, in popular culture, and in scholarly writings, too, the story that is told about single people is that they are sad and lonely. If only they would get married, the narrative insists, that would make them live longer, healthier, and more socially connected lives – and, as *Time* magazine proclaimed in a recent cover story, they will probably "die happier," too.

In "What No One Ever Told You about People Who Are Single," I will challenge every element of the conventional wisdom. I will argue that the story that has been told is more ideology than science. It is time for a more accurate portrayal of single people and single life – one that recognizes the real strengths and resilience of people who are single, and what makes single life so meaningful.

The Rise of Single People

There are more single people than ever before. Americans spend more years of their adult lives unmarried than married. People who do try marriage are less inclined to try it again than they once were.

Many reasons have been suggested for the rise of Unmarried America and research has supported the importance of many of them. They include, for example, socioeconomic factors such as the challenge of finding decent-paying jobs and the desire to meet educational goals before marrying. I will make the case for a reason that is rarely acknowledged: Increasing numbers of people are single because they want to be. Living single allows them to live their best, most authentic, and most meaningful life.

What You Know about the Benefits of Marrying that Just Isn't So

Claims that getting married makes people happier, healthier, and less isolated are based on studies that, methodologically, could never support such claims. I will explain what is problematic about so many of the relevant studies. I will also describe the results of some of the highest quality studies available, and show that they do not support the "get married, get happier and healthier" narrative.

In some important ways, getting married does not result in lasting improvements. People end up about where they were when they were single. In other ways, results are exactly the opposite of what we have been led to believe. For example, single people are more connected

to parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, and coworkers than married people are, and when people marry, they become more insular.

There Are Many Reasons Why People Who Marry *Should* Be Doing Better, and They Are Not (Just) the Ones You've Been Told

Scholars who predict that people who marry will become happier and healthier often point to the emotional and psychological benefits that marital relationship has the potential to offer, such as "support, intimacy, caring, and companionship." Rarely do they acknowledge other factors that are totally separate from anything that happens within a marriage.

People who marry get access to more than 1,000 federal benefits and protections, many of them financial. With greater economic advantage comes greater access to many other advantages, such as better health care.

Married people are also advantaged by the relentless celebration of marriage and coupling and weddings that I call *matrimania*. Single people, in contrast, are targets of *singlism* – the stereotyping, stigmatizing, marginalizing, and discrimination against people who are single. The important people in the lives of single people are also marginalized. People such as close friends and siblings are not valued in the same way that spouses are, and they are not covered by laws such as the Family and Medical Leave Act.

Considering all of the financial and cultural advantages people get just because they are married, and all the ways in which they are believed to be advantaged by the social support and other relational aspects of marriage, it becomes even more striking that single people are doing as well as they are.

Social scientists need to move beyond the deficit model of single life and address the sources of single people's resilience. They also need to understand what makes single life potentially so fulfilling.

What We Know about the Strengths of Single People and the Life-Enriching Potential of Single Life – and What We Still Need to Learn

Search for journal articles about marriage in the PsycINFO database over the past 30 years, as I did, and tens of thousands of results will unfurl before you. Search instead for "never married" and related phrases, and all you get is a measly 814. I scrutinized the abstracts of every one of them, searching for research-based insights about single life. But only a very small number of the studies were motivated by a desire to learn anything about single people. Typically, single people were the comparison group in studies designed to elucidate something about marriage.

The available findings, though, are telling. For example, research comparing people who have stayed single with those who have stayed married shows that single people have a heightened sense of self-determination and they are more likely to experience "a sense of continued growth and development as a person." Other longitudinal research shows that single people value meaningful work more than married people do – and that those differences existed in high school, before anyone got married or decided to stay single. Another study of lifelong single people showed that self-sufficiency serves them well: the more self-sufficient they were, the less likely they were to experience negative emotions. For married people, just the opposite was true.

Research on relationships other than romantic ones is also important to our understanding of single life. As new kinds of questions come to the fore, scholars are learning more about the risks of putting too much relationship capital into The One, and the psychological benefits of investing in The Ones. They are also beginning to realize that genuine attachment relationships are not limited to romantic relationships or the bond between parents and young children. They are finding that a preoccupation with the perils of loneliness can obscure the profound benefits of solitude.

Heading into the future, I think research psychologists will find something that is of great consequence to practitioners as well as to single and coupled people everywhere. It is what I concluded on the last page of my recent book, *How We Live Now: Redefining Home and Family in the 21st Century*:

More than ever before, Americans can pursue the ways of living that work best for them. There is no one blueprint for the good life. We can create our own lifespaces. What matters is not what everyone else is doing or what other people think we should be doing, but whether we can find the places, the spaces, and the people that fit who we really are and allow us to live our best lives.

Bella DePaulo (PhD, Harvard) is a project scientist at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is the author of [*Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*](#), [*How We Live Now: Redefining Home and Family in the 21st Century*](#), and more than 100 scholarly publications. Her honors include a James McKeen Cattell Award and a Research Scientist Development Award. She has served as Chair of the Society of Experimental Social Psychology and lectured nationally and internationally. Professor DePaulo has appeared on NPR and many broadcast TV and cable news channels. Her work has been covered by leading media sources such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New Yorker*, the *Economist*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *AARP Magazine*, and the *TED Ideas Blog*. She has been writing the "Living Single" blog for *Psychology Today* since 2008 and the "Single at Heart" blog for *Psych Central* since 2011. Bella DePaulo has published articles in publications such as the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Forbes*, *Time*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Quartz*, *Nautilus*, as well as more than a half-dozen opinion pieces in the *Washington Post*. *Atlantic* magazine described Dr. DePaulo as "America's foremost thinker and writer on the single experience." More information is at her website, BellaDePaulo.com.