Study: The Health Benefits of Marriage Don't Apply to Cohabitating Gay Couples

In a study we failed to cover a couple weeks back (sometimes, you have to pick and choose), researchers at the University of Missouri found that greater mental and physical health is generally seen in married people, who are also less likely to develop chronic conditions than people who are widowed or divorced. It wasn't the first study to suggest that being (happily) married may be good for your health.

Do same-sex couples who live together, but are unable to marry, get the same advantages? From a socioeconomic standpoint, researchers at Michigan State University assumed that this wouldn't be the case. They looked at the self-reported health, on a scale from "poor" to "excellent," of a nationally representative sample of over 3,000 cohabitating same-sex couples, equal parts male and female, as compared to the health of people in heterosexual marriages, as well as single, divorced, and windowed individuals. Per their results, published in the Journal of Health and Social Behavior, men living with a same-sex partner were 61 percent more likely to report having "poor" or "fair" health than men in heterosexual relationships; the odds were 46 percent higher for gay women than their straight, married peers.

Contrary to their expectations, socioeconomic status -- as measure by education level, poverty, and insurance coverage -- didn't account for these differences. At the same time, it was the only reason why same-sex couples were healthier than single, divorced, or widowed people. Once socioeconomic status had been accounted for, all reported more or less equal health status which, again, was lower than that reported by people in heterosexual marriages.

This means there must be something else making same-sex couples feel less healthy than heterosexual married people. The authors of the study suggest that stress borne from continuing discrimination against homosexuality may be part of the problem. Among all black women, those in same-sex cohabitating relationships had the worst reported health, while gay white women were healthier than straight white women who were either divorced or living with a male partner. This effect wasn't seen for men, and points to the possibility of what the authors call a "triple jeopardy": social stress caused by their sexuality, added on to that experienced by racial minorities and women in general, all could be contributing to their poor health.

But the authors also posit that there could be something inherent to the institution of marriage, beyond the socioeconomic advantage it provides, that contributes to the health effects observed
for heterosexual couples. Surprisingly, they didn't look at same-sex married couples as a separate category of people, in fact combining those they identified under the category of cohabitating couples. The authors argue that this should not affect their findings because only small proportion of gay couples in their sample were married, but also because the legal status of same-sex marriages is still so tenuous. Only when gay marriage is entirely sanctioned, they imply, would the particular psychological and social support of marriage, or whatever else that mysterious "something" is, apply to gay spouses, too.
Harmful Effects of BPA Start Before Birth

COLUMBIA - A new MU study confirms that a common chemical found in plastic food containers and in the lining of metal food and beverage cans negatively affects the reproductive behaviors of mice and could also affect humans.

In her latest study, Dr. Cheryl Rosenfeld, associate professor for the University of Missouri, gave pregnant female mice a diet containing the chemical Bisphenol A (BPA) to mimic the way humans get the same chemical in their food on a daily basis. These mice also mimic humans because this species, California mouse, is monogamous and the mother and father raise the pups together.

"What happens in utero can have longterm consequences in terms of later adult diseases and even behavioral outcomes," Rosenfeld said. "By going after behaviors that are essential for that animal species to reproduce, that's where I think we're starting to see the parallels between the animals and potential(ly) humans."

She found that the offspring of those female mice given BPA did see consequences from the chemical.

The male mice had difficulty marking their territory, "which in the wild would equate to reduced likelihood of maintaining a home range, and thereby, less likelihood that they would reproduce," Rosenfeld said.

The reason BPA affects behaviors is because it is "a weak estrogen." That can cause harmful effects to the body's reproductive and immune systems.

"Imagine it's like the light switch, ok, so the light can be either on, or it it can be off," Rosenfeld said. "Essentially what can happen is BPA can trigger a gene to be turned on when it should not be turned on."

Although the FDA banned the use of BPA in baby bottles and sippy cups last year, Rosenfeld said there should be more regulation for what food and drink containers pregnant mothers are using.

"What really concerns me is there's not been one piece of legislation or even any policy discussed about regulating exposure of the pregnant mother, which is probably the primary source of exposure and probably the most dramatic consequences can happen when the pregnant mother is exposed to [BPA]. Not just to her, but to her offspring and even what we call trans-generational effects," Rosenfeld said.

Rosenfeld said billions of pounds of BPA are used every year in items like plastic food containers, soda cans and even cardboard. People can limit the amount of BPA they consume by looking at the numbers at
the bottom of plastic containers. Numbers 1 and 2 indicate low levels of BPA, while 5 and 6 mean higher levels.

She also advises not to heat food in plastic containers. More of the chemical is released into the food when it is heated.
MU, school district partner with Tribune on science page

By Catherine Martin

Young readers will have a chance to indulge their scientific curiosity every Wednesday in a special section of the Tribune.

The page is called "Did You Know — Kids" and was created through a partnership between the Tribune, Columbia Public Schools and the University of Missouri. Starting today, the weekly page will feature an article from the district's science department focusing on recent science news accompanied with questions for kids to answer.

"The goal is to put out real-life stories that will be interesting to kids," district science coordinator Mike Szydlowski said.

It also will have an "Ask a Scientist" column, where MU scientists will answer questions posed by students from district schools.

"We're looking to develop the next generation of scientists. I believe that starts with children," said Deanna Lankford of MU's science outreach department. "We want children to ask questions and find answers and ... realize scientists are willing to take time away from their research and labs and answer questions that children pose."

Lankford pointed to a number of benefits, including encouraging curiosity and an interest in science and bringing science into the family. She said she hopes parents will read and discuss the page with their children.

All parents will receive a complimentary copy at parent/teacher conferences this week, and teachers in grades 4-8 will use the page in their classrooms.

Tribune General Manager Andy Waters came up with the idea of a kids page as a way to expand the Tribune's Newspapers in Education program, which he said distributes about 4,000 newspapers to Columbia Public Schools students each week.
Many of those papers go to older students, Waters said, and he wanted to add a page for younger kids, in the spirit of publications such as National Geographic Kids. He posed the idea to Peter Stiepleman, assistant superintendent of elementary education, and eventually a district team decided on a science page.

Szydlowski said he already distributes an email with a similar format — a relevant article and questions answered by scientists — to teachers each week to use in class. "The goal ... is to make students more literate so they can answer questions and evaluate things they hear on the news and hear everyday in the world around them," he said.

Szydlowski said he tries to pick topics that are interesting to kids. Favorites included an article on reindeer adaptations and another answering "What is the flu?"

Stiepleman said Szydlowski shows how nonfiction content such as science can be woven into processing, or interpreting and understanding how to apply the content, which is part of new national education standards.

Partnering with the Tribune will improve that initiative, Szydlowski said. "It adds a level of realness when it's printed into the real paper, not just printed off a copy machine," he said.

The science page also will be part of the paper year-round — not just when school is in session.

"We feel it's a great way to keep science education going all summer long instead of just starting completely over," Szydlowski said.
Findings released on Wednesday by the Milken Institute corroborate a view many in higher education have found themselves defending in recent years: A college education pays. In a report titled “A Matter of Degrees: The Effect of Educational Attainment on Regional Economic Prosperity,” the nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank says its research proves “the strong relationship between educational attainment and a region’s economic performance.”

The report associates education with increases in real gross domestic product per capita and real wages, linking the addition of one year in a worker’s average years of schooling to a 10.5-percent rise in a region’s real GDP per capita and a 8.4-percent rise in the region’s real wages. The regional jumps in GDP and wages grow even larger—to 17.4 percent and 17.8 percent, respectively—when applied to workers who already hold at least a high-school diploma.

The report cites as an example the work force in Danville, Va., where workers’ average years of schooling increased by 1.1 years from 1990 to 2010, paralleling an increase in real GDP per capita of $3,440.

While interest in whether education affects pay isn’t new, the Milken Institute’s report makes what it calls a “less conventional” assertion, concluding that less-educated workers can benefit simply by being employed in the same geographic area as well-educated workers.

“As others around you obtain more education, their wages rise—and yours do, too,” the report states.

The report notes that “returns to investment in education appear to be higher in some industries than in others,” with the greatest returns seen in areas where business and information-technology service industries involving high-skilled workers make up a large share of the labor force. Milken backs up its findings with data going back more than 30 years that show educational attainment by age, state, metropolitan area, and occupation, and its relation to real wages and real GDP per capita.
The report also includes five broad policy recommendations for governments, educational institutions, and businesses that it says will enhance economic competitiveness regionally and, eventually, nationwide. The recommendations are: make higher education more affordable and accessible, increase graduation rates, strengthen coordination between higher-education institutions and industries, and promote research and development.