Men’s Physical and Mental Health

African American men also change their behavior after marriage in ways that are beneficial to their health. The social and emotional support that married black men receive from their wives is instrumental in encouraging healthy activities and protecting men’s emotional health.

Risky Behaviors and Physical Health

Married black men are more likely to report excellent or good physical health, as opposed to fair or poor health. They are less likely to experience physical distress such as headaches, back pain, stomach or bladder problems, and limited upper or lower body mobility, and are less likely to suffer from chronic diseases such as arthritis, hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. As a result of their improved health overall, married black men are less likely to report being disabled or having limitations in physical and social functioning, work activity, or activities of daily living such as household chores, bathing, and dressing.[10]

Married black men are healthier because they engage in more activities that promote good health and fewer risky activities that endanger health. A nationally representative study including over 10,000 African American men found that married men report higher levels of physical activity during leisure time and lower incidence of cigarette smoking and heavy drinking. In fact, the only health indicator for which married men were worse off than unmarried men was obesity—never-married men were less likely than married men to be overweight or obese.[11] Other studies confirm differences in leisure time physical activity and cigarette smoking between married and unmarried black men, and also find that marijuana and cocaine use are less prevalent among married black men.[12]

Although these studies did not explore the underlying causes of healthy behavior among married men, the authors controlled for differences in age, income, poverty status, and occupation and still found that married black men were healthier. Of course, we do not know if marriage is the cause since men who abstain from risky behaviors are probably more likely to attract and keep a wife. A study by a group of public health researchers, however, provides evidence that becoming married actually influences men’s behavior. By following the smoking, drinking, and drug use patterns of a sample of young men...
from late adolescence into their thirties, Jerald Bachman and his colleagues find that in the year preceding marriage, men decrease their consumption of cigarettes, alcohol, and cocaine, while their unmarried counterparts increase their drinking and cocaine use.[13]

Healthy Partnerships and Emotional Health

How do wives have a direct positive impact on African American husbands’ health? Married black men benefit from the social and emotional support of their wives and from their wives’ encouragement towards healthy behavior. Married men are more likely than single men to report that someone monitors their health and reminds them to do healthy things, such as exercising or seeing a doctor regularly. The everyday interaction provided by marriage also protects men against loneliness and social isolation, which can negatively impact physical and mental health. Marriage can also bolster men’s belief that their lives have meaning and purpose because someone relies on them and cares for them.[14]

Studies also indicate that marriage seems to be beneficial for emotional health. Married black men have lower suicide rates than never-married and divorced men in each age category, and married men are less likely to report that it is acceptable for a person to take his own life when confronting serious problems.[15] Among black men, being married contributed significantly to self-reported personal happiness, and among married black men, marital satisfaction was the most important factor contributing to happiness.[16]

11. Schoenborn, “Marital Status and Health.”
13. Ibid.