

Does Divorce Make People Happy?¹

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The marriage and divorce trends of the “modern” American family have been studied for decades. In an attempt to further understand the outcomes of divorce, a team of family scholars headed by University of Chicago sociologist Linda Waite studied whether unhappily married adults who divorced were any happier than unhappily married people who stayed married.

Early research on divorce concluded that, “A husband and wife would both consent

to a divorce if, and only if, they both expected to be better off divorced” (Becker, 1981). But were they? Using data from the National Survey of Family and Households, what the researchers found was that, on average, unhappily married adults who divorced were no happier than their counterparts who remained married (Waite et al., 2002).

They reported that divorce “did not typically reduce symptoms of depression, raise self-esteem, or increase a sense of mastery” (Waite et al., ¶ 4, 2002). The authors of the study explained that while eliminating some stresses found in the unhappy marriage, divorce created a new set of stressors that could deeply affect emotional well-being, such as child custody and changes in financial stability (Waite et al., 2002).

While the authors couldn't conclude whether unhappy spouses who divorced would have become happy if they'd remained in their marriage, they did find that two-thirds of unhappy marriages had become happier five years later. They attributed a strong desire to stay

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married, a commitment to solving problems and a commitment to find personal happiness despite a mediocre marriage were strong predictors of “happy” marriages (Waite et al., 2002).

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