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Laura Waters Black

Brigham Young University, waters.laura95@gmail.com

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The Effects of Memory Loss on Marriage in Older Couples

by Laura Black



Memory loss can take a toll on relationships, mental health, and overall well-being. Many have experienced firsthand these adverse effects, such as the decline or loss of a relationship

once cherished, the stress of worrying about one's safety, or the struggle to connect emotionally with a memory-impaired loved one. Although much research has been conducted on the general effects of cognitive decline on relationships, not much information is available about the smaller, day-to-day impact of memory loss on couples and their marriages.

Dr. Jeremy Yorgason, professor of Family Life and director of the Gerontology program at Brigham Young University, recently published a study about the relationship between daily memory failures and its impact on interactions in older married couples.¹

This study is different from previous studies, which have typically investigated the strain on relationships of more advanced memory loss such as progressed dementia or Alzheimer's disease. Rather, the current study looks at more minor, everyday memory failures that can be annoying at first but have more severe effects when the memory loss is an ongoing, daily experience.

Dr. Yorgason's research studied the impacts on both spouses whereas other studies have mostly focused on the memory-impaired spouse. This focus allowed these researchers to investigate the impact of memory loss on the relationship as a whole and shed new light on emotional strain.

Associates of Dr. Yorgason gathered data from more than 6,000 individuals who were high school seniors in the class of 1966 (individuals now in their 70s) who were surveyed in 1966, 1980, and 2010. Dr. Yorgason then collected data from 191 of the participants and their spouses. The participating couples answered questions nightly for 14 consecutive days, giving the research team a detailed look into the daily happenings of these marriages experiencing memory impairments.

The study measured everyday memory failures, such as not recognizing people or forgetting basic words or skills, as well as positive marital events, such as feeling supported, being listened to, or doing leisure activities together. Couples also noted negative marital events, such as having an argument or feeling criticized by the other spouse. Using a well-known depression and mood scale, the study also measured depressive symptoms. As a result, these couples provided researchers with insight into daily moods, conflicts, stress levels, and other interactions not previously covered in memory loss research.

The researchers suspected and were able to confirm that depressive symptoms and memory loss would impact both individuals and the marriage itself in a negative way. They found that when the strain of everyday kinds of memory failure are consistent across days, this can lead to greater levels of depressive symptoms for both spouses. Importantly, they also found that depressive symptoms in either spouse can negatively impact marital interactions.

While these findings may not be very surprising to couples who deal with everyday memory failure on a daily basis, the research also reveals a positive aspect. Take the couple, for example, that uses a written personal history and photo albums to frequently discuss positive past

memories, creating shared meaning and "co-constructing" their memories together. This joint activity not only warms their hearts but strengthens their bond and reinforces names, places, and events. By taking a proactive approach to the challenge, the experience of memory loss can actually increase intimacy and love in older married couples.

Dr. Yorgason's study on memory loss can provide valuable information for both health professionals and the loved ones of those struggling with the daily impact of memory loss. It also highlights the potential for the same episodes that cause pain and stress in relationships to become an opportunity for couples to come together and support one another.

Couples struggling with the impact of memory loss may draw hope from the results of this study that indicate greater closeness can be achieved through taking a different approach. Other couples may simply find solace in knowing that good research is being done in an effort to direct greater care toward those experiencing these unique struggles. Either way, Dr. Yorgason and his associates through their new research have contributed substantially in the effort to support couples and families dealing with memory impairment.

Laura Black received a B.S. in Family Studies from Brigham Young University in April 2020. During her time in the School of Family Life, she served as a student Editor-in-Chief for this journal, Family Perspectives, and was instrumental in producing the first two issues of this publication.

Endnotes

¹ Yorgason, J. B., Choi, H., Neupert, S. D., Cichy, K. E., & Hill, M. S. (2020). Microlongitudinal analysis of memory failures, negative affect, and marital interactions. *Psychology and Aging, 35*(1), 8–19. <http://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000400>