Relationships in Later Life

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As baby boomers are getting older and living longer, relationships in later life are becoming important to understand. As people age, they face challenges in their life such as dealing with health problems and making adjustments to retirement.

According to a review of the research on marriage in later life from the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, several studies address great health benefits of marriage. They find that married couples have better health. In particular, those married couples satisfied with their relationship enjoy better mental health and well-being. Most married couples in later life are happy with their marriages. Some studies suggest that the older people are the less likely they are to argue and the more affectionate and tolerant they are with each other. Husbands who could negotiate marital conflict in constructive ways seemed to be happier in their marriages and were more satisfied with life in retirement.

Regarding marital satisfaction and retirement, some studies show that retirement simply reinforces the quality of marital relationships. Retirement shows positive effects on marital quality in already happy marriages, but unhappy marriages were adversely affected by retirement. Many couples adjust to the retirement transition well and report an improvement in marital satisfaction due to decreased work-related stress, enhanced time for companionship, and joint endeavors. In general, married people adjust better to retirement than unmarried people do, especially when spouses share interests before retirement.

Poor pre-retirement marital quality is associated with problems in marriage during retirement. Retired men seem to become more dependent on their wives which may cause problems and stress in marriage due to changes in roles, identities, and responsibilities. When men retire before their wives, their marital quality declines. One study found decreases in marital happiness when husbands had been retired between four and eight years. On the contrary, couples are much more satisfied in their relationship when wives are retired and husbands are working. Conflict also arose when a spouse's retirement expectations were not met.

Researchers have found that happily married older couples highly value their relationships and experience increasing closeness as the years go by. When retirement time arrives, there are many things to be worked out. Enjoying each other in retirement doesn't happen over night. It takes time and effort to make adjustments. Each person needs some time for privacy and personal interests as well as "couple time together." Minor irritations need to be resolved. Having open-communication, flexibility, and humor can help minimize conflict. Retirement can be a time

for great personal contributions and a sense of freedom and happiness.

Reference:

Lambert, N. M. Marriage in later life: A review of the research. National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, Brigham Young University.