



BE A MAN. GET MARRIED.

BRAD WILCOX

Marriage might have been fine for your parents or grandparents. But of what value is it today? Isn't it, as more and more young people seem to be saying, "Just a piece of paper?" Well, it turns out that that piece of paper might be the most valuable thing you will ever own.

Take the case of Doug Taulbee. At age 18, Taulbee worked a minimum wage job operating a press at a factory in Indiana and lived in his parents' basement. "I didn't have a care in the world," Taulbee says. "I didn't even have any bills."

But after marrying at 19 and having kids, Taulbee's perspective changed: "I had to step up and think about others and start taking care of them." Taulbee quit his factory job and joined the Army, where he made significantly more money and received housing and health care paid for by the military.

Whenever he saw a chance at promotion, he pursued it. It meant more money and benefits for himself and his family. Recently, in a bid to further boost his family's income, he left the Army to work as a finance manager at a car dealership. He's now pulling in six figures.

Men who see no need to marry, or who are reluctant to marry until they make more money, could benefit from Taulbee's discovery: Marriage has a transformative effect on the behavior, emotional health, and financial well-being of adults, especially men.

Men who get married work harder and more strategically, and earn more money than their single peers from similar backgrounds. Marriage also transforms men's social world; they spend less time with friends and more time with family. They go to bars less and to church more. In the words of Nobel Prize-winning economist George Akerlof, men "settle down when they get married; if they fail to get married they fail to settle down."

My own research bears out Akerlof's view. Married men work about 400 hours more per year than single men with equivalent backgrounds. A Harvard study also found that married men were much less likely than their single peers to quit their current job unless they had another one lined up.

All this translates into a substantial marriage premium. On average, married men earn almost 20% more than their single peers. That's even after controlling for differences in education, race, ethnicity, and other background factors. You can read more about this in my study "For Richer, For Poorer: How Family Structures Economic Success in America."

Why is there such a substantial marriage premium? There are at least four important reasons.

One: After marrying, men assume a new identity. Marriage is one of the last “rite[s] of passage into manhood” remaining in our society, argues sociologist Steven Nock. He found that marriage engenders an ethic of responsibility among men, as well as a newfound sense of meaning and status in the world.

Two: Married men are motivated to maximize their income. This means having a different attitude toward their job. They work more hours, and make better work choices. Studies find that men increase their work hours after marrying and reduce their hours after divorcing. Sociologist Elizabeth Gorman concludes that married men are more likely to value higher-paying jobs than their single peers.

Three: There is evidence that employers prefer and promote men who are married. Married men are often seen as more responsible and dedicated workers and are rewarded with more opportunities to advance.

Fourth and finally, married men benefit from the advice and encouragement of their wives, who have an obvious interest in their success. There is no better motivator than your spouse.

The tragedy is that despite all the good news we keep learning about the benefits of marriage, the institution is in retreat. In 1960, 72% of all adults ages 18 and older were married. Today, it’s 49%. In 1960, the average age at which men married was 23. Today it’s 29. The consequences of this are negative across the income spectrum, but they are especially so for those in the lower and middle classes.

Marriage is a clear path to a better life. It always has been. And now we have plenty of data to confirm it. But if still you don’t believe me, just ask Doug Taulbee and millions like him.

I’m Brad Wilcox, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia, for Prager University.