

New Generation Relationships

Insights from The Shepell·fqi Research Group



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New Generation Relationships

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Valentine's Day is the time of year when romantic relationships are in focus. For some, the focus is positive, and brings the relationship to a new level, like a marriage engagement; for others, the focus illuminates the less positive aspects of relationships. With this in mind, The Shepell•fgi Research Group conducted a study of the correlates of relationship issues, the factors that relate to positive relationships, and the impact of negative relationships.

The study was based on a sample of 156,725 individual clients that accessed the Shepell•fgi EAP between the years 2003 and 2006 (62% female, 38% male). The findings from this analysis are supplemented by data from a literature review.

The findings:

- Approximately one quarter (24%) of EAP accesses are for relationship issues
- There is a geographical tendency with respect to relationship issues. Western provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba) cluster above the national average, while central and Eastern provinces cluster at or below the national average
- The 30-39 year old age group presents relationship issues at a disproportionately higher rate than other age groups
- Even though EAP use for relationship problems for all age groups is higher in the West, for 30-39 year olds, it is proportionately higher in the Maritimes

Relationships and health:

- Relationships support social networks. Such networks in turn are correlated with better health
- While marriage itself has been correlated with better health, the quality of the marriage is more important than the fact of the marriage
- Negative spousal behaviour impacts the physical health of Baby Boomers and older age groups more than younger age groups
- Conversely, while poor health impacts all relationships, the effect is most pronounced in the younger cohorts (Generation X and Y)

Relationships and Productivity:

- Higher levels of marital conflict predicted lower levels of productivity the following day
- Those with higher levels of marital conflict also lost more work days than their peers - this was particularly true for men with 10 years or less in the marriage

Overall, the findings suggest a strong association between relationships, health and productivity. This highlights the vulnerability of persons in the early career years, in addition to the association between age, geography and relationships issues.

In this report, recommendations are made for skill development. The core skills of conflict management and communication, directly benefit relationships, and have a both direct and indirect benefit on health and productivity at work.

INTRODUCTION

If there is one time of year when romantic relationships are on one's mind, it is Valentine's Day. From the medieval times, when the tradition of courtly love flourished, until today, Valentine's Day provides a clear context, if not a prod, for couples to profess their love and commitment. This special day, along with its heart-shaped chocolates, fresh flowers, romantic dinners and poetic terms of endearment, is often a momentous relationship catalyst, leading some relationships into lifelong commitment, while others, to their demise.

Valentine's Day is possibly the most highly scripted and marketed occasion of the year, and as a result, it implies a set of expectations for appropriate behaviour, and opportunity for unique social comparison.

Research exploring the effects of holidays on relationships maintains that, paradoxically, Valentine's Day can instigate a set of processes often detrimental to romantic relationships and also catalyze existing relationship difficulties. On the other hand, there is little pretence, that this 'Valentine's Day Effect' would have great impact on quality relationships.

This finding brings to mind several key questions:

- *What are the correlates of relationship concerns?*
- *What relationship virtues create immunity to the catalyzing influences and instigating effects of Valentine's Day and other similar 'romanticised' events?*
- *What factors act as moderators to the ebb and flow of relationship and marital quality?*
- *And in view of the changes in the norms and meanings of marriage characteristic of contemporary society, would the answers to these questions have read differently in the prime years of today's oldest cohorts?*

Accordingly, The Shepell•fgi Research Group conducted an analysis of Employee Assistance

Program (EAP) data for relationship problems, and reviewed the current literature, to gain insight into relationships.

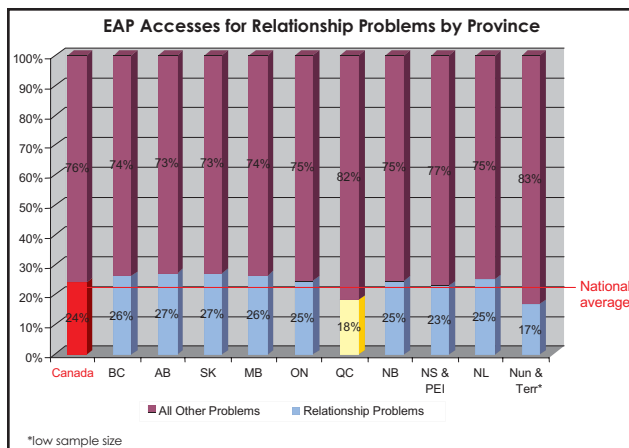
METHOD

The sample consisted of 156,725 individual clients that accessed the Shepell•fgi EAP between the years 2003 and 2006 (62% female, 38% male). Analyses were restricted to active client organizations that joined the EAP before 2003 to control for changes in population size and composition.

Shepell•fgi tracks nearly 100 different presenting problems at EAP intake. The umbrella grouping 'relationship problems' is sub-categorized into the following categories: conflict resolution, intimacy issues, relationship breakdown, financial management conflict, role and household management and general marital relationship problems. These sub-categories are then collapsed into 'relationship problems', and compared to other problems as a composite. The rates of relationship problems are then compared across age groups and provinces/territories in Canada.

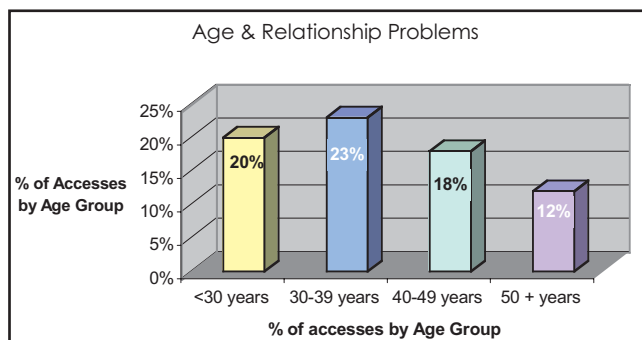
GENERAL FINDINGS

Who is having relationship problems and where are they in Canada?



Relationship problems appear to have a geographic tendency.

- While the percentage of EAP accesses for relationship problems are relatively even across Canada, Western provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba) tend to be higher than the national average of 24%.
- Central and Eastern provinces are near or below the national average.
- As well, our findings show that clients in Quebec make up one of the lowest proportion of EAP accesses for relationship problems, at 18%. This is 6% less than the national average. Nunavut and the Territories appear to be accessing least, but due to the small sample size from those geographic areas, this percentage may not be a good representation.



There is a clear age-effect on EAP accesses for relationship problems¹. Our analyses reveal that younger Canadians are experiencing more relationship problems than their older counterparts. This is supported by external research.

- When thirty-year-old clients accessed EAP, 23% of them reported relationship problems, as compared to 20% for clients under 30 years old, 18% for clients in their forties, and 12% for 50 plus years.
- Thirty-year-olds were also more likely to report separation and divorce issues (5% of accesses vs. 3% for other age groups).

Province	Age Group	Relationship Problems (%)	All Other Problems (%)	Proportional Diff between Relationship and Other
BC	< 30 yrs	22	21	1
	30 to 39 yrs	41	33	8
	40 to 49 yrs	28	31	-3
	50 yrs +	9	15	-6
AB	< 30 yrs	25	28	-3
	30 to 39 yrs	41	33	8
	40 to 49 yrs	27	28	-1
	50 yrs +	7	12	-4
SK	< 30 yrs	24	21	3
	30 to 39 yrs	38	31	8
	40 to 49 yrs	27	34	-7
	50 yrs +	10	14	-4
MB	< 30 yrs	27	25	2
	30 to 39 yrs	41	33	8
	40 to 49 yrs	26	30	-5
	50 yrs +	7	12	-5
ON	< 30 yrs	18	17	1
	30 to 39 yrs	44	35	9
	40 to 49 yrs	29	33	-3
	50 yrs +	8	15	-7
QC	< 30 yrs	18	20	-2
	30 to 39 yrs	43	35	8
	40 to 49 yrs	30	31	-1
	50 yrs +	9	13	-5
NB	< 30 yrs	21	20	1
	30 to 39 yrs	46	35	11
	40 to 49 yrs	26	30	-5
	50 yrs +	7	14	-7
NS & PEI	< 30 yrs	23	24	-1
	30 to 39 yrs	44	35	9
	40 to 49 yrs	26	29	-3
	50 yrs +	7	12	-5
NFLD	< 30 yrs	24	24	0
	30 to 39 yrs	49	37	13
	40 to 49 yrs	23	27	-3
	50 yrs +	3	12	-9
Nun & Terr	< 30 yrs	-	16	-16
	30 to 39 yrs	67	43	24
	40 to 49 yrs	22	34	-12
	50 yrs +	11	7	4
Canada	< 30 yrs	20	20	0
	30 to 39 yrs	43	34	9
	40 to 49 yrs	29	32	-3
	50 yrs +	8	14	-6

While the 30-39 year old age group tends to use EAP more for all problems, there still is a disproportionate use by this group for relationship problems.

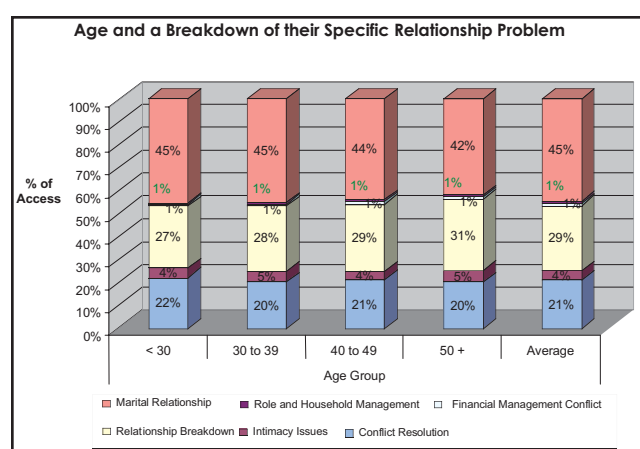
- An interesting interaction emerges when considering geographic location and age together. The extent of the disproportionate number of relationship concerns for 30-39 year olds is higher in the Maritime provinces than the rest of the country.
- As such, even though EAP use for relationship

¹ Also noted in the 2007 report, 'Till Stress Do Us Part: An EAP's Perspective on Marital/Relationship Issues', published by the Shepell•fgi Research Group.

problems is higher in the West, for 30-39 year olds, it is proportionately higher in the East.

- In Quebec and Alberta, EAPs used proportionately less than the norm for people under 30 years of age.

What kinds of relationship problems are Canadians accessing EAP for?



Among clients who access relationship problems

- The sub-category 'general marital relationship' problems makes up the greatest proportion averaging at 45%,
- This is followed by relationship breakdown at 29%.
- The balance of the sub-categories are conflict resolution (21%)
- Intimacy issues (4%)
- Role and household management (1%) and
- Financial management conflict (1%).

As shown above, interestingly, the proportions of utilization are similar across the age bands.

RELATIONSHIPS TRENDS IN THE CANADIAN LANDSCAPE

Over five years, the number of common-law

relationships in Canada has surged 18.9%, and now makes up 15.5% of the Canadian population. According to Statistics Canada, this figure has more than doubled from two decades ago when common-law relationships made up only 7.2% of the populace. The number of lone-parent families also increased by 7.8%, as compared to a marginal increase in the number of marriages, up only 3.5% since 2001. Married couples now represent just over two-thirds of the Canadian population (68.6%), sliding from 70.5% just five years ago; a stark comparison to the representation of married couples two decades ago: 80.2%.

In Quebec, where the prevalence of common-law couple families has been a defining pattern for quite some time, the number of cohabitating couples increased 20.3% from 2001 to 2006, accounting for 44% of the national total of partners fitting into this category.

Quebec also has the highest per cent of the population who are divorced (6.37%), followed by Yukon (6.03%), British Columbia (5.63%) and Alberta (5.12%). This is compared to the national average of those with a divorced status (4.41%).

The past five years has also witnessed an 11.8% increase in the number of one-person households, and at the same time, an 11.2% increase in the number of couples without children aged twenty-four years or younger — evidently indicative of our aging population and declining birth rate, but also perhaps the changes in the norms and meanings of marriage characteristic of contemporary society.

THE VALENTINE'S DAY EFFECT

While Valentine's Day provides the most salient opportunity for couples to enhance their romantic relationship, it has been confirmed, contrary to popular perception, that it can also facilitate their demise.

Research suggests that the day of St-Valentine can affect relationships by prompting one to start making

comparisons of their relationship. This can result in cognitions that the partner is either desirable in comparison to another mate or by contrast, not desirable.

The tradition of public celebration on Valentine's Day creates this medium for social comparison— an occasion to compare one's own relationship to those of others. The 'actor-observer affect' that can occur in these situations, and can lead one to attribute his/her own behaviours as situational (my behaviour is because it is Valentine's Day), whereas others' to be dispositional (their behaviour is because *they* are in love), creating an unfavourable comparison. This skews the estimate of the quantity of romance and love in the relationship of others. Valentine's Day can also amplify an existing concern with the relationship, thereby detrimentally affecting the relationship.

These mechanisms, however, clearly do not thwart all relationships. 'Quality relationships' naturally create immunity to the catalyzing influences and instigating effects of Valentine's Day and other similar 'romanticised' events.

For this discussion, quality relates to satisfaction, happiness, adjustment and interaction.

As the discussion continues, the various influences on relationship quality will be revealed, as well as how quality may be realized.

RELATIONSHIPS AND WELL-BEING

Good relationships are the essence of physical and mental health. Research shows that relationships of all varieties simply help us live happier lives. What is more, relationships not only make us feel good, but positive relationships lead to healthier and longer lives.

The evidence for this is overwhelming:

- People in relationships tend to be happier and live longer
- People in relationships are far less likely to suffer

from psychological illness

- The strong social network offered through relationships can present protective effects against colds, infections and medical disorders.

Additionally, when it comes to well-being, beliefs about relationships count, especially for those couples that are married. Research has found that individuals who value the permanence and importance, and feel strongly about their marriage, have better mental-well-being, namely a larger reduction in depression. Although the pure marital effect is significant in the data, *marital quality*, rather than marriage itself is the biggest predictor of well-being.

Well-being psychologists have consistently confirmed, that throughout the Western world, married people report more happiness than those of all other marital statuses -- remarried, never married, cohabitating, divorced, or separated. Accordingly, one must ask: how has the transformation in the structure, rules and meaning of marriages, attributable to the influences of a more contemporary society, impacted well-being in relationships?

RELATIONSHIPS AND AGE: A CLOSER LOOK

Though early relationship research speculated that relationship longevity predicted marital agreement, shifts in the familial division of labour as well as societal norms and meanings of marriage, have propelled today's research to look toward the facets related to the stages in the family life-course and trends within birth cohorts, to explain marital agreement and quality.

A closer look at the age-related and life-course aspects of relationships will begin shed light on how relationship quality may be attained:

Generation X and Y²

Cohort theorists maintain that today's younger cohorts have greater access to resources and education,

² Generation Y birth dates 1982-1996; Generation X birth dates 1967-1981

compared to their elders, and as a result, have simply different relationship expectations. What is more, there is a tendency for the younger generation to be generally more disagreeable and have a greater propensity to engage in interpersonal conflict; a trait researchers maintain will impact relationships in the future as much as it is today.

Today's younger couples also make a non-traditional labour dyad, where both partners are much more likely to be employed, as compared to their older counterparts. The resulting increase in employment rates and earning power has been posited to lead to the promotion of more relationship discord.

While poorer health predicts more frequent relationship disagreements across all cohorts, it is confirmed that it is more consequential among younger than older cohorts.

Though unexpected, this is possibly the case because health problems are less expected among younger persons, and as a result, health has a stronger impact on younger couples' marital disagreements. Health problems tend to also have a substantial impact on those in the middle of their life-course possibly due to its stronger impact on family responsibilities compared to couples later in the life-course.

Relationship satisfaction is the lowest with the presence of a child in the household. Constant demands to engage in communication and negotiation regarding child rearing practices and home rules leads to greater amounts of relationship discord. Accordingly, Generation X and Y's position in their life-course, and the greater propensity for them to have children at this point in time, simply creates likelihood that these partners have more relationship disagreements.

What is more, as privileges once reserved to marriage— such as sexual life, parenting, and economic security— cease to be so restricted exclusively with marriage, some experts think that so too might the association between marriage and well-being. Thus, the changes in the norms and meanings

of marriage characteristic of contemporary society, in which the younger cohorts have grown, have presumably had an effect on this cohort's psychological well-being.

Baby Boom to World War II Generation³

Unlike their younger counterparts, research confirms that partners in older relationships are indeed more likely than younger and midlife partners to keep their opinions to themselves when disagreements with their spouse arise. What's more, they largely use a more passive form of coping and are much less likely to confront, when compared to younger couples. Aging theorists would maintain that this is largely part of their nature. On the other hand, from a family life-course perspective, the fact that older couples face fewer sources of conflict and have more quality time to spend together can be used to explain why they also disagree less with one another, compared to younger couples.

Older cohorts also have very different expectations, especially compared to today's youngest generation. It is possible that the deprivation imposed by the Depression and World War II, when older couples grew to adulthood, has taught them to cope and has created lower or perhaps more realistic expectations for their marriages than members of subsequent cohorts.

Their relationship is also much more likely to reflect a more 'traditional' division of labor with the husband employed and the wife not employed. Understandably, it is characterized significantly less by relationship disagreement over household tasks and intimacy, as well as money and spending.

By contrast, adjustment to changes to health and vitality more often leads to conflict for these older cohorts. Spousal behaviours seem to be more consequential to physical health for these groups, in addition to the challenges experienced in adjusting to retirement and a reduced income.

Positive relationship process—namely satisfaction and

³ Boomers birth dates 1946-1966

happiness—are benefits to the health of older cohorts. On the other hand, negative spousal behaviours are more consequential for these older cohorts, causing more physical symptoms chronic health problems, physical disability and poorer perceived health.

RELATIONSHIPS AND PRODUCTIVITY

Preliminary measures from a recent large-scale study representing a diverse range of EAP clients, revealed that 31% of EAP clients with relationship issues reported that their physical or emotional relationship problem interfered ‘quite a bit or extremely’ with their normal interactions with co-workers, family or friends, while only 8% of clients reported this difficulty at case close.

More imminent studies testing the impact of relationships on productivity have begun to show significant results, making relationship stability and satisfaction the interest to any employer. The major finding from one study in particular showed that higher levels of marital conflict on one day strongly predicted lower levels of work productivity the next day. In fact, workers who were one standard deviation above the mean in reported marital conflict, lost 1.34 days of work per month, compared with workers who had average levels of marital conflict. This was predominantly the case for men within the first 10 years of marriage.

Relationship support has long been a hallmark of counselling, making the EAP an ideal venue for couples to get support. In fact, the EAP study also confirmed a 74% reduction in relationship difficulty following EAP intervention, according to pre and post-testing measures. Accordingly, it is quite evident that EAP counselling is an effective modality for the support and resolution of relationship issues, and simply put, it makes business sense. With this in mind, available and effective EAP support should be promoted to a significantly greater extent, especially to those in the younger age band (< 30 years).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Enhancing Relationship Quality

Knowing the diverse influences on relationships, what can partners do to enhance relationship quality? Simply put, the ability to moderate to the ebb and flow of relationship quality requires work. While the process to build a strong relationship is unique to each couple, there are some well-founded and essential skills:

- Communication, conflict management and negotiations skills are essential for relationships. These skills are highly coachable and offer couples the chance to intensively enhance and protect the positive connections in their relationship.
- Couples require strategies to maintain aspects of marital satisfaction and stability (such as strengthening positive connections by protecting, enhancing, and restoring fun, friendship, and romance) amidst a high-stress and very busy life.
- Relationships necessitate the ability to handle difficult situations without engaging in destructive, negative interactions such as escalation, criticism, invalidation, and demand-withdraw. By developing skills to deal with difficult situations, couples can learn to avoid both marital and mental distress.

Relationships and Work: A Win-Win Approach

The links between marital functioning and a wide range of outcomes has led to recognition that marriage has important business consequences. Companies are familiar with the problems impacting employees' personal lives can and can positively affect employee performance in the workplace by providing marriage enrichment training. Using marriage education and relationship building programs, employers can provide, in a secure and collegial format, the information and skills their people need to improve relationships and reduce conflict at work and at home.

This is a win-win approach. Evidently, it benefits the

employee, by enhancing the aptitudes of relationships success, while at the same time, the benefit to the workplace is two-fold: facilitating greater productivity, and providing employees with the same relationship building skills that are critical for business success. The fact is: business and work, like love and marriage, are

based on relationships, and accordingly, helping people improve their relationship skills makes dollars and sense.

THE SHEPELL•FGI RESEARCH GROUP

The Shepell•fgi Research Group, a subsidiary of Shepell•fgi, has a mandate to educate employers and business leaders on the physical, mental and social health issues that impact clients, their employees and families, and workplaces. The Research Group analyzes and provides commentary on key health trends, partnering with some of the industry's highest profile research institutes and scholars, and drawing from 25 years of expertise. The findings contained in this report are based on Shepell•fgi proprietary data and are supported by information from a variety of academic, government, and private research sources. References have been omitted for space considerations and are available upon request. Gillian Macartney Dawson, M.A., Health Consultant, and Joyce Wong, B.Sc. (Hons), Research Analyst, of The Shepell•fgi Research Group and Health Solutions Department, prepared this research report. Paula Allen, VP Health Solutions and Shepell•fgi Research Group oversees the Shepell•fgi Research Group. Questions or comments may be directed to Paula Allen at 1-800-461-9722. © 2008 Shepell•fgi.