

Hands down, people without kids have better lives—except for this one major thing



This article has been corrected.

As a married dad with two grade-school daughters, a wife who works a bigger job than I do, and a pretty big job of my own, I often envy (and sometimes resent) the social exploits of my child-less friends. It always seems like they're eating at the cool new restaurants, going to kick-ass concerts, jet-setting to Vegas or Paris, and—gasp—sleeping past 8:00am.

These same friends surely roll their eyes at all the doting pictures of my kids on Facebook, my lame Honda Pilot, and my constantly rejecting their impromptu social invitations. Dude, I don't even have time to see one episode of *Modern Family*, how the hell am I supposed to join you at the Black Keys concert on an hour's notice?

Parents and non-parents might as well be two different species. Conventional wisdom tells us that parents sleep less, exercise less, gain weight more, stress more, and have less time overall for hobbies or entertainment. Non-parents, conversely, travel more, eat out more, read more, watch more movies and TV, and do more yoga.

But, is this all true or simply stereotype? How different are the lives of parents and non-parents, really? And how do these differences impact our overall happiness?

Since 2010, [polling platform CivicScience](#) has cataloged 1,050,053 responses to the “Parental Status” poll, including 656,266 parents and 393,787 non-parents in the US and analyzed a subset of parents, age 25 to 54, comparing them to non-parents in the same age bracket.

Here are the facts and the myths:

1. Non-parents get more sleep: Fact

Non-parents are 75% more likely than parents to report an average of over eight hours of sleep each night. Parents are 29% more likely to report less than six hours of sleep per night. Perhaps that’s why parents are 28% more likely to say they drink coffee “every day without fail.”

2. Non-parents are healthier: Fact

Non-parents are 73% more likely than parents to say they “never” eat at fast food restaurants. Parents are 54% more likely to smoke cigarettes every day. Non-parents are 38% more likely to exercise at a gym once a week or more, while parents are 17% more likely to say they never exercise and 10% more likely to consider themselves overweight.

3. Non-parents have more financial and career freedom: Fact

Parents are 41% more likely to use coupons “every chance they get,” and yet non-parents are more than twice as likely to save over 20% of their income in a given month. This could be because non-parents are better educated: they are 23% more likely to have a college degree and 29% more likely to have a graduate degree or PhD.

4. Non-parents have more exciting social lives: Fact

Non-parents are more than twice as likely to eat at upscale restaurants at least once a month or more. They are 62% more likely to say that traveling is a “passion” of theirs. When given the opportunity, non-parents are 86% more likely to say they “splurge” on themselves.

5. Non-parents get to enjoy more music, TV, and movies: Fact

Non-parents are 95% more likely than parents to say they are most passionate about TV shows and 41% more likely to be passionate about music. They're 39% more likely to go to the movies once a month or more.

Parents, on the other hand, are more likely to DVR a TV program and watch it after it broadcasts. Parents are much less likely to “binge watch” a show like *House of Cards* or *Game of Thrones*. Find me a parent of young kids who has six hours of contiguous free time for TV and I'll find you a talking unicorn.

6. Parents worry more: Fact

Despite being more likely to live in suburban or rural areas, parents are 27% more likely to say that they are very concerned about crime and violence where they live. It could be because parents are 51% more likely to say they watch the local news—where coverage of crime and violence is pervasive—every day. Parents also worry more about the economy, public education, health care, taxes. And the list goes on.

7. Parents suffer from higher levels of stress: Fact

Non-parents are actually 23% more likely than parents to say their lives are “not at all stressful.” Although, it's worth noting that non-parents are also 16% more likely to take prescription medication to manage stress and anxiety.

8. Parents are more likely to long for an earlier time in their lives: Fact

One of the poll question that asks people whether if they could, would they rather go back in time or forward into the future. Parents are 12.5% more likely to choose going back in time. Non-parents are 30% more likely to say they'd rather go into the future. This could be interpreted a couple ways: Perhaps parents wish they could go back to their early 20s or high school. Or maybe they wish they could go back to an earlier era altogether, when family life seemed more idyllic.

9. Therefore, non-parents are happier: Myth

Here's the surprise twist. When asked "how happy are you today?" parents are actually 33% more likely to say they are "very happy." Non-parents are 27% more likely to say they are "unhappy" or "very unhappy." Wait, what? Take a look:

Despite all of the negatives in their lives—the stress, the unhealthy lifestyle, the meager social life, the financial challenges, the pop culture oblivion, and the longing for younger days—parents still find themselves happier. We can't prove exactly what drives these numbers. I have good friends who are physically unable to have kids, which no doubt affects their happiness. Some people choose not to have kids because of other hardships in their lives. And, surely, lots of unhappy parents only say they're happy because they think they're supposed to.

But maybe joy indeed doesn't just have to come from extrinsic things and fabulous social lives—it can come from the adventure of raising a family, from teaching and nurturing others, from sacrifice, and from unconditional love.

I just wish you could have all of those things and still get eight hours of sleep.

We welcome your comments at ideas@qz.com.

Correction: *A previous version of this article stated that parents are 43% more likely to say they are "very happy"; the correct value is 33%.*

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