

"Let's Just Live Together"

Once Shunned, Cohabitation is Accepted as a Modern Marriage Precursor. Yet, is this True? Can it Insulate a Couple From Divorce?

Record numbers (over four million) of couples who have not married are currently living together in America. In today's divorce culture, cohabitation has become a common alternative to traditional marriage. Nationwide, of all couples marrying between 1980 and 1984, 44 percent had lived together before their exchange of marital vows, while just ten years earlier, only 11 percent of couples had cohabited prior to marriage. Today, a majority of marriages are preceded by cohabitation.

This growth in cohabitation (a 600 percent increase between 1970 and 1991) has led several sociologists and legal scholars to marvel, "What was a short time ago strongly condemned is now condoned, tolerated, even encouraged and institutionalized." As recently as the mid 1960's, most Americans regarded nonmarital cohabitation as a moral wrong. But in the late 1960's, cohabitation began to take root in many American college and university campuses. The sexual revolution began to change the norms and values of many young Americans who would soon consider marriage.

Many academic leaders echoed Margaret Mead's reasoning that by cohabiting, people were screening bad marriages in this "trial marriage" arrangement. Sociologist Carl Danziger spoke of this lifestyle in this manner: "The most positive aspect of cohabitation is that it aids in preventing those marriages between two people who are clearly incompatible." Eleanor Macklin of Syracuse University wrote, "The benefits tend to outweigh the costs, and there are few deleterious effects."

No other cultural phenomenon has done more to foster cohabitation than the divorce epidemic. Research has found that young women from broken homes are almost two-thirds more likely to cohabit than their peers who were raised in intact marriages. Some have observed that the appeal of cohabitation to modern young adults is that it appears to offer all the benefits of marriage without the costs of divorce. Yet,

according to studies, most of those who cohabit want to marry and have a successful marriage. They often view marriage as the "crown jewel" of a successful cohabitation. In general, couples who cohabit are not rebuking marriage but rather attempting to protect themselves from a failed marriage.

Unfortunately, cohabitation is an utter failure as a strategy for a successful marriage. A major national study conducted over 10 years found that couples who had lived together before marriage had a divorce rate one-third higher than couples who had not. In another major study, researchers from the University of Nebraska - Lincoln found higher, not lower, levels of marital instability among those who cohabited prior to their marriage.

"Those who cohabit before marriage have substantially higher divorce rates than those who do not."

Recent studies from Canada and Sweden reveal similar stability problems with cohabitation. Contrary to the popular notion, cohabitation does not serve as an effective testing ground for marriage. Sociologists at the Universities of Chicago and Michigan explain that the "expectation of a positive relationship between cohabitation and marital stability . . . has been shattered in recent years by studies conducted in several Western countries." They continue, "Those who would cohabit before marriage have substantially higher divorce rates than those who do not; the recorded differentials range from 50 to 100 percent."

Even those couples who cohabited prior to marriage who stay married have greater marital dissatisfaction than those who have not cohabited. In a survey conducted by Louis Harris and Associates, cohabitants were one-third less likely to express strong satisfaction with their lives

than were those living together in marriage. Data from the National Institute of Mental Health show that cohabiting women have rates of depression that are more than three times higher than married women, and more than twice as high as other single women. Similar research conducted at UCLA revealed, "Marriage preceded by cohabitation is more prone to problems often associated with other deviant lifestyles -- e.g., use of drugs and alcohol, more permissive sexual relationships, and an abhorrence of dependence -- than marriages."

Not surprisingly, many cohabiting couples separate prior to an exchange of marital vows. Although not legally or statistically classified as a divorce, these breakups create emotional problems similar to that of divorce. Ironically, it is that divorce trauma which cohabitants are trying to avoid. In her report Non-Marital Heterosexual Cohabitation, Eleanor Macklin observed that for a cohabiting couple, the emotional consequences of a breakup are "similar to those associated with divorce: denial, anger, grief, and gradual reintegration into single life."

Psychological scars may not be the only ones which are produced by cohabitation. Contrary to popular portrayals, cohabitation is a much more physically dangerous lifestyle than marriage. Although it is true that separation can be more easily obtained in cohabitive relationships, violence is still much more common in cohabitation. The Family Violence Research Program at the University of New Hampshire reports that violence rates are twice as high among cohabitants when compared to their married counterparts. The report also found that cohabiting women are almost five times as likely to suffer severe violence than married women.

The research is clear: cohabitation is not the answer to a better marriage and in fact may contribute to divorce, domestic violence and marital unhappiness.

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