

COHABITATION

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Since 1960, America has witnessed a 12-fold increase in cohabitation from 430,000 couples to 5.4 million couples. Whether you like it or not, most couples today, at least two-thirds, live together before getting married.¹²

WHY COUPLES LIVE TOGETHER

Many cohabiters believe that living together is the best way to “test out” the relationship and increase their odds of doing well in marriage.¹³ Proponents say things like: “It’s crazy to marry someone without living with them first. You need to test out the relationship!”

In fact, the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, found that nearly half of 20-somethings agreed with the statement, “You would only marry someone if he or she agreed to live together with you first, so that you could find out whether you really get along.” About two-thirds said they believed that moving in together before marriage was a good way to avoid divorce.¹⁴

According to David Popenhoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, the underlying reason for the rise in cohabitation is a lack of male commitment to marriage. They write, “Men experience few social pressures to marry, gain many of the benefits of marriage by cohabiting with a romantic partner, and are ever more reluctant to commit to marriage in their early adult years.”

WHAT ABOUT LIVING TOGETHER WITHOUT HAVING SEX

Maybe you’ve heard the story about the young man who denied to his visiting mother that he and his live-in girlfriend were sleeping together. His mother had her doubts, but kept them to herself as she went home that evening. A week later her son wrote her this e-mail, “Mom, I’m not accusing you of anything, but we’ve not been able to find our remote control ever since your visit.” To which his mom replied, “Son, I’m not accusing you of anything, but if your girlfriend was sleeping in her own bed you would have found your remote by now.” If you’re working with a couple who says they are living together but not having sex, you probably have your doubts, too.

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THE CONSEQUENCES OF COHABITING

So does cohabiting lead to good marriages or the polar opposite - increasing the likelihood of divorce? Here’s what we know: Couples who cohabit before marriage (and especially before an engagement) tend to be less satisfied with their marriages — and more likely to divorce — than couples who do not. These negative outcomes are called the cohabitation effect.¹⁵

Researchers characterize this effect as “sliding, not deciding.” Moving from dating to sleeping over to sleeping over a lot to cohabitation can be a gradual slope, one not marked by rings or ceremonies or sometimes even a conversation. Couples bypass talking about why they want to live together and what it will mean.

Cohabitation creates what researchers call “relationship inertia,”-when a couple living together ends up in a bad marriage because, hey, it’s really hard to move out once you move in. Merging homes and investing in a joint living space can result in a lot of “sunk costs”

that keep couples emotionally and financially invested in relationships that might have ended had the couple not cohabited.

Dr. Galena Rhoades, a Research Associate Professor at University of Denver, found that those who moved in together before marriage reported lower marriage satisfaction and more potential for divorce than couples who waited until they were married to make the big move. Through her research, Rhoades posits that the increase in cohabiting couples is resulting in marriages that simply never would have happened in a non-cohabiting society.¹⁶

But the detrimental side of the cohabitation effect is about more than just “sliding” or “inertia.” Psychologist Meg Jay, author of *The Defining Decade*, says it’s due to “gender asymmetry.” Women tend to see cohabiting as a step toward marriage, while some men see it as a way to stall marriage. It is easy to see how such conflicted, often unconscious, motives could be unhealthy.

One thing men and women do agree on, however, is that their standards for a live-in partner are lower than they are for a spouse. Cohabiters want to feel committed to their partners, yet they are often confused about whether they have consciously chosen their mates. Founding relationships on convenience or ambiguity can interfere with the process of claiming the people we love. A life built on top of “maybe you’ll do” simply does not feel as dedicated as a life built on top of the “we do” of marriage. As some say, you can’t practice permanence.

Perhaps that’s why, long before all the research studies were conducted, Paul wrote in I Corinthians 6:17: “Sex is as much spiritual mystery as physical fact. We must not pursue the kind of sex that avoids commitment and intimacy, leaving us more lonely than ever.”

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Each of you
should learn to
control his own
body in a way
that is holy and
honorable.

— I Thessalonians 4:4

The bottom line is that concerns about pre-marital cohabitation are legit. Sure you will find studies pointing to the benefits of living together before marriage, but substantial evidence associates cohabitation with greater hazards of marital instability and negative relationship outcomes. Pre-marital cohabitation is viewed as a risk factor for divorce as it predicts later marital instability, poorer marriage quality, and less relationship satisfaction.¹⁷ Compared to married couples, cohabiting couples argue more, have more trouble resolving conflicts, are more insecure about their partners’ feelings, and have more problems related to their future goals.¹⁸