

Statistically, cohabitation is an enemy of marriage

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By: **Val Farmer**, INFORUM

Many young people mistakenly believe that cohabitation is a stepping stone to marriage, when actually only slightly better than 50 percent of these relationships end in marriage. Most cohabiting couples either marry or break up within two years.

If a couple does marry, premarital cohabitation actually raises the chances of divorce by 50 percent. Moreover, this divorce statistic is this high or higher for cohabitators in the U.S., Canada, Australia, Great Britain, Sweden and other western industrialized economies. If the marriage survives seven years, then the divorce rate levels off and becomes equal to the rate of divorce for couples who didn't live together before marriage.

Researchers report that 50 to 60 percent of couples who marry today lived together first and that 70 percent of young adults will cohabit. Of those cohabiting, 66 percent moved in before making plans to marry, 23 percent planned to marry but weren't engaged, and 11 percent moved in when they got engaged.

Testing the relationship for marriage? This is mostly a myth. Most couples report they didn't consciously decide to live together. Two-thirds of cohabitators said they either "slid into it" or "talked about it, but then it just sort of happened." Only one-third talked about it and made a decision to live together. Most unmarried couples who live together aren't trying to test their relationship as a precursor to marriage; they just want to spend more time together.

The younger a person is when they engage in premarital sex, the more likely it is they will engage in a cohabiting relationship.

Living together before marriage used to be called "shacking up." Now it is cool – a rite of passage into adulthood. Instead of asking, "Who are you dating?" friends ask, "Who are you living with?" They see it as a sign of social desirability – a measure of social status.

What is behind the higher divorce rate of cohabiting couples?

- The bail-out factor. Cohabiting couples are a self-selected group of individuals who show a lower regard for marriage commitment by their willingness to live together in the first place. They are more willing to see divorce as a solution when there are problems in their marriage.

Serial cohabitators have an 80 percent higher divorce rate once they marry. Multiple cohabiting is a strong predictor of the failure of future relationships. The longer a couple is together before marriage, the more likely it is that the low-commitment ethic of cohabitation will take hold, the opposite of what is required for a successful marriage.

- More affairs. As cohabitators, they are more likely to have secondary sexual partners – especially if they view their relationship as uncommitted. After marriage, they are 3.3 times as likely to have an affair. Cohabitators have as much sex as married couples, but they are less satisfied. Marital commitment adds to emotional satisfaction and bonding and makes sex more meaningful and rewarding.

- High-risk people. Those who choose a living-together arrangement are high-risk individuals who are less religious, more liberal, less educated, more individualistic, and more likely to bring addiction or personality problems to the relationship.

- Money fights. These couples start their relationship by keeping their expenses separate. Once they marry, they have more arguments about money and have a hard time sharing their resources. Couples who don't live together before marriage generally start pooling their resources from the day of their marriage.

- Poor problem-solving skills. The biggest problem cohabiting couples have after marriage is their poor conflict-resolution skills. Because of the weak commitment during cohabitation, couples learn to avoid discussing important issues. Too

much trouble at that point would rock the boat. So they don't. After marriage, the poor communication habits developed during cohabitation continue.

- The "glow" is gone. The average length of time of cohabitation before marriage is 1.3 years. This corresponds to the euphoric beginnings of marriage. By the time they actually marry, their relationship is starting to evolve into a normal period of disillusionment that happens after the honeymoon is over. Cohabiting couples blame marriage for the increased problems when they are experiencing normal adjustments to being together over a period of time.

- Early cohabitation stops development. Most couples start cohabiting when they should be spending time developing their personalities and learning to be independent. Their developmental growth is halted by this early dependency on a relationship to meet their needs for happiness.

They haven't grown up enough to take responsibility for their own happiness.

- More violence. Because couples start cohabiting when they don't value the long-term nature of the relationship, individuals show less impulse control. One study found that the risk of domestic violence for women in cohabiting relationships was double that in married relationships; the risk is even greater for child abuse.

Don't fool yourself. Instead of a stepping stone to a happy marriage, cohabitation is more like a stumbling block. The belief that cohabitation makes for a better marriage is a myth and a convenient rationalization. The reality is that it is an enemy to marriage.

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