



Shackin' up...will tear you down

Poster Discussion Guide

Scott Gardner, PhD

South Dakota State University

The Myth – Living together before marriage is a good way to make sure your relationship is right for marriage. It is an excellent way to prepare for a successful, healthy marriage.

The Facts - Couples who cohabit:

- Are less satisfied in their marriages.
- Have less stability in their marriages.
- Have lower quality marriages.
- Have more affairs in their marriages
- Have poorer communication.
- Have more marital conflict.
- Are more likely to divorce (**46% higher chance**).
- Are more likely to experience domestic violence.

More reasons why cohabitation can negatively affect future marriage:

- Couples can slide into a weaker marriage after cohabiting. There is some evidence that couples who choose to cohabit because they don't feel adequately compatible for marriage, end up marrying not because things have improved, but because it seems like the next logical thing to do. (Dr. Norval Glenn at the University of Texas)
- The frequency of drug abuse among cohabiting couples before and after moving in together is the same. However, the rate of drug abuse after marriage declines, reducing potential addictive problems before they can invade a marriage. Cohabiting couples face greater conflicts arising from substance abuse in their future marriages.
- There are more affairs in cohabiting relationships than in marriage relationships. This is probably due to the differences in levels of commitment and a lack of norms and boundaries in cohabiting relationships. Going out to the bar alone and flirting with someone is definitely wrong if you are married, but if you are "just living together," the rules aren't so defined in everyone's mind. Bringing these patterns to marriage is destabilizing.
- Cohabitation does not foster the development of strong communication and conflict resolution patterns. In cohabitation, if things aren't going your way with your partner, you can just walk away or ignore the problems. In addition, patterns of leaving and separating that develop during cohabitation can undermine marriage later on.
- Research shows that extended family is much more likely to socially and financially support married children than cohabiting children. Relatively weak relationships between cohabiting couples and their partner's families, in which live-in boyfriends or girlfriends aren't treated as real members of the family, can carry into the future marriage.

What works?

In their 2003 National Marriage Project report, David Popenoe and Barbara Defoe Whitehead recommend:

- Consider not living together at all before marriage. Cohabitation does not appear to be helpful as a try-out for marriage, and may be harmful.
- Do not make a habit of cohabiting. Be aware of the dangers of multiple living together experiences, both for your own sense of wellbeing and for your chances of establishing a strong lifelong partnership. Contrary to popular wisdom, you do not learn to have better relationships from multiple failed relationships.
- Limit cohabitation to the shortest possible period of time. The longer you live together with a partner, the more likely it is that the low-commitment ethic of cohabitation will take hold.
- Do not cohabit if children are involved. Cohabiting parents break up at a much higher rate than married parents and the effects can be devastating to children. Children living in cohabiting unions with stepfathers or mother's boyfriends are at higher risk of sexual abuse and physical violence, including lethal violence, than children living with married biological parents.

Other helpful ideas from research:

Get to know one another well in a variety of situations. Spend time together in many settings and go on a variety of dates that will allow you to know your partner well. Dates should allow you to experience your partner in fun situations, family oriented situations, religious situations, serious situations, educational situations, and in situations related to hobbies each person might have. Spend time talking about each others' views on politics, children, family, finances, intimacy, your personality, religion, gender roles, home management, chores, careers, hopes, dreams and aspirations for the future.

Take a marriage preparation course. Cohabitation increases the chance of divorce by 46%; while taking a marriage preparation class or seminar **reduces the rate of divorce by 50%.**

Participation in these programs has been shown to:

- Improve the overall relationship.
- Improve commitment to the relationship.
- Increase acceptance of partners.
- Decrease disagreements.
- Decrease negative emotions.
- **Cut the divorce rate by half.**

More Resources

Brown, S. L. & Booth, A. (1996). Cohabitation versus marriage: A comparison of relationship quality. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 58, 668-678.

Bumpass, L. L. (1995). *The Declining Significance of Marriage: Changing Family Life in the United States*. (NSFH Working Paper No. 66.) Center for Demography and Ecology: University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Hall, D. & Zhao, J. (1995). Cohabitation and divorce in Canada: Testing the selectivity hypothesis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 421-427.

Krishnan, B. (1998). Premarital cohabitation and marital disruption. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 28, 157-170.

Lillard, L.; Brien, M.; Waite, L. (1995). Premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital dissolution: A matter of self-selection? *Demography*, 32, 437-457.

Nock, S. L. (1995). A comparison of marriages and cohabiting relationships. *Journal of family Issues*, 16, 53-76.

Popenoe, D. & Whitehead, B. D. (2003). *Should We Live Together? What Young Adults Need to Know about Cohabitation before Marriage: A Comprehensive Review of Recent Research, 2nd Edition*. National Marriage Project. Also available at <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/swlt2.pdf>