

Living Together Before Marriage: As Good as Advertised?



Ken Himes, Executive Director

"Doesn't it make sense to try it out first, to see if it's going to work, before you commit?"

This question, asked by a local high school student in a class I spoke in, seems to reflect the prevailing view today. In the last 35 years, the rate at which couples cohabit prior to marriage has gone from 2.5% to over 60%. The average age for first marriage has risen from 20.8 for women and 23.2 for men, to 25.3 and 27.1, respectively.

Clearly, couples are taking their time to decide whom to marry, and are living together while they're deciding. Given our society's high divorce rate, why wouldn't a young person want to find some way to be more certain that his or her marriage will work?

So that student is not alone in his thinking. But that didn't stop me from trying to change it.

I pointed out that couples who live together have a divorce rate that is 50% higher than those who don't. Of 100 couples who live together, only 55 will actually get married, and of those 55, only 12 will still be married a decade later, according to the University of Wisconsin's National Survey of Families and Households. Yet 90% of the women in those cohabitations expect to marry their partners. Nearly half will experience what some call "premarital divorce." Sad.

So why doesn't cohabitation work as well as advertised?

Dr. Scott Stanley, an expert on marriage and

commitment at the University of Denver, suggests two possible reasons. First, couples who cohabit are likely to be more liberal in their views about marriage, and are more likely to consider divorce as an option. A more subtle but significant reason may well be the second: since the commitment level in cohabitation is less than in marriage, couples may not bond as deeply. After all, why would you bare your soul completely to someone who might leave you if they really knew you?

None of this seemed to convince my young student friend. But that won't stop Friends of the Family from continuing to try.

"What you need to know about living together" and "10 things teens should know about marriage" are two full-color brochures that we make available at our Healthy Relationships classes in area high schools. If you would like a copy, please call us at 757-1761 or email friends@fofm.org.