

How Modern Approaches to Relationships Decrease the Likelihood of a Healthy Marriage

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Most unmarried Americans say they would like to marry, yet marriage rates in the United States have decreased steadily during the past several decades.

Delaying marriage, experimenting with multiple sexual partners, and living together before marrying contribute to this decline.

Society should work to ensure that young adults understand what leads to healthy, stable marriages and help to prepare them to build such relationships.

Most unmarried Americans say they would like to marry, and most teenagers say that having a healthy marriage someday is very important to them.¹ Yet marriage rates in the United States have decreased steadily during the past several decades.

Marriage is one of the strongest factors associated with adult happiness and is also associated with many other benefits, including increased household income, better health, and greater psychological well-being. Children raised in married-parent families are at far lower risk for negative outcomes compared to children raised in non-intact homes.² The desire for connection and love is alive, and its benefits are many, but fewer people are marrying, and the share of people expected to marry continues to decline.³

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One of the factors behind the drop in the marriage rate is that today's culture promotes an approach to relationships that is often antithetical to the formation of healthy marriages. Today's prevailing cultural wisdom is that people should delay marriage, focus on individual development, experiment with multiple sexual partners, and live together before marrying. This approach fosters poorer relationship quality, greater marital instability, and reduced rates of marriage.

There has been considerable discussion with respect to loneliness and increasing levels of disconnection and purposelessness in society today.⁴ Single adults are more likely to experience loneliness compared to their married counterparts, and decreasing levels of marriage likely will mean more lonely Americans.⁵

Leaders in a variety of settings—parents, educators, clergy, policymakers, and others—should work to ensure that young adults understand what leads to healthy, stable marriages. They should also help young adults prepare for and build healthy marriages and families, which are still the most fundamental units of society.

Trends in Marriage

Most Americans marry or hope to marry. For the past several decades, the share of high school seniors saying that having a good marriage and family life is extremely important has remained high at around 80 percent for young women and about 70 percent for young men.⁶ As of 2013, 95 percent of Americans had been married, were married, or said they wanted to wed.⁷ There has been some decline in the share of high school seniors who place a high priority on marriage, but the desire for marriage remains quite strong. Americans continue to rank family and children as the factors that provide the greatest meaning in life.⁸

Nevertheless, U.S. marriage rates have dropped steadily. Up until about 1980, 90 percent of adults had married by their mid-30s. Today, only 60 percent of adults are married at that age.⁹ The age at first marriage continues to rise, and as marriage is delayed, fewer people end up getting married.¹⁰ It is projected that one-third of Gen Zers will not marry by the time they reach age 45 or may never marry.¹¹

There are benefits to some increase in age at first marriage. Those who wed in their teens are significantly more likely to divorce compared to those who wait until their early to mid-20s to marry. The decline in teen marriages during the past several decades has contributed to the decrease in divorce in recent decades.¹² Delay in marriage also reflects increased

educational and career opportunities, particularly for women. This has opened doors for more people, especially women, to receive higher education, develop talents, and contribute to their communities, both in the labor force and otherwise.

But the approach to relationships today says that marriage should happen only when people have completed a list of personal achievements that seems continually to grow. Education, career, travels, and hobbies are prioritized for young adults, while marriage often takes a back seat.

The delayed path to marriage that contemporary culture broadly supports is one that frequently includes multiple sexual partners and cohabitation outside of marriage. For much of the population, the delayed path to marriage also means unwed childbearing. These are all factors that decrease the likelihood of a strong marriage.

Deprioritizing Marriage

In articles providing advice to young adults, the list of what to accomplish during this stage of life includes things like finding your passions, traveling, building a career, investing financially, volunteering, establishing healthy habits, and strengthening friendships.¹³ It is difficult to find much, if anything, suggesting that young adults should be preparing for or seeking marriage. The dominant cultural message is that young adulthood is a time to explore, have fun, focus on oneself, and build a career. This path is to be pursued alone, with friends, or maybe with a boyfriend or girlfriend. Getting an education, establishing good habits, and starting a career are important goals for young adults, but the culture fails to acknowledge the importance and benefits of marriage.

Nor do parents seem to put a lot of emphasis on marriage for their children. In a 2023 Pew survey, only around 20 percent of parents said it is extremely or very important that their children get married, and about the same share said it is extremely or very important that their children have children of their own. In contrast, nearly 90 percent of parents in the survey said it is extremely or very important that their children are financially independent, and a similar share said it is extremely or very important that their children have jobs they enjoy when they grow up.¹⁴

Similarly, in another 2023 Pew survey, only around a quarter of respondents said being married is extremely or very important for having a happy life, and about the same number said having children is extremely or very important for having a happy life. In contrast, 71 percent of respondents

said having a job or career they enjoy is extremely or very important for having a happy life, and 61 percent said having close friends is extremely or very important for having a happy life.¹⁵

Underpinnings of Today's Relationship Philosophy

What has driven the shift away from a culture in which marriage and family were at the center of adult life to a culture that prioritizes individual pursuits? One contributing factor is likely elevated levels of divorce. As divorce rates increased during the 1970s and 1980s, more recent generations of young adults saw the breakup of their parents' marriages.¹⁶ Exposure to parental divorce is associated with lower confidence in marriage and may encourage people either to avoid marriage altogether or to approach marriage with the mindset that a person must be sufficiently stable financially to go it alone if the marriage ends.¹⁷

But high divorce rates in the 1970s and 1980s were a product of a more individualistic view of marriage that had been pushed for decades before the mid- to late 20th century.¹⁸ These beliefs were more fully realized around 1960 with the advent of the birth control pill, which facilitated major increases in sexual activity outside of marriage. This allowed people to separate sexual relationships from childbearing, and thus from the bonds of marriage relationships, more easily than had been possible when social norms required that children be born to married parents.¹⁹ Liberalized abortion laws resulting from the Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision²⁰ also helped to facilitate the disconnection between sex and marriage by giving people a backup plan they could follow if birth control failed or they failed to use birth control.

Delayed Marriage

With the disconnection of sex, marriage, and childbearing, people are encouraged to delay the commitments and responsibilities of family formation. Today's culture tells people to put off marriage until they have accomplished multiple personal achievements. The list of expected accomplishments before marriage includes completing an education, establishing a career, purchasing a home, dating, and having sexual relationships with multiple people as well as being able to afford an elaborate wedding.²¹ While it is important to have some things in place before marrying, today's prerequisites for marriage include accomplishments, such as buying a home and being established in a career, that previous

generations would have expected to achieve only once they were well into establishing their families.

As noted earlier, some delay in marriage has its benefits, but there are downsides too. The risk of divorce increases for those who wait until after their late 20s to wed.²² Currently, the median age at first marriage is above 28 for women and above 30 for men, which means that many people wait until after their late 20s to marry.²³ Also, as marriage is delayed, the less likely people are to get married at all.²⁴

Having an earlier “marital horizon” is also associated with less risky behavior, so encouraging later marriage may foster poorer behavior and behavior that can stand in the way of forming a healthy marriage down the road. College students who have a closer “marital horizon” (those who expect to marry earlier) engage in fewer risky behaviors like binge drinking and permissive sexual activity compared to their peers with later marital horizons.²⁵ Approaching life and dating with a focus on building a marriage appears to orient people toward healthier behavior, and pushing marriage further off into adulthood may do the opposite.

Trends in Sexual Activity. One of the beliefs surrounding modern dating relationships is that non-marital sexual activity is acceptable and beneficial. The belief is that testing sexual compatibility in a relationship and having multiple sexual partners help people to know what they want and avoid marrying someone with whom they are sexually incompatible.²⁶

In reality, however, rather than helping to foster stronger marriages, having multiple premarital sexual partners is associated with poorer marital stability.²⁷ Any number of premarital sexual partners is associated with increased risk for divorce, but the risk increases as the number of sexual partners grows. Researchers Jesse Smith and Nicholas H. Wolfinger have found that those with between one and eight premarital sexual partners had about 150 percent greater likelihood of divorce compared to those with no premarital sexual partners and that those with nine or more partners had about triple the likelihood of divorce compared to those with no premarital sexual partners. The researchers controlled for multiple factors, including gender, religiosity, psychological attributes, and sexual attitudes, and were led to suggest that the link between premarital sexual activity and divorce is not simply due to personal differences between those who are more sexually active and those who are less sexually active before marriage.²⁸

Premarital sex is also associated with poorer relationship quality. Dean M. Busby, Jason S. Carroll, and Brian J. Willoughby have found that those who wait until marriage to become sexually active with their partner have significantly higher marital quality (greater relationship satisfaction, better

communication, higher sexual quality, and greater perceived stability) compared to those who become sexually involved with their partner before marrying.²⁹ Carroll has noted that “proper partner selection is often difficult for sexually involved couples who experience strong physical rewards with each other, as these rewards can cause them to ignore or minimize deeper incompatibilities in the relationship.”³⁰

Despite the link with poorer marital outcomes, sexual activity outside of marriage is nearly universal today with about 90 percent of men and women having ever engaged in premarital sex.³¹ The median number of sex partners among sexually experienced men and women ages 25–49 is 4.3 for women and 6.3 for men according to National Survey of Family Growth data from 2015–2019. Among women ages 25–49, 53 percent reported having five or more partners during their lifetimes; among men, 67 percent reported having five or more partners during their lifetimes, and 28 percent reported having 15 or more partners.³²

Cohabitation. As sexual activity has become the norm in dating relationships, people have increasingly lived together outside of marriage.³³ Cohabitation, or living together unwed, has become a common part of the dating process.

Cohabitation is a shaky path to marriage for several reasons. Despite a commonly held belief, cohabitation does not decrease the likelihood of divorce or increase the likelihood of a happy marriage.³⁴ Instead, a broad body of research shows that cohabitation is associated with poorer marital quality and stability.³⁵

Part of the reason for the link between cohabitation and poorer marital outcomes may be the ambiguous nature of cohabitation. Because couples often do not make a concrete decision to live together, and because living with a partner can make it harder to end a relationship, cohabitation may increase the likelihood that some couples who are not well-suited to one another end up marrying.³⁶ Living together before marriage may also change people’s views on marriage, reducing their positive attitudes toward marriage and increasing their acceptance of divorce.³⁷

Cohabitation can also keep people in a relationship that does not progress to marriage for longer than otherwise would be the case because of the greater constraints it creates (having to find a new place to live, dividing belongings, etc.). In other words, cohabitation can reduce other dating opportunities that might have greater potential for marriage. For most couples, moving in together is a matter of convenience and often not a deliberate relationship step to indicate greater commitment, despite the reality that it creates greater constraints on the relationship.³⁸

Research also suggests that more couples are staying in ambiguous cohabiting relationships today than in the past because cohabitation relationships have become less likely to transition to marriage, at least within several years of moving in together. Among those cohabiting from 2006–2013, only about 20 percent transitioned to marriage within five years. This is about half of the share of cohabiting relationships that transitioned to marriage among those cohabiting in 1983–1988.³⁹ About one-third of couples in both cohorts ended their relationships within five years.

Cohabiting relationships are far less stable than marriages, so it isn't that cohabitation has just become an alternative to marriage.⁴⁰ Rather, cohabitation seems to have become an alternative to dating, a way to have some of the benefits of marriage (i.e., pooling financial resources, sharing rent, convenience) but without the same level of commitment and stability that comes with it.⁴¹

Additionally, cohabitation has lengthened the path to marriage considerably for couples who do end up marrying.⁴² In the 1960s (and before), few couples lived together before marriage. By the 1970s, couples lived together for a median of a few months before getting married. As of the 2010s, couples spent a median of more than three years cohabiting before their weddings.⁴³

Family Complexity Created by Unwed Childbearing. As sexual activity and cohabitation outside of marriage have become common, unwed births have increased dramatically, particularly among Americans without a college education. Today, 40 percent of children are born to unwed mothers. Among those mothers with less than a college education, the majority of births are outside of marriage today.⁴⁴

Women who have children outside of marriage are less likely to marry compared to those who do not have an unwed birth, even controlling for factors like education.⁴⁵ This could be for a variety of reasons, but researchers suggest that it may be due to single mothers having less time to date, as well as to potential partners being disinterested in raising another man's children.⁴⁶ Unwed childbearing also creates greater relationship complexity if a parent does re-partner or remarry (blending families in a new relationship), which can be stressful.⁴⁷ There also are substantial marriage penalties in the welfare system that incentivize lower-income mothers to remain unmarried.⁴⁸

Cultivating a Culture of Strong and Healthy Marriages

Today's relationship culture often makes it harder for people to form and build healthy relationships and marriages. Although most people do marry,

a growing number are struggling to form healthy marriages, leaving more people disconnected and unable to fulfill their desire for a happy family life, especially having children. The culture should encourage norms that direct people toward healthy, stable marriages rather than continuing to promote behaviors that are antithetical to this goal.

This will begin at home. Parents often emphasize financial and career success for their children but may neglect encouraging their children to prepare for and prioritize marriage. Parents should help their children to understand what factors contribute to healthy dating and marriage relationships. Parents should also refrain from discouraging their adult children from marrying in their early or mid-twenties if their children find someone with whom they can build a healthy marriage.

Schools should support parents in these efforts by providing education to high schoolers on healthy dating and marriage relationships. These courses should include information on avoiding poor relationship decisions and the consequences of having multiple sexual partners in addition to teaching students about the benefits of healthy marriages and what a healthy marriage looks like. Curricula should also teach youth how to avoid unhealthy and abusive dating relationships, as well as how to build and cultivate friendship in dating, and provide instruction in such skills as conflict management, communication, and budgeting. Some states have offered courses like this in their high schools. Utah, for example, offers its Adult Roles and Responsibilities curriculum, and Texas has implemented its PAPA (Parenting and Paternity Awareness) program.⁴⁹

Colleges and universities could help to foster healthy relationships and marriages by offering relationship education courses or workshops. Some schools provide this education as an individual course, as part of another course, or through lecture series.⁵⁰

Churches and other houses of worship should also provide healthy marriage and relationship education to young adults as well as education and mentoring for premarital and married couples. While some churches provide marriage and family life education, many have no formal marriage education course or ministry.⁵¹ Religious organizations could also sponsor activities that give young adults opportunities to meet and socialize in environments that support healthy dating relationships.

Conclusion

Today's culture places heavy emphasis on personal development, education, and career success but often neglects the importance of healthy

relationships and marriages. Yet, a healthy marriage is one of the greatest sources of happiness and well-being. Helping people to succeed in building and sustaining healthy marriages is a pathway to greater happiness, connection, and human flourishing.

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