

# How Relationships Are Impacted by Cohabitation

## Introduction

Have you ever snuck a look at a gift you were going to receive ahead of time (e.g. finding a birthday present and looking at it before your birthday)? Did knowing ahead of time spoil the surprise on the day you were to receive it? Living together is like opening a wonderful gift ahead of its intended time. It is unwrapping a special gift, peeking at it too soon, and then having to live with the consequences.

Cohabitation rates have skyrocketed since the 1960s when Western cultures began to cast off traditional sexual mores, but the same period also saw a correlating upsurge of divorce. This document looks at how a couple may have decided to cohabit, issues that this has raised, and the impact cohabitation has had on their relationship.

## Tips for Discussing Cohabitation

While virtually all studies show that cohabitation is detrimental to the marriage relationship, about two thirds of married couples cohabit before marriage in the United States. Here are some relationship areas that researchers have found to be impacted by cohabitation.

Note that some recent studies<sup>1</sup> have yielded conflicting results for *engaged* couples that live together but have a specific wedding date scheduled. We recommend that mentors always address this topic from both a spiritual perspective and a relational perspective. Even if there wasn't such a negative effect on couples, cohabitation is still morally wrong.

## Higher Break up or Divorce Rates - The Myth of "Testing the Relationship" First

Today, a majority of young people believe that living together first is helpful in determining if a marriage is likely to last. Nothing could be further from the truth. While it might seem reasonable to "try the shoe on before deciding if you'll buy it," it's impossible to "practice" permanence. Marriages aren't shoes. Shoes can be thrown away without anyone getting hurt.

By its very nature, trying out a relationship through cohabitation results in a self-serving, performance based relationship. That's a far cry from the commitment-based, covenant relationship of a true marriage.

When cohabiting, couples usually focus on obtaining satisfaction *from* the other person. Marriage requires spouses to focus on providing satisfaction *for* the other person and receiving satisfaction as a byproduct.

- 1) Living together sets up a couple for failure. Cohabitation increases the divorce rate of those who eventually marry to about 65%.<sup>2</sup> Others estimate the increase in divorces after cohabitation at 50 to 100% higher than for couples who have not lived together.<sup>3</sup> This effect was noted in studies conducted in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and several European countries.<sup>4</sup> Why is this so? Cohabiting couples fail to realize that what is *not* being tested is commitment—the very glue that holds a marriage together.
- 2) The risks are even greater for African-American couples. As reported in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 70% of both white and black cohabiters believed they would eventually marry their partner. In reality, only 60% of whites and less than 20% of black cohabiters eventually married.<sup>5</sup>
- 3) For those couples living together, the question is not will they stay together, but how long will it be before they break up. Out of 100 cohabiting couples, 40 break up before getting married, and (with higher divorce rates) 45 of the 60 who do marry get divorced. This leaves only 15 of 100 couples still together ten years later. Cohabitation isn't a "trial marriage" but rather a "trial divorce."<sup>6</sup>
- 4) A University of Western Ontario study of over 8,000 ever-married men and women found a direct relationship between cohabitation and divorce. It was determined that cohabitation "has a direct negative impact on subsequent marital stability," because living in such a union "undermines the legitimacy of formal marriage" and "reduces commitment of marriage."<sup>7</sup>
- 5) Dr. Scott Stanley from the University of Denver reported in his book, *The Power of Commitment*, that "men were less dedicated in their marriages if they had lived with their partners before marriage."<sup>8</sup> If a couple lives together before marriage, both partners are more likely to cheat on the other after marriage.
- 6) The longer the cohabitation experience, the more likely married individuals are to question the value of marital permanence. Couples who do not cohabit prior to marriage, on the other hand, are more likely to accept that various small stressors are part of the normal cost of commitment to marital permanence.<sup>9</sup>

## **Adverse Psychological Impact**

- 1) Cohabiting women have rates of depression three times higher than married women (National Institute for Mental Health).<sup>10</sup> The longer couples cohabit, the greater the likelihood of depression.<sup>11</sup>
- 2) A study by the National Council on Family Relations (n=309 newlywed couples) found those who cohabited were less happy in marriage.<sup>12</sup>
- 3) Our discussions with cohabiting couples indicate that women tend to view living together as a stepping stone to marriage while the appeal to their male partners were the conveniences of readily available sex and shared expenses. This difference in perspective often leads to grave disappointment to cohabiting women.

## **Reduced Communication**

- 1) Dr. Catherine Cohan and Stacey Kleinbaum of Pennsylvania State University interviewed 92 couples married less than 2 years and found that those who lived together for *just one month* before marriage displayed poorer communication and problem-solving skills than those who did not live together. “In general, they discovered that those who lived together before marriage were more verbally aggressive, more hostile, and less supportive than those who waited until marriage to live together. The problem, according to the authors, could be that those living together without the benefit of marriage have less commitment to one another and so they don't work at their marriage as much. They summed up their research by saying, ‘We just know that people who lived together first had poorer communication skills.’”<sup>13</sup>
- 2) 60% of those who had cohabited before marriage were more verbally aggressive, less supportive of one another, and more hostile than the 40 % of spouses who had not lived together.<sup>14</sup>
- 3) People who lived together before marriage have more negative communication in their marriages than those who did not live together.<sup>15</sup>

## **Reduced Relationship Quality**

- 1) Cohabitation is associated with lower levels of relationship satisfaction.<sup>16</sup>
- 2) Cohabitation is associated with higher perceived relationship instability.<sup>17</sup>
- 3) Cohabitation is associated with lower levels of dedication to the partner for both men and women.<sup>18</sup>
- 4) Conventional wisdom says it is acceptable to have a “trial period” to “test drive a car before you buy it.” For marriage, however, just the opposite is true! “A newly married couple makes a more deliberate effort to accommodate each other because they know their relationship will be for life.
- 5) They want to build compatibility, not test it.”<sup>19</sup> As Proverbs 14:12 reminds us, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.”
- 6) The longer couples live together before marriage, the earlier disillusionment develops in the marital relationship along with lower the marital quality and commitment.<sup>20</sup>

## **Increased Aggression**

- 1) Cohabitation is associated with greater likelihood of domestic aggression.<sup>21</sup>
- 2) A woman who lives with a man is three times more likely to be physically abused than a married woman, and if the cohabitating couple breaks up, the woman is 18 times more likely to be harmed than a married woman.<sup>22</sup>
- 3) Physical intimacy is a mistaken attempt to quickly build emotional bridges, but relationships built on such an inadequate foundation eventually collapse. A study at Penn State University comparing the relationship qualities of 682 cohabiters and 6,881 married couples, 19 to 48 years of age, found that cohabiters argue, shout, and hit more often than married couples.<sup>23</sup>
- 4) 60% of test subjects who had cohabited before marriage were more verbally aggressive, less supportive of one another, and more hostile than the 40% of spouses who had not lived together.<sup>24</sup>

## **Handling of Property**

Economic forces often contribute to a couple deciding to cohabit.

- 1) “A couple dates, they get sexually involved, and they find themselves spending a great deal of time together, including many nights. Sooner or later it dawns on them that they can do what they're doing much cheaper by sharing a residence and other living expenses. Their thinking has severed the moral connection between sex and marriage so the economic aspect of their relationship becomes the dominant consideration.”<sup>25</sup>

- 2) For most cohabiting couples, money and property tend to remain either 'his' or 'hers', rather than 'ours'. As a result, there is limited shared financial goal setting and planning with less importance placed on how he or she spends their own money. This mindset misses the economic synergy that is present in most marriages.

### **Adverse Impact on Children**

- 1) “Compared with children in married stepfamilies, children in cohabiting homes are more likely to fail in school, run afoul of the law, suffer from depression, do drugs, and—most disturbingly—be abused. (Note that children in intact, married homes do best on all these outcomes.) In the words of an Urban Institute study, “cohabiting families are not simply an extension of traditional married biological or blended families. Indeed, a recent federal report on child abuse found that children in cohabiting stepfamilies were 98% more likely to be physically abused, 130% more likely to be sexually abused, and 64% more likely to be emotionally abused, compared with children in married stepfamilies.”<sup>26</sup>
- 2) Research reported on a web site for husbands and fathers showed:<sup>27</sup>
  - Since cohabiting couples are more likely to break up than married couples, children are five times more likely to experience the trauma of a breakup of their parents (Journal of Marriage and Family).
  - Children are 50 times more likely to be abused when they are not living with two biological or adoptive parents (U.S. Census data).
  - Even factoring in socioeconomic and mental health differences, cohabiting couples’ children are twice as likely to suffer from psychiatric disorders, diseases, suicide attempts, alcoholism, and drug abuse.
  - Children are more likely to suffer the negative effects of poverty and low socioeconomic status.
  - Children are more likely to have difficulties forming healthy relationships.
- 3) Parents who cohabited have greater difficulty establishing moral guidelines for their children, especially when they reach the dating age.

### **Spiritual Issues**

Last but not least, the Bible says in Hebrews 13:4, “*Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed be kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.*” God has so much more in store for the couple who will stay pure in their earthly relationships. He also desires to forgive the couple who is willing to repent (turn away) of their sin, and start their relationship anew.

The biblical commitment is always to sexual purity as God's will for our lives. Pastor Jeff VanGoethem says, “The simple truth is that the practice of cohabitation does not follow God's wisdom on how to establish permanent love relationships. Little wonder they fail at the rate they do.”<sup>28</sup>

In couples we have mentored, there is a dramatic difference in the spiritual and relational vitality observed between those who have had sex outside marriage and those who enter marriage as virgins. Whether one looks at cohabitation from a biblical or secular perspective, the overwhelming evidence suggests that living together is not wise.

### **Footnotes**

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