



Written by [Kelly Holt](#) on April 21, 2012

Growing Evidence That Cohabitation Harms Chances of Successful Marriage

The article's author, Meg Jay, a clinical psychologist at the University of Virginia, noted that couples have expectations that living together will increase their chances of successful marriage, and are distraught to find otherwise:

Couples who cohabit before marriage (and especially before an engagement or an otherwise clear commitment) tend to be less satisfied with their marriages — and more likely to divorce — than couples who do not. These negative outcomes are called the cohabitation effect.



The [National Marriage Project](#) — a nonpartisan, nonsectarian initiative funded by private foundations, which provides research on the state of marriage in America — recently conducted a [survey](#) about different aspects of marriage. Its key finding about cohabitation? “The number of unmarried couples has increased dramatically over the past four decades. Most younger Americans now spend some time living together outside of marriage.”

According to Jay's *New York Times* article, cohabitation in the United States has increased by more than 1500 percent in the last 50 years, with more than 7.5 million unmarried couples now living together, compared with 450,000 in 1960. Jay opined that cohabitation was on the rise due to the sexual revolution of the '60s, widespread access to birth control, and the appeal of sharing expenses. Now, however, she notes that couples in their 20s add to those factors the additional view of cohabitation as prophylaxis — that is, they think it will help prevent divorce.

Jay notes,

In a [nationwide survey](#) conducted in 2001 by the National Marriage Project, then at Rutgers and now at the University of Virginia, nearly half of 20-somethings agreed with the statement, “You would only marry someone if he or she agreed to live together with you first, so that you could find out whether you really get along.” About two-thirds said they believed that moving in together before marriage was a good way to avoid divorce.

Although the article cited a March 2012 [report](#) from the Department of Health and Human Services saying that “the unfavorable connection between cohabitation and divorce does seem to be lessening,” couples still don't ask the right questions and don't talk about why they want to live together. Men and women, not surprisingly, have different agendas. Women are more likely than men to see it as a step on the way to marriage. Men, on the other hand, tend to use cohabitation as a way to avoid commitment or test relationships.

Frighteningly, Jay wrote that “the most recent research suggests that serial cohabitators, couples with differing levels of commitment and those who use cohabitation as a test are most at risk for poor



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relationship quality and eventual relationship dissolution.”

Couples often “slide” into cohabitation; one of Jay’s clients — a new bride less than a year into her marriage and already considering divorce — told her that it “just happened.” “We were sleeping over at each other’s places all the time. We liked to be together, so it was cheaper and more convenient. It was a quick decision but if it didn’t work out there was a quick exit.”

But getting out isn’t as easy as it is perceived to be. The high-stakes investments of time, emotion, economics, and the sharing of things such as pets make it difficult to break up, and it seems easier to just go ahead and get married.

An important point in Jay’s article is her conclusion gleaned from some of her clients that they wish they hadn’t committed so many of their younger years in relationships that would have lasted only months had they not been living together. Another significant conclusion? “Founding relationships on convenience or ambiguity can interfere with the process of claiming the people we love.”

Jay concluded her article with this statement: “I am not for or against living together, but I am for young adults knowing that, far from safeguarding against divorce and unhappiness, moving in with someone can increase your chances of making a mistake — or of spending too much time on a mistake. A mentor of mine used to say, ‘The best time to work on someone’s marriage is before he or she has one,’ and in our era, that may mean before cohabitation.”

[The Barna Group](#), a California research company, provides information and resources on topics it claims are at the “intersection of faith and culture.” Accordingly, it has published [surveys](#) on the matter of cohabitation, finding the following:

Government statistics and a wealth of other research data have shown that cohabitation increases the likelihood of divorce, yet cohabiting is growing in popularity. Studies showing the importance and value of preparing for marriage seem to fall on deaf ears. America has become an experimental, experience-driven culture. Rather than learn from objective information and teaching based on that information, people prefer to follow their instincts and let the chips fall where they may. Given that tendency, we can expect America to retain the highest divorce rate among all developed nations of the world.

Most alarming to those in favor of chastity until marriage, these increased divorce rates will likely induce the children of divorce to repeat the patterns set by their parents, making it probable that cohabitation and divorce are here to stay.



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