

The Top Ten Myths of Marriage

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1. Marriage benefits men much more than women.

Contrary to earlier and widely publicized reports, recent research finds men and women to benefit about equally from marriage, although in different ways. Both men and women live longer, happier, healthier and wealthier lives when they are married. Husbands typically gain greater health benefits while wives gain greater financial advantages.¹

2. Having children typically brings a married couple closer together and increases marital happiness.

Many studies have shown that the arrival of the first baby commonly has the effect of pushing the mother and father farther apart, and bringing stress to the marriage. However, couples with children have a slightly lower rate of divorce than childless couples.²

3. The keys to long-term marital success are good luck and romantic love.

Rather than luck and love, the most common reasons couples give for their long-term marital success are commitment and companionship. They define their marriage as a creation that has taken hard work, dedication and commitment (to each other and to the institution of marriage). The happiest couples are friends who share lives and are compatible in interests and values.³

4. The more educated a woman becomes, the lower are her chances of getting married.

A recent study based on marriage rates in the mid-1990s concluded that today's women college graduates are more likely to marry than their non-college peers, despite their older age at first marriage. This is a change from the past, when women with more education were less likely to marry.⁴

5. Couples who live together before marriage, and are thus able to test how well suited they are for each other, have more satisfying and longer-lasting marriages than couples who do not.

Many studies have found that those who live together before marriage have less satisfying marriages and a considerably higher chance of eventually breaking up. One reason is that people who cohabit may be more skittish of commitment and more likely to call it quits when problems arise. But in addition, the very act of living together may lead to attitudes that make happy marriages more difficult. The findings of one recent study, for example, suggest "there may be less motivation for cohabiting partners to develop their conflict resolution and support skills." (One important exception: cohabiting couples who are already planning to marry each other in the near future have just as good a chance at staying together as couples who don't live together before marriage).⁵

6. People can't be expected to stay in a marriage for a lifetime as they did in the past because we live so much longer today.

*Unless our comparison goes back a hundred years, there is no basis for this belief. The enormous increase in longevity is due mainly to a steep reduction in infant mortality. And while adults today can expect to live a little longer than their grandparents, they also marry at a later age. The life span of a typical, divorce-free marriage, therefore, has not changed much in the past fifty years. Also, many couples call it quits long before they get to a significant anniversary: half of all divorces take place by the seventh year of a marriage.*⁶

7. Marrying puts a woman at greater risk of domestic violence than if she remains single.

*Contrary to the proposition that for men "a marriage license is a hitting license," a large body of research shows that being unmarried—and especially living with a man outside of marriage—is associated with a considerably higher risk of domestic violence for women. One reason for this finding is that married women may significantly underreport domestic violence. Further, women are less likely to marry and more likely to divorce a man who is violent. Yet it is probably also the case that married men are less likely to commit domestic violence because they are more invested in their wives' wellbeing, and more integrated into the extended family and community. These social forces seem to help check men's violent behavior.*⁷

8. Married people have less satisfying sex lives, and less sex, than single people.

*According to a large-scale national study, married people have both more and better sex than do their unmarried counterparts. Not only do they have sex more often but they enjoy it more, both physically and emotionally.*⁸

9. Cohabitation is just like marriage, but without "the piece of paper."

*Cohabitation typically does not bring the benefits—in physical health, wealth, and emotional wellbeing—that marriage does. In terms of these benefits cohabitants in the United States more closely resemble singles than married couples. This is due, in part, to the fact that cohabitants tend not to be as committed as married couples, and they are more oriented toward their own personal autonomy and less to the wellbeing of their partner.*⁹

10. Because of the high divorce rate, which weeds out the unhappy marriages, people who stay married have happier marriages than people did in the past when everyone stuck it out, no matter how bad the marriage.

*According to what people have reported in several large national surveys, the general level of happiness in marriages has not increased and probably has declined slightly. Some studies have found in recent marriages, compared to those of twenty or thirty years ago, significantly more work-related stress, more marital conflict and less marital interaction.*¹⁰

- ¹ The research on this topic is reviewed in Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000): Ch. 12
- ² Carolyn Pape Cowan and Philip A. Cowan, *When Partners Become Parents: The Big Life Change for Couples* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Jay Belsky and John Kelly, *The Transition to Parenthood* (New York: Dell, 1994); Tim B. Heaton, "Marital Stability Throughout the Child-rearing Years" *Demography* 27 (1990):55-63; Linda Waite and Lee A. Lillard, "Children and Marital Disruption" *American Journal of Sociology* 96 (1991):930-953
- ³ Finnegan Alford-Cooper, *For Keeps: Marriages the Last a Lifetime* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998); Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee. *The Good Marriage* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995); Robert Lauer and Jeanette Lauer, "Factors in Long-Term Marriage" *Journal of Family Issues* 7:4 (1986): 382-390
- ⁴ Joshua R. Goldstein and Catherine T. Kenney, "Marriage Delayed or Marriage Forgone? New Cohort Forecasts of First Marriage for U. S. Women" *American Sociological Review* 66 (2001):506-519
- ⁵ Alfred DeMaris and K. Vaninadha Rao, "Premarital Cohabitation and Marital Instability in the United States: A Reassessment" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54 (1992):178-190; Pamela J. Smock, "Cohabitation in the United States" *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000); William G. Axinn and Jennifer S. Barber, "Living Arrangements and Family Formation Attitudes in Early Adulthood" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59 (1997):595-611; Susan L. Brown, "The Effect of Union Type on Psychological Well-Being: Depression Among Cohabitors Versus Marrieds" *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 41 (2000):241-55; Catherine L. Cohan and Stacey Kleinbaum, "Toward a Greater Understanding of the Cohabitation Effect: Premarital Cohabitation and Marital Communication" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 64 (2002): 180-192
- ⁶ Norval D. Glenn, "A Critique of Twenty Family and Marriage and Family Textbooks" *Family Relations* 46-3 (1997):197-208
- ⁷ Jan E. Stets, "Cohabiting and Marital Aggression: The Role of Social Isolation" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (1991):669-680; Richard J. Gelles, *Intimate Violence in Families*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: 1997); Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000): Ch. 11
- ⁸ Linda J. Waite and Kara Joyner, "Emotional and Physical Satisfaction with Sex in Married, Cohabiting, and Dating Sexual Unions: Do Men and Women Differ?" Pp. 239-269 in E. O. Laumann and R. T. Michael, eds., *Sex, Love, and Health in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Edward O. Laumann, J. H. Gagnon, R. T. Michael and S. Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994)
- ⁹ Stephen L. Nock, "A Comparison of Marriages and Cohabiting Relationships" *Journal of Family Issues* 16-1 (1995): 53-76; Amy Mehraban Pienta, et. al., "Health Consequences of Marriage for the Retirement Years" *Journal of Family Issues* 21-5 (2000):559-586; Susan L. Brown, "The Effect of Union Type on Psychological Well-Being: Depression Among Cohabitors versus Marrieds" *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 41(2000):241-255; Susan L. Brown and Alan Booth, "Cohabitation Versus Marriage: A Comparison of Relationship Quality" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (1996):668-678.
- ¹⁰ Norval D. Glenn, "Values, Attitudes, and the State of American Marriage" Pp. 15-33 in David Popenoe, D. Blankenhorn and J. B. Elshtain (eds.) *Promises to Keep: Decline and Renewal of Marriage in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996); Stacy J. Rogers and Paul R. Amato, "Is Marital Quality Declining: The Evidence from Two Generations" *Social Forces* 75 (1997); Stacy J. Rogers and Paul R. Amato, "Have Changes in Gender Relations Affected Marital Quality?" *Social Forces* 79 (2000):731-753; General Social Survey, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.