

Considerations on Cohabiting for Couples

Categories of Consideration

- (1) Sociological. The statistics and evidence of implications cohabitating prior to marriage has upon the relationship over time.
- (2) Psychological. Subtle impacts cohabitating has on each partner and the stage it sets for the long term relationship.
- (3) Spiritual. Clear Scriptural mandates and revealed passion on the subject by God creates a situation where cohabitating cannot be practiced without a individual

Sociological Considerations

- (1) Trends give pause if nothing else does:
 - a. Just 50% of couples who cohabit ever get married, despite 75% saying they intend to get married some day; 40% of couples breakup within the first few years of living together. Only after couples have survived living together more than 7 years do they begin to enter the “normal” range of marriage survival rates. What does this do to your rationale for living together?
 - b. There are obvious health concerns that are typical of any promiscuous or premarital sexual activity lifestyle, but due to the presumed monogamy within cohabitation it is not greatly magnified...except that in the case of failed cohabitating relationships there are certainly concerns for subsequent relationships.
 - c. 50% of non-cohabitating marriages fail in the US, with cohabitating couples having a 50% higher rate of divorce (i.e. 75%, reportedly as high as 85%) despite the rationale that a “preview” ensures better long-term outcomes. That means couples who do live together, determine they are compatible and then commit actually experience less stability in long-term outcomes than those who enter marriage never having cohabitated.
 - d. 1993 article in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* entitled “Premarital Cohabitation & Marital Instability” revealed sociological data that typical married couples who had cohabitated prior to marriage experience less satisfaction in their marriage than those that had not cohabitated.
 - e. Multiple studies/articles on outcomes-based evaluation of the premise that living together improves chances of happiness or works out better for the individuals involved consistently return results contrary to the assumption most couples enter a living together scenario with:
 - i. Balakrishnan, Rao, et. al., (1987) A hazard model analysis of the covariates of marriage dissolution in Canada. *Demography*, 24, 395-406.
 - ii. Booth and Johnson (1988). Premarital cohabitation and marital success. *Journal of Family Issues*, 9, 255-272.
 - iii. Bumpass and Sweet (1989). National estimates of cohabitation. *Demography*, 26, 615-625.

- iv. DeMaris and Leslie (1984). Cohabitation with the future spouse: Its influence upon marital satisfaction and communication. *Journal of Marriage and the family*, 46, 77-84.
- v. DeMaris and Rao (1992). Premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital stability in the United States: A reassessment. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54, 178-190.
- vi. Teachman and Polonko (1990). Cohabitation and marital stability in the United States. *Social Forces*, 69, 207-220.
- vii. Teachman, Thomas and Paasch (1991). Legal status and the stability of coresidential unions. *Demography*, 28, 571-486.
- viii. Thompson and Colella, (1992). Cohabitation and marital stability: Quality or commitment? *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54, 259-267

- (2) While the convenience of cohabitation is the ability to terminate the relationship without legal, religious or family requirements – this does not escape the couple from financial, material, emotional and relational headaches. Without the rule of law and religious sentiments, the process of extracting individual elements from a joint living situation is precarious at best.
- (3) Because cohabitation practices introduce a sense of approval on sharing many of the practices of marriage outside of any long-term commitment, the rate of infidelity by people cohabitating is notably higher. All the perks, half the security, higher risk and a high probability of long term effects.

Psychological Considerations

- (1) Stress. Studies in the US and UK have revealed that couples bear an underlying stress level that is higher while cohabitating than those that do not, setting a stage charged by stress entering marriage. (Coontz, *Marriage, a History*)
- (2) Mental Health of Men vs Women. Studies have shown that cohabitating, while less burdensome on the male psyche, creates a uniquely cumulative strain on a woman's mental health. Women who remained single and then got married demonstrate significantly better mental health than those who engage in cohabitating relationships, breakups and then eventual marriage. (based upon British Household Panel Survey of 10 years, 2,000 couples) This is partially due to the impact of failed relationships for women when cohabitation was engaged, bringing grief similar to that of divorce. Cohabitating and breaking up does not spare the woman from emotional grief – just the man.
- (3) Strained Meaning. Essentially, living together is “love on trial period status” meaning the relationship strives to express all the fullness of love and marriage without the commitment. This is an unnatural strain – for love to have an “exit clause,” a “best if sold by” condition that is supposed to then suddenly be cemented at a future wedding date just does not work. It supposes that everything being lived out in cohabitation is really an inspection and trial, unofficially being analyzed by each partner to determine if the other is “good enough” or they themselves are “ready.” It establishes a love that is based upon performance, despite a human longing to experience in marriage love that is not based upon performance. Ceremonies and a license do not easily undo this performance context built up over time.
- (4) Living together doesn't necessarily accelerate the “getting intimate” process. Despite the intuitive assumption behind cohabitation, jumping into a cohabitation situation often proves to muddy the intimacy and relational depth process rather than improve it. Certain aspects require time. Living separate requires more intentional communication, more intentional time allocation and disciplines that ultimately create the basis of a robust relationship. Living together can short-circuit those processes. You can live with someone in a college dorm for 2 years and not really know them – because the day-to-day is magnified while the depth of the person is hidden back at home and in years of development that is not readily discernable just because of proximity.

- (5) Women often report disappointment and disillusionment approaching their wedding when cohabitating. “What will really change?” is the common question. “It’s no big deal, now....it’s really just about making it official and ‘right’ in front of some people I guess...this feels anti-climactic...I always imagined it being more exciting than this?” These are first hand reports from bride-to-be’s. It’s ironic that cohabitating is intended to make breaking up easier than divorce but it ends up robbing the wedding of fullness of joy for the couple.
- (6) Some couples will experience sexual, romantic, and relational dysfunction following cohabitation as a result of repressed emotions of guilt. Most commonly the concentration of unaddressed guilt will reside within one partner to the point of manifesting in outbursts of resentment, inability to freely experience physical romance, or engage in couple-oriented social settings. A phenomenon of displaced shame or guilt creates angst within the relationship when there is nothing to be resolved now that everything is “officially appropriate” while feelings from the previous period begin to influence the bliss of the present/future.

Spiritual Considerations

- (1) Disobedience is a scary thing. One of the scariest things to be is a Christian - who has professed Jesus Christ as Lord, knows Scripture, is in Biblical Community - and yet willfully defies the call of God. A merciful, loving, gracious, forgiving God has historically shown amazing acceptance of ignorant, enslaved, struggling people. That same God has shown often times severe abhorrence for rebellious disobedience. Jesus said, “if you love Me, you will obey Me.” Willful disobedience is the very act of un-love towards Jesus. As Jesus walked the streets of Palestine, some of his most repeated words in the Gospels were, “Woe to you...” pointing to people who knew the truth but legalized, manipulated, avoided, corrupted or disregarded it. Woe to you is equally applicable to modern day saints who defy God as they were to 1st Century Pharisees.
- (2) Verses like Exodus 20:14, 2 Timothy 2:22, Ephesians 1:4, 1 Peter 1:14-16, 2 Peter 1:5-7, Ephesians 5:5, Hebrews 13:4, Philippians 4:8, 1 Thessalonians and Romans 16:19 speak for themselves. Christians are not lacking for Biblical references on the subject, so further explanation is not needed. Read the passages and let the Word of God do its own work.
- (3) In Genesis 2 we see introduced this concept of man and woman joining in marriage to become “one flesh.” Theologically, this “oneness” principle is deep. Ephesians 5 has Paul discussing the relationship of a man to a woman as a “deep and profound mystery” that God amazingly uses to reflect the Church and Christ to the world. In dissecting marriage into physical, psychological, spiritual and legal ingredients and experimenting with just certain components in cohabitation, the entire venture of Oneness is trivialized and endangered for the future state of marriage. Does someone really think by just avoiding the paper license of marriage that they can consume the marital feast of relational, spiritual and physical substances in a disposable fashion without invoking hazard and harm to the cosmic intent designed by God?
- (4) In Romans the question is raised, should we sin more knowingly drawing upon the grace of God? Paul gives a resounding “No way!” And yet, when Christians knowingly live in a state of cohabitation, the unspoken reason there is not spiritual panic is because they are presuming the grace of God...*He’ll forgive me, I’ll take my knocks and move on...* Jesus, while being tempted in the wilderness said “We are told not to test the Lord,” yet that is exactly the type of manipulation a Christian is engaging God in when then knowingly and sustainably sin – daring God to respond with judgment instead of grace. Regardless of how God responds in the present time, this behavior is a living contradiction for someone whose identity is in the resurrected Jesus Christ...it is a forced schizophrenic behavior, to intentionally live against the nature of our new life and calling in Christ.