

Must-Have Conversations

Intimacy/Cohabitation

On average, if cohabiting couples do marry, they have a 46% higher divorce rate.

As a courting or engaged couple, you have probably discussed where to draw the line about sexual intimacy before marriage. The Catholic Church teaches that every act of sexual intercourse is intended by God to express love, commitment and openness to life in the total gift of the spouses to each other. This total commitment is possible only in marriage.

As you move towards marriage, it's important to make sure that sexual intimacy builds on other kinds of intimacy and does not short circuit your knowing each other on many levels.

What are those other levels? John Van Epp, Ph.D. explains in his book, *How To Avoid Marrying a Jerk*, that a healthy sexual relationship comes in stages of bonding:

1. Knowledge of the other beyond the superficial
2. Trust in the other to be a person of integrity
3. Reliability of the other to be a person you can count on
4. Commitment to the other that is not temporary
5. Sexual Touch in which you give yourself fully to your beloved

Van Epp says the order is important. Couples should “never go further in one bonding area than you have gone in the previous.” The risk of disappointment and going beyond your safety zone will not bring you lasting happiness.

Steps leading to sexual intimacy, however, are not the whole of what intimacy is about. Long-married couples know that intimacy includes so much more than just the physical. The emotional intimacy of being able to share your most private and cherished thoughts is a pre-requisite for a fulfilling marriage. Knowing that you can be vulnerable and your spouse will not use sensitive information to hurt you is another form of intimacy. Realizing that your relationship does not depend on looks, talent, success, or perfection is a kind of intimacy that money cannot buy.

What about couples who live together before marriage? How does this impact a future marriage and ability to be intimate on more than just the sexual level? Given the high divorce rate, it would seem logical to live together before marriage in order to know your partner more fully.

As intuitive as this assumption sounds, current research does not bear it out. Studies (Whitehead and Popenoe, 2002) show that:

- Women in cohabiting relationships, and their children, are more likely to be abused.
- Cohabiting couples have lower levels of happiness and wellbeing compared to married couples.

Why does living together before marriage to prevent divorce end up harming one's marriage? The answer has to do with the dynamics of commitment. Cohabiting before marriage generally means that at least one partner is not ready to commit to a permanent relationship. One or both partners are holding something back. They might be censoring their words and actions to put their best foot forward, lest

they lose the relationship. In other words, what you see may not be what you end up getting. Communication may not be completely honest. For example, the couple may avoid sensitive subjects that they fear will disturb the relationship. One partner may give in unduly out of fear that the other will leave.

Another pitfall of cohabiting is “low commitment/high autonomy” relationships. This means that since the couple’s commitment to each other is not yet complete, each retains a degree of independence in the relationship. The longer this pattern continues the harder it is to make the transition to the high commitment needed for marriage.

Does this mean that cohabiting couples are doomed to misery and divorce? No, but it does give the thoughtful person cause to pause and re-evaluate. Whitehead and Popenoe recommend the following:

- Consider not living together at all before marriage. There is no evidence that cohabitators who eventually marry will have a stronger marriage than those who don’t live together. Instead, they may be at greater risk for divorce. Some studies indicate that those who live together with definite plans for marriage are at minimal risk; however, there are no positive effects from cohabiting.

- Do not make a habit of cohabiting. Be aware of the dangers of multiple living together experiences. Contrary to popular wisdom, multiple cohabiting experiences do not teach one how to have better relationships.

- Understand the danger of lengthy cohabitation. The longer you live together with a partner, the more likely that the low-commitment ethic of cohabitation will take hold, the opposite of what a successful marriage requires.

- Do not cohabit if children are involved. Cohabiting parents break up at a much higher rate than married parents. Moreover, children living in cohabiting unions with stepfathers or mothers’ boyfriends are at higher risk of sexual abuse and physical violence.