



Recipe
for
HEARTBREAK

*Living
Together
Outside of
Marriage*



**ROCKY MOUNTAIN
FAMILY COUNCIL**

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Many who fancy themselves as being enlightened preach the acceptance of cohabitation as a modern marriage strengthener. Can cohabiting insulate a couple from divorce? How common is it? Does it help build a strong foundation for a future marriage or does it undermine the possibility of marriage?

Rocky Mountain Family Council contracted with Wirthlin Worldwide, a nationally recognized polling firm, to poll a random sample of over 400 Coloradans to determine their beliefs about topics relating to marriage and divorce, including cohabitation. The margin of error for a sample of this size is plus or minus 4.9 percentage points in 95 out of 100 cases.

The survey found that just over one fifth of Colorado adults (21%) have ever been in a cohabiting relationship outside of marriage. Only 6 percent said they are currently “living with a significant other.”

Does living together lead to lifelong marriage?

Only 18 percent of those who have ever cohabited are currently married compared with 58 percent of all Colorado adults.

When asked if they plan to marry their significant other, 56 percent said yes and 32 percent said no. More men (60%) plan to marry their significant other than women (53%), but 47 percent of women don't expect to marry compared to 10 percent of the men. Thirty percent of men don't know.

How would you rate your sexual satisfaction?

Cohabited

7.4

Never Cohabited

7.9

0

2

4

6

8

10

Sixty-eight percent of those currently living together have known their significant other four years or more.

Scared by the past

Over one-third (34%) of those whose parents divorced have cohabited outside of marriage at some time compared to only 22 percent of respondents whose parents did not divorce. After seeing their own parents divorce, many people may have hoped that living together prior to marriage would help them to stave off divorce. However, other facts regarding divorce and prior cohabitation suggest a connection exists between them. Specifically, 41 percent of those currently divorced lived with someone outside of marriage at some point. In contrast, only 20 percent of those who have never been divorced lived with someone outside of marriage. Further, 37 percent of those who are not sure they would marry the same person again say they have cohabited before—only 17 percent of those certain they would marry the same person again have lived with someone outside of marriage.

Marriage fosters greater sexual satisfaction

Respondents who have cohabited were less sexually satisfied on average (7.4) compared to those who have never lived with someone before marriage (7.9). In fact, 44 percent of non-cohabiters rate their sexual satisfaction a nine or 10 compared to 34 percent of those who have cohabited. Additionally, 26 percent of those who have cohabited rated their sexual satisfaction a six or below compared to only 17 percent of non-cohabiters.

Those who have cohabited outside of marriage, naturally, are more likely to believe sexual experience before marriage is a positive thing (52%). Those who are currently married (69%) see abstinence before marriage as very important. Married women believe in abstinence before marriage more than married men (76%, compared to 62%). Singles (45%) and specifically single males (36%) are less inclined to believe abstinence before marriage is the right choice. In short, those more likely to commit themselves to their spouse tend to see the benefits of abstinence before marriage, whereas those living outside of marital vows see sexual experience as an important element to young people.

Added strength

Those who have never cohabited rate the strength of their relationship, on average, higher than those who have cohabited (9.0 and 8.5 respectively on a 10-point scale).



Strength of Relationship

Cohabited

8.5

Never Cohabited

9

More accepting of divorce

Coloradans who have cohabited are more likely to say that an unhappy couple with children should divorce than those who have never cohabited (57%, compared to 45%).

Finally, we find the same trend in terms of whether someone has ever considered divorce (31 percent of those who have considered divorce have cohabited at some point, whereas only 16 percent of those who have never considered divorce have ever cohabited). Thus, living together before marriage increases the likelihood of a lower level of commitment to the person one ultimately marries.

Other Studies

There is an ever-growing collection of data that sheds an unfavorable light on the living arrangement called cohabiting. The theory that couples can strengthen their relationships by living together before getting married is a fallacy. Instead of strengthening marriages, living together damages future marriages dramatically.

Your cheatin' heart

For example, if a woman lives with a man before marriage, she is more likely to cheat on him after marriage. In a recent study published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* researchers analyzed reported sexual relationships of 1,235 women, ages 20 to 37, and found that it was 3.3 times more

likely that a woman who had cohabited before marriage would have a secondary sex partner after marriage. The study also found that married women were “five times less likely to have a secondary sex partner than cohabiting women” and that “cohabiting relationships appear to be more similar to dating relationships than to marriage.”¹

Weaker than marriage

A recent study at Johns Hopkins University found that when couples choose to live together outside of wedlock, their relationship is something quite different from and significantly weaker than marriage. Researchers found specifically that most cohabitations end within two years and that “cohabitations are not informal marriages, but relationships formed by a looser bond.” The Johns Hopkins’ study went on to show that men and women looking for someone with whom to cohabit look for “characteristics such as education which can reflect a short-term ability to contribute to the relationship.” In contrast, men and women looking for a spouse pay more attention to “ascribed characteristics (such as age, and religion) that reflect long-term considerations.” The researchers concluded, “While cohabitators anticipate time together, married persons anticipate a lifetime.”²

Double the divorce

Couples who live together before their wedding day will likely be setting a court date for a divorce not long there after. In a study at the University of Western Ontario, sociologists investigated the relationship between cohabitation and divorce among Canadian couples. Through analysis of a national representative sample of over 8,000 men and women who have been married at some time, the sociologists established that “premarital cohabitators in Canada have over twice the risk of divorce ... when compared with noncohabitators.” It is possible, the researchers acknowledge, that living in a nonmarital union “can have a direct negative impact on subsequent marital stability,” perhaps because living in such a union “undermine[s] the legitimacy of formal marriage” and so “reduces commitment to marriage.” The researchers also see something more than coincidental in the parallel rise in premarital cohabitation and marital instability.³

Male power

In an article in *Family Therapy*, sociologists at Northern State University uncovered in their study of college students that cohabitation puts women in a perilous position, often at the mercy of men who regard rape with a disturbing indifference. The study also found that those who are most likely to cohabit indicate “Lower levels of religiosity, more liberal attitudes toward sexual behavior, less traditional views of marriage, and less tradi-

tional views of sex roles.” All of these findings were expected and unsurprising. What the authors of the study did not expect to find, however, was that “those males who had cohabited displayed the most accepting views of rape.” Previous studies have found that men typically cohabit because of the “convenience” of the relationship, whereas women cohabit with “the expectation that cohabitation will lead to marriage”—thus creating a relationship in which men are likely to “hold a position of power” over women who expect much more from the relationship than they do. No wonder that “cohabiting couples report greater tension in the relationship” than do married couples. ⁴

Trial balloon popped

In a recent study published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, researchers found that only 30 percent of the sample cohabiting couples ultimately married, casting doubt on the value of so-called “trial marriages.” The study also showed that those couples who had cohabited before marriage were more likely to have led lives marked by promiscuity than couples who had never cohabited. Cohabitors broke with tradition in other ways, too. Husbands who had cohabited before wedlock were less likely to be employed full time and more likely to have “lower occupational status” than their counterparts who had not cohabited before marriage. Also, wives who had cohabited were more likely to be employed full time than their counterparts who had not. This pattern of employment may explain why married couples who had first cohabited report “less traditional division of domestic labor,” with husbands performing more “feminine chores” and wives performing more “masculine chores,” than couples who had not cohabited. The *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* article also agreed with earlier findings that couples who have cohabited are more likely to divorce than married couples who have never cohabited. ⁵

Endnotes

1 Renata Forste and Koray Tanfer, “Sexual Exclusivity Among Dating, Cohabiting and Married Women,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 [1996]: 33-47.

2 Robert Schoen and Robin M. Weinick, “Partner Choice in Marriages and Cohabitations,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55 [1993]: 408-414.

3 David R. Hall and John Z. Zhou, “Cohabitation and Divorce in Canada: Testing the Selectivity Hypothesis,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57 (1995): 421-427.

4 Terry Huffman et al., “Gender Differences and Factors Related to the Disposition Toward Cohabitation,” *Family Therapy* 21 (1994): 171-184.

5 John D. Cunningham and John K. Antill, “Cohabitation and Marriage: Retrospective and Predictive Comparisons,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 11 (1994): 77-93.

Studies cited in this brochure were obtained through summaries in *The Family in America: New Research* published by The Rockford Institute (800) 964-5819.