



Does Divorce Make People Happier?

For years, couples in bad marriages have assumed they had two choices: get some counseling and stay married and miserable or get a divorce and become happier. A study published by the Institute for American Values challenges the widespread false assumption that divorce is the answer.

It Takes Time

Researchers found that two-thirds of unhappily married spouses who stayed married reported that their marriages were happy five years later. In fact, the unhappiest marriages reported the most dramatic turnarounds: among those who rated their marriages as very unhappy, almost eight out of 10 who avoided divorce were happily married five years later.

Who helped these unhappy couples avoid divorce?

The study said that many husbands and wives named family members and clergy as those who discouraged divorce and/or who actively intervened. Both husbands and wives indicated through focus group interviews that they wanted to get help from someone who wanted their marriages to succeed. Marriage neutrality—often seen by counselors and attorneys as ethical—was not what unhappy spouses seeking help said they wanted.

Why doesn't divorce typically make adults happier?

The authors of the study explain that the decision to divorce sets in motion a large number of processes and events over which an individual has little control that are likely to deeply affect his or her emotional wellbeing. These include the response of one's spouse to divorce; the reactions of children; potential disappointments and aggravation in custody, child support, and visitation orders; new financial or health stresses for one or both parents; and new relationships and remarriage.

Forming Happier Bonds

A strong commitment to marriage as an institution, and a powerful reluctance to divorce, does not, as most people assume, keep unhappily married people locked in misery together. They help couples form happier bonds. "In most cases, a strong commitment to staying married not only helps couples avoid divorce, it helps more couples achieve a happier marriage," notes Denver-based research team member Scott Stanley.

We live in a culture of divorce and it has taken us over 30 years to get here. If spouses, churches and the government will take studies like this seriously and strongly commit to marriage as an institution, it may not take over 30 years to revive a culture of marriage.

Source: Waite, Linda L.; Browning, Don; Doherty, William J; Gallagher, Maggie; Luo, Le; and Stanley, Scott; Institute for American Values, [Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages](#), 2002.