

# COHABITATION

## THE CONSEQUENCES OF COHABITATION

Since God's Word forbids the living together of people without commitment in marriage, no one who does this can at the same time have a good conscience and be penitent. However, there are other consequences. These were spelt out in an article printed in *Christian News*, 12 Oct 1988, p. 9. The Old Testament and Gospel readings for today, which focus on Mary's virginity, remind us that one of the greatest gifts people can give to their partners on their wedding day is their own virginity

## COHABITATION A STUPID WAY TO START MARRIAGE

(By V Farmer, a clinical psychologist in Fargo, specialising in rural mental health and family business relationships)

"Suppose I told you that a certain behaviour, which you believe is a stepping-stone to marriage, actually results in only a slightly better than 50 per cent chance of marriage. Or that the same behaviour actually raises your chances of divorce by 50 per cent. Be honest; if you were interested in a successful marriage, you would have to admit that behaviour is a stupid thing. Right?"

"That behaviour is cohabitation. Half of all young adults getting married have had a living-together arrangement in their lives before marriage. Next to dual-career marriages, cohabitation has the biggest impact on family-life today. The rate of cohabiting couples has increased seven times from 1970 to 1988.

"Studies have consistently shown that cohabitation makes for poorer marriages and higher rates of divorce. Instead of a stepping stone to a happy marriage, it is a stumbling block.

"This divorce statistic is this high or higher for cohabiters in the United States, Canada, Australia, Great Britain, Sweden and other western industrialised economies. If the marriage survives seven years, then the divorce-rate levels off and becomes equal to the rate of divorce for couples who have not lived together before marriage.

"High status instead of a stigma. Living together has become a form of dating, which may or may not result in engagement or marriage. The younger persons are when they engage in premarital sex, the more likely it is they will engage in a cohabiting relationship. Once sex has become a part of dating, it is a small step to cohabitation.

"Living together before marriage used to be called 'shacking up'. Now it is cool - a rite of passage into adulthood. Instead of asking, "Who are you dating?" friends ask, "Who are you living with?" They see it as a socially desirable sign, a measure of social status. Perhaps we can trace this change of attitude to the declining influence of religion and family. Perhaps it is due to the rising influence of glamorising of premarital sex by the media.

"What is behind the higher divorce rate of cohabiting couples?"

"The bail-out factor. Cohabiting couples are a self-selected group of individuals who show a lower regard for commitment in marriage by their willingness to live together in the first place. They are more willing to see divorce as a solution when there are problems in their marriage. Serial cohabiters have an 80 per cent higher divorce rate once they marry.

"More affairs. As cohabiters, they are more likely to have secondary sexual partners" especially if they view their relationship as uncommitted. After marriage they are 3.3 times as likely to have an affair. Cohabiters have as much sex as married couples, but they are less satisfied. Marital commitment adds to emotional satisfaction and bonding and makes sex more meaningful and rewarding.

"High risk people. Those who choose a living-together arrangement are high-risk individuals who are less religious, more liberal, less educated, more individualistic, and more likely to bring addiction or personality-problems to the relationship. Women who cohabit are more likely to come from divorced families. The higher divorce-rate reflects the fact that cohabiters are a high-risk group for divorce.

Money fights. These couples begin their relationship by keeping their expenses separate. Once they marry, they have more arguments about money and have a hard time sharing their resources. Couples who don't live together before marriage generally begin pooling their resources from the day of their marriage.

"Poor problem-solving skills. The biggest problem cohabiting couples have after marriage is their poor skill in resolving conflicts. Because of the weak commitment during cohabitation, couples learn to avoid discussing important issues. Too much trouble at that point would rock the boat. So they don't. After marriage, they continue their poor habits.

“The “glow” is gone. The average length of time of cohabitation before marriage is 1.3 years. This is the couple’s infatuation phase of cohabitation. Their marriage begins with a period of disillusionment instead of a honeymoon period. Couples who live together think marriage is causing the problems, when in reality their normal adjustments of marriage aren’t balanced by the normal euphoric beginning.

“Early cohabitation stops development. Most couples begin cohabiting when they should be spending time developing their personalities and learning to be independent. Their developmental growth is halted by this early dependency on a relationship to meet their needs for happiness. They haven’t grown up enough to take responsibility for their own happiness. This is similar to teen-age couples who marry too young. They marry before their ability to give love and take responsibility is fully developed.

“More violence. Because they begin cohabiting when they don’t value the long-term nature of the relationship, individuals show less control of their impulses. Cohabiting couples have a much higher rate of domestic violence. When his happens, there is a 98 per cent carry-over of this violence into marriage.

“Heard enough? Do you really want to be stupid about your life and take unnecessary chances with happiness? If you do, you have been forewarned. The odds are against you.

“My thanks go to Barbara Markey, N.D., Ph. D at the Creighton Centre for Marriage and Family for her excellent overview and data on the status of cohabiting couples.”