

Ten Important Research Findings on Marriage and Choosing a Marriage Partner

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1. Marrying as a teenager is the highest known risk factor for divorce.

People who marry in their teens are two to three times more likely to divorce than people who marry in their twenties or older.

2. The most likely way to find a future marriage partner is through an introduction by family, friends, or acquaintances.

Despite the romantic notion that people meet and fall in love through chance or fate, the evidence suggests that social networks are important in bringing together individuals of similar interests and backgrounds, especially when it comes to selecting a marriage partner.

According to a large-scale national survey of sexuality, almost sixty percent of married people were introduced by family, friends, co-workers or other acquaintances.

3. The more similar people are in their values, backgrounds and life goals, the more likely they are to have a successful marriage.

Opposites may attract but they may not live together harmoniously as married couples. People who share common backgrounds and similar social networks are better suited as marriage partners than people who are very different in their backgrounds and networks.

4. Women have a significantly better chance of marrying if they do not become single parents before marrying.

Having a child out of wedlock reduces the chances of ever marrying. Despite the growing numbers of potential marriage partners with children, one study noted,

"having children is still one of the least desirable characteristics a potential marriage partner can possess." The only partner characteristic men and women rank as even less desirable than having children is the inability to hold a steady job.

5. Both women and men who are college educated are more likely to marry, and less likely to divorce, than people with lower levels of education.

Despite occasional news stories predicting lifelong singlehood for college-educated women, these predictions have proven false. Though the first generation of college educated women (those who earned baccalaureate degrees in the 1920s) married less frequently than their less well-educated peers, the reverse is true today. College educated women's chances of marrying are better than less well-educated women. However, the growing gender gap in college education may make it more difficult for college women to find similarly well-educated men in the future. This is already a problem for African-American female college graduates, who greatly outnumber African-American male college graduates.

6. Living together before marriage has not proved useful as a "trial marriage."

People who have multiple cohabiting relationships before marriage are more likely to experience marital conflict, marital unhappiness and eventual divorce than people who do not cohabit before marriage. Researchers attribute some but not all of these differences to the differing characteristics of people who cohabit, the so-called "selection

effect," rather than to the experience of cohabiting itself. It has been hypothesized that the negative effects of cohabitation on future marital success may diminish as living together becomes a common experience among today's young adults. However, according to one recent study of couples who were married between 1981 and 1997, the negative effects persist among younger cohorts, supporting the view that the cohabitation experience itself contributes to problems in marriage.

7. Marriage helps people to generate income and wealth.

Compared to those who merely live together, people who marry become economically better off. Men become more productive after marriage; they earn between ten and forty percent more than do single men with similar education and job histories. Marital social norms that encourage healthy, productive behavior and wealth accumulation play a role. Some of the greater wealth of married couples results from their more efficient specialization and pooling of resources, and because they save more. Married people also receive more money from family members than the unmarried (including cohabiting couples), probably because families consider marriage more permanent and more binding than a living-together union.

8. People who are married are more likely to have emotionally and physically satisfying sex lives than single people or those who just live together.

Contrary to the popular belief that married sex is boring and infrequent, married people report higher levels of sexual satisfaction than both sexually

active singles and cohabiting couples, according to the most comprehensive and recent survey of sexuality. Forty-two percent of wives said that they found sex extremely emotionally and physically satisfying, compared to just 31 percent of single women who had a sex partner. And 48 percent of husbands said sex was extremely satisfying emotionally, compared to just 37 percent of cohabiting men. The higher level of commitment in marriage is probably the reason for the high level of reported sexual satisfaction; marital commitment contributes to a greater sense of trust and security, less drug and alcohol-infused sex, and more mutual communication between the couple.

9. People who grow up in a family broken by divorce are slightly less likely to marry, and much more likely to divorce when they do marry.

According to one study the divorce risk nearly triples if one marries someone who also comes from a broken home. The increased risk is much lower, however, if the marital partner is someone who grew up in a happy, intact family.

10. For large segments of the population, the risk of divorce is far below fifty percent.

Although the overall divorce rate in America remains close to fifty percent of all marriages, it has been dropping gradually over the past two decades. Also, the risk of divorce is far below fifty percent for educated people going into their first marriage, and lower still for people who wait to marry at least until their mid-twenties, haven't lived with many different partners prior to marriage, or are strongly religious and marry someone of the same faith.

Research Sources

1. Teenage marriage and divorce

Depending on how the age categories are delineated and the length of the time period covered after marriage, teenage marriages have been found to be from two to three times more likely to end in divorce compared to marriages at older ages. See T. C. Martin and L. Bumpass "Recent Trends in Marital Disruption," *Demography* 26 (1989): 37-5. A recent government study found that 59% of marriages for women under age 18 end in divorce or separation within 15 years, compared with 36% of those married at age 20 or older. National Center for Health Statistics, *Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States*. (Hyattsville, MD: Department of Health and Human Services, 2002), http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_23/sr23_022.pdf

2. Finding a marriage partner

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3. People of similar backgrounds

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4. Single parents and marriage

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6. Cohabitation as trial marriage

See discussion in Claire M. Kamp Dush, Catherine L. Cohan, and Paul R. Amato, "The Relationship between Cohabitation and Marital Quality and Stability: Change Across Cohorts?" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65 (August 2003): 539-49. For a comprehensive review of the research on the relationship between cohabitation and risk of marital disruption, see David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Should We Live Together?*, 2nd Ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: The National Marriage Project, Rutgers University, 2002). See also William G. Axinn and Jennifer S. Barber, "Living Arrangements and Family Formation Attitudes in Early Adulthood," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 59 (1997): 595-611; William J. Axinn and Arland Thornton, "The Relationship Between Cohabitation and Divorce: Selectivity or Causal Influence," *Demography* 29-3 (1992): 357-374; Robert Schoen "First Unions and the Stability of First Marriages," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54 (1992): 281-84. However, living together with the person one intends to marry does not increase the risk of divorce. For first time cohabiting couples who eventually marry, living together is linked to the engagement process. See, for example, Jay Teachman, "Premarital Sex, Premarital Cohabitation and the Risk of Subsequent Marital Dissolution Among Women," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65 (May 2003): 444-455; Susan L. Brown and Alan Booth, "Cohabitation versus Marriage: A Comparison of Relationship Quality," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (1996): 668-678.

7. Marriage and wealth

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9. People from broken homes

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found that when the wife alone had experienced a parental divorce, the odds of divorce increased by more than half (59%), but when both spouses experienced parental divorce, the odds of divorce nearly tripled (189%). Paul R. Amato, "Explaining the Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 58 (August, 1996): 628-640. Another study suggests that the main reason people who experience a parental divorce have a higher divorce rate themselves is because they tend to hold a comparatively weak commitment to the norm of lifelong marriage. Paul R. Amato and Danelle D. DeBoer, "The Transmission of Marital Instability Across Generations: Relationship Skills or Commitment to Marriage?" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 63 (November, 2001): 1038-1051. Research on mate selection and marital success is reviewed in Jeffrey H. Larson and Thomas B. Holman, "Premarital Predictors of Marital Quality and Stability," *Family Relations* 43 (1994): 228-237. On the lower marriage rate of the children of divorce, see Nicholas H. Wolfinger, "Parental Divorce and Offspring Marriage: Early or Late?" *Social Forces* (September, 2003): 337-353.

10. The risk of divorce

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