

# Premartial and marital counseling



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The occurrence of premarital sexual behaviors for adolescents and adults alike has become increasingly more accepted in today's society (Garrison, Smith, & Besharov, 1994). With 69% of female adolescents and 64% of male adolescents aged 18-19 having had experienced sexual intercourse although never married (Abma, Martinez, Mosher, & Dawson, 2004), specific concerns for unmarried sexually active individuals are apparent. If unwed individuals are not taking advantage of the various forms of contraception, the risk of an unwanted pregnancy is present.

The four leading STDs in the U. S. , which account for 14. 5 million new STD cases each year, are Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), Trichomoniasis, Chlamydia, and Genital Herpes; these four STDs are transmitted by skin-to-skin contact and cannot be prevented by any form of protection available (Louisiana Governor's Program on Abstinence, 2005). The most prevalent STD, HPV (Center for Disease Control, 2005), is the cause of nearly 100% of all cervical cancer worldwide (American Cancer Society [ACA], 2005). Iso, the nonuse or misuse of sexual protection may lead to an increase in the rate of other sexually transmitted diseases. Concerns that are not apparent may also be present. Premarital sexual intercourse has also been linked to future marital dissolution (Heaton, 2002; Kahn & London, 1991; Teachman, 2003); however, research on this relationship is scarce. Does premarital intercourse have beneficial or harmful effects on general marital relationships or marital sexual adjustments? This is a common question this research was not designed to attack.

In a separate project, however, some data have been obtained from married men relative to their experience in premarital intercourse, and their

evaluation of the effects of these experiences on their marital adjustments. Also, many of the two hundred men who participated in the study reported in the preceding chapters have since married. Some of these have visited the writer, and evaluated the significance of their premarital experiences so far as general marital adjustments and marital sexual adjustments are concerned.

These data, therefore, seem to warrant some discussion of the possible significance of premarital intercourse for marital adjustments. This discussion may help stimulate further research and determine its direction. Before examining these data it will be helpful to survey briefly authoritative opinions on this question. Some opinions are based on research and others are simply opinions. A respectable amount of literature on the subject has accumulated, for writers and researchers, no less than laymen, have been concerned with the effect of premarital intercourse on marriage relationships.

Speculative opinions range from one extreme to another and are easier to find than opinions based upon research. Some authorities regard premarital intercourse as essential to successful marriage whereas others regard it as highly damaging. We will do no more than to quote opinions from these extremes. An illustration of the view that premarital intercourse is highly beneficial is found in the following quotation from Reich (84, pp. 6 - 27): “ Not long ago, it was considered a moral crime, calling for drastic punishment, when a couple who intended to be married, became sexually acquainted with each other beforehand.

Today, quite spontaneously, and in spite of the influence of church, scholastic medicine, and puritanical minds, the view becomes more and more general that it is unhygienic, imprudent and possibly disastrous if two people bind themselves without having first convinced themselves that they are matched in the basis of their life together, that is, in their sexual life. In addition to the increased rate of premarital sex, the rate of cohabitation outside of the marriage relationship has greatly increased. It is said that only about 8% of the population were involved in cohabiting unions in the 1960's (Bumpass, 1990). In our society today, of the 62% of women under age 44 who have ever been married, approximately 50% of them have cohabited at some point in their lives. In addition to this, 10% of women under age 44 have cohabited but have never been married (Bramlet & Mosher, 2002).

Many studies have linked cohabitation to both future marital trouble and divorce (Amato & Booth, 1997; Booth & Johnson, 1988; Heaton, 2002; Kamp Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003; Larson & Holman, 1994; Thomson & Coletta, 1992). It is also been suggested that premarital sexual intercourse has a similar relationship to the future marriage (Kahn & London, 1991; Teachman, 2003; Whyte, 1990); this relationship, however, is not as thoroughly researched as is the relationship between cohabitation and the marriage.

The purpose of the current study is to examine the relationship between premarital sexual behaviors, including cohabitation, and the state of the first marriage. According to Waite and Gallagher (2000), the defining characteristic of the cohabitation relationship that distinguishes it from other non-marital romantic relationships may be the high importance of the sexual relationship between the partners. As a result, cohabitation may be

negatively related to marital stability and satisfaction because of the sexual relationship that existed between the cohabiting partners prior to marriage.

The study intended to examine the relationship between premarital sexual behaviors and the state of the marriage to clarify the associations that are present within and outside of the occurrence of cohabitation. The current study also expanded on a previous study conducted by Teachman (2003) that considered the occurrence of premarital sexual relationships and future marital disruption. The study found that when women experienced sexual intercourse prior to marriage with individuals other than her husband, her probability of divorce increased.

However, when sexual intercourse was limited to only her future husband, there was little risk of marital disruption. The proposed study will examine the relationship between various heterosexual premarital sexual behaviors and marital satisfaction and stability among women. Similar to Teachman, the study considered the commitment level that the individuals felt toward their sexual partner during the time of the premarital sexual act and the occurrence of sexual behaviors that were limited to only their husbands.

In 2005, the marriage rate for the U. S. was 7. marriages per 1, 000 people of the total population. The divorce rate for the same year was 3. 6 divorces per 1, 000 people of the total population (Munson & Sutton, 2006). With the percentage of marriages that end in divorce at about 50%, it may seem that individuals would be discouraged from entering into a marriage union. However, over 90% of emerging adults reported that marriage was their ultimate relationship goal amidst the continuing threat of marital instability

(Arnett, 2004). Many aspects of premarital and marital relationships have been found to predict marital stability or dissolution.

Heaton (2002) found that factors such as higher rates of cohabitation, more experiences of premarital sexual behaviors, and heterogamy of demographic variables between partners may be related to higher levels of marital dissolution. One of the most notable predictors, perhaps, is the age at which an individual marries. Researchers have consistently linked a younger age at marriage to future marital dissolution (Booth & Edwards, 1985; Bumpass, Castro-Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Feng, Giarrusso, Bengtson, & Frye, 1999; Heaton, 2002).

Booth and Edwards (1985) suggested that the marital instability evidenced in couples who married at a young age was due to a lack of sexual exclusiveness in the marriage and the inadequate performances of marital roles. The age at the first marriage, however, continues to rise in our society. During the 1950's, the age at the first marriage was lower than at any other time during the 20th century in the U. S. , with men marrying at the average age of 22. 7 years and women at the average age of 20. 2 years. In 2005, the average age at the first marriage was 27. 1 years and 25. years for men and women, respectively (U. S. Census Bureau, 2006).

Heaton (2002) proposed that the rising age at the time of marriage is responsible for a recent decrease in the divorce rate. Heaton suggested that, as evidenced by the divorce rate that began slowly decreasing in 1980 and has presently leveled out, marital stability in the United States may be increasing rather than decreasing. The perceived effect of the rising age at the time of marriage may counteract the experiences and characteristics

that are thought to lead to higher marital dissolution (Heaton, 2002). According to Wright (1982), a Christian premarital counselor, particular changes in society posed a threat to marital stability regardless of the increasing age at marriage. One change that could be perceived as a threat to marital stability was the shift of the family's focus away from the extended family and toward the nuclear family; this shift could be believed to reduce the amount of resources available to the husband and wife.

Another possible threat to marital stability mentioned by Wright was the independence of the mate selection process among individuals involved. A couple in the year 2006 may not be as likely as a couple in the mid 1900's to consider other's opinions regarding their choice of a mate. Wright also claimed that undefined roles, rather than the fixed male and female roles found in a traditional marriage, may jeopardize marital stability. Lastly, Wright declared that the declining sexual morality of our society could have a negative impact on marital stability (cf. Popenoe, 1996). Overall, Wright blamed societal attitudes and people within the institution of marriage, not the institution itself, for threatening marital stability.

Gottman (1994a), one of the most prominent researchers on the topic of marital stability and divorce, suggested that there are two types of marriages based on interactive behavior of spouses: regulated and nonregulated. Regulated couples are those whose ratio of positive to negative behaviors within interactions was at least five positive behaviors to every one negative behavior; nonregulated couples, however, had a ratio of less than five positive behaviors to a negative behavior (Gottman 1994a, 1994b).

Gottman claimed that when a healthy ratio of five to one is not maintained, the couple is at risk for progressing down a cascade of harmful communicative behaviors. The cascade begins with criticism or complaining, which leads to contempt, which leads to defensiveness, which results in one spouse completely withdrawing or stonewalling. The four harmful behaviors have been called the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Gottman suggested that negative interactions between spouses were not unhealthy, but the use of any of the Four Horsemen was dysfunctional.

Several studies have suggested that marital satisfaction can be predicted by the satisfaction and quality of the premarital relationship of the couple (Fowers & Olson, 1986; Larsen & Olson, 1989; Markman, Ressick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clements, 1993). One notable assessment of the premarital relationship is the PREPARE inventory (Fowers & Olson, 1992). Fowers and Olson (1992) used the PREPARE inventory to place couples into one of four typologies: Vitalized, Harmonious, Traditional, and Conflicted.

Vitalized couples are characterized as being highly satisfied with their romantic relationship. Harmonious couples have a moderate level of relational satisfaction and unrealistic views of marriage. Traditional couples are categorized by slight relational dissatisfaction and realistic views of marriage. Conflicted couples are seen as the most dissatisfied with their relationship and demonstrate high levels of conflict. These four premarital couple types are believed to be predictive of future marital satisfaction (Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996).

Greeley (1991) suggested that the congenial character of the spouse, the agreement of values, high levels of communication, and satisfaction with the



sex life were adequate predictors of marital happiness. He suggested that the two strongest predictors of marital satisfaction were the kindness and gentleness of the spouse and the feeling of importance to the relationship. Greeley also found a positive relationship between social class and marital happiness; the higher one's income, the more likely they were to report a more satisfying marriage. Marital satisfaction may contribute to the various advantages experienced by spouses.

Happy marriages may improve the physical, psychological, and financial health of spouses. Spouses, especially men, who are satisfied with their marriages, are more likely to abandon unhealthy or harmful behaviors upon marriage, thereby improving their physical health and increasing their longevity of life (Waite, 2002; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Satisfied marriages are negatively related to levels of depression, anxiety, and distress (Waite, 2002). These psychological benefits, however, are only present when the marriage is reportedly happy; unhappy spouses tend to report higher levels of distress than unmarried individuals (Ross, 1995).

Although marriages may be generally slightly less satisfying than the 1970's, the majority of researchers agree that marriage improves the emotional well-being of spouses (Waite, 2000). Marriage also presents a financial advantage to spouses. For wives, particularly, marriage provides a higher household income than women who are single or cohabiting (Waite, 2002). Also, healthy marriages are characterized by the specialization of the financial role, which allows the more financially adept spouse to handle the finances (Seltzer, 2004; Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

This improves the financial situation for spouses over the cohabiting and single. Sexual satisfaction is reportedly greatest among monogamous married couples than among cohabiting and dating couples (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). In one study, 48% of husbands reported that sex with their wife was emotionally satisfying, and 50% of husbands found married sex physically satisfying. In the same study, only 37% and 39% of cohabiting men found sex with their partners emotionally satisfying and physically satisfying, respectively.

Married women and cohabiting women have reported being similar in their measures of sexual satisfaction; 42% of wives and 39% of cohabiting women have reported emotional satisfaction with their sex lives (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). However, married women were found to be five times more likely to remain monogamous than women who were dating or women who were cohabiting (Forste & Tanfer, 1996). Husbands and wives also reported that sex in marriage continued to improve over time because of the close proximity, the long-term commitment, the exclusivity, and the emotional bonding that marriage promotes (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).