

THE ELEPHANT IN THE BEDROOM

by Ron Deal

Due to increases in population, the total number of married couples in America is higher than ever. But the proportion of households made up of married couples has for the first time ever, dropped below half. According to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey released last month, heterosexual married couples made up 49.7%, or 55.2 million, of the nation's 111.1 million households in 2005 (in 1930 married couples comprised 84% of all households). Why the decline? Apparently marriage is facing more competition.

One competitor is delaying marriage. The average young adult age 25-34 is delaying their commitment to marry until their mid- to late twenties (those who delay marriage still want to get married eventually). The fiercest competition of marriage across age ranges seems to be cohabitation. The Census estimates that 5.2 million couples, a little more than 5% of all households, are unmarried opposite-sex partners. Just since 2000 cohabitation has risen 14%. According to the 2000 Census, 60-75% of first marriages are preceded by cohabitation as are 80-85% of remarriages.

With a growing concern that cohabiting couples are inadvertently sabotaging their emotional and spiritual health, this article will review what couples need to know about the impact of living together before marriage, particularly before a marriage forming a stepfamily.

God's Heart for Our Best

Cohabitation is more than about having sex, but that certainly is part of it. "I know God doesn't approve of sex before marriage, but some things are difficult to avoid," said one 34-year-old woman recently, "especially when we're living together." That response is becoming more and more common when I ask couples who are having sex just what their value is about their own behavior. They know where God draws the line but struggle to honor it. Such responses acknowledge the moral implications of cohabitation; it also indicates that convenience often wins out over conviction of truth for many believers.

I'd like to return to the matter of obedience to not-so convenient moral absolutes later, but for now let's consider whether God's instruction to avoid even the hint of sexual immorality (which is certainly implied in cohabitation) has any practical merit. Let's ask the question, if we remove "sin" from the equation, does living together make sense?

As we explore the practicality of cohabitation, keep in mind that God's mandates are always for our protection and provision. Protection against what will hurt our life and spirit and provision for what brings us the best in life (John 10:10). Let's see if his decree facilitates that for couples.

Why Do People Cohabit?

Smoking cigarettes is very bad for your health, but people still do it. The same is true for cohabitation. In a report on cohabitation research, Dr. David Olson and Amy Olson-Sigg list a number of reported reasons that couples cohabit ¹.

- Economic advantages: "We can save money by sharing living expenses."
- Increase intimacy: "We have more opportunities to share sexual and emotional intimacy without getting married."
- "Testing" compatibility: "Living together enables us to better learn about each other's habits and character, and see how we operate together day-to-day."

- Trial marriage: “We are planning to marry soon.”
- Less complicated dissolution: “If the relationship doesn’t work out, there is no messy divorce.”

It is this fear of divorce (for re-married’s it is the fear of divorcing again) that is profoundly driving couples to a “half-way house” approach. Conceivably, cohabitation allows couples to protect themselves from emotional pain while obtaining the economic and sexual benefits that normally are reserved for marriage. The fear of hurt is particularly high in pre-stepfamily couples who have themselves already felt the pain of an ended relationship (even if by death, but particularly if by divorce), and don’t want to expose their children to more potential hurt should another marriage dissolve. The irony, however, is that cohabiting relationships experience the very thing they hope to guard against. The research is clear ²:

- Cohabiting couples have lower levels of personal happiness and higher rates of depression than married couples ³.
- Cohabitors value independence more than married partners and have more individual freedom ⁴.
- Cohabitors are less likely to be supportive financially of one another than are married partners ⁵.
- Cohabiting couples are less sexually committed or trustworthy⁶.
- Cohabitors have more negative attitudes about marriage than non-cohabitors ⁷.
- Couples living together have the lowest level of premarital satisfaction when compared to other living arrangements ⁸.
- Marriages preceded by cohabitation are more likely to end in divorce ⁹.
- Cohabitors have lower scores than non-cohabitors on religious behaviors, personal faith, church attendance and joint religious activities.
- Cohabiting increases the risk of couple abuse and, if there are children, child abuse.

Essentially, cohabitation is living with second-best and then wondering why it didn’t work out for the best. Is cohabitation a true test of a couple’s potential marriage quality (i.e., “trial marriage”); does it help couples avoid a breakup before marriage or divorce after the wedding? Does it make sense? Absolutely not. Yet, couples still do it, even to the detriment of their relationship.

Cohabitation also deteriorates parental authority. For single parents who are interested in the spiritual training of their children, cohabitation makes the strength of their message weaker. “How can mom tell me not to do something when she moved us into his house before they were married?” I’ve heard many an adolescent ask. “Good point,” I respond. I’ll never forget hearing one child say, “We go to church, but I’m not sure why. In the end, my dad lives by convenience. That’s why he lives with Marsha.” Parents who want children who live by God’s moral standards must themselves live by those same standards, no matter how “impractical” it may be.

Finding the Best

The above research is clear—apparently God does know what’s best for us. We just have to trust his leading and his heart for our best. Someone has said that all sin flows from the suspicion that God isn’t good. If one doesn’t trust God’s intent to bring us good things, then you begin to think that maybe his commands are not in your best interest. That’s when disobedience for the sake of convenience makes sense. Sex before marriage and cohabitation are associated with

negative outcomes for couples and children—but then God knew that. It is a wise couple, then, that trust's God's intent and works to weed such negativity out of their relationship. I've never met a couple who regretted doing so.

So, What Should We Do Now?

If you have a friend who is cohabiting, don't leave that elephant lying in the bedroom. Talk with them with a gentle spirit and express your concern for their well-being. Share this article with them and ask them to consider the inadvertent negative outcomes that they may be bringing to their future.

If you are cohabiting, what should you do? First, begin by acknowledging that God's best for you cannot be found away from his will. Declare to one another that you trust his wisdom over your own and resolve to find a way back to humble obedience. Then, wrestle with the fears or concerns that you may be experiencing that led you into a cohabiting situation. Honestly ask yourself and your partner why you were drawn toward a "half-way house" situation. You must deal with these fears if you are going to handle them in a healthy manner. And finally, begin to take concrete steps toward moving out. One partner needs to find an alternate location to live. This won't be convenient or easy, but it will bring spiritual integrity. It will also shed a light on the legitimacy of your relationship—and to be honest—if your relationship can't handle the inconvenience, then you just uncovered what you would eventually find out anyway.

Chad and Darla decided to move in together, mostly for economic reasons, but partly because they really thought they were going to spend the rest of their life together. What they discovered was a sense of unrest within their souls about their decision and a gradual slide away from Christian influences. Because they were embarrassed to share their cohabiting relationship, they shied away from regular attendance at their church and close connections with friends who might "discover what was going on." They also began to lose perspective on their relationship. "I'm just not sure anymore why he is with me," Darla said. "I can't help but think that if we weren't living together or having sex that he wouldn't be committed to me." After discussing this with me, we agreed that the only way to objectively evaluate their relationship and make certain decisions about the future was to no longer live together. Until then, they just couldn't have the confidence they needed to make a decision about marriage.

Moving out uncovered a number of fears that each of them had not faced while cohabiting. But after a few months of working through the residue of the past, both Chad and Darla were ready to commit. Their confidence level had gone up and their preparedness for marriage improved. They were ready to move forward—and that's just what they did—without regret.

Copyright © 2006 Ron Deal, Used with permission.

Ron L. Deal is President of [Successful Stepfamilies](#), a licensed marriage and family therapist, and licensed professional counselor. He wants you and your kids to experience God's best.

REFERENCES:

- 1 Olson, David & Olson-Sigg, Amy (2005). Overview of Cohabitation Research: For Use with PREPARE-CC. Document prepared by Life Innovations, Inc. Minneapolis, MN.
- 2 As reported in Ibid.
- 3 Waite, L. & Gallagher, M. (2000). The case for marriage: Why married people are happier, healthier and better off financially. New York: Doubleday.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid
- 7 Axinn & Barber, 1997.
- 8 Olson, D. (2001). Comparative analysis of couple living arrangements before marriage. Life Innovations, Inc. Minneapolis, MN.

9 Popenoe, D. & Whitehead, B. (1999). Should we live together? What young adults need to know about cohabitation before marriage. The National Marriage Project, New Brunswick, NJ.