



Moving in Together

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Is Cohabitation a good test run?

There is no doubt that a new norm exists in the culture of love connections: Most adult couples now choose to *cohabit vs tying the knot* from the git-go. This preference mirrors contemporary American views on the practice, which has gone from unmentionable to a presumed expectation. In several studies, including a notable one by the Barna Group¹, the majority of those interviewed regardless of age feel cohabiting is a *good idea* (65% agree.)

While it's true that in 2023 most households in the U.S. were still comprised of married couples, an examination of their *lifetime experiences* tells another story:

“Among people ages 18 to 44, a larger share has cohabited at some point than have been married (59% vs. 50%). Moreover, marriage and cohabitation are now intertwined, as a plurality of adults (35%) have experienced both types of relationships.”²

What all of this means is that the trend of cohabitation has a longer presence among couples than we presume, and that it isn't just the younger generations that embrace it: More Americans have been cohabiting before they marry than outright marrying directly.

Barna Group asked the pertinent question: *What's the rationale which supports premarital cohabitation?* In their survey a majority who support it do so because they feel it's *a test of compatibility prior to a marriage*. To this group cohabiting is a “good idea,” since these say it gives the couple a test-drive in assessing their capacity to

¹ Barna Group (2016). *A Majority of Americans Now Believe in Cohabitation*. Barna Group Survey Report, June 24. www.barnagroup.com/cohabitation. See also: GK Rhoades, SM Stanley, and HJ Markman's (2009) *Couples' Reasons for Cohabitation*. *J. of Family Issues*, 30, 233–258; and by the same authors, (2006) *Sliding vs Deciding: Inertia and the Premarital Cohabitation Effect*. *J. Family Relations*, 55, 499–509.

² JM Horowitz, N Graf, and G Livingston (2019), *Marriage and Cohabitation in the United States*. Pew Research Center. www.pewresearchcenter.org/socialtrends/2019.

sustain the relationship within the intimacy of living together. After all, these said, *how would one know* if there's possible longevity as a couple unless one is in regular, intimate (meaning living in the same space, and more) relationship?

Other sources find it isn't just to test-drive the relationship in intimate settings that fuels cohabitation. These sources report cohabiting as a means for couples "to spend more time together."³ However, when we look at gender differences in responses of what the rationale for cohabitation is, we find that *men* were more likely than *women* to opt for testing the relationship via cohabitation. Women, on the other hand, were the ones who expressed a greater desire for *more time and intimacy* as the principal reason to cohabit.⁴ Go figure.

One final note in looking at numbers before we ask *other* questions pertinent to cohabiting, and this has to do with the generations.

It would come as no surprise that Millennials, Gen-Xers and now Gen-Zers would be more likely to support, or outright cohabit, given the generational ideological differences (on average, 72% endorse both). These have come into adulthood at a time when sexual strictures no longer tie down a majority; where gender, careers, and marital expectations have changed significantly. What may come as a surprise is that about 60% of Baby Boomers (in their 70's and some into their 80's) now *also* cohabit.⁵ "Living together," as these call the practice, may be more significantly related to former spousal losses and not feeling the need to "tie the knot again;" as well as the consequences financially of blending households, pensions, and inheritances in wills. But the fact remains, older cohorts now also cohabit more than (re)marry.

Is Cohabiting a Good Test of a Relationship?

The idea of 'testing' a relationship may sound plausible until experienced. Data collected via several studies by the team of Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman⁶ found that cohabiting is associated with many kinds of negatives. Women eventually report a *lower level of confidence* in the relationship, along with *higher levels of negative dynamics with their partner*. These also experienced greater *abandonment anxiety* if these went into a cohabiting experience to test the relationship. Men also expressed *greater anxiety, negative interactions*, as well as *psychological aggression*, lower *relationship confidence*, and difficulties in *adjustments* to living together when cohabiting.

³ Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2009), *Couples' Reasons for Cohabitation*, op.cit., 237.

⁴ SM Stanley (2016), *What You Need to Know for Sure Before Moving in Together*. Decide or Slide. Posted July 24, 2016. www.decideorslide.com.

⁵ Barna Group, op.cit, p.5.

⁶ See Footnotes 1 and 3, above.

It may be true that some—if not a majority—of those negatives may have been present in the relationship (or individuals) before cohabiting. Stanley reports,

It seems to us that many people who think about testing their relationship by cohabiting *already know*, at some level, what the ‘grade’ of that test may be: they are just hoping that the answer looks better over time.”⁷

The Rhoades team also found that cohabitators have more difficulty *breaking up*: All other variables being considered, a cohabiting couple will have a harder time breaking up than a couple that is only seriously dating and contemplating marriage.

The principal reason? The Rhoades team has called it “*the inertia of cohabitation*.”⁸ They mean by this that many who cohabit *slide* into situations which make it harder to end the relationship before making a clear decision about what’s best for them. These situations can include co-dependency issues, issues related to feelings of abandonment, or simply ones that are economically feasible but not emotionally sustainable. “The situation looks quite a bit different for those who have strongly clarified mutual commitments to the future *before moving in together*, such as being engaged for a while and—gasp—planning marriage.”⁹

What About the Christian Couple Who Cohabits?

It doesn’t come as a surprise that most Americans who are religious don’t look kindly on cohabitation. Premarital relationships, Christians teach, are to practice abstinence and other physical boundaries which are understood to include cohabiting. Those surveyed by Barna who are ‘practicing Christians’ not only believe cohabitation isn’t a *good idea*, but that it is a moral/physical wrong since it involves fornication. Thus, the most prominent detractors in the cohabitation debate are religious folk.

Not practicing what you preach. Not all religious folk, however, live out their stated beliefs. Barna surveys report almost **six in ten Christians** (57%)—from Millennials through Gen X to Gen Z—either currently or have previously lived with their boyfriend/ girlfriend. And this is a number suggestive of the broader influence of those 65% (see above) who believe it’s a good idea.

One has to take into consideration the intersections here, and how the ‘reinterpretation’ of many doctrinal points are in fact justified by younger Christian generations; a *values shift* that is ongoing. Younger, less religious, and more liberal

⁷ Stanley (2016), *op.cit.*, p.4.

⁸ Stanley, et al., (2006), *Sliding vs Deciding*, p. 500.

⁹ Stanley, p. 6.

Christians are more likely to have lived with a significant other before marriage.¹⁰ Interestingly, Barna data show that these *still attend church regularly*, none the less *reinterpret* the notion of fornication: Many believe *a serious relationship* which *may* eventually culminate in marriage *is enough reason* to justify cohabitation. In this thinking, cohabitation is *excluded* from the fornication prohibition since the ‘serious’ relationship itself is seen as a commitment *almost* akin to a covenantal marriage. Of course, it is not.¹¹

Complicating the rationale. Today’s younger generations have experienced significant shifts in family life, especially divorces; these revealing the fault lines of marriages. Many are thus wary of marriage, seeing it as a risky endeavor. Making sure they get it right now includes the possibility of cohabitation. These want to avoid the breaking up heartache possibly experienced in their own families of origin, as well as in families of their friends. Cohabiting becomes a means of testing the waters (or so these come to believe) before making that final commitment to a significant other. Accepting cohabitation as the *norm* vs a *de facto abstinence* seems *progressive*; and *waiting* seems antiquated. For many younger couples, cohabitation has become a *rite of passage*. This thinking of course includes having premarital sex, *even if* one does not cohabit. Premarital sex is also seen as a *compatibility test*, it being blinded to the notion that sexual intimacy and pleasure have now become other commodities to be experienced.

Religious objection as doctrine. In orthodox and conservative Christian circles, any cohabitation which includes physical/sexual intimacy of the type which enables “becoming one flesh” (a nice way of saying *having sex* and the *potential* for a pregnancy) is forbidden. Applicable doctrines here revolve around the notion of ***fornication***: any ‘carnal union’ between an *unmarried* man and an *unmarried* woman; and the notion of ***marriage***: a lifelong and sexually exclusive covenantal relationship between a man and a woman.

The former suggests sexual intercourse (and some would say any act which includes sexual-oral, sexual-anal, or stimulatory sex between unmarried couples) corrupts both the intent of the covenant if engaged premaritally, as well as the bodies themselves. Paul admonishes in both I and II Corinthians to “flee” from what he calls this “sexual immorality,” engaging in sex before a covenantal relationship with another is completed (i.e., having a wedded spouse). Moreover, Paul especially

¹⁰ Barna Group, *op.cit.*, pp. 4–5.

¹¹ The question pastors should be asking—which is obviously for another piece—is why are doctrinal points being watered down, repurposed for countercultural uses? Many of those younger couples interviewed by Barna (and my own experience with college-aged and graduate students) suggest there is such a strong pull to bend into cultural norms that church, Christian teachings, and mom and dad’s examples just don’t live up to the same draw. “Progressive” (insurance) ads may give you a hint: Don’t become your parents!

underscores the notion that “who you sleep with” also becomes “your flesh,” meaning you are uniting intimately with this person in ways meant for covenantal commitments, not just ‘dating’ or other forms of social lovemaking.

The latter suggests cohabitation is pushing aside the notion that this relational union is to be objectively life-long. There’s no room here for any “testing it out” to see “if we work together long-term or not,” since such would obviate the persons haven’t really worked out their relational hopes and expectations sufficiently to commit to lifelong in the first place!

To orthodox and conservative Christians, these doctrines and forms of their expression in the Old and New Testaments are sufficiently clear to call premarital sex, and cohabitation which includes it, *sinful*—in both cases inured to the biblical instructions *and* to the personal ethic of abstinence prior to marriage.

Cohabitation Fails the Test

Data suggest it’s easy to slide into cohabitation as progressive thinking, and this includes the reinterpretation of doctrines to enable it. The facts reported, again and again, strongly advise against the cohabiting experience, especially if one sees it as a ‘test of the relationship’ before deeper commitment. For a good near-forty percent, these stay in a relationship, including moving on into a marriage that they would have otherwise left long before.¹² Why settle? Because convenience and insecurities block common sense in many cohabiters.

To sum up here, those that cohabit before marriage often are:

- Significantly more likely to be poorer in the long run despite their incomes being equal, because they manage money differently
- Cause couples to be more controlling of each other
- Experience higher levels of dissatisfaction, insecurities and anxieties about the relationship. In this vein, women fare much worse than men.
- Experience higher levels of domestic violence (against the woman) and cheating (by the man)
- At higher risk of later divorces if marriage occurs

Religious leaders should be aware of the countercultural trends and when possible, celebrate the reasons why to wait—both the spiritual reasons for waiting as well as how marriages can be affected if cohabiting precedes it.

Smart couples should work on their relationship and figure out their compatibility, talk about a future together, *which includes* talking about lifelong commitments, and

¹² KB Guzzo (2014) *Trends in Cohabitation Outcomes*. J. of Marriage and Family, 76, 826–842.

what that all would look like. Take a relationship course; do some kind of couples prep workshop; and test that compatibility *before* you make the mistake of cohabiting. And yes, all data point to it being *a mistake*. For the Christian believer, it can be double jeopardy.

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