

12 Myths about Cohabitation

Cohabitators as a group believe key myths, and these misconceptions encourage them to live together. Following are some common myths along with brief refutations.

- "Everyone's doing it." *No, nearly half of couples are not.*
- "Living together is a step toward marriage." *No, it is a step toward breakup-either before or after the wedding.*
- "We are in a committed relationship." *Untrue. The only truly committed relationship is marriage.*
- "Living together is a trial marriage." *Actually, cohabitation is the worst possible preparation for a healthy marriage. It increases the odds of divorce by 50 percent.*
- "We can't afford to move apart." *Singles can save just as much money by living with someone of the same gender.*
- "We love each other, so it's okay." *If you really loved each other, you would do what's best for each other and for the relationship-what's sanctioned by God and proven through the ages to be the safest, best, most fulfilling way to love.*
- "It can't hurt anybody." *At least one partner is hurt if the relationship disintegrates, which it is likely to do. Also, since cohabitators are as likely as married couples to have children, if the relationship ends, the children feel abandoned and experience significant trauma that can have lifelong effects.*
- "A marriage license is just a piece of paper." *No, it represents a way of life, a state of being blessed by God and sanctioned by the church, government, and community. It affects every aspect of life: health, happiness, longevity, and sex. They're all better with that "piece of paper."*
- "We're getting married anyway." *Don't be so sure. Half of couples living together do not marry-and those who do are much more likely to divorce. Even a month's cohabitation damages the relationship.*
- "What we do is no one's business." *Cohabitation is everyone's business. It threatens society morally and burdens it financially. Eight out of ten cohabiting relationships will fail before or after the wedding, which costs taxpayers a staggering \$185 billion a year.*
- "The Bible doesn't mention cohabitation." *Jesus confronted the woman at the well, saying, "You have had five husbands, and you aren't even married to the man you're living with now" (John 4:18, NLT). It was a gentle rebuke, but she was convicted, telling others, "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did" (John 4:29, NLT).*
- "Cohabitation, marriage, and divorce are simply different lifestyle choices." *"This is the most powerful and dangerous myth," write Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher in The Case for Marriage. "Marriage is not only a private vow, it is a public act, a contract, taken in full public view, enforceable by law and in the equally powerful court of public opinion."*

Benefits to cohabiting couples of moving apart

1. MOVING APART OFFERS A NEW BEGINNING

Living independently provides couples with an opportunity to see marriage as a decisive new beginning—a watershed moment in their lives. It's a chance for them to take a "fresh look" at each other. Living apart will be a radically different experience from living together and will help the cohabiting couple deal with problems that arose in the relationship before full marital commitment was made.

2. MOVING APART SOLVES SOME PROBLEMS

Arguments over money, particularly over what is a fair share for each to contribute toward rent, utilities, and groceries, will cease. This is path to new self-respect as well as respect for one's future spouse. By living separately, the relationship is put on a healthier and more biblical footing.

3. MOVING APART ALIGNS THE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD'S WILL

Scripture calls couples to chastity before marriage and fidelity within marriage. If couples expect God to bless their relationship, they need to consider following his guidelines.

Biblical standards call us to God's best. The blessings for each partner and for the relationship will be abundant if cohabiting couples choose to begin abiding by God's ways by moving apart and remaining chaste from this point until the wedding. Couples have an opportunity to practice chastity while they are single so that when they do marry, they will have demonstrated to their spouse that they can be faithful. Fidelity builds trust. We base our trust on our future spouse's past behavior.

4. MOVING APART OFFERS TIME AND SPACE TO EXAMINE ATTITUDES AND PATTERNS

It's difficult for a premarital couple to learn and practice communication and problem-solving skills when they're sexually bonded. When they're in conflict, they often turn to sex to restore emotional intimacy. This pattern leaves relational issues unresolved. The closeness that comes with physical intimacy is shallow and temporary, evaporating when the next argument erupts over the same issue. Root problems remain unaddressed, and the couple grows increasingly frustrated with their pattern of high conflict and unresolved issues.

If, however, the couple sets aside sex and develops healthy communication skills, they will grow closer through their efforts to understand one another and reach consensus.

MOVING APART OFFERS HOPE

Cohabiting couples who move apart and enroll in a rigorous preparation process fare better in marriage than similar couples who do not.

Study of Cohabitation

- The statistics involving cohabitation are staggering, and more concerning than this is the moral toll that cohabitation is having on the sanctity of marriage. Here is a summary of the growth in cohabitation rates over the last fifty years:

1960	439,000	
1970	523,000	
1980	1,589,000	
1990	2,856,000	
2000	4,736,000	
Now	5,400,000	(VanGoethem, 35, McManus XII)

- So, has this surge in changed behavior resulted in better, more well-adjusted relationships? Unfortunately, the exact opposite has taken place.

“Nearly half of all cohabiting couples break up before a marriage ever takes place. Even when these couples do eventually marry, two-thirds will divorce – which means four out of five of the 5.4 million couples now cohabiting will not enjoy a lasting marriage.” (McManus, XII)

“The divorce rate for first marriages is 45%. Therefore, instead of 45% of every fifty cohabiting couples who marry divorcing (22 couples), half again as many will do so (33 couples) – two-thirds will divorce. When added to the 45 couples who break up short of marriage, that’s an abysmal failure rate of 78 out of 100 “trial marriages.” This does not count the 10 couples who are still cohabiting after 5 years, another 8 of whom will likely fail, **bringing the total failure rate to 86 of the original 100 couples!**” (McManus, 69)

- Why has cohabitation had such a profoundly negative impact on marriages? Here’s one reason why:

The problem is, “You can’t practice permanence,” declares Dr. Barbara Markey, the primary creator of the FOCCUS Premarital Inventory. (McManus, 13)

“Essentially, it’s a tryout – an audition of sorts. They’re trying to find out how compatible they are, and it all depends on whether the partner is meeting their expectations...according to David Gudel in *Before You Live Together*, this forces the couple into a “performance-based relationship. Each person attempts to earn the other’s love through achievement. Each evaluates whether the other lives up to his or her expectations.” Two words characterize performance-based relationships: “if” and “then.” Whether you want to admit it, when two people live together before marriage they are thinking: *If* you do (this), *then* I’ll do (this)...” (McManus, 37)

- So, what does Scripture have to say about the topic?

Proverbs 3:3-6 – “Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”

Mark 10:6-9 – “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”

John 4:18 – “The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband...”

Hebrews 13:4 - “Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”

1 Corinthians 7:39 – “A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.”

“The truth is that wherever a man lies with a woman, whether they like it or not, a transcendental relation is set up between them which must be eternally enjoyed or eternally endured.” C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (McManus, 33)

- If cohabitation is clearly wrong based on Scripture and statistics prove it sets people up for a bleak future, why are so many people choosing this route?

“Economic concerns are the most pragmatic of the forces driving the cohabitation lifestyle. A couple dates, they get sexually involved, and they find themselves spending a great deal of time together, including many nights. Sooner or later it dawns upon them that they can do what they’re doing much cheaper by sharing a residence and other living expenses. Their thinking has severed the moral connection between sex and marriage so the economic aspect of their relationship becomes the dominant consideration. (VanGoethem, 48-49)

“Marriage generates wealth; cohabitation does not. Why? Married couples pool their economic resources and have mutual financial goals that they sacrifice for and invest in. Cohabitors, in sharp contrast, usually keep separate bank accounts and do not plan for an economic future together, since he or she could walk out tomorrow.” (McManus, 47)

McManus, Mike and Harriet. *Living Together: Myths, Risks & Answers*. (New York: Howard Books, 2008)

VanGoethem, Jeff. *Living Together: A Guide to Counseling Unmarried Couples*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2005)

Cohabitation Facts

1. Percentage of couples who are cohabiting at any one time: 5 percent.
2. Percentage of Americans who have cohabited at some time: 50 percent.
3. Percentage of cohabiting couples who go on to marry: 50-60 percent.
4. Percentage of cohabiting couples who have been married previously: at least 30 percent.
5. Percentage of never-married individuals between twenty-five and thirty-four in a cohabiting relationship: 20-24 percent.
6. Percentage of cohabiting relationships involving children: 40 percent.
7. Percentage of children born to cohabiting couples who will experience the termination of their parents' relationship (splitting up or divorce): 75 percent.
8. Average length of a cohabiting relationship that does not lead to marriage: 12-18 months.
9. Percentage of unions that survive two years:
 - cohabiting unions not leading to marriage: 33 percent.
 - marital unions: 95 percent.
10. Percentage of unions that survive ten years:
 - cohabiting unions not leading to marriage: 12 percent.
 - marital unions: 90 percent.
11. Likelihood of divorce: Within the first ten years of marriage, those who cohabit prior to marriage are almost twice as likely to divorce as opposed to those who do not cohabit prior to marriage.
12. Likelihood of marital disruption within the first ten years:
 - cohabited prior to marriage: 57 percent.
 - did not cohabit prior to marriage: 30 percent.
13. Likelihood of marital disruption within the first two years of marriage:
 - cohabited prior to marriage: 29 percent.
 - did not cohabit prior to marriage: 9 percent.
14. Percentage of Americans who believe cohabitation is morally wrong: 25 percent.
15. Additional percentage of Americans who have some moral qualms about cohabitation: 25 percent.
16. Percentage of Americans over age 60 who approve of cohabitation: 20 percent.
17. Married couples who believe that the likelihood of experiencing a divorce in their relationship is "very low:"
 - those who cohabited prior to marriage: 39 percent.
 - those who did not cohabit prior to marriage: 61 percent.