

Little Known Research

MARRIAGE COUNSELING
Specialists

A Common Myth: Half of today's marriages are going to end in divorce.

The fact: The famous 50% divorce rate does not apply to currently married couples. It's a projection (an informed guess, really) of the future divorce rate of couples getting married in a given year. Less than 2% of all current marriages end in divorce each year. For currently married couples, their odds of divorce go down the longer they've been together. And if they are college graduates, they are far less likely to get divorced than couples a generation ago.

Reference: Here's a great [blog post](#) on divorce rates, with lots of reference, by researcher Scott Stanley.

Everyone Should Know: Women initiate 2/3 of divorces

It's amazing how many therapists and lay people alike are surprised that women are far more likely to initiate divorce than men are. The most common explanation given is that women may be more sensitive to the quality of their marital relationships whereas men benefit more from just being married. Whatever the reason, it's been true for a long time and all over the industrialized world that wives are more likely to take the lead in ending a marriage.

Reference: See the literature review in: Liana C. Sayer, Paula England, Paul D. Allison and Nicole Kangas (2011). She Left, He Left: How Employment and Satisfaction Affect Women's and Men's Decisions to Leave Marriages. *American Journal of Sociology*, 116, 1982-2018

A Common Myth: Kids are Better Off if Their Unhappily Married Parents Divorce

This used to be the conventional wisdom in the field, but research over the past 20 years has pointed to a more complex picture. This research has had the advantage of following large groups of families from before a marital break till afterwards, and thus being able to look at the quality of the marriage before the divorce. The consensus finding is that kids are only better off after a divorce when their parents had a highly conflictual marriage. Most divorces (50-67% depending on the study), however, occur in marriages with moderate levels of conflict but where one the spouses was unhappy. In those case, children do much more poorly when their parents break up. Their lives were okay before even though their parents were not happily married, as long as the parents kept the conflict down. But divorce propelled these children into a new world of upheaval and distress.

Source: Amato, P. R., & Hohmann-Marriott, B. (2007). A comparison of high and low-distress marriages that end in divorce. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69, 621 – 638.

Fact or Fiction: Divorce is Usually a Consensus Decision

That's a fiction. It's usually one person's decision to start the divorce process, with the other not wanting the divorce. We tend to talk about a couple deciding to divorce, but that's misleading. There is almost always "leaver and a leavee," at least at the beginning. (Sometimes by the time the divorce process has played out for a while, the leavee is sick of the whole thing and wants out of the marriage—or has come to accept the other's decision.) A good reason to keep this difference in mind is that each person tends to be in a different emotional place during the divorce process, and needs a different kind of support. Not surprisingly, the leavee tends to be more distressed.

A classic reference based on in depth interviews: Diane Vaughn (1986), *Uncoupling*. New York: Oxford.

It Just Ain't True: Living together before marriage is a good way to avoid later marital problems and divorce

This one is widely believed—and contradicted by the research. In dozens of studies, no benefit for later marriage has been founded from living together before hand. The debate in the research community is about how to interpret the opposite finding: that cohabitation is associated with poorer marital quality, more conflict and more divorce. It's not known whether this comes from "selection factors"—characteristics of people who cohabit— or causal factors—something about cohabitation that creates challenges for a subsequent marriage. The current consensus is both/and—selection and causation—with the leading candidates for causation being attitudes about commitment learned in multiple cohabiting relationships, "sliding" versus "deciding" to get married because it's hard to break up when living together, and having a child before marriage. Couples who cohabit when committed to marry and don't already have a child have no more subsequent marital problems than those who do not cohabit. But they are not better off. Bottom line: there are no proven benefits from "test driving" a relationship before committing to marriage—popular wisdom notwithstanding.

References:

Tach, L. and Halpern-Meehin, S. (2009), How Does Premarital Cohabitation Affect Trajectories of Marital Quality? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71, 298–317.

Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Sliding vs. Deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect. *Family Relations*, 55, 499-509.