Cohabitation & Marital Success

New Research On Cohabitation Before Marriage

In the break-up heard 'round the world, Taylor Swift is reportedly on her own again after her split in March from British actor Joe Alwyn. The couple's six-year relationship has been explored in Swift's music, including her new album, "Midnights," which hinted that the end of their romance was near.

But the prospects for Swift and Alwyn seemed brighter a few years ago when it was widely reported that they had moved in together in London. The pop superstar seemed to celebrate the couple's decision to live together in her 2019 ballad, "Lover," in which she sang: "This is our place, we make the rules," and "Take me out and take me home." The song concluded with wedding-like vows:

> *Ladies and gentlemen, will you please stand?*
> *With every guitar string scar on my hand*
> *I take this magnetic force of a man to be my lover.*

While rumors of a secret engagement followed the couple over the years, in the end, like most cohabiting couples, making their own rules did not work out quite the way Swift may have anticipated when she and Alwyn first moved in together.

The Swift-and-Alwyn saga follows a script that the majority of today's adults, including many Christians, follow: meet, date, fall in love, and sort of drift into living together as the "next step" in your romance — without clear intentions to marry. In fact, an estimated 70% of couples today will cohabit before tying the knot. Pew Research found that 58% of white evangelicals believe that cohabitation is "morally acceptable" if a couple plans to marry. A 2012 General Social Survey found that 41% of Christians believe living together is acceptable even without marriage plans.

The popularity of cohabitation flows partly from the fact that many young people believe the myth that living together before marriage is not only acceptable but beneficial for their eventual marriage — even though research continues to link cohabitation to lower quality and less stable unions. The research tells us, for instance, that most cohabitating couples today end up like Swift and Alwyn, not even making it to the altar. One recent study found that 54% of first-time cohabiting couples saw their relationship end in a break-up within six years of moving in together, whereas only 33% had tied the knot in the same time frame.

And for those who manage to marry, a new Institute for Family Studies report confirms long-standing research showing that cohabiting before marriage is still associated with a higher risk of divorce in the United States. Specifically, the report by psychologists Scott Stanley and Galena Rhoades found that 25% of couples who cohabited before marrying in the years 2010 to 2019 ended up divorcing, compared to 20% of those who did not. Living together outside of marriage puts couples at risk for divorce (if they even marry) for a number of reasons.

- **First**, having a low-commitment option available means that many couples move in too quickly, without establishing the kind of jointly committed love that is the foundation of a good marriage. Likewise, this option also means that people can live together for reasons of utility—it's more convenient, it allows you to save money on rent, and so forth. That ends up being a bad basis for moving onto marriage later; in fact, men and women who moved in together for such reasons are more likely to land in divorce court than those who do so in order to spend more time together.
- **Second**, cohabitation itself increases the odds that cohabiting partners adopt a less committed view of marriage, one which makes them more accepting of divorce. This low-commitment mentality makes them more vulnerable to marital dissolution when times get tough.

- **Third,** because so many cohabitations today do not lead to marriage, young men and women often end up accumulating multiple cohabiting partners before they do tie the knot. A study of women from Stanford University found that serial cohabitations put them at an especially high risk of later divorce when they do marry. New research from the Wheatley Institute by family scholars Brian Willoughby and Jason Carroll finds that both men and women with multiple sexual relationships like these are not only less happy but also less sexually satisfied in their marriages.
- **Finally**, when couples just "slide" into cohabitation, rather than "decide" to be together, they risk getting locked into a relationship and possibly a marriage with someone who is not the best fit for them — what Stanley and Rhoades describe as a pathway into marriage driven by "inertia." About 64% of recently married Americans who lived together before marriage acknowledged this was indeed their path into cohabitation before entering marriage.

In fact, according to this new IFS report, the risk of marital failure is especially high today for married men and women who moved in together without an engagement. Those who slid into cohabitation before getting engaged were markedly more likely to end up divorced or separated. Thirty-four percent of those who cohabited prior to an engagement ended up seeing their marriage end, compared to just 23% of those who did not move in together until after an engagement or the wedding.

This new research by Stanley and Rhoades also provides additional evidence that accumulating cohabiting partners prior to marriage is a risky proposition. Specifically, men and women who cohabited with two or more partners prior to marriage were about 60% more likely to end up seeing their marriage end in divorce or separation, compared to those who did not cohabit before marriage.

It's for these reasons that Stanley and Rhoades conclude that young men and women who want a lasting marriage should not "believe the hype that living together before marriage will improve your odds." In fact, they note: "There is virtually no evidence to support the belief that living together before marriage can improve the odds of marital stability."

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All this may help explain why another figure very much in the public eye, comedian Steve Harvey, took a rather different view of cohabitation than Taylor Swift did in her song "Lover." Because cohabitation did not work out well for him (he's been married three times) or for many of his friends and colleagues, Harvey spotlighted the harms of living together outside of marriage on his talk show.

On the show, the musician Ledisi shared about the many years she spent waiting for her live-in boyfriend to commit to marriage. "I was with someone for a long time and living with them and thinking it would grow into something where we'd finally get married," she said, "and it didn't happen." Co-host Diane Valentine agreed, adding: "When you are cohabiting with someone, you are basically playing the role of the wife for free … Why get married?"

Based on experiences like theirs, Harvey emphasized:

> *Now, even though I've lived with someone, I wouldn't let my daughters … Let me tell you the saying I've taught all my daughters: 'You have to let a man see what he can get, but you have to make him imagine what he can have.' That's when you lock a man in.*

Unlike Taylor Swift, then, who had high hopes when she took Joe Alwyn "home," Harvey advises women to wait until marriage to make a home with a man: "Stop giving yourself away; you are the prize."

Wise words for young women and men today who desire a happy, lasting marriage and a stable family life for their future children.

- Brad Wilcox is director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. 6/23