Eight modern myths about marriage

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A few years ago, a high profile female television news anchor wrote a stinging attack on mentors from her mother's generation. Approaching 40, "childless and angry", Virginia Haussegger criticised those who suggested her generation could have it all:

For those of us who listened to our feminist foremothers' encouragement; waved the purple scarves at their rallies; read about and applauded [feminist leaders and writers]; for all of us who took all that on board and forged ahead, crashed through barriers and carved out good, successful and even some brilliant careers; we're now left – many of us at least – as premature "empty nesters".

We're alone, childless, many of us partnerless, or drifting along in "permanent temporariness"… to describe that somewhat ambiguous, uncommitted type of relationship that seems to dominate among childless, professional couples in their 30s and 40s …[1]

The article provoked a furious response in some quarters, but it also placed in stark relief the modern dilemma of endeavouring to combine career with marriage and family.

In a society that highly values informed consent, it is surprising that many young people are unaware of the factors that enhance or detract from marital success.[2]

According to family scholars, some choices increase the odds of marital success, while others reduce it. Knowing these factors can help individuals avoid poor choices and maximise the chance of marital success.

Family scholars have identified a series of beliefs that can detract from marital success. Professor Galena Rhoades and colleagues at the University of Denver write:

The current research provides many insights for how individuals and couples can be more careful and thoughtful in their relationship behaviour in ways that are protective of themselves and their future aspirations.[3]

Myth 1: There is a 50 per cent risk of divorce

It is often claimed that the divorce rate is nearly 50 per cent of all marriages. At best, this is a crude measure; at worst, it is misleading.[4] Often it is a comparison of the number of weddings and the number of divorces in a year. This is inaccurate, as the divorce figures quoted are a percentage of all marriages, over many years. If it is used as a projection of the number of marriages that are likely to end in divorce before one spouse dies, it is still unreliable, as divorce rates may rise or fall in the future.

The divorce rate in a number of countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, has fallen slowly over the past two decades.[5]

The risks of divorce vary according to the circumstances of each couple.

Here is an analogy. We know that the risk of a car accident can be increased or reduced, according to our behaviour. If we speed or have faulty brakes, the risk increases. If we go through a red light or drive while intoxicated, the risk of an accident is increased. Insurance companies measure these risks. Hence they increase the premium or payment for young drivers who are more likely to engage in these behaviours because the risk of an accident is higher. Conversely, they reduce the premium for people with a record of safe driving.

The same is true for marriage and divorce. For many people, the risk of divorce is much lower than the often-quoted 50%.

Using national health data, American scholars found that various personal and social factors decrease the risk of divorce substantially (Table 1).[6]

Although these risks were calculated for US women only, and there may be some variations from nation to nation, they accord with other findings.

Knowing about possible risks can help inform personal decisions.

Myth 2: Premarital cohabitation improves the chances of marital success

Despite popular opinion, cohabitation is a problematic pathway to marital success. Three key findings emerge from the social science research. First, cohabitations are short-term relationships. Most cohabiting couples separate or marry rather than remain in long-term cohabitation.[7]

Secondly, it has been insufficiently recognised that the breakdown of a cohabiting relationship is often devastating for at least one of the partners. Professor Christian Smith and his colleagues at Pennsylvania State University observe:

A significant number of emerging adults appear to have suffered hurtful if not devastating breakups involving romantic partners with whom they thought they were very seriously involved, and often, they assumed, on the road to marriage. Usually, but not always, the most damaged party is the woman involved, not the man.[8]

The sociologists noted that while young adults want to delay marriage, many of them, particularly women, appear to also seek the intimacy, loyalty and security that only a committed relationship can deliver.

Thirdly, some family scholars suggest that when couples cohabit after having decided to marry, they are at no greater risk of a subsequent marriage breakdown, but couples that drift from cohabitation

Risk of divorce	
Factors	**% decrease in risk of divorce**
Making over $50,000 annually (vs under $25,000)	-30%
Having graduated college (vs not completed high school)	-25%
Having a baby 7 months or more after marriage (vs before marriage)	-24%
Marrying after 25 years of age (vs under 18)	-24%
Coming from an intact family of origin (vs divorced parents)	-14%
Religious affiliation (vs none)	-14%

Table 1: risk of divorce for US women[6]

to marriage have an increased exposure to unhappiness, separation and divorce. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead observes that because cohabitation conflates courtship and a living together union, there is nothing that ritually marks the entry into a cohabiting relationship:

A couple's decision to cohabit is made privately. Sometimes this decision is thoughtful and purposeful, but very often it is made casually. People can slide into living together, without any serious discussion or mutual understanding as to its meaning, purpose, or likely duration, and without much preparation, other than renting [a removal van]. As a consequence, cohabitation-as-courtship can contribute to confusion, misunderstanding, miscommunication, and faulty assumptions. It is easy for a couple to decide to live together and, at the same time, harbor very different expectations of the relationship.[9]

Whitehead cautions that cohabitation risks a number of downsides for women in particular, entangling them in a relationship that makes it difficult to see signs that it is not progressing, and even investing time and emotional energy into a stagnating union. Where there are different levels of commitment,[10] the less committed partner can have more power in the relationships, leaving the other uncertain and constantly seeking signs of reassurance.[11]

Furthermore, Scott Stanley has identified uncommitted cohabitation entered into prior to a decision to marry as problematic for the success of the relationship. In their recent study of *Premarital sex in America*, Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker also warn of the downsides of cohabitation, especially for women.[12]

Reflecting on the fact that seeming to "tell people what to do" invites a rebuff, Rev Tony Kerin offers a reason why, in his experience as a marriage educator, cohabitation is complicated for many couples. "Marriages are not," he says "and never have been *prêt-a-porter* ('ready to wear'). It takes a long time to marry your life to that of your partner." Kerin also warns about "commitment creep":

A couple who commence to cohabit before they are ready for long term commitment often find themselves locked in by the inertia of their circumstances. A relationship that, had they not lived together, would have run its course and dissipated, is given unwarranted encouragement because it takes so much more effort to move out and find new lodgings than to put up with the lacklustre relationship of domestic drudgery which has crept up on them. They are subconsciously more committed to accepting things the way they are than they had deliberately chosen to be. Eventually the breakup is all the more painful ...[13]

Couples are unlikely to know the outcome when they begin to cohabit or necessarily recognise the signs of problems during the course of it. This is why marriage educators have responded to the challenging nature of cohabitation by encouraging individuals to reflect on the decisions they are making, using workshops, inventories and questionnaires.[14]

It takes a long time to marry your life to that of your partner.

Because of the possible ambiguity around the meaning of cohabitation, they add, there are likely many individuals who discover later rather than sooner that cohabiting did not mean the same thing for their partners as for them.[15]

Myth 3: It is preferable to marry later

The median age of marriage has increased significantly over the past few decades throughout the West. A number of reasons have been suggested for the delay, including the fact that education now takes longer for many young adults and the higher costs of establishing a home; a desire to experience life before "settling down"; as well as the desire to be socially, economically and emotionally ready for a lifelong commitment.

Marrying very young predicts both divorce[16] and marital problems.[17] Analysis by Professor Paul Amato and colleagues of a sample of national US data revealed that there was increased divorce proneness where teens wed.[18] The sociologists also found that divorce proneness reduced as the age of marriage increased. This factor has spawned a belief that couples who marry at an older age are more mature and therefore more likely to succeed at marriage.[19] However, recent research suggests there is a significant difference between marrying as a teenager versus marrying in the early twenties.[20]

The studies raise doubts whether the benefit of delaying marriage extend beyond the mid-twenties. Recent research has found, that all things being equal, marriages commencing between the ages of 22 and 25 show the greatest promise of reporting the highest quality and remaining intact while unions entered into at later ages "fare very well in terms of survival but rather poorly in quality". The scholars conclude, "little or nothing in the way of marital success is likely to be gained by deliberately delaying marriage beyond the mid-twenties".[21]

Delayed marriage can have other consequences for couples wishing to have children, including decreasing fertility,[22] increased low birth weights and preterm delivery.[23]

Myth 4: Marriage is private and natural – there is nothing to learn

"Whatever happened to old fashioned love, the kind that would last through the years", asked a correspondent to a metropolitan newspaper.[24] In questioning the value of marriage education, he repeated a widely-held notion. Often people think that a relationship is their private business, as if outside influences – whether their own families or the broader society – have no impact or affect upon them. Equally, people often regard relating with another as "natural" – something we all automatically know how to do.[25]

Marital educators have identified a series of other beliefs that are commonly-held, but misleading:

- If you're in love, a relationship will be good spontaneously and will not require work.
- A relationship, especially marriage, stays the same.
- The less we know about our partner, the more "romantic" our relationship will be.
- In a significant relationship, emotions always must be intense and positive.
- In marriage, there must be constant sexual attraction.
- My partner must "complete" me, that is, make up for my weaknesses.
- We will live happily forever.
- My spouse should always understand me.
- If my partner doesn't meet my needs, I'll find someone else.[26]

A consequence of these beliefs is a reluctance to seek advice. The UK Centre for Social Justice noted:

Anecdotal evidence we received suggested that most people struggle with the concept of seeking advice on how to manage relationships at home, considering it is only for those who have problems. 75% of all relationship support involves the treatment of problems, such as counselling … rather than their prevention.[27]

The idea that being married is a natural state – and therefore we know automatically how to "do it" – is a myth. Conversely, as a result of participating in a marriage and relationship education program, couples are more likely to seek professional help if problems arise in their marriage.[28]

Myth 5: Marital satisfaction necessarily declines over time

There is a widespread belief about a "honeymoon-is-over" effect in all marriages. This belief was reinforced by a number of studies in the 1990s that indicated a decline in marital satisfaction in the early years of a marriage. One study found that both husbands and wives reported a decline in satisfaction and love over the first two-and-a-half years of their wedded

life.[29] In subsequent research, Professor Lawrence Kurdek concluded that marital quality – measured as attractions to marriage – declines steadily over the first four years of marriage. He also found that depressive symptoms, rather than levels of depression at the start of the marriage, were important for understanding change in marital quality.[30] As a significant proportion of divorces occur in the early years of marriage, the findings contributed to the popular belief about the honeymoon effect.

More recent research has challenged the premise that marital satisfaction necessarily declines over time. These studies show that marital satisfaction remains highly stable for many couples. In a four-year study of newlyweds,[31] and a 20-year study of continuously married spouses,[32] more than two-thirds of the couples studied were found to have highly stable marital satisfaction. The psychologists, Thomas Bradbury and Justin Lavner, observe: "These findings cast doubt on the inevitability of declines in satisfaction …".

Myth 6: Conflict destroys marriage

The renowned marital researcher, John Gottman, observes that all marital conflicts, ranging from mundane annoyances to all-out wars fall into one of two categories, "either they can be resolved, or they are perpetual, which means they will be part of your lives forever, in some form or another".[33]

Professor Gottman discovered that 69% of marital conflicts were of the second type. Despite the perpetual nature of the disagreements, couples who understood that problems were an inevitable part of a relationship were able to cope with them, avoid situations which worsen them, and develop strategies and routines which help to deal with them. It was when couples failed to cope with the inevitable conflicts, and fell into a relationship gridlock, that the pattern endangered the marriage.

Professor Gottman says:

Being aware that specific patterns and interactions in your marriage are part of a process that leads to divorce – and knowing how to reverse those patterns – may help you back away from that slippery slope.[34]

Psychologist Benjamin Karney notes that spouses who are able to make charitable explanations of their partner's disappointing or irritating behaviours are far less likely to divorce in the early years of marriage.[35]

Conversely, Gottman posits that certain negative behaviours damage a relationship. Describing these behaviours as the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse", these disastrous ways of interacting, in order of least to most dangerous, are:

- criticism
- contempt
- defensiveness
- stonewalling

Gottman says they create a continuing cycle of discord and negativity that's hard to break through if you don't understand what is happening.[36]

While reiterating that abusive relationships are unacceptable, research findings suggest that many couples can improve their marital relations by learning more about the role of conflict in their relationships.

Myth 7: A 'good divorce' is beneficial for adults and children

The idea of a "good divorce" with minimal distress for the parties, including children, is common.[37] According to this belief popularised by Constance Ahrons, "adults and children emerge at least as emotionally well as they were before the divorce".[38] According to this thesis, despite the fact that relationship dysfunction drove the parents apart, the former spouses are sufficiently cooperative "to permit the bonds of kinship – with and through their children – to continue".[39]

Yet studies indicate that the separated and divorced are overall less happy than the married: even the most unhappily married people in a large Australian survey were, on average, still more content than the divorced. According to one of the researchers, Mariah Evans, this is partly because "people in unhappy marriages underestimate the extent to which divorce will disrupt many, many aspects of their lives".[40] This is borne out by surveys of life satisfaction which reveal much lower levels for the divorced and separated.[41]

Separation and divorce can have a significant, long-term impact on children. US paediatricians highlighted the "long, searing experience" on children,[42] and recommended that in addition to providing appropriate treatment, measures aimed at "preserving the intact family where appropriate" should be pursued.



Fathers are important

Family relationships after divorce are also significant to the wellbeing of children. Despite the attractiveness of the belief in a "good divorce", recent research questions the idea that "positive post-divorce family relationships have substantial benefits for children".[43] This is apart from the fact that a significant minority of children lose (almost) all contact with one parent following divorce.

Australian data reveals that one-third of children never stayed with their father post-separation, with 11% never seeing their father and 23% seeing their father only during the daytime.[44]

New Zealand family scholar Jan Pryor notes although divorce itself is at times preferable to sustaining a toxic marriage, "a 'good divorce' as defined does not ensure optimal outcomes for children".[45]

Parental-child relations tend to worsen post divorce according to a series of studies,[46] even compared to relations in intact, but unhappy families.[47]

Myth 8: Fathers are dispensable

Fathers are important. Consider the intense bitterness the feminist author, Germaine Greer, expressed towards her father in *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You*. Cut by her father's abandonment of her to go to war, her anguish is intensified by his subsequent failure to want to know her and show affection:

Some children can remember their fathers reciting Urdu poetry or Marlowe, or teaching them to recognise birds or butterflies, to spot trains, to play chess or cricket. But you Daddy dear? Not a curve-ball, not a cover drive, not a card trick. Not a maxim. Not a saw, adage or proverb. Except, "you're big enough and ugly enough to take care of yourself."

Dr Moira Eastman asks in *The Magical Power of Family*, can anyone insist that Greer's choice of theme for her life's work is unrelated to her family experience, especially disillusion with her father? Families have survived and blossomed despite fathers being away at war or work – without the consequences that Greer ascribes to her situation. Nonetheless, mothers and fathers are critical for the welfare of children. In his best-selling book, *The Road Less Travelled*, M Scott Peck observed that children are not deceived by "hollow words" and "mechanical actions". They know by the quantity and quality of time given to them how they are valued. They want "to believe that they are loved but unconsciously they know that their parents' words do not match up to their deeds".[48]

The view that fathers are superfluous should be, as the Council on Families in America claimed, a major social concern for our society:

First, fathers are vitally important to the task of childrearing. Certainly, we have never met the child who did not say that she or he wanted to be raised by both a father and a mother. And children know whereof they speak. The importance of fathers to childrearing is strongly supported by social science research. Second, it is extremely important to the larger society that men remain involved in family life. For men,

married fatherhood is a civilising force of no mean proportions. Conversely, having a large number of men disconnected from the patterns and satisfactions of family life – and thus much more prone to unhappiness, deviance and crime – has always, and properly, been one of society's worst fears. In too many of our nation's communities today, this fear is becoming a reality.[49]



A stable, healthy marriage between a husband and wife is optimal for child well-being. Many studies reveal that fathers play an important role in the lives of their children.[50] In a study of 2,700 adolescents, Columbia University scholar Marcia L Carlson found that the higher the level of father involvement, the lower the level of behavioural problems, with adolescents without a father having the highest problem scores. Recent Australian research concluded "adolescent boys engage in more delinquent behaviour if there is no father figure in their lives".[51] Moreover, "father involvement is more beneficial when the father is coresident" than when the father is living apart from the child.[52]

Recent research through the *Princeton Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study* underlines the importance of both mothers and fathers.

The sociologist, Sara McLanahan, emphasises the need for emotional support between couples: "The better the couple gets along, the better it is for the child."[53]

What makes marriage work?

Psychologist Blaine Fowers, suggests in *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness* that our inclination to understand marriage as an emotion-based, private affair is one of the great tragedies of our time.[54]

Increasingly, social scientists stress that the virtues of commitment, responsibility and loyalty are required to sustain marriage.

Good communication can only occur if there is a commitment to self-restraint, to listening, by couples. Self-disclosure requires trust; and vulnerability requires courage.

How we preserve marriage – against the cultural and economic pressures that threaten to overwhelm it – as the foundation of healthy family life, the protective institution for children, the crucible of the free market, and the essential condition for democracy, will determine the health and longevity of the critical institutions of the western liberal experiment.

The future of individuals, families, communities and nations is tied to the outcome.

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