

'Living together' a  
statistical risk, experts say  
By Michael Foust

WASHINGTON (BP)--Does living together before marriage increase the chances for a successful marriage? The answer may surprise some.

Between 50 and 60 percent of all marriages begin with the two partners cohabitating, and many of those couples no doubt believe they are making a wise move up front. But living together before marriage actually increases the chances of divorce in a first marriage -- 67 percent of cohabitating couples eventually divorce, compared to the normal 45 percent for first marriages.

That and other myth-busting facts form the core of a new book by Mike and Harriet McManus, "Living Together: Myths, Risks & Answers" (Howard Books), with a foreword by Chuck Colson. Co-founders of the organization Marriage Savers, the couple have invested much of their lives trying to help strengthen marriages and push down the divorce rate.

The biblical warnings against cohabitation, the book says, are affirmed by statistics showing it's a bad idea.

"Men and woman cohabit for different reasons," Mike McManus said in a conference call discussing the book. "Women see it as a step toward marriage. They think they can audition for this job. Men do it because they like to have the ready availability of sex and having someone share their living expenses. Women should heed their mother's advice -- if you give away the milk, he won't buy the cow."

The number of cohabitating couples has soared in recent decades, from about 439,000 in 1960 to more than 5 million today. About 10 percent of couples who married between 1965 and 1974 lived together before marriage. Today, that number is more than 50 percent.

Couples who live together not only are significantly more likely to divorce after marriage, but about 45 percent of them will break up before marriage, studies show. Cohabitation, McManus said, has a high failure rate because it's based on selfishness.

"If you make me feel loved, then I might marry you. If you make me happy, then I might marry you," McManus said. "Love and marriage is an investment, and cohabitation is a gamble. Cohabitation is conditional; marriage is based on permanence. These are radically different psychological premises. True love is selfless -- seeking to serve the other person. Cohabitation is based on selfishness -- 'How will this relationship satisfy me?'"

He added that no studies have ever shown cohabitation to benefit relationships.

Harriet McManus discounted the notion that couples can go through a "trial marriage."

"[I]t's really more like a trial divorce," she said at a press conference at the Family Research Council. "The only question is whether you break up before the wedding or after the wedding in a legal divorce. As one of our marriage educator friends says, you can't practice permanence. Of 100 cohabiting couples, 85 break up before or after the wedding, leaving only 15 couples in a lasting marriage after 10 years, and who knows how many more divorces after 10 years."

Women who cohabit are more likely to be abused and to be depressed than women in a marriage, studies cited by the McManuses say. Additionally, men and women in a live-together arrangement are more likely to cheat on one another. But perhaps most concerning, couples who cohabit are nearly just as likely as married couples to have children -- meaning that the failed relationship has an impact beyond the man and woman.

"The children feel abandoned when one parent moves out," Harriet McManus said. "That causes a great deal of trauma for the children, tripling the odds that the child will be expelled from school [compared to] those raised in an intact family."

Couples who believe they can save money by cohabitating must weigh not only the biblical commandment against it but the likely negative consequences of their decision, the McManuses say. Such couples should instead look for same-sex roommates as a money-saver, they added.

Often, couples cohabit because they rarely have seen a successful marriage up close, Mike McManus said.

"The major underlying reason for soaring cohabitation is that these are couples in which one or both partners grew up in a divorced home or in a home where there was not a marriage," he said. "These young couples fear marriage because they fear divorce."

Churches should mentor engaged couples as a way to strengthen relationships, stop cohabitation and prevent divorces, the McManuses believe. Statistics back them up. Of 288 couples who were mentored at their church between 1992 and 2000, only seven divorced or separated. Fifty-five of the couples (19 percent) broke up before marrying.

"That's a huge percentage -- that's 19 percent," Mike McManus said of the break-ups. "You need to have the (mentoring) process be rigorous enough that the weak relationships either break up on their own or get better and get stronger."

Cohabitation, Mike McManus believes, is a subject too often avoided by pastors.

"I think if sermons were preached on this subject and if churches offered an alternative -- a better way to test the relationship -- the country would be better off."

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With reporting by Katherine Kipp, an intern with the Washington bureau of Baptist Press.