

What's so bad about a "starter marriage"? - AvvoStories

Tuesday, September 27 2016, 10:55 AM

What's so bad about a "starter marriage"?

[Divorce](#), [News](#), [Relationships](#)

There have been a number of [analyses](#) and think pieces on how the Millennial generation is not embracing the concept of marriage with the same enthusiasm as previous generations. One manifestation of the tendency is their reputed embrace of the so-called [starter marriage](#)—that is, a first marriage that lasts less than five years and ends without children.

When the idea of the starter marriage first emerged, Constance Ahrons, then a professor of sociology at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and associate director of its marriage and family therapy doctoral program, reminded the [New York Times](#), "People still enter marriage with expectations, with dreams, with fantasies of the house we're going to buy, the children we're going to have. It's those dreams of the future that get disturbed."

Are there other costs to starter marriages, or have Millennials simply made good on the adage "practice makes perfect"?

Is the starter marriage really a thing?

Some people think these short-lived marriages are a result of Millennials rushing into marriage. But [statistics](#) show that's not the case; Millennials are less likely to marry than any generation before them, and only 28 percent of Millennials have married so far. A full quarter of Millennials are predicted to remain unmarried for life. The [median age](#) at first marriage is now 27 for women and 29 for men — compared to age 20 for women and 23 for men in 1960.

There is evidence that [cohabitation](#) is the real starter marriage, and contrary to early research, newer studies indicate that a "[trial run](#)" of cohabitation may improve the odds of a successful marriage. (Legalized same-sex marriages are too new to have generated long-term data, but an initial [study](#) by the Williams Institute in California finds that same-sex couples are slightly less likely to divorce than opposite-sex couples.)

While the prevalence of starter marriages does seem to be inflated in the popular imagination, that doesn't mean the starter marriage is an entirely imagined phenomenon. For the [four percent](#) of Millennials who have already experienced divorce, the end of a short-lived marriage may have wreaked real financial and emotional havoc. After all, no one actually gets married with the intention to upgrade in a couple years. Or do they?

There's real pain, but also hope

According to Pamela Paul, who literally wrote the book on starter marriages ([The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony](#)), these unions do not fail because Millennials have casual attitudes about marriage. Paul claims early marriages fail because couples enter marriage with twin pillars of unrealistic expectations and an unprecedented comfort level with divorce.

And there are reasons for that comfort level. First of all, there is less stigma attached to divorce now than ever before. Fewer and fewer people refer to it as a "failure," and the aura of immorality that once hovered around it has more or less dissipated. Furthermore, technology has [greatly reduced the cost and difficulty](#) of uncontested divorces, reducing overall anxiety as well as uncertainty around the cost and process.

Still, the [emotional impacts](#) of a break-up apply even to short-lived marriages. Moreover, those impacts are amplified in states that don't recognize "irreconcilable differences" as [grounds for divorce](#), forcing many couples to claim

desertion, extreme cruelty, or other unpleasant options that intensify each other's suffering. And while everyone agrees that divorce is less tragic when there are no children involved, even young, childless couples can struggle determining custody of pets and dealing with shared obligations like apartment and car leases.

Minimizing the damage

Despite the emotional and financial cost of divorce, there really is [evidence](#) that admitting failure and trying again is wiser than toughing it out. According to the Marriage Foundation, a California nonprofit that studies marriage and divorce, 45% of first marriages (at any age) fail, while only 31% of second nuptials end in divorce. It's hard to tell whether that is because people are older and more mature when they remarry, or because practice really does make perfect.

Either way, couples considering marriage would like to get it right the first time, and they can work to manage expectations. [Premarital counseling](#) can help couples build relationship skills and solve problems (or recognize incompatibility) before they tie the knot. As can a [prenuptial agreement](#). Many couples are reluctant to even discuss a prenup because they fear it will make them look like they are not serious about making the marriage last. But prenuptial agreements [can be a relationship positive](#), requiring couples to really get familiar with their partner's finances – and their attitudes about money – before they can affect each other's credit rating.

In fact, forming a financial agreement may be more important than actually getting married. If cohabitation really is the new starter marriage, prenuptial agreements may come too late. Many experts are now recommending that couples develop a [cohabitation agreement](#) before signing a lease together.

Sitting down with a [lawyer](#) to hammer out the details of their finances is an eye-opening marital test drive that can save couples a lot of money and heartache down the road – whether they ever get married or not.

Tagged [divorce](#), [marriage](#), [prenup](#), [same-sex marriage](#)

[Leave a comment](#)