

Prosperity Through Timeless Values

Dr. Jennifer Roback Morse • Your Coach for the Culture Wars



WHY NOT TAKE HER FOR A TEST DRIVE?

Research shows that cohabitation is correlated with unhappiness and domestic violence. Cohabiting couples report lower levels of satisfaction in the relationship than married couples. Women are more likely to be abused by a cohabiting boyfriend than a husband. Children are more likely to be abused by their mothers' boyfriends than by her husband, even if the boyfriend is their biological father. If a cohabiting couple ultimately marries, they have a higher propensity to divorce.

Most of the recent reports and commentaries on cohabitation report these difficulties, and at the same time, tend to downplay them. Living together before marriage seems to resemble taking a car for a test drive. The "trial period" gives people a chance to discover whether they are compatible. "You wouldn't buy a car without taking it for a test drive, now would you?"

Here's the problem with the car analogy: the car doesn't have hurt feelings if the driver dumps it back at the used car lot and decides not to buy it. The analogy works great if you picture yourself as the driver. It stinks if you picture yourself as the car.

Yet this is the implication of the "test drive" metaphor. I am going to drive you around the block a few times, withholding judgement and commitment until I have satisfied myself about you. Pay no attention to my indecision, or my periodic evaluations of your performance. Try to act as if we were married, so I can get a clear picture of what you're likely to be like as a spouse. You just pretend to be married; I'll just pretend to be shopping.

The contract analogy doesn't help much either. Living together is fine as long as both people agree to it. The agreement amounts to this: "I am willing to let you use me as if I were a commodity, as long as you allow me to treat you as if you were a commodity." But this is a bogus agreement. We can say at the outset that we agree to be the "man of steel", but no one can credibly promise to have no feelings of remorse if the relationship fails.

There is an essential difference between sexual activity and other forms of activity. The sexual act is by its nature, a gift of oneself to another person. We all have a deep longing to be cherished by the person we have sex with. That longing is not fooled by our pretensions to sophistication.

Here is a better analogy: Suppose I ask you to give me a blank check, signed and ready to cash. All I have to do is fill in the amount. Most people would be unlikely to do this. You might do it, if you snuck out and drained the money out of your account before you gave me the check. Or, you could give me the check and be scared about what I might do.

But what do you have in your checking account that is more valuable than what you give to a sexual partner? When people live together, and sleep together, without marriage, they put themselves in a position that is similar to the person being asked to give a blank check. They either hold back on their partner by not giving the full self in the sexual act and in their shared lives together. Or, they feel scared a lot of the time, wondering whether their partner will somehow take advantage of their vulnerability.

No one can simulate self-giving. Half a commitment is no commitment. Cohabiting couples have one foot out the door, throughout the relationship.

They rehearse not trusting. The social scientists that gather the data do not have an easy way to measure this kind of dynamic inside the relationship.

In my view, this accounts for the disappointing results of cohabitation. I am sorry to say that I learned this from experience. My husband and I lived together before we were married. It took us a long time to unlearn the habits of the heart that we built up during those cohabiting years.

The sexual revolution promised a humane and realistic approach to human sexuality. Ironically, the uncommitted-sex mentality has proven to underestimate both the value and the power of sexual activity. Lifelong, committed relationships are difficult, no doubt about it. But self-giving loving relationships still have the best chance of making us happy.

COHABITATION FAST FACTS

- Cohabitors are more likely to be depressed than married couples.
- The presence of children exacerbates depression among cohabitators, but not among married couples.
- Cohabiting couples perceive their relationships as less stable.
- Cohabitors report poorer relationship quality than married couples.
- Cohabiting women are more likely to have “secondary sex partners” than are married women.
- Cohabitors have lower commitment to the relationship, lower levels of happiness and worse relationships with their parents than married couples.
- Cohabiting couples have higher rates of assault, and the violence is more severe, than among dating or married couples.
- Cohabitors tend to be more socially isolated and this partially explains their heightened levels of domestic violence.
- Prior cohabitants had a higher rate of pre-marital aggression than couples who did not live together.
- According to a study of British child abuse registries, a cohabiting boyfriend is the most serious risk factor for child abuse. Children are safest living with their natural parents, married to each other, next safest living with their mother and her new husband, next safest living with their natural mother alone, still less safe with two natural parents cohabiting and the least safe with their mother and a cohabiting, but unrelated boyfriend.
- Married couples whose marriages are preceded by cohabitation are more likely to get divorced and to report lower quality marriages.
- The increased probability of divorce cannot be accounted for by systematic differences between those who choose to get married and those who choose to cohabit.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Dr. Morse offers a variety of workshops and seminars on cohabitation.

For Pastors: “How to prepare cohabitators for life-long love.”

For Married couples: “Rearranging your marriage: recovering from cohabitation.”

For Cohabiting women: “Why Johnny Can’t Commit: resolving the cohabitation dilemma.”

Call Dr. Morse today at 760-295-9278, to book a workshop that meets your needs.

Or, try Jennifer Roback Morse, Smart Sex: Finding Life-long Love in a Hook-up World, (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 2005).