

How Many Married People Have Thought About Divorce?

by Alan J. Hawkins and Sage E. Allen | November 2, 2015 8:30 am

Almost everyone wants a happy marriage and wants it to last a lifetime.¹ But most also know the scary U.S. statistics: nearly 50 percent of first marriages and more than 60 percent of second marriages end in divorce. Researchers have discovered a lot about the struggles that lead to marital breakdown and the factors that raise or lower couples' divorce risk. Strangely, however, we know little about how people consider the option of divorce. What are spouses thinking as they ponder it? How often and how long have they been having these thoughts? What marital problems are they facing, and what do they do to address them?

This report provides some answers to these questions from a new national survey of 3,000 individuals ages 25 to 50 who have been married at least one year. (The sample closely represents all Americans in this demographic.) The survey, part of the National Divorce Decision-Making Project,² asked a set of questions about what we labeled "divorce ideation": what people are thinking about and doing when they are considering divorce. We also conducted in-depth interviews with a small sub-sample of respondents to get a more fine-grained perspective.

Findings

We give a lot more details in our full report[1],³ but here is the big-picture summary of what we found.

1. Thoughts about divorce are common in our society. More than half of married individuals (ages 25–50) say they have had thoughts about divorce, either in the past or currently, spoken or unspoken. A sizeable minority report having thought about divorce in the last six months.
2. Most spouses who had recently considered divorce want to stay in—not leave—their marriage and fix their problems.
3. Many respondents had thought about divorce in the past but decided to stay married, and almost all of them are glad they did. They are not only *survivors* but *thrivers*. So thinking about divorce isn't always a sign of imminent separation.
4. Patience, perspective, and promises—commitment—appear to be the most common tools that people employ to resolve or simply outlast their marital problems. Taking direct action to fix problems, such as seeking counseling, doesn't seem to be the primary path for repairing relationships.

One in Four Spouses Has Recently Thought About Divorce

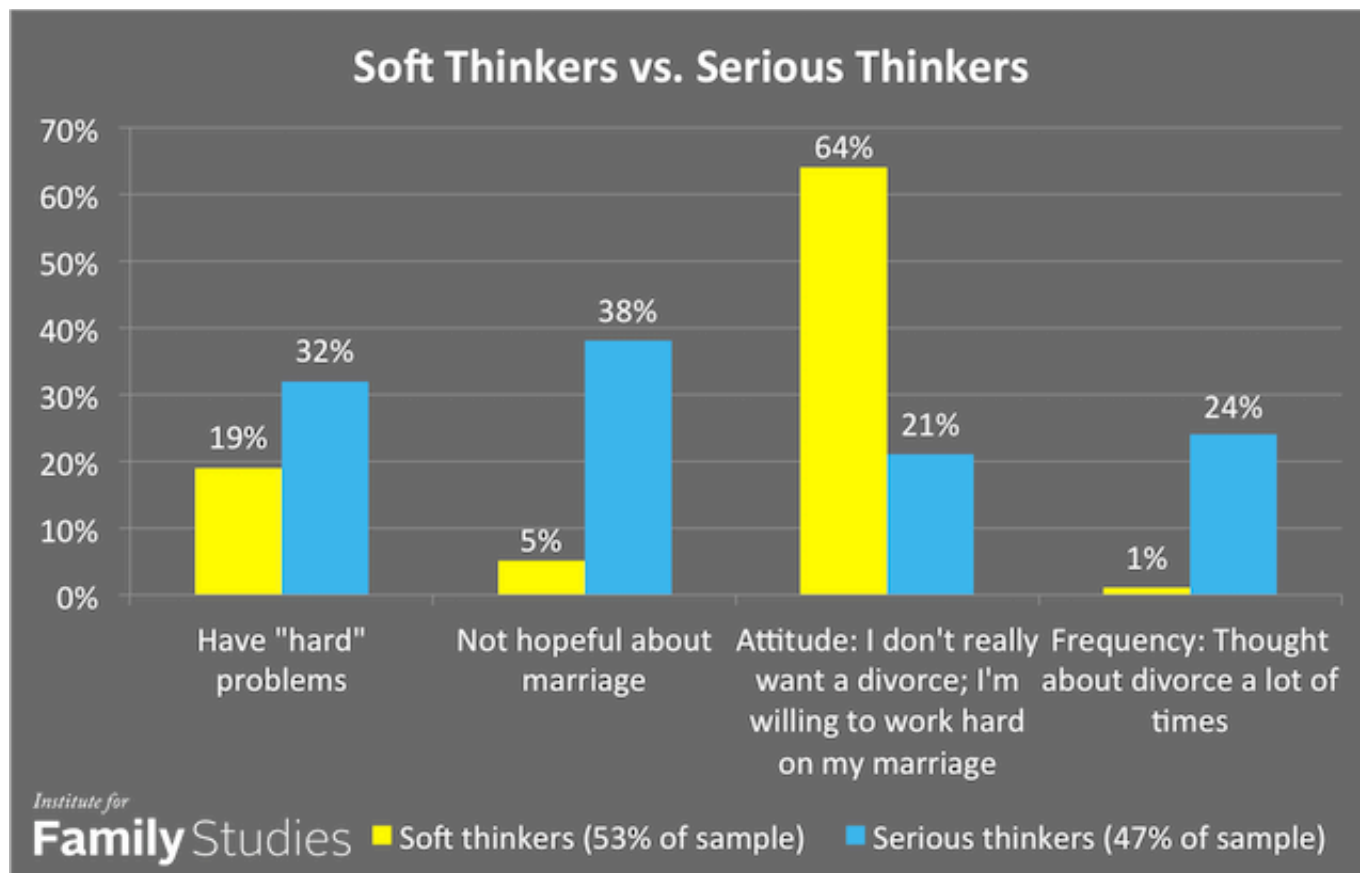
Overall, we found that one in four spouses in our national survey had thought about divorce in the last six months. And this number didn't begin to drop off until people had been married 15 to 20 years. But most of this group had recently thought about divorce only a few times, rather than a lot. About half had been thinking about divorce for more than a year. A significant number said they didn't really want a divorce and they were willing to work hard on the marriage (43 percent), or they were willing to work on the marriage if their spouse got serious about making some important changes (23 percent). Only a few (5 percent) said they were done with the marriage.

These infrequent thinkers were reasonably hopeful that their relationship had what it takes to overcome their challenges. They were more likely to report less intense, and more easily resolved, marital problems (57 percent) rather than the tougher problems of infidelity, abuse, and addiction (43 percent). (Less intense problems included things like growing apart or losing connection, losing romantic feelings, not paying enough attention to the marriage, and money disagreements.)

Even among those experiencing the harder problems, a third said they really didn't want a divorce and were willing to work hard on the marriage; another 25 percent said they would work hard on the marriage if their spouse made some major changes. Ninety percent of all thinkers had not taken legal action to obtain a divorce. Also, most of them were trying to take some action to work on the relationship, although our in-depth interviews revealed that many spouses in this group were struggling with just how to move forward. Thinking about divorcing or staying married occupied a considerable amount of emotional energy and was not something our interviewees took lightly.

More sophisticated statistical analyses of responses to many of the questions in the survey confirmed that there are two distinct groups of spouses considering divorce. One group was much more likely to be thinking about divorce frequently. In addition, they had higher levels of problems in their marriages, both the more common as well as the more severe kinds. They were less hopeful about the future of their relationship than the other group. Moreover, they were much more likely to say they were done with the marriage (although this was still a small proportion of the group) or to say they had mixed feelings about a divorce. The label *serious thinkers* fits this group well.

In contrast, nearly 90 percent of the other group said they had thought about divorce only a few times in the last six months; only 1 percent said they had been thinking about it a lot. This group reported lower levels of marital problems of all types, and they were more hopeful about the prospects for their marriage. Also, they were almost three times as likely as serious thinkers to say that they did not want a divorce and were willing to work hard to keep the marriage together. We labeled this second group *soft thinkers*. ("Soft" thinking isn't necessarily fleeting or painless, however: in our in-depth interviews we discovered that soft thinkers can still be confused, discouraged, and hurting.) Based on this analysis combining many questions, 53 percent of spouses who had thought about divorce recently were soft thinkers; 47 percent were serious thinkers. The differences between these groups are illustrated in the chart below.



Thoughts and Actions

Divorce is a scary thing to think about, so we tend to assume people will tolerate a lot of marital problems before starting to consider it. That one in four married people have recently pondered divorce does not seem to bear out this assumption. In a culture with high divorce rates and widespread concerns about the fragility of marriage, perhaps it is hard *not* to have some thoughts about divorce when problems and disappointments arise in marriage. It's difficult to swim upstream against such a strong cultural current.

Furthermore, thoughts about divorce don't have to be a sign of impending marital doom. Yes, sometimes those thoughts are frequent and stem from serious, even dangerous, problems, so thoughts about divorce may take people in that direction appropriately. But usually thoughts about divorce are just that: thoughts, not concrete actions, decisions, or deep doubts. Even among those in our study with more serious reasons for thinking about divorce recently, few said that they were done with the marriage; a third said they didn't really want a divorce and were willing to work hard on their marriage. (About half had mixed feelings.) Thinking about divorce could spur efforts to strengthen or repair a relationship.

Does this mean that soft thinkers are not at risk for divorce? Probably not. Thoughts are different from actions but clearly can influence them over time. Even "soft," occasional thoughts about divorce can color people's perceptions of a relationship, shaping their feelings in more negative ways that can make marriages less satisfying and more fragile. Furthermore, decisions to remain married could be short-term strategies rather than long-term decisions, and the threshold for divorce in our society may not be especially high. Still, we shouldn't assume that any thoughts about divorce signal impending doom, even if they do suggest greater risk.

Addressing and Outlasting Marital Problems

Some spouses who reported thoughts about divorce while taking our survey said in interviews a few weeks later that now they were *not* thinking about divorce. And we also discovered that many people go through tough times in their marriage and not only survive but thrive. In fact, our survey found that more than one in four respondents (28 percent) had thought their marriage was in serious trouble at some point in the past, but had not thought so recently. Nearly 90 percent of them said they were glad they were still married; less than 1 percent were not glad to be together. So it seems people regularly do work through or outlast their problems.

When these “survivors” were asked what helped them through their rough patches, more than 90 percent said, “Over time, things changed and just got better or weren’t as hard.” A similar proportion said, “My commitment to keeping my marriage/family together was strong.” Also, “I/my spouse worked at fixing some problems and improving our relationship” was endorsed as helpful by nearly all who reported serious marital problems in the past. About one in four survivors got some counseling (as individuals or with their spouses), and most of them (75 percent) said it was helpful. Patience, perseverance, promises, and some relationship “perspiration” helped many people resolve their marital problems.

We hope the findings from our study[2] can help those who are thinking about divorce understand how common their thoughts are and maybe even make them a little less scary. Perhaps, too, our findings can provide them some direction and hope. In addition, the study should give professionals and laypeople who are trying to support struggling marriages a better map of this mostly uncharted cognitive terrain.

1. Wilcox, W. B. (2010). When Marriage Disappears: The Retreat from Marriage in Middle America. In W. B. Wilcox (Ed.), *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2012* (pp. 13–60). Charlottesville, VA, and New York: National Marriage Project and Institute for American Values.

2. This work is a result of a team of scholars with the National Divorce Decision-making Project, funded by the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University: Alan Hawkins and Sage Allen (Brigham Young University); Steven Harris and Sarah Crabtree (University of Minnesota); Kelly Roberts, Payton Birlew, and Alejandra Gamboa (University of North Texas); Sarah Allen and Linda Moore (Montana State University); David Schramm (University of Missouri); and Adam Galovan (University of Alberta).

3. To access a summary and the full report, go to: familystudiescenter.byu.edu[3].

Endnotes:

1. full report: <https://familystudiescenter.byu.edu/Pages/Home.aspx>
2. study: <https://familystudiescenter.byu.edu/Pages/Home.aspx>
3. familystudiescenter.byu.edu: <https://familystudiescenter.byu.edu/Pages/Home.aspx>

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