

# How to Lower Your Risk of Divorce: Advice to Singles

by Scott Stanley | @DecideOrSlide | February 11, 2015 8:30 am

As I discussed in my last blog post[1], couples marrying today still face a substantial lifetime risk of divorce. Even if the risk drops to around 40 percent, that's a lot of divorce. However, you are not a statistic, and you can do things that impact your likelihood of lasting love in marriage. In this piece, I focus on those who are not yet married but who want to be in the future. In a future piece, I'll focus on those already married who are concerned about their risk for divorce.

I will first share some factors associated with higher risk for divorce and then describe specific strategies for lowering that risk in *your* life.

## Who Is at Greater Risk for Divorcing?

In my last piece[2], I reviewed some of the complexities in understanding the average divorce risk. No matter which estimate one uses, the fact is that there is a substantial risk for divorce in marriage. While there are academic arguments about how great the *average* risk is, there is a lot less argument among scholars about the *relative* risks. Some people face a higher risk of divorce, and others a very low risk. What follows is not an exhaustive list but it will hit the highlights.

### Individual Characteristics Linked with Higher Rates of Divorce:

- Marrying at a young age (e.g., marrying younger than 22)<sup>i</sup>
- Having less education (versus having a college degree)<sup>ii</sup>
- Having parents who divorced or who never married<sup>iii</sup>
- Having a personality that is more reactive to stress and emotion<sup>iv</sup>
- Having a prior marriage that ended<sup>v</sup>
- Prior to marrying, having sex with or cohabiting with someone other than your mate<sup>vi</sup>
- Having a very low income or being in poverty<sup>vii</sup>

### Couple Characteristics Linked with Higher Rates of Divorce:

- Having a child together before marrying<sup>viii</sup>
- Living together before either being married or at least engaged<sup>ix</sup>
- Poorer communication and conflict management<sup>x</sup>
- Being different in religion or race<sup>xi</sup>

While some people truly face a higher risk of divorce than others, many people who have a very low risk nevertheless worry about divorce happening to them. Some people avoid marriage because of their fear of divorce, but avoiding marriage won't really reduce one's chances of experiencing heartache and family

instability. To really avoid the possibility of such pain, one would need to avoid love, sex, and children altogether. For some, avoiding marriage may actually increase their likelihood of experiencing the very thing they fear—heartache and break-up—because marriage can be a potent force for clarifying and reinforcing commitment between two people.

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It's useful to think about the above list of risk factors in terms of which are dynamic, meaning potentially changeable, and which are static, meaning not changeable.<sup>xii</sup> No one can go back and change the history of their parents' marriage. Nor, when you are already married, can you go back and change the history of things like if you cohabited prior to engagement or had a child before marriage. But even with static risk factors, there is good news. Those seemingly unchangeable risk factors are believed to have their impact on your present life through other dimensions that are dynamic. For example, although having parents who divorced seems to weaken adults' views of commitment in marriage,<sup>xiii</sup> you can control your own beliefs about marriage and your own level of commitment to your partner.

### **Advice for Those Not Yet Married**

If you have not yet married or even chosen a partner, you have, by far, the most power to affect your eventual likelihood of divorce. Those who are already married can only change how they think and act in their existing marriage. Singles who have not yet chosen a partner have a lot more that is still on the table for change. In other words, your stage of life shapes what is dynamic and static in terms of factors associated with *your* risk for divorce. The earlier you are in the process of finding a mate, the more your choices going forward can affect your future. Here are a few tips to keep in mind as you proceed.

1. *Take it slow.* Get to know a person very well before deciding to marry. We all know people who fell in love at first sight and married within months, and who have done well over many years in marriage. But there are many other couples who married fast and blew apart. By taking more time, you can see how a potential partner treats others, responds to stress, and handles disagreements with you on things that matter. Also, if your relationship is moving toward marriage, take some time to clarify expectations about marriage, family, and life. If you are not sure what to talk through, my colleagues and I have chapters on expectations in most of our books, including a detailed list of topics to talk through (e.g., here[3] and here[4]).

2. *Pay attention to major red flags.* If you see evidence of controlling or abusive behavior, or serious substance use problems, don't move blindly ahead hoping things will work out. Love does not conquer all. If you have trusted friends or family, listen to them about concerns they see in the person you are dating. Don't marry a makeover project—or, at the least, don't do so until there is great evidence of real, lasting change when there are concerns. And don't move in together to test such a relationship. That's the worst reason you can have to move in together.<sup>xiv</sup>

3. *Look for someone who shares your beliefs and values.* What are your central values in life? Are they shared? Avoid situations where you might fall for someone prior to determining these things. Once you sense some chemistry, it's hard to hold onto what had been non-negotiable for what you wanted in a mate. This is where people can use online dating sites effectively: You can be clear about the big things you are looking for in life before you meet someone and it gets all complicated with chemistry. Chemistry is great. You want to have that. But chemistry is best developed in a sequence, not as a blinding, binding glue in a relationship

you'd otherwise never have chosen.

Love does not conquer all.

4. *Look for mutual dedication.* There should be sustained evidence that you and a prospective mate are equally devoted to the relationship; for example, that you are both willing to make sacrifices for each other. If you consistently think you are more dedicated to the relationship than your partner, consider moving on. That's a bad sign for future[5] marital quality. It's fine to be looking for love, but it's smarter to be looking for sacrifice. See here[6] for a specific example.

5. *Don't let constraints for staying together increase before you establish mutual commitment to be together.* Many people slide into situations that make it harder to end a relationship before they have made a clear decision about what is best. My colleague Galena Rhoades and I believe that this is what many people do not see about the risk of living together prior to marriage (or at least before engagement). For too many couples, living together makes it harder to break up before it's clear[7] that they really have a future together. Here's a four-minute video describing this problem[8].

6. *Do premarital training:* While marital experts debate everything, there is solid evidence that completing premarital training (education, counseling, whatever it's called) together can improve your odds in marriage.<sup>xv</sup> Although this does not guarantee marital bliss, there is much more potential upside than downside. The one "downside" I sometimes think about is actually an upside: you could learn something concerning about your partner or relationship that you didn't fully appreciate before—something that could lead you to get more help or go slower. Because of this, I recommend that you seek premarital training as far before a wedding date as possible. Why? Because the further in advance you complete it, the more you have a chance to find out something that could lead you to change your mind about marrying each other. I know I just lost a few of you. But consider carefully why you just checked out. Instead of doing something like living together, which has virtually no evidence of making marriages more likely to succeed, do something that can inform your decision without simultaneously making it harder to break up.

If you are likely to marry in a religious setting, contact that group and see if they provide premarital training. If not, check around to see if another group provides this service in a way that fits for the both of you. If you cannot find that, try a relationship education workshop if they exist in your community. Or, as another option, ask around about a local marital therapist who is skilled in helping couples prepare for marriage. If you don't have any local options, there are online resources for assessing relationships before marriage (e.g., here[9]) or for strengthening relationships (e.g., here[10], and here[11]).

What makes a great marriage is not two perfect people aligning their lives, but two imperfect people transformed by a life of commitment and love.

7. *Be realistic about potential mates.* There are things I like about the concept of a soul-mate. For some people, that means someone to share life with; someone at a deep level of connection and perhaps of shared beliefs who can be a fellow traveler in life. I have no problem with that. For others, however, the concept is dangerous: what they really mean by "soul-mate" is a perfect lover who is ideal for them. Here's the risk in that: You may well marry someone you believe is your soul-mate, in this extreme view of perfect love. But someday, you will realize that this person is not perfect. You will get hurt. You will be misunderstood or maybe even challenged about some of your imperfections.

Some very sound marriages fail because one or both partners expected a level of acceptance, passion, or

perfection that is just not possible or exceedingly rare. That's a real shame. What makes a great marriage is not two perfect people aligning their lives, but two imperfect people transformed by a life of commitment and love. Look for someone who can commit and grow and sacrifice, and be that person to your eventual mate.

### **But I Am at High Risk!**

Perhaps you realize that you bring a high risk for divorce to a marriage. Some people get dealt a worse hand in life, and you may have been dealt a tough one. Further, individuals with a greater risk for divorce are more likely to marry other individuals with greater risk for divorce. What can you do? Consider the hand you were dealt and play that hand as well as you can. Even just committing to my first suggestion above, to go slower, could make a huge difference in your life and odds of divorcing. Marriage involves a choice to risk loving another for life, but that is different from gambling with your love life. Just make sure you are deciding rather than sliding your way into your future.

*Disclosure: I am co-author of two books I referenced here, and I am a partner in the company that publishes the online intervention, ePREP, that is linked as an online resource. Since helping people improve their odds in marriage is my area of specialty, it seemed unwise to avoid recommending anything that my colleagues (such as Howard Markman) and I are associated with.*

*Update, 3/2/15: The first paragraph on premarital training was expanded.*

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  - ii. Raley, R. K., & Bumpass, L. (2003). The topography of the divorce plateau: Levels and trends in union stability in the United States after 1980. *Demographic Research*, 8, 245-260.; Wilcox, W. B., & Marquardt, E. (2011). *The State of Our Unions 2011: Marriage in America*. Charlottesville, VA: The National Marriage Project. [See the box labeled: Your Chances of Divorce May Be Much Lower than You Think.]
  - iii. Amato, P. R. (2010). Research on Divorce: Continuing Trends and New Developments. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 72(3), 650-666.
  - iv. Kelly, E. L., & Conley, J. J. (1987). Personality and compatibility: A prospective analysis of marital stability and marital satisfaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 27-40.
  - v. Amato, P. R. (2010). Research on Divorce: Continuing Trends and New Developments. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 72(3), 650-666. ; Whitton, S. W., Stanley, S. M., Markman, H. J., & Johnson, C. A. (2013). Attitudes toward divorce, commitment, and divorce proneness in first marriages and remarriages. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75, 276-287.
  - vi. Teachman, J. D. (2003). Premarital sex, premarital cohabitation, and the risk of subsequent marital dissolution among women. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65(2), 444-455.
  - vii. Bramlett, M. D., & Mosher, W. D. (2002). Cohabitation, marriage, divorce, and remarriage in

the United States. Vital and Health Statistics, Series 23. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

viii. Tach, L., & Halpern-Meehin, S. (2009). How Does Premarital Cohabitation Affect Trajectories of Marital Quality? *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 71(2), 298-317.

ix. Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., Amato, P. R., Markman, H. J., & Johnson, C. A. (2010). The timing of cohabitation and engagement: Impact on first and second marriages. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 906-918.

x. Gottman, J. (1994). What predicts divorce? The relationship between marital process and marital outcomes. Lawrence Erlbaum, New Jersey.; Clements, M. L., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2004). Before they said "I do": Discriminating among marital outcomes over 13 years based on premarital data. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66, 613-626.

xi. Heaton, T. B. (2002). Factors contributing to increasing marital stability in the United States. *Journal of Family Issues*, 23, 392-409.

xii. Stanley, S. M. (2001). Making a case for premarital education. *Family Relations*, 50(3), 272-280. ; Markman, H. J., Stanley, S. M., & Blumberg, S. L. (2010). *Fighting for your marriage*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

xiii. Amato, P. R. & DeBoer, D. (2001). The transmission of divorce across generations: Relationship skills or commitment to marriage? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63, 1038-1051.; see also Whitton, S. W., Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2008). Effects of parental divorce on marital commitment and confidence. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22, 789-793.

xiv. Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2009). Couples' reasons for cohabitation: Associations with individual well-being and relationship quality. *Journal of Family Issues*, 30, 233 – 258.

xv. Carroll, J. S., & Doherty, W. J. (2003). Evaluating the effectiveness of premarital prevention programs: A meta-analytic review of outcome research. *Family Relations*, 52, 105-118; Stanley, S. M., Amato, P. R., Johnson, C. A., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Premarital education, marital quality, and marital stability: Findings from a large, random household survey. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 20(1), 117-126.

## Endnotes:

1. my last blog post: <http://family-studies.org/what-is-the-divorce-rate-anyway-around-42-percent-one-scholar-believes/>
2. last piece: <http://family-studies.org/what-is-the-divorce-rate-anyway-around-42-percent-one-scholar-believes/>
3. here: [http://www.amazon.com/Fighting-Your-Marriage-Best-seller-Preventing/dp/0470485914/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1423446967&sr=8-1&keywords=fighting+for+your+marriage](http://www.amazon.com/Fighting-Your-Marriage-Best-seller-Preventing/dp/0470485914/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1423446967&sr=8-1&keywords=fighting+for+your+marriage)
4. here: <http://www.amazon.com/Lasting-Promise-Christian-Fighting->

Marriage/dp/1118672925/ref=sr\_1\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1423446992&sr=8-1&keywords=a+lasting+promise

5. That's a bad sign for future: <http://nationalmarriageproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/NMP-BeforeIDoReport-Final.pdf>
6. here: <http://slidingvsdeciding.blogspot.com/2013/09/thats-cool.html>
7. before it's clear: <http://family-studies.org/why-doesnt-living-together-before-marrying-decrease-the-risk-of-divorce/>
8. Here's a four-minute video describing this problem: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPOSG5l\\_bY4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPOSG5l_bY4)
9. here: <http://relateinstitute.com/>
10. here: <https://www.lovetakeslearning.com/store/>
11. here: <http://www.poweroftwomarriage.com/>

**Source URL:** <http://family-studies.org/how-to-lower-your-risk-of-divorce-advice-to-singles/>

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