

The Meaning of Marriage Matters, Part 2 Permanence vs. Divorce: Finding a Safe Place to Keep Our Hearts¹

A high divorce rate makes it harder for us all to aspire to forever. We come to see marriage as fragile rather than strong, as something that succumbs instead of overcomes. It's harder to trust that marriage is a safe place to keep our hearts. As a result, the decision to marry is bigger and harder to make and the fear that marriage may not be permanent may restrict our ability to fully commit.

Researchers tell us that 40%–50% of first marriages—and 60%-plus of second marriages—fall short of forever.² That figure is too high, especially for the more disadvantaged in our society and for the million-plus children each year whose lives, on average, are negatively affected by divorce.³ How have the high rates of divorce over the past 50 years affected the *meaning* of marriage today? And how does this change behavior, especially for young people in the prime marrying years?

It's not that we take divorce lightly. More than 90% of Americans believe that divorce is a major problem in society and nearly 60% believe that it should be harder than it is to get a divorce.⁴ Yet on a personal level, our attitudes are more accepting. For instance, among Millennials, nearly half (44%) believe that the institution of marriage is becoming optional or obsolete in society, even while they still personally aspire to marry.⁵

The point is not that any specific divorce is wrong. Quite the contrary, the option of divorce is necessary to be able to end a dangerous or unhealthy or dead marriage. Yes, a weakened norm of permanence in

marriage makes it easier for those in unhealthy relationships to exit the institution. But that is not the end of it. It also makes it harder for people to stay committed and work through their challenges. Like impatient investors, those without a sense of permanence in marriage find it harder to absorb the short-term relational ups and downs and to trust the long-term prospects of the investment.

Greater acceptance of divorce means more divorces occur not just among unhealthy marriages but for those on the margins, as well. And there are many at the margins. Research suggests that about half of all married couples at some point have experienced a significant problem and thought their marriage was in trouble, and a third have seriously considered a divorce at some point in their marriage. About one in four married individuals (ages 25–50) have recently had thoughts about divorce.⁶ Research also finds that most divorces come from marriages that were not experiencing particularly low levels of happiness or high levels of conflict.⁷

When marriage no longer has a strong sense of permanence, it not only changes how young adults approach marriage, but when they do marry it becomes easier to exit than to endure, even when circumstances are not extreme. And usually they are not. The harder reasons that people give for divorce, such as abuse and addiction that indicate unhealthy or dangerous relationships, are not the reasons most people give for divorce. The most common reason that divorced individuals give for their divorce is lack of commitment.⁸

The idea that divorce should never be an option, even though sometimes it's a necessity, is eroding, and thus our ability to sustain a marriage is weakened. The sense that one can deposit one's heart in an institution for safekeeping and earn a lifetime of interest is diminishing.

To feel safe, a healthy marriage needs a feeling of psychological safety.⁹ This safety is harder to find when divorce seems so common. And a lack of trust in permanence can make unhappy spouses quicker to assume the worst. When permanence feels like a fading feature of the institution, we will come to expect it less. Importantly, we will be less able to ask for it.

The meaning of marriage matters for our abilities to form and sustain a healthy, stable marriage. "Whatever" doesn't work that well when it comes to marriage. As individuals and as a society, we need to engineer ways to reinforce the waning sense that marriages are forever.

Public Proposals and Personal Plans

Our no-fault divorce laws have abandoned the concept of marital permanence, but most people still want to believe in forever, and we can implement a series of feasible public policies that will support and reinforce those beliefs and reduce the legal necessity of divorce. The overall goal of marital stability policies would be to *reduce the need for divorce* by providing more help to couples forming marriages and supporting more services for couples struggling to hold their marriages together.

1. We can start by helping couples be better prepared for a healthy, enduring marriage. We know a lot about why marriages succeed and why they fail. We

can do more to teach young people, to give them the knowledge and skills and motivations needed to form a healthy marriage and avoid the problematic paths that will bring people to marriage with a lot of relationship baggage that makes it harder to get to their desired destinations.

2. When couples commit to marriage, we can provide better premarital education to build a stronger foundation for a healthy, enduring marriage. The reality is that the relational seeds of most divorces are present even before the marriage begins,¹⁰ so we need to improve couples' skills at dealing with those issues from the start. Once married, couples will benefit from greater access effective educational services to help them fight off the inevitable forces of marital entropy and keep their relationships vital.

Overall, we can build a smart marriage culture, with a strong understanding that healthy, stable marriages are built on a known foundation of correct knowledge and motivations, as well as a set of effective skills that can be learned, practiced, and improved.

3. When they are struggling, some couples find themselves thinking that divorce might be the answer to their problems, but we can do more as a civil society than throw our hands up in the air. For those who are doubting their marriages but are not experiencing insurmountable problems, we can provide better educational and counseling options to help them assess more clearly their circumstances and the prospects of repairing the marriage.¹¹

4. Of course, everything we can do indirectly to make it easier for marriages to thrive—from more good-paying jobs, to better educational opportunities, to help for overcoming addictions, to workplaces that help couples balance work and family demands—will help prevent the need for divorce.

While we can imagine a better world that helps to reduce the necessity for divorce, the reality is that we live in the present, imperfect one. What can young adults do to minimize the risk of divorce, to act with more confidence in forever?

1. They can start by developing a long-term perspective. Together, couples can approach a marriage like seasoned, long-term investors who ride out the frequent market undulations knowing the likelihood that a good investment will pay off in the long run. Marriage, like financial markets, is no place for the short-sighted and impatient.

2. Next, they can reject the notion that divorce is a random accident waiting to happen. Divorce happens for reasons, most of which are understandable and

predictable, many of them in plain sight even before lovers exchange wedding vows. And this understanding leads to the next action point:

3. They can take a proactive approach to building and sustaining a healthy, stable marriage. They can take a marriage preparation class to gain a deeper understanding of themselves, their future spouse, and their relationship, and take it early enough to learn and practice the skills and motivations that create healthy relationships. After the wedding, they can keep investing energy in the marriage, finding a way amidst all the other demands of life to demonstrate that a good marriage is really the most important personal goal in life.

All such efforts—personal and societal, direct and indirect—communicate support for the aspiration of marital permanence. They reinforce that there are ways to make marriage a safer place to keep our hearts.

Endnotes

- ¹ Scholars who contributed to writing this essay include: Alan J. Hawkins, Brian J. Willoughby, Jason S. Carroll, and Dean M. Busby.
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- ³ Amato, P. R., & Anthony, C. J. (2014). Estimating the effects of parental divorce and death with fixed effects models. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *76*, 370–386.
- ⁴ National Fatherhood Initiative. (2005). With this ring ... : A national survey on marriage in America. Gaithersburg, MD: National Fatherhood Initiative. <http://www.fatherhood.org/with-this-ring-survey>
- ⁵ Wang, W. (2011, March 9). For millennials, parenthood trumps marriage. *Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends*. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/03/09/for-millennials-parenthood-trumps-marriage/>
- ⁶ Johnson, C. A., Stanley, S. M., Glenn, N. D., Amato, P. R., Nock, S. L., Markman, H. J., & Dion, M. R. (2002). *Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 baseline statewide survey on marriage and divorce*. Stillwater: Oklahoma State University Bureau for Social Research; Schramm, D. G., Marshall, J. P., Harris, V. W., & George, A. (2003). *Marriage in Utah: 2003 baseline statewide survey on marriage and divorce*. Salt Lake City: Utah Department of Workforce Services; “Thinking about Divorce” survey, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University.
- ⁷ James, S. (2015). Marital quality of divorced women. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *29*, 479–489; Amato, P. R., & Hohmann-Marriott, B. (2007). A comparison of high- and low-distress marriages that end in divorce. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *69*, 621–638.
- ⁸ Harris, S. M., Glenn, N. D., Rappleyea, D. L., Diaz-Loving, R., Hawkins, A. J., Daire, A. P., Osborne, C., & Huston, T. L. (2008). *Together in Texas: Baseline report on marriage in the Lone Star State*. Austin, TX: Health and Human Services Commission. Retrieved from <http://togetherintexas.com/pdf/baselinerreport.pdf>; Johnson, C. A., Stanley, S. M., Glenn, N. D., Amato, P. R., Nock, S. L., Markman, H. J., & Dion, M. R. (2002). *Marriage in Oklahoma: 2001 baseline statewide survey on marriage and divorce*. Stillwater: Oklahoma State University Bureau for Social Research; Schramm, D. G., Marshall, J. P., Harris, V. W., & George, A. (2003). *Marriage in Utah: 2003 baseline statewide survey on marriage and divorce*. Salt Lake City: Utah Department of Workforce Services; With this ring ... : A national survey on marriage in America. Gaithersburg, MD: National Fatherhood Initiative. <http://www.fatherhood.org/with-this-ring-survey>
- ⁹ Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Whitton, S. W. (2010). Commitment: Functions, formation, and the securing of romantic attachment. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *2*, 243–257.
- ¹⁰ For instance, see: Lavner, J. A., & Bradbury, T. N. (2012). Why do even satisfied newlyweds eventually go on to divorce? *Journal of Family Psychology*, *26*, 1–10; Lavner, J., Bradbury, T., & Karney, B. (2012). Incremental change or initial differences? Testing two models of marital deterioration. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *26*, 606–616; Lavner, J., Karney, B., & Bradbury, T. (2012). Do cold feet warn of trouble ahead? Premarital uncertainty and four-year marital outcomes. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *26*, 1012–1017.
- ¹¹ Hawkins, A. J., Fackrell, T. A., & Harris, S. M. (2013). *Should I try to work it out? A guidebook for individuals and couples at the crossroads of divorce*. Available at: <http://strongermarriage.org/html/divorce-remarriage/should-i-try-to-work-it-out>