

## COHABITATION - OR "RENT-A-SPOUSE"

Cohabitation is defined as two unrelated adults who are involved in an emotional and sexual relationship and who sleep together in the same residence on a regular basis. There are over 3 million cohabitating couples in the United States. Cohabitation has been increasing at a rate of about 15% a year for the past decade or so. The following discusses cohabitation from a purely psychological and sociological perspective, but it validates the objections to this practice as a serious moral disorder because it is basically a self-centered and self-serving relationship.

Reasons offered for cohabitation include the following: fear of marriage; career or educational commitments; increased tolerance from society, parents, and peers; improved birth control technology; and the desire for a stable and sexual relationship without legal ties. Cohabitants also regard living together as a vaccination against divorce which, as we shall see, is an illusion.

Other reasons given are:

- Greater sense of well-being
- Delaying the age at which a person marries
- Living with an intimate partner provides an opportunity for individuals to learn more about themselves and their partners and also provides an opportunity to screen out a partner with whom marriage might not work.
- A person's values, habits, reactions, behavior patterns, and relationship expectations are sometimes more fully revealed in a living-together relationship context than in a traditional dating context. However, the same thing not only will happen but also needs to happen in an honest and open dating relationship if it is serious.
- Since living together relationships usually involve fewer legal ties, it may be easier to disengage from such a relationship than from a marriage. Discord is more likely to lead to the termination of a cohabitating relationship than of a marital relationship.

Here are the negative consequences of cohabitation:

- Because cohabitation is often an ambiguous relationship, with partners attributing different meanings to the experience, the potential for feeling tricked or deceived is higher than in a marriage relationship, which usually has more clearly defined expectations.
- When levels of commitment are uneven in a relationship, the partner who is more committed feels used. In a one-sided convenience relationship, one partner manipulates the other to fulfill sexual, domestic, or other needs while withholding any semblance of commitment. There is little reciprocity, and the relationship becomes exploitive.
- Some cohabitating couples must contend with parents who disapprove of, or do not fully accept, their living arrangement. Some parents express their disapproval of their child's cohabitating by cutting off communication with, as well as economic support for, their child. Other parents display lack of acceptance of cohabitation in more subtle ways such as excluding the couple from family activities.

- Some economic liabilities exist for those who live together instead of getting married. People who live together typically do not benefit from their partner's health insurance, Social Security, or retirement benefits. Only spouses qualify for such payments.
- For males in particular, the negative part of having a live-in partner is the loss of personal freedom (Lynch & Richards, Family Life Researchers)
- Cohabitation has been shown to attract a different type of couple than marriage and to foster attitudes that contribute to divorce (Steven Nock, Sociologist). Cohabitants are not ready to commit to each other. Cohabitants may have developed "bad habits with respect to the development and maintenance of a relationship, and these problems get imported into subsequent relationships" (Stets, 1993), e.g. a greater tendency to withdraw from a relationship and separate than to negotiate disagreements.

When those who had lived together prior to marriage were compared with those who had not, the former revealed lower marital quality, higher marital conflict, and more marital problems (Rogers & Amato, 1997). The proportion of separating and divorcing within 10 years is a third higher among those who lived together before marriage than among those who did not (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989); DeMaris & Veninadha Rao, 1992; Balakrishan & colleagues, 1987)

- Other researchers have found lower commitment to the institution of marriage, a belief that marriage is not a lifetime commitment, and a greater perceived likelihood of divorce among couples who had cohabitated (Thomson & Colella, 1992; Stets, 1993). Cohabitants were characterized by lower-quality relationships because cohabitation is an incomplete institution. Non-marital unions are not yet governed by strong consensual norms or formal laws. What is the legitimate role of a parent in his or her offspring's cohabitating union? What is the non-marital equivalent of an in-law? What is the legal status of children born from non-marital unions? Who has custody rights when they separate?
- Cohabitants tend to be people who are willing to violate social norms and live together before marriage. Once they marry, they may be more willing to break another social norm and divorce if they are unhappy than unhappily married persons who tend to conform to social norms and have no history of unconventional behavior.
- The bulk of the available data suggests that people should not live with a partner before marriage if their sole goal in doing so is to help ensure a durable marriage with that partner.
- In one study, 65% of abused partners were in live-in situations; 19% were in traditional marriages.

--Edited by Patrick J. Hession