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Idaho Common Sense™



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Cohabitation - still just shacking up

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It's called cohabitation, the progressive, enlightened, and politically correct term for old-fashioned shacking up. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development reports that "cohabitation, once rare, is now the norm." Roughly 10% of couples living together are not married. It used to be wrong, discussed in whispers. Our mothers would point to those who "lived together," explaining in hushed tones they were not married. What changed? Were our mothers wrong?

If 10% of people participate in a behavior does that make it the 'norm'? More important, does 10% of the people cohabitating make it right, make it healthy, or does it just make it more common than it used to be? Could cohabitating be the 'norm' and still wrong? Are values and morals a moving target, changing at the whims of society, abandoning any absolutes?

Moreover, has cohabitation developed into a workable alternative or precursor to marriage or is it still just plain, old fashioned shacking up with the same old problems repackaged? USA Today pointed out that cohabiting with your spouse does not lead to a higher risk of divorce. Data shows that is true only if you marry the only person with whom you cohabit. But, being involved in more than one cohabitating relationship raises the risk of divorce more than twofold. Further, only 50% of cohabitating couples get married and many people cohabit with more than one person, leaving more than 50% to move on with the twofold higher risk of divorce. The 'norm' may not be that great. Are the downsides of cohabitation pretty much unchanged,

with a lack of commitment and a focus on self still the underlying themes?

Some might argue that cohabitation has no more dismal outcomes than traditional marriage, so why the fuss? But aren't failed marriages the result of people not able to honor the commitments they made, while 'failed' cohabitation is an expected outcome? The goal of marriage is a lifelong relationship, a lifelong commitment. The goal of cohabitation on the other hand, is nothing more than a trial run, not a commitment. There are too many people seeking divorces and too many people choosing cohabitation. Are these just two more examples of a deteriorating family, a deteriorating society? What are we missing?

Several years ago I heard Billy Graham make a statement about lifetime marriages, claiming they required much more commitment than love to survive. That statement fascinated me. Months later I was caring for a couple who had been married for over 70 years. After dealing with the medical issues, we sat and talked. I told them what Billy Graham said and asked what they thought of his statement. The husband responded rather quickly that Billy Graham was correct. I then asked if he had loved his wife this entire 70 plus years. He candidly responded, "No." I asked if he would be willing to explain what he meant. He said there was "this time in the 50s when I did not love her; I was not even sure if I liked her much." Asking how long those feelings lasted, I was surprised to learn he felt that way for over 5 years. A bit confused, I asked why he did not divorce her if he felt that way for so

many years. I will never forget his answer. He matter-of-factly said, "I couldn't divorce her. She was my wife."

Can cohabitation lead to the kind of feelings, the kind of commitment, the kind of love this old man expressed? Can cohabitation bring this kind of genuine commitment, this kind of joy and peace? Or is cohabitation just another way to avoid commitment? This man understood what he promised when he married; he understood his commitment, his vows, his promise to his wife, and his promise to his God. There were no 'ifs' or 'buts' in his promise of "until death do us part." Why did he stay? He stayed simply because he said he would.

My father's advice to have such a marriage was simple. He said there were two kinds of girls, the dating kind and the marrying kind. He cautioned I date only the marrying kind because marrying the dating kind would lead to unhappiness. Had he had a daughter, he would have given her the same advice.

Do you think the dating kind might be more inclined to cohabit? Do you think some divorces might be a result of the marrying kind mistakenly marrying the dating kind, hoping they will change once married? My father's advice is more profound than I appreciated. Perhaps the dating kind explains the rising prevalence of cohabitation and divorce. Perhaps the old couple were both the marrying kind.

Seek out the marrying kind for dating and marriage, living the old couples' axiom, "I couldn't divorce her. She was my wife."

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