

session 12: marriage and families

In the U.S., a shift has occurred in the last 20-30 years. Fewer people are getting married, and the age for getting married has been inching up over the years. For women, the average age for getting married went from 21 in 1970 to 25 in 2003. For men, it went from age 23 to 27. In Texas, the average age for men is 26, and for women 23.

However, most people do get married at some point in their lives. And many who don't get married would like to. For example, a recent study of low-income unmarried couples who just had a baby found that the majority of both the men and the women wanted to stay together and get married at some point in the future.

Here are some of the key benefits of marriage:

- Getting married often makes economic sense. Two can live more cheaply than one. Married people often work harder, earn more and save more.
- Once a couple gets married, friends and family members tend to be more willing to offer support and assistance when it's needed.
- Married people get certain legal rights, for example:
 - They can get covered by their spouse's insurance plan.
 - Their spouse can give consent for medical treatments.
 - They have a right to inherit their spouse's property even without a will.
- Marriage often brings: companionship, long-term friendship, increased health and happiness, comfort and care over the long haul.
- Children tend to fare better when their parents are married. Although most children raised by single parents end up doing just fine, children are generally better off when their parents are married, live in the same home and have a reasonably healthy marriage. Why? One reason is that married parents tend to earn higher incomes. Having more money reduces stress and makes it easier for parents to spend time with and nurture children. Married parents usually get more support from their extended families and friends. Children tend to have better outcomes, including better educational achievements, better health, are less likely to enter the criminal justice system and less likely to be divorced themselves later in life.

Here are some factors that make getting married more challenging:

- Children from a former relationship (and having to pay child support if the child doesn't live with you)
- Unresolved issues of mistrust or infidelity in the relationship
- Pressure to marry because of an unplanned pregnancy
- Limited education and limited job skills
- Addictions to drugs, alcohol or gambling
- High levels of conflict in the relationship
- A problem with anger or violence (one or both partners)
- Money issues
- Relatives who do not approve of the marriage

Things to work out before getting married:

Expectations: Discuss what you expect from one another – how will you communicate; how will you solve problems; what would be a “deal breaker” for both of you; what is your understanding of the commitment you’re making; how you will manage household tasks; what are your plans for having children.

Money Management – Discuss your attitudes about money; decide whether to keep your money separate or together; work out a budget, decide how you will keep track of and pay bills; make a plan to save; and make a plan to put your affairs in order (insurance, wills, etc.).

Pre-Marital Education or Counseling: There is so much to talk about and work through before getting married. Most couples either don't take the time or don't know how to tackle all of these important topics. Having someone like a counselor or minister guide you through this process is so helpful. Occasionally, couples recognize during counseling that they should not get married! Wouldn't you rather reach that conclusion before rather than after saying, “I do?” In the year before getting married, the State of Texas strongly encourages couples to attend a pre-marital education class that lasts 8 hours. If you complete the course, the State waives the license fee and waiting period.

Interviews with People Whose Parents Have Separated or Divorced

Some people avoid getting married because they fear that the marriage won't work and they will have to get a divorce. Many people believe that the divorce rate is climbing, when it has actually declined since the early 1980s.

Although the divorce rate may not be as high as many people think, it is still quite high and the impact on adults and children is real. It's important for you to be informed about the realities of divorce so you can take that knowledge with you as you make decisions about relationships. Instead of being crippled by fear, you can be equipped to create a healthy marriage, if that's your choice, and to avoid being in a situation where you feel that the only way out is a divorce.

In this assignment, you will interview three people whose parents have separated or divorced. As with the interview of a married couple, this will be an informal discussion with people who feel comfortable sharing their personal experiences. You won't need to take any notes. You won't be asked to discuss any specific information in class.

Interview Questions:

- How old were you when your parents separated/divorced?
- What was their relationship like before they separated/divorced?
- How did you handle the separation? How did it affect you?
- How do your parents get along now that they are divorced? How does that affect you?
- How has your parents' relationship affected your attitudes about relationships and marriage?