



# Busting Cultural Myths About Marriage and Divorce

By Shaunti Feldhahn

OK, raise your hand if you have ever quoted the facts about the 50% divorce rate? Yep, that would be all of us!

How about this one? Have you ever lamented the fact that the divorce rate was the same in the church? Or that most marriages are just hanging in there, not vibrant and happy? Have you privately told your spouse how defeated you feel facing a newlywed couple, wondering if they'll be one of the statistics in a few years?

Have you seen or shared the sobering statistic that most second marriages don't make it? Or talked about marriage being hard?

I don't know about you, but I have said every one of those things – whether just to friends or from the stage at marriage conferences. I felt like I had to exhort people to work hard in their marriages, to get them to realize just how seriously they needed to take their vows. And while that goal is incredibly important, I had no idea that my means of getting there was having the opposite effect.

I also had no idea that every one of the statistics I was quoting – statistics that fit both with conventional wisdom and what I saw reported in the media – were nowhere close to true!

Without realizing it, those of us who have shared that information have been, as Andy Stanley put it in the Foreword to my new book [The Good News About Marriage](#), “A small part of a very large problem.” We have been both accepting and adding to a deep sense of cultural discouragement about marriage. A discouragement that instead of motivating people, leeches hope from marriages. A discouragement that, it turns out, is based more on myth than reality.

## Indiana Jones and the Divorce Stats of Doom

In 2006 I was a nationally syndicated newspaper columnist writing a routine piece about marriage and divorce. I wanted to accurately cite the numbers, but my senior researcher and I were soon really confused by contradictory statistics about what the divorce rate actually was. In the end, a question we originally expected to answer in two minutes, took eight years of investigation to unravel. I felt a bit like Indiana Jones as we waded into the deep jungle of complex statistical projections and feuding demographers in search of great treasure: the truth that surely had to be in there somewhere.

Along the way, we kept unearthing encouraging facts not just about the divorce rate but about marriage overall. Facts we felt urgently needed to come to light, to bring balance to the national conversation and encourage individual marriages! Yes, we also saw plenty of very real concerns. And we quickly found that this field is so complicated, there is often no way to nail down one “right” answer. But we can get a lot closer.

Here are just a few examples of the truths we cover in [The Good News About Marriage](#).

## The Good News

Perhaps most surprising, half of all marriages are not ending in divorce. According to the Census Bureau, 72% of those who have ever been married, are still married to their first spouse! And the 28% who aren't, includes everyone who was married for many years, until a spouse died. No-one knows what the average first-marriage divorce rate actually is, but based on the rate of widowhood and other factors, we can estimate it is probably closer to 20-25%. For all marriages (including second marriages, and so on), it is in the 31-35% range, depending on the study.

Now, expert demographers continue to project that 40-50% of couples will get divorced – but it is important to remember that those are *projections*. And I'm skeptical because the actual numbers have never come close, and divorce rates continue to drop, not rise! Even among the highest-risk age group –baby boomers—seven in ten are still married to their first spouse. Most of them have had 30 years' worth of chances to get divorced...and they are still together.

Now any amount of divorce is still too high! But still, knowing that most marriages last a lifetime is good news that urgently needs to be part of our conventional wisdom.

Another myth that is begging to be debunked is the notion that “Barna found that the rate of divorce is the same in the church.” Actually the Barna Group found no such thing and George Barna himself told me he would love to correct this misunderstanding. Because he wasn't studying people “in the church.”

The Barna Group studies were focusing specifically on the divorce rates of those with Christian and non-Christian *belief systems* and didn't take worship attendance into account. So I partnered with the Barna Group and we re-ran the numbers: and if the person was in church last week, their divorce rate dropped by 27%. And that is one of the smallest drops found in recent studies: overall, regular church attendance lowers the divorce rate anywhere from 25-50%, depending on the study you look at.

### “The implications are enormous”

A few years ago, when I first shared these facts and others at a conference of marriage and family pastors, one ministry leader came up to me with a stunned look on his face. “If this is true,” he said, “the implications are enormous.”

Since then I have heard similar statements from hundreds of pastors, counselors and average men and women. They have felt as though for too long they were – as one put it – “held hostage to bad data that we couldn't contradict.” And they see the dramatic difference it will make to know the truth... and be able to share it.

Imagine the difference for pastors to know that they can stand on stage and tell their congregations with confidence that *going to church matters for your marriage*.

Imagine the difference for a counselor to be able to confidently tell a struggling couple, “Most people get through this, and you can too.”

Imagine equipping the average young person with the ability to counter the cynical statements of his college professors or the “why bother getting married” comments of friends who are living together, with the solid truth that, actually, most marriages last a lifetime. (And are happy! We cover that in [The Good News About Marriage](#), too.)

Those of us who work with marriages may secretly wonder whether there is reason for our ministry, if the

news about the divorce rate is better than we think. And the answer is a resounding yes. Because I have seen in the research what every marriage counselor knows intimately: divorce isn't the greatest threat to marriage. Discouragement is.

What marriages need today is hope. And of all people, we should be the ones most prepared and eager to offer hope. And now, we can.

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Shaunti Feldhahn is a Harvard-trained social researcher, popular speaker and best-selling author of *For Women Only*, *For Men Only* and *The Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriages*, which have sold more than 2 million copies in 22 languages worldwide. Her research is regularly featured in media as diverse as *The New York Times* and Focus on the Family, *Cosmopolitan Magazine* and The Today Show. With *The Good News About Marriage*, Shaunti is eager to support leaders in moving marriages from discouragement to hope. Get updates at [www.goodnewsmarriage.com](http://www.goodnewsmarriage.com).