

Summarizing the good news about marriage

The following are the most important good-news findings, estimates, and conclusions in *The Good News About Marriage*. My goal is to provide something helpful and quick for the busy marriage therapist, pastor, priest, counselor, or other reader who wants a crib sheet on what we found. You can find more at www.goodnewsmarriage.com.

Contrary to popular opinion, the good news is that...

...the actual divorce rate has never gotten close to 50 percent.

There is no way to nail down one final divorce rate. However, according to the Census Bureau, 71 percent of women today are still married to their first spouse.ⁱ And among the 29 percent who aren't, a portion of those marriages ended in widowhood, not divorce. Thus, the current divorce rate is probably closer to 20 to 25 percent for first marriages and 31 percent for all marriages (first and subsequent marriages). According to the same census report, 30.8 percent of ever-married women have been divorced. Many other studies have found similar numbers.ⁱⁱ

...most marriages are happy.

Although most people think that only about a third of marriages are happy, in reality around 80 percent of marriages are happy. In multiple surveys, 91 to 97 percent of respondents say their marriages are happy.ⁱⁱⁱ In my own survey that categorized couples based on the answers of *both* the husband and the wife (including, perhaps, a slightly higher number of distressed couples), 71 percent of couples were happy, with 34 percent being very happy.^{iv} In another poll, 93 percent said they would marry their spouse all over again.^v Encouragingly, if those who are most *unhappy* stick with it, they rate their marriages as the most happy within five years.^{vi}

...the rate of divorce in the church is not the same as the rate among those who don't attend worship services.

The common belief to the contrary is based on a misunderstanding of the well-known George Barna studies. In fact, every study that has been done has found that those who act on their faith by attending worship services, praying with their spouse, and so on are happier and closer in their marriage and/or have a significantly lower divorce rate. Several studies have found the rate of divorce among church attenders falls by roughly 25–50 percent.^{vii} Special analysis of the Barna data shows that among those who attend church weekly, the divorce rate drops by 27 percent from those who do not.^{viii}

...most remarriages survive just fine.

Although popular myth puts the divorce rate for second marriages at over 60 percent and for third marriages at over 73 percent, these numbers appear to be purely urban legend. Census Bureau numbers show that 65 percent of women in second marriages are still married to their spouse, meaning only 35 percent of those marriages ended (and it is likely that a fairly significant percentage of those ended with the death of a spouse).^{ix} In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that second marriages of a high risk group of baby boomers had only a 36 percent divorce rate.^x So we can estimate that roughly one third of all remarriages have ended in divorce. The greatest spike in divorce in remarriages occurs within the first five years.^{xi}

...most marriage problems are not caused by big ticket issues, and simple changes can make a big difference.

Most marriage problems are caused by day-to-day misunderstandings, unintended hurt, and trying hard in the wrong areas. Fully 99 percent of married people—and 97 percent even among struggling couples—care about their spouse and want the best for them. But in 82 percent of struggling couples, one partner is simply unaware of the other spouse’s unhappiness.^{xii} And since solving a lack of awareness is simpler than addressing major systemic issues, such as addiction, that is one reason why those who stick with tough marriages usually find themselves very happy five years later.

In summary, although there is plenty of very real concern surrounding the state of marriage in our culture today, many of the depressing “facts” that people think they know about marriage simply aren’t true. After an eight-year study, we can firmly conclude that marriage is actually much stronger and happier than many of us have believed.

Getting this good news out there is vital for giving people hope, counteracting the dangerous feeling of futility about marriage that infects our culture, and demonstrating that we can still believe in marriage.

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- i. Rose M. Kreider and Renee Ellis, “Number, Timing, and Duration of Marriages and Divorces: 2009,” Current Population Reports p71-125 (2011). Calculated from Table 6, page 16. www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p70-125.pdf.
 - ii. For example, see University of Chicago, General Social Survey, 2012; University of Texas–Austin, the National Fatherhood Initiative Marriage Survey, 2005; the Barna Group, 2013.
 - iii. See, for example, University of Chicago, General Social Survey, multiple years; University of Texas–Austin, 2003–2004 survey for the National Fatherhood Initiative; Marist Poll 2010 for the Knights of Columbus.
 - iv. Shaunti Feldhahn, The Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriages survey, conducted 2010–2012.
 - v. Norval D. Glenn, “With This Ring: A National Survey on Marriage in America,” National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005, 34, <http://blog.fatherhood.org/with-this-ring-survey>. (The survey was conducted 2003–2004.)
 - vi. Linda J. Waite et al., Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages, Institute for American Values, 2002, 5, https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/does_divorce_make_people_happy.pdf.
 - vii. For example, see W. Bradford Wilcox, “Is Religion an Answer? Marriage, Fatherhood, and the Male Problematic,” Research Brief No. 11 (New York: Institute for American Values, 2008), www.americanvalues.org/search/item.php?id=20; “When Baby Makes Three: How Parenthood Makes Life Meaningful and How Marriage Makes Parenthood Bearable,” The State of Our Unions 2011 (Charlottesville, VA: National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, 2011), 31–32, figure 13, www.stateofourunions.org/2011/when-baby-makes-three.php; and Margaret L. Vaaler, Christopher G. Ellison, and Daniel A. Powers, “Religious Influences on the Risk of Marital Dissolution,” Journal of Marriage and Family 71 (November 2009).
 - viii. Special analysis for Shaunti Feldhahn, 2008 OmniPoll, Barna Group, Ventura, CA, 2013.
 - ix. Kreider and Ellis, “Number, Timing, and Duration: 2009.”
 - x. Alison Aughinbaugh, Omar Robles, and Hugette Sun, “Marriage and Divorce: Patterns by Gender, Race, and Educational Attainment,” Monthly Labor Review (October 2013): table 3, section “Among Those Who Remarried After Divorce,” www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2013/article/marriage-and-divorce-patterns-by-gender-race-and-educational-attainment.htm. The BLS examined a specific cohort in the well-known longitudinal study National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79).
 - xi. Joshua R. Goldstein, “The Leveling of Divorce in the United States,” Demography 36, no. 3 (August 1999): 410–11, http://ccutrona.public.iastate.edu/psych592a/articles/Goldstein_1999.pdf.
 - xii. Shaunti Feldhahn, The Surprising Secrets of Highly Happy Marriages survey, conducted 2010–2012.