

The real threat to marriage
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[**Note:** Some of the most important findings in this summary of research have been given emphasis by italicizing or boldfacing them.]

Marriage: It's in the news. Whether it's judicial overreaches redefining it, breakups, nasty divorces, or lawsuits, the news is bad wherever you turn – including the pulpit and the counseling office.

Some believe marriage is on its way out – a dying institution, a global failure. But is it really? Have we been bamboozled by easy-release figures that support pessimistic attitudes about God's design for human relationships?

With more than half of marriages ending in divorce in and out of the church, we can only expect an escalating trend to continue, right? The 50% divorce rate stat has spread far and wide. And it has wielded a heavy dose of disillusionment along the way.

However, according to author Shaunti Feldhahn, a Harvard University trained Wall Street analyst and social researcher, the truth about marriage and divorce presents an altogether fresh and surprisingly hopeful picture. In her book *The Good News about Marriage: Debunking Discouraging Myths about Marriage and Divorce*, she contends, "Divorce is not the biggest threat to marriage. Discouragement is." She believes the widespread sense of hopelessness is brought on, at least in part, by false information.

But how can this be? Where did the 50% number come from? It has streamed from every outlet. The question rattled through Feldhahn's thoughts as she struggled to complete an article. What started as a simple task to source the commonly accepted stat turned into exasperation and an eight year research project that she describes as "a rigorous, fair, and accurate attempt to reclaim a whole other side of the truth about marriage."

The real deal

She has finally discovered *the divorce rate in America is nowhere close to 50%. And it never has been. As a matter of fact, the rate has been steadily declining since 1980. In reality, 71% of women are still married to their first spouse. And widowhood reduces the remaining 29%, bringing us to an approximate **25% divorce rate for first marriages.***

Additionally, Feldhahn told AFA Journal, the rate of divorce is not the same among Christians. Previously reported numbers were based solely on belief systems (stated religion) and not whether those beliefs were actually being practiced in their lives. With the help of Barna Group's comprehensive research from 2008, Feldhahn and her staff were able to incorporate participants' answers about church attendance. The results revealed a 27% decrease in the number of divorces among those who had been to church in the last seven days.

Landmark findings by the National Survey of Families and Households between 1987 and 1994 revealed a *50% lesser occasion of divorce among those who share the same faith and attend church.* A Family Life Family Needs Survey among more than 50 churches in 2012-2013 found that *only 22% of those ever married had been divorced.* Numbers vary, but no matter which way you cut it, divorce in the church is lower. And divorce overall is much lower than the numbers pushed by secular media and others.

Just move in

Divorce has declined and found a steady, straight road. But according to a Pew Research poll, barely half of Americans are currently married – only 51% of adults age 18 and older compared to 72% reported

in 1960. So, are the decreasing numbers of divorce due to corresponding lower numbers of those participating in marriage in the first place?

It is difficult to argue otherwise. However, a number of other considerations at work in society are turning the idea on its ear. For instance, the age at which marriage occurs is increasingly reaching higher numbers. Because young-age marriage correlates strongly with a high divorce rate, the deferral of marriage serves to further reduce the divorce rate.

In addition, cohabitation has seen a significant rise over the last 20 years. Live-in situations create and further a noncommittal, easy-out attitude that spills into marital relationships. This increase brings to the surface a higher likelihood of divorce for those who live together before marriage.

Pew research found in 2010 that *61% of people who have never been married have a desire for marriage in the future*. And with good news about marriage bursting from the ranks of American households, it is no wonder it remains a sought-after establishment.

Life at home

Marriages are happy. It is true. *About 80% of marriages overall are happy, and more than a third go beyond the “happy” mark, overflowing into the “very happy” category.*

Of those currently in struggling marriages, 80% will still be married five years later. And solid, hopeful encouragement exists within those stats. “A landmark study found that if you wait five years, eight in ten people say they are very happy five years later,” said Feldhahn.

“Most couples don’t mind the idea of working hard at marriage,” she said. “What discourages them is the idea that marriage itself is inherently hard and complicated, or that working hard won’t pay off.”

When one spouse is less than happy, 82% of the time the other spouse is simply unaware of it. The culprit is typically a stockpile of misunderstandings, conflict, and hurt feelings that materialize over time and cause a rift between the two. It is rarely intentional. *More than 99% of married people care deeply about their spouse, and 93% would marry their spouse again.* In most cases, having a good marriage or improving a struggling marriage doesn’t require couples to “solve deep, systemic issues,” explained Feldhahn. “Instead, small changes can and do make a big difference.”

Feldhahn took a look at remarriage as well. Any search on the internet turns up 60% and 73% divorce rates, respectively, for second and third marriages. An exhaustive search found no such evidence, leaving Feldhahn to conclude the numbers are nothing more than “urban legend.” According to the Census Bureau, *65% of women in second marriages are still married to their second spouse.* And because second and third marriages tend to occur later in life, the percentage of those marriages ended by death is expected to be higher than first marriages, resulting in a second marriage divorce rate of 30% or less.

Hope, enormous implications

Now that the dark compilation of deceptive figures has been dismantled, it is easier to see the beautiful and imperfect gem on which Feldhahn based her statement, “Divorce is not the biggest threat to marriage. Discouragement is.”

So, in Christian marriage, be encouraged. It is Christ who created all things and who designed marriage for His good purpose. In this world, we will have trouble. But He sent encouragement: “[T]ake heart! I have overcome the world.”

In the end, Feldhahn’s research pronounces with clarity, “You can believe in marriage.”

SUMMARY: Contrary to conventional thinking ...

- The actual divorce rate has never gotten close to 50%.
- Those who attend church regularly have a significantly lower divorce rate than those who don’t.

- Most marriages are happy.
- Simple changes make a big difference in most marriage problems.
- Most remarriages succeed.

The Good News about Marriage: Debunking Discouraging Myths about Marriage and Divorce by
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