

New Report Finds Link Between Strong Marriages and Sexual Restraint During the Dating Years

Sexually inexperienced individuals who have only had sex with their spouse are three times more likely to have a highly stable marriage than sexually experienced individuals

PROVO, Utah, April 18, 2023 – For many young adults, single life in American culture has become synonymous with sexual experimentation in both committed romantic dating relationships and casual sexual hook-ups. However, most single adults in the United States today still desire to one day have a successful, lifelong marriage. Because of these trends, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that over half of married adults in the United States enter marriage today having had five or more previous sexual partners.

Are these dating patterns compatible with the future desire for a loving and lasting marriage? The conventional wisdom of the modern dating culture would say yes. Many people believe that it is important for couples to test their “sexual chemistry” while dating and for single adults to gain “sexual experience” before marriage in order to sample one’s options and eventually select a spouse better suited to their preferences. Also, many believe that young people need to experiment sexually while they are single so that they will be “ready to settle down and get married” when the time comes.

However, a new report from the Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University reveals that these common beliefs do not hold up to scientific scrutiny. In fact, the report reviews a series of recent studies using several different national datasets showing that having multiple sexual partners during the dating years leads to higher divorce rates in future marriages. These studies conclude that the number of sex partners a person has prior to marriage is one of the strongest predictors of divorce in social science research.

The Wheatley report also presents the findings of a new national survey of married adults that shows that “sexually inexperienced” individuals or the ones who have only had sex with their spouse are the ones most likely to flourish in marriage, reporting the highest levels of relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and emotional closeness with their spouses.

The report entitled, *“The Myth of Sexual Experience: Why Sexually Inexperienced Dating Couples Actually Go On to Have Stronger Marriages,”* found that between 10% to 20% of married adults report that they have only engaged in sexual intercourse with their spouse. These individuals were twice as likely to report that they are very satisfied with their marriage and nearly three times as likely to report that they were not considering ending their marriage compared to individuals who entered marriage with high levels of sexual experience before marriage.

“Our study confirms what other national studies have been finding the last few years, that sexually inexperienced dating couples are two to three times more likely to be in a highly stable

marriage,” said Brian J. Willoughby, Ph.D., a fellow at the Wheatley Institute and co-author of the report. “It appears that sexual exclusivity between spouses provides an underappreciated foundation for the intimacies of marriage and helps spouses create a mutually satisfying relationship founded on emotional intimacy and healthy communication.”

The report examines the association between sexual experience histories and the quality of current marriage relationships using a dataset of 3,750 individuals in committed couple relationships. The sample was recruited from across the United States based on quotas for age, race, education level, and geographic region, aimed at creating a demographically diverse sample.

Among the report’s findings:

- Married men and women are remarkably similar in their levels of sexual activity before marriage, with 1 in 5 reporting only one lifetime sex partner (20% of men, 19% of women), about 1 in 3 reporting 2 to 4 sex partners (35% of men, 33% of women), about 1 in 4 reporting 5 to 9 sex partners (23% of men, 25% of women), and the remaining 1 in 5 reporting 10 or more sex partners (22% of men, and 23% of women).
- Married men and women who have only had sex with their spouse have a nearly 45% chance of reporting a very high level of relationship stability in their marriage, compared to only 25% of married individuals with 5-9 lifetime sexual partners and only 14% of married individuals with 10 or more lifetime sexual partners.
- Previous research assumes that there is a meaningful distinction between sexual partners inside of a committed dating relationship (for example within an exclusive dating relationship or being engaged to marry) versus casual sexual partners in hook-up or one-night-stand type interactions. This study was able to analyze both types of sexual partners separately and found that whether a person’s sexual partners were committed partners or casual sex partners did not change the negative effect premarital sexual experience had on future marriage outcomes.
- In analyzing the overall trendline, for every additional lifetime sexual partner reported, the probability of the individual being highly satisfied with their marriage decreased by almost 4%, the probability of their marriage being highly stable decreased by 6.5% and the probability of their marriage containing high levels of sexual satisfaction decreased by 4% in comparison to individuals who have only had sex with their spouse.
- Nearly 1 in 5 married men and women who have only had sex with their spouse report that they are “very satisfied” with multiple aspects of their sexual relationship in their marriage, compared to 1 in 10 married men and women who are “highly sexually experienced” and have 10+ lifetime sexual partners before marriage.

- Almost 80% of married individuals who were sexually inexperienced before marriage report the highest level of emotional closeness in their marriage, more than 20% higher than individuals who have had multiple lifetime sexual partners before marriage.

“While this study provides some stark cautions about myths in our modern dating culture, it also provides some hope for individuals who may regret their previous sexual decision making and would like to change the course of their future marriage outcomes,” said Jason S. Carroll, Ph.D., Associate Director of the Wheatley Institute and co-author of the report. “Even with the noted risks, we found that about 10% to 15% of individuals with high sexual experience during their dating years are still doing quite well in their marriages. It is likely that these individuals were able to improve their trajectory by changing their mindset about sex, approaching marriage with enduring commitment, and embracing fidelity by avoiding alternative seeking behaviors after marriage.”

Findings in the report conclude that the number of lifetime sexual partners participants had prior to getting married was negatively associated with their overall satisfaction, sexual quality, emotional connection and relationship stability in their later marriages. These findings remained strong even when statistically controlling for a range of variables including biological sex, religiosity and relationship length, these findings held strong. The report concludes with a detailed discussion of some of the explanations for why sexual exclusivity helps couples come together in healthier ways and helps them stay together after they are married.

You can read the full report at: <https://wheatley.byu.edu/The-Myth-of-Sexual-Experience>

About the Wheatley Institute

The Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University engages students, scholars, thought leaders, and the public in research-supported work that fortifies the core institutions of the family, religion, and constitutional government.

About the Authors

Brian J. Willoughby, Ph.D., is Professor in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University, and a fellow at The Wheatley Institute. Dr. Willoughby is currently an Associate Editor of the Journal of Sex Research an official publication of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality. Contact: brian.willoughby@byu.edu 801-422-3915

Jason S. Carroll, Ph.D. is the Associate Director of the Wheatley Institute, Professor in the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University, and a Senior Fellow at the Institute for Family Studies. In 2014, Dr. Carroll received the Berscheid-Hatfield Award for Distinguished Mid-Career Achievement, a biennial award given for distinguished scientific achievement by the International Association for Relationship Research. Contact: jcarroll@byu.edu 801-362-6920