

Abstaining from Sex Until Marriage Helps Marriages Last

Virginity gets very little press or screen time these days and that's a shame. As a [new American study confirms](#), a woman who enters marriage as a virgin has the best chance of still being married five years later – and probably beyond that. In fact, the odds of her marriage lasting have got better over the last 30 years, as divorce rates for such women have dropped from 11 percent in the 1980s to 6 percent in the 2000s.

The likely reason for that, says the author of the study, University of Utah sociologist Nicholas H. Wolfinger, is religion –that other uncool topic. His data, taken from three waves of the National Survey of Family Growth, shows that women who marry as virgins are far more likely to attend church at least once a week. Sadly, there are fewer and fewer of them. Four decades ago 21 percent of brides had no previous sexual partner, but by 2010 that figure had dropped to 5 percent, representing the most religious women.

(By now you may be asking, Hey, what about the men? Wolfinger explains that “the NSFG doesn't have full data on men's premarital sexual behaviour, and in any event they recall their own marital histories less reliably than do women.”)

As you might expect, the next most likely to last marriages are those of women who have had only one sex partner previously – in most cases their future husbands. Their numbers, however, have dropped from 43 percent in the 1970s to 22 percent in the current decade.

☒ *Source: NSFG, 2002-2013*

The stats for the 1970s may surprise us, as they did Wolfinger. Even though the sexual revolution was well under way, he notes, almost two-thirds of brides had at most one

sexual partner before getting married.

“Even in the 1980s, slightly over half of women had a maximum of one sex partner before walking down the aisle. Things looked very different at the start of the new millennium.”

By the 2010s, the number of brides who had had multiple sexual partners had climbed significantly. Those who'd had 10 or more partners had gone from 2 percent to 18 percent. As you would expect, this group has the highest five-year divorce rates – but only since the 2000s. Prior to that, women with two partners prior to marriage had the highest divorce rates – around 30 percent – compared to those with more partners.

This again is surprising, Wolfinger admits. He suggests a couple of reasons:

- * Women with two previous partners may already have a child from another relationship when they marry, and this is known to have a “profound negative effect on marital happiness” as well as carry a higher risk of divorce.

- * “Over-emphasised comparisons”:

“In most cases, a woman's two premarital sex partners include her future husband and one other man. That second sex partner is first-hand proof of a sexual alternative to one's husband. These sexual experiences convince women that sex outside of wedlock is indeed a possibility. The man involved was likely to have become a partner in the course of a serious relationship—women inclined to hook up will have had more than two premarital partners—thereby emphasizing the seriousness of the alternative. Of course, women learn about the viability of nonmarital sex if they have multiple premarital partners, but with multiple partners, each one represents a smaller part of a woman's sexual and romantic biography. Having two partners may lead to uncertainty, but having a few more apparently leads to greater clarity about

the right man to marry. The odds of divorce are lowest with zero or one premarital partners, but otherwise sowing one's oats seems compatible with having a lasting marriage."

Well, lasting five years, at least. But this ceases to be the case (statistically) beyond 10 partners: "a lot of partners means a lot of baggage, which makes a stable marriage less tenable." Wolfinger speculates further about whether this correlation is true or spurious, and notes that the difference between this group and the women with two premarital partners when it comes to divorce is not significant.

Bottom line, however: "The odds of divorce are lowest with zero or one premarital partners."

Finally, Wolfinger notes that these findings remain substantially true after controlling for the effects of other social and demographic characteristics of women. Some of these factors, however, explained more than others:

"Aside from religion, race and family of origin accounted for the largest portion of the sexual partners/divorce relationship. Caucasian and African American women had similar premarital sexual behavior, but Latinas and members of the "Other" population group had notably fewer sex partners and lower divorce rates than either whites or blacks. Similarly, people who grew up without both parents had more partners and divorced more. Detailed psychometric data would be necessary to further explain the relationship between numbers of sex partners and marital stability."

Perhaps one could conclude that the race factor is itself largely explained by family structure. It makes sense that coming from an intact family gives a person some protection against divorce. And religious practice makes that protection even stronger. That is not surprising, even if other aspects of the study are.

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