



The “Me-First” Ethic Is Breaking Marriages Before They Begin

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FAMILY MATTERS

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Can couples lower divorce risk? Yes—shared religious worship predicts greater stability, meaning, and satisfaction.

Marriage in America is in trouble. Rates of new marriages are at an [all-time low](#), and record numbers of Americans have [never been married](#). Many young people fear they will either never marry or, if they do, the marriage [will end in divorce](#). Is there anything they can do to improve their chances of marital success?

Thankfully, the answer is yes. Recent [research](#) from BYU’s Wheatley Institute shows that several practices within each spouse’s control contribute to stable marriages. I emphasize two of these: being fully committed to your spouse and participating in religious activities together.

Commitment does not come as a surprise. Being committed to marriage means being [willing to sacrifice](#) for your spouse and dedicating ongoing [time, energy, thought](#), and effort to the relationship. We all want to feel stable and secure in our relationships. If you can tell your partner has one foot out the door, you'll likely be anxious about the relationship. Commitment is the glue that builds trust between a couple. Marriage researcher W. Bradford Wilcox [explains](#) that some people enter relationships with a "me-first" attitude, while others adopt a "family-first" mindset. Those with a "family-first" mindset are willing to work and sacrifice when the going gets rough, making it more likely that their marriage will endure. His research also shows that those who [get married](#) and then stay married are typically much more likely to be happy than those who don't. Importantly, your behaviors must consistently reflect a "family-first" mindset. Find ways to continue to [date your spouse](#), make time for [recreation together](#), talk about each others' [dreams and hardships](#), and prioritize your spouse over everything else.

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Religion reinforces commitment in marriage by inspiring greater accountability. Many religions teach that marriage is [more than just a civil agreement](#) between two people—it includes a promise to God and each other to maintain the union. The more married couples prioritize each other and God, the more likely they are to stay married. When challenges arise, religious couples tend to believe they are accountable to God, not just their spouse. This elevated perspective encourages them to consider reconciliation over divorce.

Religion also reinforces commitment by promoting honesty. Many religions charge their members to be upstanding individuals who are earnest and trustworthy. Honesty helps couples maintain complete fidelity to each other—helping them stay committed to each other and avoid divorce.

Besides reinforcing commitment, religion also brings a host of other benefits to marriage. For one, couples who share a religious identity and have high levels of religiosity experience greater marital satisfaction, according to [a 2021 study](#).

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Religion also offers quality recreational couple time through activities like scripture study, [church attendance](#), and community outreach that reinforce the couple's shared religious identity. These activities, offered by a shared religion, encourage healthier interactions between the couple and greater internalization of their shared religious beliefs.

Being devoutly religious can also be protective against divorce. A [14-year Harvard University study](#) reveals that couples who regularly attend religious services together are 50% less likely to get divorced. The Wheatley Institute has likewise [shown](#) that shared church attendance is linked to greater stability in a marriage. In turn, these religious couples report feeling greater meaning and purpose in their lives, as well as higher satisfaction and happiness in their marriage. Religion benefits relational commitment even further when shared religious practices are also observed in the home.

The attitudes, behaviors, and decisions of highly religious individuals tend to contribute to better relational outcomes in marriage. For example, [another study conducted in 2020](#) by researchers Dean Busby and David Dollahite examined relationship qualities of highly religious individuals of various Christian faiths. They found that highly religious individuals are different in many ways: they have fewer sexual partners overall, they wait longer in a relationship before introducing physical intimacy, they avoid living together before marriage, and they more deeply value the marital relationship. Together, these characteristics are associated with increased stability in marriage and [lower risk](#) of divorce.

Religion paves the way for a lasting marriage.

Highly committed religious individuals are also less likely to cohabit before marriage, according to [the 2020 Busby and Dollahite study](#). Contrary to popular belief, [cohabitation](#) does not lead to improved marital outcomes. Rather, cohabitation is a mark of lower commitment in a relationship. Cohabitation says, "I like you, but I still want to be able to walk out." Couples who cohabit are more likely to dissolve the relationship before marriage or ultimately end their marriage in divorce, according to a [2022 study](#). Cohabitation fortifies a lack of commitment, as many cohabiting couples continually push marriage off further or indefinitely.

Of course, not all religious people have successful marriages, and commitment takes great intention to maintain in the long run. But with so much concern about marriage among young people, it's important to emphasize what is within their control. Through religion, couples can find greater strength in their marriage that fortifies their commitment to each other. While the risk of divorce can never be completely eliminated, religion paves the way for a lasting marriage with high commitment.

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