

# SEARCHING FOR HAPPINESS IN AMERICA

*Lori Jackson—English 252*

**I**n the early 1980s the divorce rate peaked at the current 50%, with marriages on a steady incline. As we entered the late 1990s divorce remained almost stagnant; but the number of marriage licenses being issued dropped 18% during the ten year span of 1997-2007 (Live Births, Deaths, Marriages and Divorces: 1996-2007). These statistics present a trend: society seems to be avoiding marriage as a means of steering clear of divorce. Numerous indicators attempt to justify the reasoning behind these trends, but with the institution of marriage being attacked there is a need to identify why so many people resort to no-fault divorce rather than making a marriage work.

While statistics are merely a reflection of general tendencies, there are exceptions. “Unhappy marriages run a complex gamut – from the dissatisfied couples for whom the present marriage, though flawed, is better than the alternative, to partners who inflict harm on each other” (VanDenBerghe 29). Circumstances vary greatly, and in “certain clinical situations where abuse, violence and addictions create oppressive conditions for one partner, divorce can be justified. However, there must, likewise, be open –mindedness to recognizing and dealing with the full range of effects created by divorce (Woody 446).” These effects are having long term consequences on the individuals involved. Although many people in unhappy marriages believe that divorce, or avoiding marriage altogether, is the answer to achieving happiness again,

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several studies show that a greater level of satisfaction comes to the majority of marriages that learn to work through their differences and remain married.

## ALTERNATIVES TO MARRIAGE

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**C**ynicism seems to be on the rise as more “young people in the United States are increasingly apprehensive and pessimistic about marriage. They display a remarkable increase in acceptance of out-of-wedlock childbearing, single parenting, and living together before marriage. No wonder the number of people getting married in the United States has dropped so markedly” (Popenoe and Whitehead 31). It has become the cultural norm in our country to shy away from the commitment of marriage. Cohabitation has become a means to test the grounds of a relationship, making it easier to move on when a relationship loses interest. With an increased number of younger Americans cohabitating rather than committing to marriage, there is a growing attitude that marriage is non-essential and the human need for companionship can be satisfied with the revolving relationships (Hamilton and Wingert). A recent analysis of adolescent opinions shows they have become a great deal more accepting of these substitutes for marriage, thus endangering the family and its role in society (Popenoe and Whitehead 30).

There is a common misconception that living together will strengthen a relationship that leads to marriage. But statistics show there is a higher divorce rate for couples that cohabit and then marry, with tendencies in these couples to marry, divorce and then live with someone again; and even

higher divorce rates and instability for those that remarry after a divorce (Popenoe and Whitehead 21, 25). “Cohabiting couples experience greater conflict, lower-quality relationships, less stability, and less equality for the women involved... with lower levels of sexual satisfaction and infidelity as a leading problem” (Goldscheider, Thornton and Young-DeMarco 695).

### CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF DIVORCE

**T**o many the vows taken at marriage are merely an agreement between two consenting adults, where God and Society have little to no significance to their union. Marriage is often seen as unnecessary or easily dissolved when no longer convenient. Some seem to almost anticipate failure with the signing of prenuptial agreements. The legal system offers a quick-fix and in some cases it “discourages marriage by penalizing responsible fatherhood and encouraging mothers on welfare not to marry” (Covey 122). Society tries to tell us that we are strong; we can be single parents, we can survive divorce and we can find happiness – we even deserve it. The reality of that way of thinking is that the void and loneliness remains as many continue to search for fulfillment in all the wrong ways. Hugh W. Pinnock said: “We are living in...what has been called the space age or computer age. However, it seems to be the age of blaming everyone and everything for any unfavorable condition...It is time to take responsibility for our actions. Now is the time to stop blaming others” (Savage 163).

One husband shared this insight: “I found it convenient to blame my wife because it was a way of justifying my

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own failure. By my hostile feelings I could make it appear that she was the guilty one and that I was a helpless victim...The truth is that my irritation was not due to her behavior at all. It was, instead, the product of my own unwillingness to accept the responsibility of my actions” (Olson 107). All too often couples find themselves blaming each other for the tension and strains of life rather than depending upon the other for encouragement and love. Unfortunately some couples view this type of discord as a means to leave (Harper 30). The world has taught us this type of behavior in this generation of instant gratification and individualism. We are bombarded on every side with ways to love ourselves, enhance our self-esteem, get what we want when we want it, and generally “look out for number one.” The care and feeding of our individual self has taken over our perspective (Reynolds 142).

Blaming our problems on everyone and refusing to be responsible for actions are simply symptoms of pride and selfishness. Douglas Brinley said; “Every divorce is the result of selfishness on the part of one or the other or both parties to a marriage contract. Someone is thinking of self-comforts, conveniences, freedoms, luxuries or ease” (77). Marriage is not about the individual; it is about the other person. It is not about looking for what is wrong in that person but looking for what is good and right. Solutions are not found by turning away from conflict, but by embracing and learning from it. The selfishness that society is immersed in has become the detrimental device in American marriages.

As individuals lose themselves to these selfish emotions, the effects of divorce not only have ramifications on the couple themselves, but often on the children that are a prod-

uct of the marriage. Studies indicate that on average, children from divorced families are different from children whose parents stay married. They are “twice as likely to receive psychological help, to skip school, to get pregnant as a teenager, to be out of work in their late teens and early twenties, to see their own marriages end in divorce and to experience clinically significant psychological distress and depression childhood and adulthood” (Woody 445). The fact that future generations are being affected by divorce should be reason enough for society to adjust its perceptions and individuals to start looking at making inward changes.

#### BENEFITS OF A HAPPY MARRIAGE

**D**espite the current focus on personal freedom, there is no substitute for the joy and satisfaction of interdependent living. When a couple moves from being independent [me] to interdependent [we], they work together rather than individually, there is growth and development that bonds and unites them in profound ways (Covey 20, 182). Numerous social scientists confirm that marriage has a great impact to the overall well-being of individuals. “In assuring happiness, a lasting marriage proves more beneficial physically, mentally, and economically than exercise programs, medical treatments, therapy sessions, or financial investments” (VanDenBergh 29).

Married people take fewer risks, suffer less illness and disease, recover more quickly when they do become sick, and show lower rates of depression and psychiatric disorders; in general married people live longer experiencing a greater quality of life. (R. Coombs 100). John Gottman summarized it

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In addition to a healthy life, the marital relationship also contributes to a couples mental health, financial security and sexual fulfillment. Sharing a life with the same person satisfies the deep human need for emotional closeness, and creates a peaceful setting in which two souls can find safety and contentment (Seamons 133). A complete family unit offers safety and economic security that is evident in the direct correlation that research shows between poverty levels and the family structure, or lack thereof (VanDenBerghe 31). Couples who get and stay married are more likely to be stable, secure and fulfilled; they tend to be happier than those who marry and later divorce (Lucas).

#### HEALTHY MARITAL ATMOSPHERE

**T**he idea of a happy marriage is easier said than done. Good marriages just don't happen they require hard work, compromise, selfless giving and realistic expectations; this can either turn someone away in discouragement or lead to a new and deeper level of commitment and love (D. and M. Coombs 195). While studies show that people in happy marriages have a high level of satisfaction, there is no guarantee of a perfect life. Research shows that when couples work on common principles to establish a healthy marital atmosphere, success rates rise considerably (Gottman).

The attitude of couples and the way they handle pres-

sure is far more important than what actually happens in their relationship. Misunderstandings, differences of opinion and even crises are normal in marriage, and can help it to become strong. They are the character building blocks out of which true joy and fulfillment come (Covey 182; Hafen 12; Harper 30). When couples are best friends, they are kind and considerate, sensitive to each other's needs and always looking for ways to make the other happy. They see themselves as partners, working together to build their life. Happy couples don't hold grudges by reprocessing wrongs again and again; they understand that it is vital to repent and seek forgiveness as well as to forgive the other. Above all, healthy marriages have a common commitment to God and each other, this type of connection creates a higher moral value and protects against infidelity, pornographic addictions and substance abuse.

While each of these principles can have an overall effect on the atmosphere of the marriage, it is healthy to learn to recognize problems and solve them together. "Most people who leave their marriages find the same problems on the other side. Many realize where their first marriage went wrong, and how they could have worked to fix it. With hindsight, many people regret not having worked things out" (Israel). Successful marriages don't expect either person to be perfect; they only require that the couple be committed to strive together toward perfection (Oaks 72-73).

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## CONCLUSION

**America's search for happiness should be inward. Answers cannot be found by leaving when things get hard, but by looking at our own imperfections and finding ways that we can improve.**

**L**ove, companionship, and stability, with a long life of health and happiness – clearly, this is the ideal. Not all marriages will achieve it, and not all marriages can or should be preserved. But couples that discard the ideal lose out on the overall benefits marriage offers, while contributing to the tragic consequences of divorce. Society also suffers from the deterioration of marriage in America. Marriage is an essential institution that contributes to society as a whole as it strengthens communities, benefits economies and ensures the positive effects of the family unit to the rising generation (Popenoe and Whitehead 4; VanDenBerghe 32).

America's search for happiness should be inward. Answers cannot be found by leaving when things get hard, but by looking at our own imperfections and finding ways that we can improve. This takes the focus away from the complaining and blaming that often leads to unhappiness, and the eventual disregard for marriage. With any situation that requires change, the most lasting effects occur when we work from the inside out (Chidester 101; Covey 15).

Marriage is not a final destination; it is a journey that allows us to grow together and achieve a satisfaction that is incomparable to any other worldly accomplishment. True happiness comes from success, commitment and follow-through. As Americans realize the importance of their vows and embrace the possibilities that their marriages hold, our society will become stronger and healthier because of the family.



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