

Cohabitation: Everybody's Doing It

In an episode of the sitcom *Just Shoot Me*, Mya and Elliott, characters who are living together, are trying to make their relationship permanent. Elliott makes numerous attempts to ask Mya to marry him, but keeps having panic attacks and passing out. In a pivotal moment at the end of the show, Mya wakes up in the middle of the night, hits Elliott and tells him to leave the house. In a state of shock, Elliott questions her. And she replies, "I just realized I'm sleeping next to someone who doesn't want to spend the rest of his life with me."

According to the latest research, Mya and Elliott are just like many cohabiting couples. Elliott is scared to death of the "M" word and Mya can't figure out why Elliott doesn't want to spend the rest of his life with her.

"There is so much social pressure today to cohabit," said Dr. Barbara Markey Associate Director of the Research Center for Marriage and Family at Creighton University. "Today a person's social desirability is based on who you are living with – if you aren't living with someone there is clearly something wrong with you. We need to give people who are thinking about cohabiting the heads up. It isn't all it is made out to be."

People cohabit for a number of reasons. Some believe that it is good preparation for marriage. Others contend that it is good for them economically. And still others believe that living together is a good alternative to marriage. Experts say none of the above is true.

"Actually, instead of promoting harmony, living together often promotes discord or individualism," said Markey. "Instead of thinking in terms of 'we' most cohabiters think along the lines of 'yours' and 'mine.' It is often the very behaviors that are learned in cohabitation that get in the way of a successful marriage. In fact, in many instances there is competition about money and independence where marriage is characterized by interdependence."

So, why is everybody doing it? Are people scared of long-term commitment? Or is it the fear of divorce that puts cohabiters in a potential pre-marital divorce situation? Or is it just the "in" thing to do.

"Whatever the reason, people need to understand that they are not putting themselves in a position to experience less pain," explains Markey. "In fact, the opposite is probably true. Cohabiting often leads to heartache and pain."

According to Markey, one of the best ways young people can prepare for a great marriage relationship is learn how to live independently.

"So many young people are leaving home and moving in with a significant other thinking they are establishing their independence," said Markey. "Having never actually lived on

their own, they are setting up a situation of dependence. Young people need to learn what it is like to live on their own – being responsible for the rent, car payment, food, light bill, etc. I encourage people to take the time to learn their own individual style before trying to blend with someone else.”

If you want a long-lasting relationship based on security and mutual trust you first must know and respect yourself and that comes with taking the time to learn about yourself and responsibility. Committing to someone is not something to be taken lightly. Take time to make sure that the person you are involved with wants to spend the rest of their life with you.