

Thinking About Divorce? Think Again.

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## Making a Case for Marriage

*Part of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishop's National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage*

### The Situation

- Researchers currently estimate that forty to fifty percent of first marriages and a higher percentage of remarriages (an additional 10% to 20%) will end in divorce. ([www.healthymarriageinfo.org/research](http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/research))
- Divorce rates vary somewhat depending on a person's denominational affiliation. The divorce rate among Catholics is approximately 25% ([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)).
- The earliest years of marriage are the riskiest. One in five marriages ends in the first five years. One in three ends in 10 years. ([www.healthymarriageinfo.org/research](http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/research))

### Social science findings

- Divorce does not necessarily make people happier. In one national study, adults who were unhappy in their marriage and divorced were not as happy as people in unhappy marriages who stuck it out for five years. The former group had more symptoms of depression, lower self-esteem and greater hostility. Even those who divorced and remarried were not as happy as those who remained with their spouses for five years. (Linda J. Waite, et al, *Does Divorce Make People Happy? Findings from a Study of Unhappy Marriages*, Institute for American Values, 2002).
- It is common for couples to go through "patches" of unhappiness, but also common for marriages to go from unhappy to happy again. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of adults who said they were unhappy in their marriage but remained in it reported five years later that they were happy (Ibid.)
- On average nearly two-thirds of divorces are from marriages that can be described as low in conflict. Common reasons for divorce in these relationships include: incompatibility, growing apart, personality problems, and lack of communication. (Paul Amato & Denise Previti, *People's Reasons for Divorcing: Gender, Social Class, the Life Course, and Adjustment*, as cited at [www.healthymarriageinfo.org](http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org))
- A healthy, lifelong marriage means building "multiple marriages" with the same spouse. Every marriage goes through predictable stages, which bring change and transition. These changes, although normal, can be stressful (Barbara Markey, *The Lifecycle Stages of a Marriage*, [www.usccb.org/npim](http://www.usccb.org/npim)).
- The knowledge and skills needed to have a happy marriage can be learned. Marriage education programs can help engaged and married couples to learn the skills needed to

sustain their relationship. Marriage education programs are offered by religious organizations, community agencies, healthcare organizations, and workplaces. Information about specific marriage education programs is available at [www.nationalhealthymarriageinfo.org](http://www.nationalhealthymarriageinfo.org) and [www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com).

- For couples who are dealing with a lot of distress, the benefits from marriage education programs may be especially great. These programs can help couples to improve their communication skills and improve their marital satisfaction (Jane Reardon-Anderson, et al, *Systematic review of the impact of marriage and relationship programs*, Urban Institute, 2005).
- Effective marriage counseling or therapy can repair unhealthy, unhappy marriages. Couples should take care to find a therapist who supports marriage and has appropriate experience in working with troubled couples. Counseling is most likely to be helpful when couples seek it out at the first sign of serious marital problems ([www.healthymarriageinfo.org/aboutmarriage](http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/aboutmarriage)).

#### Church teaching and pastoral practice

- The Church recognizes that married couples have always experienced problems that threaten their union, such as jealousy, infidelity, and quarreling. These issues result from personal sin and original sin, which disrupted the unity between man and woman that God intended. Nevertheless, God's plan for marriage continues and God will provide the mercy and healing that couples need to sustain their marriages (See *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, p. 287). Prayer, the Eucharist, and the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation are important resources for Catholic couples.
- Retrouvaille is a live-in weekend and post-weekend program for couples with serious marital difficulties. Thousands of couples headed for divorced have saved their marriage by participating in the program. More information, including a list of upcoming weekends, is available at [www.retrouvaille.org](http://www.retrouvaille.org).
- Some people have experienced abuse in their marriage. They may believe—erroneously—that church teaching on the permanence of marriage requires them to stay in an abusive relationship. The U.S. bishops have made clear that no one is expected to remain in an abusive marriage. The bishops encourage abused persons who have divorced to investigate the possibility of seeking an annulment (See *When I Call For Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women*, 2002).
- The Church encourages Catholics who are divorced to remain close to the Lord through the sacraments, especially Holy Communion. Some Catholics have divorced and remarried civilly. In these cases, the Church does not consider the second marriage valid; however, it encourages these Catholics to participate in parish activities and to attend Sunday Mass, even though they cannot receive Communion (*United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*, pp. 287).

## Conclusion

All engaged couples approach their marriage with the hope and the expectation that it will last. No one wants to divorce. In some cases, divorce is the only option, for example, when one's health and well-being are threatened by a spouse's abusive behavior. In other cases, however, troubled couples need encouragement and resources to try to save their marriage. They may see divorce as their only choice because they do not know that help is available. These couples may benefit from counseling, marriage enrichment and education programs, or programs for troubled marriages such as Retrouvaille, The Third Option and others.