

# COMMON SENSE



about  
Cohabitation



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## Introduction

The current generation of young adults is far more educated than in times past. They are bright, thinking adults, many of whom are highly trained and responsible professionals. In their decision to move in together they are usually well intentioned, choosing a course of action that appears to them to be practical at many levels. They fear divorce, with good reason, and think that they are gaining more information about the person they are in love with in order to evaluate whether or not he or she is the right one. In spite of consistent research data<sup>1</sup> and compelling statistics indicating that a couple is fifty percent more likely to divorce if they live together prior to marriage, the fact that cohabitation is not helpful for their future marriage is counterintuitive at first glance to most couples.

This pamphlet is intended to make sense of the statistics and help couples understand what happens to their relationship when they move in together before making a permanent vowed commitment in marriage.

<sup>1</sup>National Survey of Families and Households, Popenoe, Whitehead, Rutgers 2002: Out of 100 cohabiting couples, only 55 will marry and only 12 will remain married after 10 years.

We know from our extensive work with engaged couples around the country that our young people are good willed and intellectually honest. It has been our experience that most couples will freely choose what will invite more love into their relationship, once they are able to shed light on the situation and see things clearly. We have great hope and confidence that the next generation of married couples can build the marriages they have always dreamed of because there are so many resources now available to help them gain the practical skills and helpful insights to do so. Every couple who is in love is a delight to those around them, even more so to those of us whose marriages have been a source of unbridled joy and deep peace. It is with a sincere desire to be of help that we offer the following thoughts as to why the research seems to make sense.

Ron and Kathy Feher

## Testing

Whether or not it is ever spoken, most individuals enter cohabitation with a mentality that they are “testing” out the relationship. They are each aware at some level that they have a position to retreat to, and so, they are “testing” to see if he or she will still love them when they see their faults. This can make them less careful not to offend the other in speech or deeds and can inadvertently give them permission to have less self-control.

There is a dramatically higher incidence of verbal abuse, disrespect and even physical abuse among cohabiting couples<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps, it is because, in marriage, knowing that you will have to deal tomorrow with what you say today can make you choose to be more respectful or polite. The truth is, with cohabitation, couples are not sure there will be a tomorrow. The result is that they can unwittingly lower the standard of respect in their relationship, and that established standard is not likely to rise when and if, they walk down the aisle.

<sup>2</sup>Magdol, T.E., A. Moffitt and P.A. Silva, “Hitting Without a License,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 60-1 (1998) 41-55.

“Testing” the relationship often boils down to seeing if you are getting what you want. In today’s culture that sounds perfectly reasonable, but a self-centered attitude can hold you back from loving others the way they most need and want to be loved. In a truly joyful marriage, spouses commit to being “other-centered.”

You are actually happier when you are outside of your self and focused on the other, and especially on what you are attracted to in them. Keeping your eyes on the other’s virtue and goodness is part of the ecstasy of being in love; and ecstasy is at its root an exodus from self.



## Norming

It is normal and even appropriate from a legal perspective for cohabitating couples to be self protective and independent about their individual time and money. They naturally hold back from giving too much of themselves or being too vulnerable when there is no binding or permanent commitment to exclusivity. The problem is that those attitudes become the “norm.” Simply said, they get used to being that way with each other. Rather than growing closer once they are married, independent attitudes can cause them to grow apart. Self protective patterns that make them less likely to reconcile well after inevitable hurts during cohabitation are likely to make the relationship more volatile and vulnerable to breakdown after the wedding.

Obviously there are many different categories of cohabitating couples. Individuals who have engaged in serial cohabitating may experience more acute trust issues and a lower standard of self-giving, but even the couple who simply moves in together during the engagement will inevitably establish a “norm” that is more self-protective and less self-donating than those who begin living together totally and permanently committed to making it work.





## Committing

Very often, when the woman is the one to suggest that the couple move in together, she may be doing so in an effort to move the relationship to the next level. Typically a woman commits when she falls in love, and so, she may already be very much invested and hoping to marry. A man really does not commit until he has had the opportunity to make a free and deliberate choice to do so which he will then wish to express in some concrete way - usually an external legal or binding action that makes it real for him.

Too often a man can agree to a living situation without considering it a commitment, but it is rarely so, emotionally, for the woman. This commitment disparity can cause immediate tension in the relationship that will only increase with time. Not only can the situation cause misunderstanding and hurt in the woman, but living together before marriage can preempt the man's freedom to make a willful choice to commit. Marriage can become the expected next step, and he ends up sliding into marriage without feeling as if he really chose it. This makes his commitment after the wedding fragile at best.

All this being said, some cases show an increasing trend for the woman to be the one reluctant to commit to the relationship. It is not uncommon for the man to be ready to marry earlier in the relationship than the woman. She may fear a loss of career goals, or identity, or she may be holding onto an idealized vision of the perfect soul mate. In such cases, she might offer or agree to live together in an effort not to lose him and as a way to forestall committing, but this can leave the man feeling insecure in the relationship and diminish his confidence in her love. The truth is that moving in together is a big commitment and responsibility, because it changes both lives in the present moment and can impact the future relationship.

## Body Language

The central issue that presents the most negative impact on the relationship, not only in the present but certainly in terms of limiting the potential for true joy in the eventual marriage, is that living together also implies sleeping together, that is, making love through physical intercourse. As human beings, we tend to believe what the body is saying even more than the words we use. Studies show that even when a couple establishes, before moving in, that they are not committed, and says verbally that sex is just fun and it does not mean anything more, they go through the same stages of trauma as a married couple who divorces when they break up.

In today's culture couples are most likely to approach sex as just an activity, something they do, and can do more or less well. This inevitably leads to a performance mindset that can be self-conscious rather than other-conscious, cause comparisons or score keeping, or result in the "activity" being taken for granted. It can become impersonal or meaningless; so that in time, the woman can feel used and the man can feel guilty or misunderstood.

What we know to be true is that lovemaking is most powerful and meaningful when it is something we are “saying” to each other not “doing,” especially if we are sincerely saying something profound to one another, not just doing something for recreation.

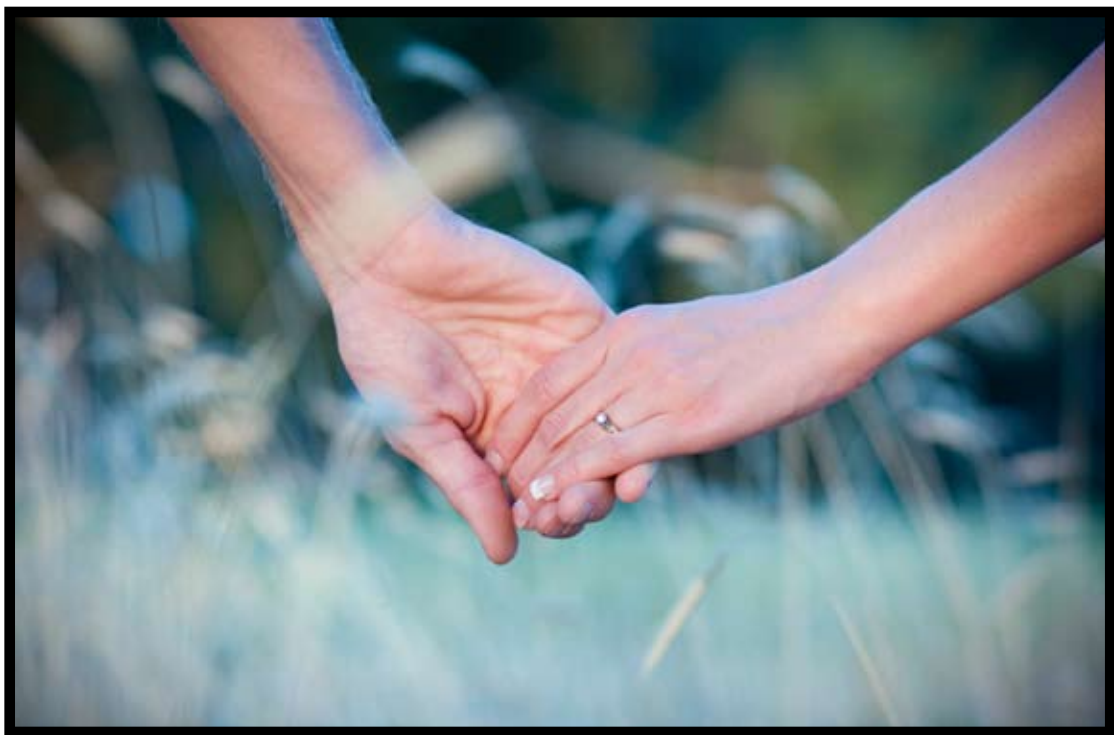


*Even for married couples, the difference between just having sex and actually making love has everything to do with what the body language really means, and how honestly we communicate it.*

In order to fully experience what lovemaking can mean in marriage, we have to take a clear look at what each of our touches are communicating.

It helps to understand that from the first kiss that made a bold statement that “we are now romantically involved,” through every touch that communicated “I am attracted to you; I want to be close to you or discover you,” something precious and affirming was being said that drew us closer and deepened the trust between us if it was honest and true. To communicate the ultimate statement that “I love you totally and permanently,” we would have to use the parts of the body that connect us with generations past and future, and as such speak permanence. The genitals communicate a permanence of family blood lines and even our potential maternity or paternity in a way that no other touch or portion of the body can communicate. The body language of intercourse says: “I hold nothing back; you and I are one; I give you my whole self, totally and completely forever; I love you and your children and your children’s children.” This “language of the body” speaks unique messages that are thrilling and powerfully bonding when completely true and can take love making to a whole new level within marriage.

Couples can articulate their total gift of self and all that they want to say to each other both verbally and physically and become sensitized to all the affirming messages of every touch between them. Approaching lovemaking as an intimate conversation using their whole bodies is more exciting and meaningful for both the man and the woman and is the key to maintaining and even increasing over time the woman's desire to make love. It has powerful implications on many emotional and spiritual levels, as well as on a physical level, In a concrete way, if a couple associates intercourse with the body language of the wedding vows, every time the couple makes love they will experience a renewal of those vows.





## Positive Pro-Active Choices

Most of what makes cohabitation unhelpful can be countered with positive proactive choices and skills that can be learned by taking a comprehensive marriage preparation course, preferably with a personal coach or mentor. There is a great deal of information and insight about masculinity and femininity, strategies and practical skills for communication, reconciliation, developing couple values, and making couple decisions that can be helpful in advancing the relationship and overcoming any negative influences of cohabitation.

A guiding principle for all healthy love relationships hoping to avoid possibly devastating hurt and misunderstanding is that the level of intimacy should always be matched by the level of commitment. Clearly once the commitment is total the intimacy can be safely total. Before that total commitment, we can sincerely communicate affirming messages of attraction and closeness that can be profoundly meaningful and build a foundation of trust as long as they are truthful and sincere. As long as the level of intimacy is matched by the level of commitment and the language of the body is consistent with the physical action the messages will be perceived as honest and authentic. These messages will then be especially exciting, precisely because of their authenticity.





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