

September 23, 2007

Offra Gerstein, Relationship Matters: When is the best age to marry?

Men and women marry later now than they did in the past. What causes this change and when is it the best age for a life commitment?

When you ask people about the causes for the success of their marriage some will say: "We married young and grew up together" Others say: "We married older and knew what we needed" Both explanations stand to reason. But, what do the researchers find?

Teenage marriages have been found to be two to three times more likely to end in divorce as compared to marriages at an older age. The National Center for Health Statistics reported in 2002 that 59 percent of marriages for women under age 18 ended in divorce or separation within 15 years as compared to 36 percent of those married at age 20 or older.

For those who marry later than the teen years, professors Betsey Stevenson and Tustin Wolfers at Wharton attempted to provide an economic model for explaining how and why families are formed. In their paper "Marriage and Divorce: Changes and Their Driving Forces," they pose that marriages are now built on "leisure and consumption complementarities" which causes men and women of similar incomes and interests to be drawn to each other. That contributes to later marriages as many establish their education and careers.

Economics and education are also credited with contributing to more solid marriages. Andrew J. Cherlin, professor of public policy and sociology at Johns Hopkins University, states that divorce rate among college educated men and women is dropping while it continues to escalate among the least schooled. He maintains that better jobs and greater economic success produces less strain in college-educated marriages.

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead and David Popenoe of Rutgers University offered additional perspectives for the timing of marriage. In their 2004 survey findings of 1,000 single, heterosexual males, ages 25-34, they found that "81 percent of married men agreed with the statement 'you decided to marry because it was the right time in your life to settle down.' Overall, people believe that the 'right' age to marry is around 25, with college-educated people favoring marriage at about 27. However, strict 'age-of-marriage' norms are weakening"

They also found that men are searching for a "soul mate" who will: "fulfill their emotional, sexual, and spiritual desires and who will also share breadwinning responsibilities" That goal contributes to longer searches. "Even when they are satisfied with their current girlfriend, they may believe that they will find a 'better one' out there if they just wait a bit longer"

Yet another view was offered by The MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood researchers who interviewed both men and women in their 20s in both rural and urban areas. They termed readiness for marriage by the "marriage mentality," which is when "a young adult decides he or she is emotionally and psychically ready to take on life-altering responsibilities of becoming a husband or wife.

"No one who is unwilling to give up the carefree, youthful ways of the single life, we were told, has any business making the lifetime commitment required of marriage unless, of course, they are willing to risk the likelihood of divorce"

- If you are a teenager — you are not ready for marriage.
- If you are an adult — your readiness for marriage is not determined by your chronological age but by your maturity.
- Ask yourself if you are satisfied with who you are today. If not, what would you need to do to feel better about yourself? Pursue your self-definition before considering a life partnership with another person.
- If you feel comfortable with yourself and your position in life, are you ready to give up the freedoms of single life for the committed companionship with a mate? This means shifting from being self-centered to other-centered.
- Are you ready to share, take turns, negotiate, compromise and sometimes defer to the needs of your partner? Can you be a caregiver if needed? Can you ask for what you need and listen well to your partner's wishes? Can you love enough to live up to your highest self without resentments, feeling deprived or needing to run or withdraw?
- Every person knows when he or she is ready for marriage. It is not about your partner's suitability — it is about your capacity to commit to loving him/her.
- When you feel ready for marriage, regardless of your age, you will find the appropriate mate for life.

Offra Gerstein, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Santa Cruz over 25 years. Her Web site is www.RelationshipMatters.com, and she can be reached by phone at 476-7666.

<http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/archive/2007/September/23/style/stories/06style.htm>