



People who have had only one lifetime sexual partner have happier marriages than people with two or more lifetime partners, according to a new report from the Institute for Family Studies.

The study's author, Dr. Nicholas Wolfinger of the University of Utah, **found that women who have been sexually intimate only with their spouses are most likely to report having “very happy” marriages, at 65 percent. Among women with between six and ten lifetime sexual partners, only 52% reported being “very happy” in their marriage, the lowest in the study.**

Among men, 71% with one partner reported being very happy with their marriage, according the study. For men who report two or more sexual partners, the number drops to 65 percent.

In addition, 40% of the study's respondents reported having had only one or zero sexual partners before getting married. Wolfinger pointed out that the rate among younger Americans, who have married since 2000, is closer to 27 percent. The median American woman born in the 1980s has had three sex partners in her lifetime, and the median man six; just five percent of all women marrying in the 2010s were virgins.

“The surprisingly large number of Americans reporting one lifetime sex partner have the happiest marriages,” the study reads. “Past one partner, it doesn't make as much of a difference. The overall disparity isn't huge, but neither is it trivial.”

The study controlled for the religiosity of its subjects, which Wolfinger said has been shown by other studies to be a major factor in happy marriages, but not the only explanation. He said the data he has is not conclusive on this point.

"Coming into this beforehand, I would have expected religion to be one reason why people who don't have a lot of sex partners would have happier marriages," Wolfinger told CNA.

"Church attendance, in itself, produces happier marriages...but be that as it may, controlling for [denomination and church attendance] did not substantially affect the relationship between how many premarital sex partners you have and whether you're in a very happy marriage."

What this means, Wolfinger clarified, is that people are more likely to have a happy marriage if they have fewer premarital sexual partners whether they are religious or not.

One major factor affecting this result, he said, is the fact that premarital sex can often result in children born out of wedlock, which unfortunately tend to strain future relationships. Moreover, people who have had previous sexual partners before marriage may later compare their spouse to those previous partners, leading to a decline in the happiness of their marriage.

In a similar 2016 study, Wolfinger examined the divorce rate in relation to the number of sexual partners a woman has had in her lifetime. He found that survey respondents who had not had sexual partners before marriage had the lowest divorce rates, and those with ten or more partners in their lifetime were the most likely to spit up, with a 30% chance of divorce in the first 5 years of marriage.

Of those women who married in the 2000s without having first had sex, nearly 70% reported regularly attending some kind of church services, while less than 30% of women with ten or more partners were churchgoers.

“Everything should be on the table”

Father Brian O’Brien, a priest of the Diocese of Tulsa in Oklahoma, told CNA that the statistics presented in the IFS study are confirmed by his experience working in marriage preparation for 11 years. He said he often presents statistics to the couples he counsels, to try to help explain how premarital cohabitation and premarital sex can negatively affect the happiness of their marriage.

"Ultimately it comes down to: we're not meant to be used," O’Brien told CNA.

"I think what happens in a lot of cases is [people think]: 'I'll just sleep with a whole bunch of people, and maybe one of them will work out.' And that's exactly what happens in the movies...but the idea that you can just use somebody and move on as if that didn't happen, I think is where the unhappiness sets in."

People will remember the sexual partners that they had "along the way," because sex bonds people together, he said. A bond with a person who is no longer in a person's life will remain with them even if they start a new relationship, leaving a "lingering guilt," "unresolved issues," and “baggage” that makes new relationships that much more difficult.

"Marriage is hard enough, and it's even harder if you're bringing in a bunch of baggage," he said. **“For couples that are going to enter into a marriage covenant, everything should be on the table.”**

O’Brien said that the broader trend in society of couples coming into marriage with multiple sexual partners, as evidenced by statistics cited in the IFS study, has also manifested itself among the couples he counsels.

"I go into [marriage prep] assuming, until I talk to them, that the couple is probably living together, and I assume that they are sexually active," O'Brien said.

"I tell [couples] that I want their marriage to be as happy and holy as possible, and your marriage will be happier and holier if you abstain from sex and if you don't live together."

O'Brien said he thinks most couples who are living together know what they're doing is wrong, especially when it comes to being sexually active. He said he suspects that there are many couples that don't see anything wrong with cohabitation before marriage, viewing the move primarily as an economic decision.

"It's not that they're sort of 'trying each other out,' it's that 'we don't want to pay two rents,'" O'Brien explained. "So I think in that way they're not really flaunting Church teaching, they're trying to make good economic decisions."

He said he takes a pastoral approach to the couple's situation, affirming them in their good decisions and "meeting them where they are."

"If they're not living together, and they're not sexually active, it's my chance to say: 'Awesome! Great job!' and to really affirm them in those decisions," he said.

He said generally in the second or third marriage prep meeting, he'll ask some basic information such as the couple's home address. If the couple is already living together, they will often admit it at that point, if reluctantly.

"They'll look at each other like: 'Oh no. Should we give him the same address?' And as soon as they do that, I'll ask 'So do you guys live at the same place?' And they have this guilty look on their face, and they'll say yes," O'Brien said.

"And I'll say: 'Ok, I'm not yelling at you, but obviously you guys feel bad about it.' So then we'll kind of take that and discuss it as we go."

O'Brien said despite popular opinion that may suggest that fewer people are seeking marriage in the Catholic Church, he and his fellow priests in Oklahoma are engaged in marriage prep and presiding at weddings "all the time."

"I'm not ready to throw in the towel on the young people of the Church," he said. "Because I think there really is a desire to have God as part of their marriage, and they're not finding that in other places."

Father Zach Swantek, a chaplain at Seton Hall University, offered his thoughts about his experience with modern marriage prep in an email to CNA.

"Often priests are afraid to discuss issues such as pre-marital sex, chastity, cohabitation, contraception and even participation in the Church with [couples], for fear that they will be offended or scared off," Swantek wrote.

"On the other hand, some priests boast about how they refuse to marry couples that fail to live in strict adherence to the teachings of the Church, yet do not help these couples to understand and live these teachings," he added.

"Marriage preparation must be viewed as an opportunity to accompany the couple, gradually leading them to the fullness of truth about faith, sacraments and marriage. This requires patience and work, but it is well worth the effort."