

## **Cohabitation**

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Cohabitation is defined as the act of an unmarried romantic couple (of any sexual orientation) residing together under one roof. The concept of cohabitation is not new and the rates with which it is occurring have been growing throughout the United States over the past several decades. The idea to live as unmarried romantic partners first became popular in Scandinavian countries where, for a variety of reasons, cohabitation remains an accepted and even valued option.

While each individual within a couple may provide different explanations as to why they ultimately chose to live together, most reasons can fall under three main categories. The first category is that of increased time together; the couple desires to have more shared time and finds that living together will help accomplish that goal. The second main category is that of convenience. Here the couple may wish to share or reduce financial responsibilities, or they may find it tiresome to trek between two separate residences with their various needed belongings. The third category views cohabitation as a method to test the relationship. Here, at least one of the individuals wishes to see how the relationship would fare, while cohabiting, in order to evaluate if the couple can withstand other important milestones (e.g., pregnancy or marriage). These categories can also be grouped into either relationship-driven reasons (e.g., wanting to spend more time together) or event-driven reasons (e.g., pregnancy or financial burdens).

In looking at the decision to cohabit, it may be helpful to understand commitment theory (e.g. dedication vs. constraint commitment). When a couple exhibits a high level of dedication towards each other, there is an internal force that motivates the couple to maintain their

relationship. These couples tend to have a unified identity, a strong desire to have a future together, and a tendency to compromise for one another. When a couple demonstrates a high level of constraint commitment, the forces at play instead increase the cost of one or both individuals leaving the relationship. The individuals within the couple may think that they have few, if any, alternatives to their current partner or relationship, or they may worry about their children's well-being or how others may view a possible breakup.

How a couple arrives at the decision to cohabit is also important. Often, individuals report that the decision to cohabit "just happened." On one side are the couples who engage in deliberate and thoughtful conversations about their trajectory as a couple and how they envision their future, thus "deciding" to cohabit. On the other side, are the couples who enter into the cohabitation with a lack of verbalized expectations for the union and a lack of an understanding of the mutual commitment perimeters, termed "sliding" into cohabitation.

Dependent on the couple (e.g., their attachment, commitment, and expectations of the future), cohabitation can have benefits or adverse implications. The benefits to cohabitation can include anything from sharing responsibilities to providing an alternative for individuals who have no legal option to wed or do not believe in the concept of marriage. One of the negative implications is that of cohabitation effect, which is the association between premarital cohabitation and poorer marital outcomes (e.g., distress or divorce).

Individuals who endorse using cohabitation to test their relationship are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and a sense of insecurity with the relationship. Another facet to consider is the lack of legal rights an unwedded partner has in regards to making decisions in cases of medical illnesses or death, or even in division of assets. It is evident that cohabitation may have effects not only on the couple involved, but also with their children. For example,

there is evidence that children within cohabitation households have poorer academic achievement, more behavioral problems, and overall, lower levels of well-being.

The relationship has a better chance of long-term success if the couple with high levels of dedication commitment decides to cohabit due to relationship—driven reasons. Those couples with higher levels of constraint commitment who slide into cohabitation due to event-driven reasons are more likely to break up or report an unsatisfying union with insecure attachments between the partners.

### **Further Reading**

Brown, S. L. (2004). Family structure and child well-being: the significance of parental cohabitation. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 66*(2), 351-367.

Rhoades, G. K., Stanley, S. M., & Markman, H. J. (2009). Couples' reasons for cohabitation: Associations with individual well-being and relationship quality. *Journal of Family Issues, 30*(2), 233-258.

Stanley, S. M., Rhoades, G. K., & Markman, H. J. (2006). Sliding versus deciding: Inertia and the premarital cohabitation effect. *Family Relations, 55*(4), 499-509.