

The Facts and Fictions of Living Together

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In This Chapter

- The in's and out's of commitment
- Defining live-in love
- Dispelling common misbeliefs about live-in love
- Comparing partnerships among married couples and live-ins
- When cohabiting is a prelude to marriage
- How significant is a "significant other"?

In this chapter, I'll bring you up-to-date on the very latest news about cohabiting with a lover. During the 1990s, studies by social scientists about cohabiting arrived on the scene in abundance. The studies not only revealed what is true and false about living together but also provided valuable information for would-be live-ins.

Understanding the basis for commitment and the possible hazards that await a naïve live-in couple will help you begin to determine your own odds for success. This information will become pertinent when you fill out the scorecards given in Part 2, "Coming Up with a Decision on Live-In Love." Subsequently you may either form a better relationship or look for a new one.

Truth or Consequences, a Self-Test

In case you think you already know all the answers, try the following quiz. Each question is significant and could affect your future well-being. If you don't find an explanation for an answer in this chapter, you will find it in one of the next three chapters that complete Part 1, "Thinking About Living Together."

True	False		
		1.	Having a live-in love relationship increases most women's level of self-esteem.
		2.	Commitment to your live-in partner is equal to the commitment found between spouses.
		3.	Live-in lovers have better sex than married couples.
		4.	Married couples are less monogamous than cohabiting partners.
		5.	Living together is the same

			as being married.
		6.	Men and women nearly always choose to cohabit with someone whom they think will be marriage material.
		7.	Dissolving a live-in relationship is relatively easy.
		8.	Marriage relationships require more time than live-in love.
		9.	Cohabiting couples qualify as common-law partners.
		10.	"Significant others" are accepted and treated with the same respect as spouses.
		11.	On the average, couples who cohabit are less committed to the institution of marriage even if they express the desire to marry.
		12.	Serial live-ins (individuals who have a string of partners) have a higher rate of divorce if and when they do marry.
		13.	Live-in lovers who are engaged before they move in together have the greatest chance of romantic and marital success.
		14.	Married couples are more likely than live-ins to sweep touchy relationship issues under the rug.
		15.	Men never get a raw deal in live-in love.
		16.	Live-in couples frequently slip-slide into marriage.
		17.	Many couples who think

			they should live-in to test their relationships actually have a lower-quality relationship than couples who marry without first cohabiting.
		18.	When experts who study cohabitation express concern about it or disapproval, they are being influenced by their moral or religious beliefs.
		19.	Whether or not a cohabiting couple moves on to marriage is largely dependent on their financial status.
		20.	Cohabiting between two independent, equitable partners may pose a higher risk for a poor relationship outcome.

Answers

1 to 7—False; 8—True; 9, 10—False; 11 to 13—True; 14, 15—False; 16, 17—True; 18—False; 19, 20—False.

Unless you got a perfect score—without guessing at the answers—and responded with knowledge and logic, you still have a lot to learn.

Commitment with a Capital "C"

When people try to pinpoint the one big difference between living together and being married, the word "commitment" often pops up as the answer. In this section, we'll look at what the word actually means when it comes to the dynamics of a love relationship.

Webster's is always a fun and easy way to begin an exploration of any word. According to the dictionary, the most common meaning of the noun *commitment* is "act of committing"; or "a pledge; something undertaken." The meaning of the verb to *commit* is "to entrust to another's care"; or "to bind oneself; pledge."

Love's Hot Line - It is folly to think that lasting love is simply a matter of the heart. Thought, understanding, and finesse are needed to head off factors that send love down a bumpy path. The best relationships have an informed captain at the helm. Each partnership requires someone to steer the love boat. Women, according to my research, usually get the job.

Most people would agree that these definitions are fairly straightforward. However, researchers who study the issue of commitment find that defining it is much more complicated. Their versions take a lot more words. Let's look at some of them.

Joint Investments

Sharing values and lifestyles (1) encourages positive matches among individuals, and (2) promotes making *joint investments* that add glue to a relationship. According to experts, this glue is more accurately called "commitment." Joint investments in children, leisure time, social lives, and financial well-being act as cohesive forces that enhance commitment in relationships.

For example, couples that buy a house together, play together, make decisions together, participate in a social life together, make love together, and together support each other are making joint investments that strengthen the bond between them.

Without all this togetherness, you aren't spelling commitment.

Trading Assets, Making Concessions

Here's a second take on commitment. Trading assets and joint investments aren't mutually exclusive ideas, but neither are they the same thing. I see them as complementary, as two aspects of the glue that holds a couple together.

Another group of experts has a different slant on how commitment works. According to this group, relationships that are succeeding show evidence of ...

- An exchange of services.
- A trading of services.
- The making of concessions.

Notice that these three processes show an investment both in the other partner and in the relationship. The bargaining that enables these processes to take place fosters the critical practices of communication, agreement, and gift-giving. In turn, these practices create staying power and relationship satisfaction while also fueling the growth of commitment.

But that's not all. Couples who specialize in certain tasks inherent in household relationships appear to make critical, mutual concessions more readily.

Those couples who do not accept a division of labor are not good bargainers and are generally competitors. They vie for more power and are unable to make agreements or concessions that would otherwise benefit the growth of commitment, staying power, and relationship satisfaction.

A Tale of Commitment

Let's take Sally and Fred. Fred was offered a promotion that would necessitate relocating. Sally was happy with her present work, the kid's school, and the proximity to extended family members. Nonetheless, they had made the decision years ago that Fred's career would take precedence over Sally's part-time work until the children went to college. Her income would be saved for the children's education, and they would live off his. They agreed to fewer frills in order to be more financially secure.

Love's Hot Line - A university study showed that most individuals who cohabit describe themselves as "never married" rather than as "married." Do you know anyone who calls his or her live-in partner a spouse? Probably not. Therefore, don't fool yourself into thinking that cohabiting equals marriage unless you and your housemate agree that it does.

Sally was okay with all of this. She wasn't in competition with Fred, and their plan took pressure off her to work full-time when the kids were young. However, before agreeing to move, she wanted to check out the school and the future market for her own career. If those things checked out satisfactorily, then she agreed that Fred should accept the promotion.

Fred realized that Sally was making difficult concessions by moving, setting up a new home, and waiting to go back to work until she got the kids settled in school. In order to show Sally how much he appreciated her support and cooperation, he drove weekend carpools for the kids and played golf with her instead of the guys on Sunday morning. After several months in the new city, he said he would like to splurge and buy tickets for the whole family to visit her folks.

A relationship like Sally and Fred's has all the ingredients for fostering commitment: joint investments, mutual concessions, exchange of services, and specialization of roles and labor.

Marriage, Living Together, and Commitment

Now that you are equipped with some definitions of commitment, you are ready to explore the role that commitment plays in both marriage and living together. A study in the 1999 *American Sociological Review* by Julie Brines and Karen Jupner stated plainly that married and live-in couples treat differently the factors that promote commitment. Empirical measurements of the way both types of couples work, handle money, spend leisure time, divide household labor, and conduct social and family relationships support this thesis.

So, which of the two couples engages in behavior that promotes the growth of commitment within their relationships?

The married ones, these experts say. And here's why:

1. Married couples monitor one another's behavior and formulate expectations that encourage the development of specialties and the essential division of labor.
2. They share more resources, making them less vulnerable as a couple and more vulnerable as individuals.
3. Married couples are more likely to be committed to social institutions, such as organized religion, that support the growth of cohesive and solid family relationships.
4. They are more likely to be engaged in raising children. Child rearing fosters a division of labor and joint investments.

Each of these examples adds to the cohesiveness and joint participation that encourages the continued commitment of married couples or live-ins.

The Great Debate

"Living together is just like being married." You've heard it; I've heard it. "Marriage is only a piece of paper." But you won't be able to convince those who have looked at both marriage and cohabiting that the two are the same.

Sociologists Julie Brines and Kara Joyner say the differences are more involved than you think. Brines and Joyner suggest that for a relationship to continue there must be a way to accommodate both interests of the parties. They think that the marriage contract helps do that.

Here's how. A legal covenant like a marriage agreement implies security, certainty, and an expectation of permanence. Even if the marriage relationship does end, the labor of the spouses and their joint investments are protected by law.

Love Stats - A study reviewed by authors in the 1995 American Sociological Review by Professors Arland Thornton, William Ayinn, and Jay Teachman revealed that cohabiting couples get more financial assistance from parents than do married couples. The financial help received by live-ins could be due to a lack of maturity and to finances that are more precarious than those of married couples. However, the problem is that this dependency may negatively affect the formation of a cohesive partnership.

Living together without a legally binding document, such as a marriage license, implies uncertainty, Brines and Joyner say. This, in turn, discourages joint investments or concession making and impedes the formation of a strong, committed relationship. Logrolling, or making trade-offs, becomes too risky for live-ins without the security of a defined future, Brines and Joyner claim.

Sweet Nothings - Logrolling is the act of mutually trading off concessions or assets between partners. For instance, a mutual tradeoff might be giving up a weekend to visit his parents if he agrees to attend a business function she prefers he join her at.

The researchers emphasize their point by citing data proving that live-in unions split more often than married ones. And that cohabitators who marry split at a higher rate than couples who did not cohabit.

Troubles A'Brewing ... - Watch out. Your live-in partner statistically has a three times greater chance of suffering depression than a spousal partner. Whether these odds are due to the uncertainty of the relationship or are a function of the personality types who opt to cohabit, the chance of depression is there.

Differences Between Marriage and Living Together

The literature on live-ins and spouses describes several differences between marriage and living together, and these are given in the following list. After the list, you'll find another list giving the similarities.

1. **A big difference between live-ins and spouses is the way they view stability within their relationship. "Stability is a function of economic equality in cohabiting relationships, and a function of specialization in marriage," Brines and Joyner say.**

Cohabiting relationships in which the woman's income exceeds, rather than equals, her partner's are more likely to end. On the other hand, husbands report satisfaction when their wives are more successful.

2. **Cohabiting couples are less socially integrated than married ones. In other words, the degree of joint social participation with friends, family, or the community is greater for marrieds; and their mutual social circles are larger than they are for cohabiting couples.**
3. **Married people are more likely to believe in traditional gender roles than cohabitators. This belief encompasses the specialization of labor that is so essential to the formation of commitment.**
4. **Live-ins are less willing to share their financial resources. This reluctance does not promote the joint investments vital to the continuation of the relationship.**
5. **Because of the time and effort needed to successfully maintain a marriage relationship, a married**

relationship is considered more constraining than a live-in one.

6. Marriage and cohabiting differ in that the cohabiting couple with children living in the home are more likely to break up than married couples with kids in the home.

Love's Hot Line - If you accept the fact, supported by current data, that married men experience an increase in average wages and workdays, then your live-in male lover may not be meeting his full earning potential.

We cannot point to one distinct difference that tells the whole story between marriage and cohabitation. There are, as seen from this list, a number of significant factors.

Similarities Between Marriage and Cohabitation

Despite the vast differences, there are similarities between cohabiting partners and married ones that are worth taking note of. This is what they have in common:

- A co-residential living arrangement
- An intimate relationship
- The co-mingling of at least some financial resources
- The diversion of time away from the relationship and the attention to other things

This list of similarities is minimal in content when compared to the extent of differences.

Does Living Together Have to Look Like Marriage?

Of course not. But then let's be frank about living together. Living together is not all that similar to the state of matrimony. The implication that is of critical importance to us as we move forward in subsequent chapters is: How can you increase the odds of relationship satisfaction and add glue to partnership?

If It Isn't Marriage, What Is It?

If living together isn't the same as marriage, then what should we call it? Descriptions to consider include: substitute, alternative, intermediate step, prelude to marriage, delaying tactic, and transition phase. Let's look at what living together entails.

Living Together Is Not ...

The consensus of opinion in the United States is that living together is not yet considered a substitute for marriage. Most people still value and desire the state of matrimony rather than living together. Still, we all know those couples who would never replace a cohabiting relationship with marriage. Although cohabiting is not a substitute for marriage, you could play with words and say that cohabiting is their *alternative to marrying*.

Love's Hot Line - In my investigation of love and marriage, I have come up with a Golden Rule that I believe makes the difference between successful or unsuccessful matrimony. The Golden Rule of a happy marriage is: Learn to please and appease, and do it often! The rule could just as easily be applied to live-in partners.

Generally the couples who consider cohabiting as an alternative to marriage are older, divorced or widowed individuals who have passed the childbearing stage and are extremely independent. In many cases, they have a cohabitation agreement that contractually spells out specific financial arrangements. The contract may cover ownership of property, the division of goods and finances in the event the couple ends the relationship, and any inheritance rights they wish to extend to their live-in partner.

Living Together Is ...

For younger couples who use living together as a way to delay the onset of marriage, cohabitation could be called a *delaying tactic*.

Numerous studies and interviews suggest that young cohabiting couples will hold off marrying until they achieve what they believe is an appropriate level of economic well-being for marriage. This interpretation makes sense when you consider those couples who live together and share expenses yet say they are waiting to tie the knot until they pay off debt, buy a house, or can afford an extravagant honeymoon.

Sixty percent of couples who form a live-in relationship as a first-time union do go on to marry. Therefore, some demographers and social scientists concede that cohabiting fits the description of a *prelude to marriage*. Because cohabiting neatly fits in-between these couples' courtships and marriages, by definition it could therefore also be called an *intermediate step to matrimony*.

Living together can provide a *time for transition* among those engaged, committed live-ins on their way to matrimony. Beth tells us why living together proved to be an important transition phase for her and Jamie.

At age 23, Beth met 24-year-old Jamie in a romantic setting on the west coast of Florida. Her vacation romance bloomed into a long-distance love affair. Within 10 months, the native of Michigan was engaged to the handsome Florida resident. Jamie wanted Beth to relocate to the seaside, move in, and put an end to living in separate cities. Beth agreed, but only after an on-the-knee proposal and a ring on her finger.

Actually it was Beth's mom who encouraged her to live with Jamie during their engagement. Beth marvels that her mother always seems to know best. Beth explains that she had a lot to get used to before she tied the knot and made a permanent commitment:

"I moved down and moved in. I started working for Jamie's family, so I spent all of my time with him and his parents. I was way too dependent on Jamie as my friend, lover, family, and fiancé. I had moved totally into his world.

"After six months when all the playing house stuff was over, it got rocky between us. I went to Scotland with my mom for two weeks, and then on Jamie's birthday we had a major blowout. I gave him his ring back, walked to a pay phone, and called my mom's friend. My best friend in Michigan sent her husband down to drive me home with all my stuff. I was in Michigan for one week. Jamie called every day."

Despite the shortness of the time she lived with Jamie, Beth realized she had lost some of her self-confidence and knew things would have to be different. She was not going to be Jamie's maid, and they would have to stop fighting one another to gain the upper hand. Beth goes on:

"It was time Jamie stopped thinking he was a bachelor living with a chicky-baby."

She insisted on using the next 10 months before their wedding to make necessary changes in their lives that would better ensure a happy ending. Fortunately Jamie's response proved his true love. He tried harder at home to be neat and made more of an effort to help her feel comfortable in his territory.

Love's Hot Line - Ladies, the concept of freedom is a major issue for men considering cohabitation and/or marriage. It isn't something they like to give up. Handle the issue with finesse. Don't battle loudly for control or insist on putting on the reins. Slowly and quietly teach them how much or how little freedom fits into good relationships. It is important that both partners in a relationship, whether spouses or live-ins, maintain some arena in which they function totally independently of one another. However, there is enough information in this chapter to prove that commitment in good relationships precludes excessive separation in leisure or household activities. Men who value independent leisure, according to Professor Morin Clarkberg, do not avoid unions but prefer less-committed relationships that require more sharing of leisure time.

Buying a house together, moving into it, and finding her own job seemed imperative to Beth. The accomplishment of these goals enabled her to bring friends into their relationship, and the house gave them something to work on together. Beth adds:

"I told Jamie Sundays were our day to do things in the house we needed to. Jamie respects me more now that I have a life. I know he understands my boundaries and what I won't put up with. We discuss plans together and show respect and common courtesy for one another. If we had gotten married when I first moved down, I would have felt trapped. Living together provided an important transition for me."

Dispelling Fictions

Common misconceptions about living together are spread by word of mouth. It is time to acknowledge these fictions and dispel them.

Fiction: The sex is better among live-ins.

Fact: Researchers at the University of California at Los Angeles found that cohabiting partners report less sexual satisfaction. It has been suggested that the uncertainty of live-in relationships contributes to sexual anxiety.

Fiction: Living together promotes sexual fidelity.

Fact: Studies reported in the late 1980s and the 1990s demonstrate that married couples disapprove of infidelity more readily than cohabitators. An interesting aside is that women who had a live-in relationship and eventually married are more likely to have a secondary sex partner after saying "I do."

Sweet Nothings - Monogamy means having one sexual partner. These days you will also encounter the term serial monogamy, which means a succession of monogamous sexual relationships.

Fiction: Living together is a good compatibility test for marriage.

Fact: The risk of divorce among those who cohabit is nearly twice as great as for married couples who did not cohabit. This landmark discovery was made by Larry L. Bumpass and James A. Sweet. One reason for their surprising data is that cohabiting brings together vastly different individuals on separate tracks.

How Significant Is a "Significant Other"?

It's nice to have a title that is widely known and accepted, but exactly how significant is a "significant other"?

Love Stats - Several researchers describe cohabiting as a distinct institutional form of relationship that is defined by a "looser bond" than matrimony. Those who cohabit act more in accordance with behavior subscribed to by singles."

That's a good question. How significant varies by degree from one couple to another. If John or Meagan both wish to be viewed as a couple by family, friends, and business associates, it is up to them to make that point indisputably clear. A problem occurs when one partner treats the other less significantly than he or she wishes.

Insignificant Others

After dating for two years, Lena, 30 and divorced, moved in with Martin, older and the part-time custodian of his teenage daughter. Lena had been living with him less than a year when a family wedding became a major issue.

Lena explains:

"The parents of the bride had visited us. I welcomed them in Max's home and helped wine and dine them. I could hardly believe it when they invited Max and his daughter but not me to the wedding.

"Max's attitude was, 'What do you want me to do? It's not my affair.' Well I guess I wanted him to pick up the goddamn telephone and say, 'Why didn't you invite Lena? I'm not coming unless she does.'

"I guess I saw us as a couple. Evidently he and his family didn't. That weekend I stayed home and took care of his house and his dog. I thought the next weekend he would take me away alone to make up. But instead he gave in to his daughter's demands that he chaperone her and her friends on a weekend trip. He invited me, but I declined. I moved out shortly after that."

Troubles A'Brewing ... - Unless the minimum attitude requirements for a significant other are fulfilled, a live-in relationship spells trouble for at least one of the participants. He or she is sure to experience a weakened self-concept and diminished self-esteem.

A Checklist for a Significant Other

At the very least, a significant other should be ...

- Accepted as an equal social partner.
- Shown consideration and respect by his or her partner.
- Championed and supported by his or her partner.
- Treated as a priority by his or her partner.
- Viewed as a unified couple by his or her live-in partner.

Put the facts and fictions of living together in your back pocket. You will need to take them out later. They will be helpful in determining whether your love interest is a good live-in risk and whether your expectations are reasonable.

The Least You Need to Know

- **Commitment is essential to forming a cohesive, lasting relationship. It isn't expressed by words alone; it must be accompanied by deeds.**
- **Married and live-in partners exhibit different degrees of commitment.**
- **On the whole, living together is not like being married.**
- **Living together acts as a transition stage into matrimony for many young couples today.**
- **Live-in partners should make sure they are significant partners with a capital "S."**

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