

shaunti feldhahn

with Tally Whitehead

foreword by Andy Stanley

the good news about marriage

debunking discouraging myths
about marriage and divorce

“This book is packed with game-changing revelations.
Bravo to Shaunti for her outstanding research.”

—Emerson Eggerichs, best-selling author of *Love and Respect*

Praise for

The Good News About Marriage

“In the thirty-two years I have been deeply immersed in the world of marriage ministry, I have been demoralized at times by the negative statistics quoted. And now I am ecstatic as I read the truth in this incredible book. Thank you, Shaunti, for doing the hard work necessary to expose the myths and lies and for finally revealing the facts about marriage. This book and the undeniable research in it is a game changer!”

—JIMMY EVANS, founder and CEO of MarriageToday, senior pastor of Trinity Fellowship

“This is an important book. Shaunti and Tally do an impressive job of showing that there is room for different viewpoints on divorce statistics and room for optimism about marriage. I believe that people make higher-risk choices partly because they have lost hope in marriage, and this book presents a basis for real hope.”

—DR. SCOTT STANLEY, coauthor of *A Lasting Promise*, research professor at the University of Denver

“Lamenting the demise of the family has almost become a cottage industry. There’s a lot of legitimate bad news out there, but Shaunti reminds readers that the situation might not be nearly as dire as we think—in fact, there are encouraging signs of hope. That’s a welcome message!”

—JIM DALY, president of Focus on the Family

“There are many bad stats out there about marriage, but Shaunti debunks those myths and provides clarity about marriage in general and how to strengthen your own marriage. *The Good News About Marriage* is well worth your time.”

—ED STETZER, PhD, president of LifeWay Research

“Every Christian leader in America needs to read the groundbreaking, hope-filled research in this book. Then they need to recommend that everyone in their sphere of influence read it as well! This is one of the most important marriage books I’ve ever read, and it will change how all of us think and talk about marriage and divorce.”

—LYSA TERKEURST, *New York Times* best-selling author, president of Proverbs 31 Ministries

“This book is *great* news about marriage! Every pastor, coach, or counselor will find a new zeal for working with marriages after learning the truth about the state of marriage today. I cannot wait to have Shaunti share these truths with the Catalyst audience.”

—TYLER REAGIN, executive director of Catalyst

“*The Good News About Marriage* offers an important word of encouragement to believers who

wonder if faith makes a difference in modern married life. Believers who put their faith into practice—who worship together and pray together—are much more likely to enjoy stable and happy marriages. This is good news indeed.”

—W. BRADFORD WILCOX, director of the National Marriage Project, associate professor of sociology at the University of Virginia

“Academically rigorous, honest, and refreshingly bold, this book will make you question what you’ve always heard about the bad news of marriage. A seminal work, this book could change the social narrative about marriage for generations. This is a must-read for academic marriage educators, and couples alike.”

—RON L. DEAL, director of FamilyLife Blended, best-selling author of *The Smart Stepfamily*

“This groundbreaking research gives us a whole different framework to think about marriage, divorce, and relationships. This is fantastic material that provides powerful tools to help us improve our personal relationships and those in our communities.”

—JUD WILHITE, author of *The God of Yes*, pastor of Central Christian Church

“Shaunti’s thoroughly researched book will inject life and hope, not only into our national consciousness about marriage, but also into every individual marriage in the country.”

—DR. TIM CLINTON, president of American Association of Christian Counselors, executive director of Center for Counseling and Family Studies at Liberty University

“Shaunti takes aim at marriage myths that have spread like cancer through our culture—myths that have become self-fulfilling prophecies. This book is packed with game-changing revelations! Bravo to Shaunti for her outstanding research.”

—EMERSON EGGERICHS, best-selling author of *Love and Respect*

“This is some of the most important information on marriage for this generation, and Shaunti brings practical inspiration on every page. This is the new go-to book for facts on marriage in America—and it’s much better news than we often hear.”

—DR. JIM BURNS, president of HomeWord, author of *Creating an Intimate Marriage* and *Closer*

“You’ve read the bad news about marriage—the cohabiting couples, extramarital affairs, and soaring divorce rates. But this book shows there’s a lot of good news about marriage today, and it’s about time someone said so!”

—BOB LEPINE, co-host of *FamilyLife Today*

“It’s impossible to overstate the importance of these findings. Our beliefs directly influence

our actions, and our beliefs about marriage have been wrong. Shaunti and Tally provide genuine hope that is based on truth. This book changes everything.”

—CHRISTOPHER McCLUSKEY, best-selling author, president of Professional Christian Coaching Institute

“Shaunti Feldhahn presents profound truth in the most relatable way. We have consistently used her books to help lay foundations for strong marriages in our church and to gain a tremendous perspective about our own relationship. Now, in *The Good News About Marriage*, Shaunti gives us the gifts of a positive perspective and a practical strategy to make the most of our marriages.”

—STEVEN AND HOLLY FURTICK, lead pastor of Elevation Church, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Greater*

shaunti feldhahn
with tally whitehead

Foreword by Andy Stanley

the
good news
about **marriage**

Debunking Discouraging Myths
About Marriage and Divorce

- the fallacy of the 50% divorce rate
- the surprising truth about divorce among churchgoers
- how most marriages are happier and healthier than we've been told



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v3.1

From Shaunti

For Jeff:

The fact that I get to live with you over the course of my lifetime is definitely the biggest scam I've pulled off.

• • •

From Tally

For Eric:

You had me at hello.

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Foreword

When Shaunti first briefed me on what she was finding, I was staggered. As a pastor of a large church and someone who is passionate about strong marriages and families, I feel a responsibility to stay informed. Many of us do. And we think we are. We think our discouragement about the state of marriage in our culture is based on years of solid evidence.

If half of marriages today end in divorce, if most couples feel the fire go out after a few years, if the rate of divorce is the same in the church as it is out, then the institution of marriage is in trouble. We subconsciously revert to crisis mode. We talk widely about the need to work harder, to always be on the lookout for potential problems, to stick to our promises, and to endure hard marriages for the long haul—even when we want to quit.

And all those actions are important—*absolutely*. But when we act and speak in crisis mode, we become a small part of a very large problem: discouraging people about marriage instead of encouraging them.

In order for people to work harder, to want to prevent potential problems, and to stick to their promises, they need to believe they can make it. They need to believe they cannot just survive their marriages but they can enjoy them. They need to believe that their marriages can thrive.

And it turns out that hope is out there. We just didn't realize it. It turns out that we have been accepting the discouraging beliefs about the state of marriage without questioning. On these pages, Shaunti makes a good case that at least some of our conventional wisdom is based on false beliefs. She makes a good case that there are actually many good, solid, evidence-based reasons to be *encouraged* about the state of marriage and reasons to encourage others as well.

That being the case, we shouldn't talk about marriage and divorce as we have in the past. It is good news that there is good news out there! And I look forward to telling people the good news about marriage.

—Andy Stanley
Senior Pastor
North Point Ministries

Surprising News About Marriage

What Most People Don't Know ... but Need To

In 2006 I was writing one of my newspaper opinion columns and referencing the high prevalence of divorce. I wanted to correctly cite the most recent divorce rate but was confused by conflicting sources and articles. After trying to figure it out for two or three hours (a lifetime in the newspaper business), I tossed it to my then research assistant (now senior researcher) Tally Whitehead, so I could keep working on the column. But after several more hours, Tally came back even more perplexed than when we started.

It can't be this difficult, I thought. We quickly called a respected expert on marriage and divorce and asked, "What's the exact divorce rate?"

Her unexpected answer: "No one knows."

Huh? Before I could say anything, she continued, "And it depends on what you mean by the 'divorce rate.' There are many different types of divorce rates. There are also many different surveys, of different groups of people; there are different ways of tracking the rate of divorce today and projecting it in the future. They all say different things. There's no way to know one 'exact' rate."

"Well ..." I tried to gather my flustered thoughts. "Just an estimate, then. Roughly what percentage of marriages will end in divorce? Like, what does the Census Bureau say?"

"The Census Bureau stopped projecting divorce rates in 1996. And even those projections were based on divorce increasing, and it's decreased instead. That won't help you."

"The divorce rate has decreased? Really? But it is still around 50 percent, right?" After all, I'd heard for years that half of all marriages end in divorce.

"Actually, the divorce rate has never hit 50 percent. It has never even gotten close. Again, it depends on what you mean by the divorce rate, but no matter what definition you use, we're significantly below 50 percent right now. It is maybe closer to 30 to 40 percent, but again, no one knows."

My first thought was *Nuts! I'm going to have to edit my column.*

My second thought was *But wait a minute. What? The divorce rate has never gotten close to 50 percent? Why haven't we heard this before? That's a really big deal!*

That was eight years ago. And only gradually over the next few years did I begin to realize what a big deal the truth actually was—not only about that, but about several other marriage

and divorce myths. Myths that are very discouraging ... and very common.

Why It Matters That We Get to the Truth

As part of the relationship research that my husband, Jeff, and I have done over the past twelve years, we have interviewed and surveyed thousands of people about their innermost thoughts, needs, and fears. Early on, we began to get a clear window not only into the needs as men and women, which was what we were primarily trying to study, but also into how their relationships worked, what inspired and discouraged them, what they believed about marriage, parenting, the workplace, and culture.

Eventually it was clear that there was one common denominator among marriages that survived versus those that failed: hope. There were many different factors that led to either outcome, of course. But underneath it all was this bottom line: Did the couple have a sense of hope ... or a sense of futility?

A couple could go through a terrible period, but if they felt certain they would make it they usually did. Even if a couple lacked that certainty, the hope that things *could* get better was often enough to keep them going. With a feeling of *We can get through this*, they would do what was needed to right the ship, patch the holes, and keep sailing.

But if a couple instead thought *This is never going to get better* or *We're not going to make it* they usually seemed to have a different outcome. A sneaking feeling of futility took over and with it a sense of inevitability. They assumed things would never change, even if they wanted them to. Instead of motivating the couple to fight harder for their marriage, their belief that approaching doom had the opposite effect. After all, if the ship is going to sink anyway, why bother working so hard to bail it out? Far better, they think, to work on escaping the wreck intact.

In other words, a couple's futile feeling *We aren't going to make it* ends up being one of the main reasons they don't make it.

A couple's futile feeling that *We aren't going to make it* ends up being one of the main reasons they don't make it.

Those who work directly with troubled couples—counselors, therapists, clergy, and marriage mentors—told me they generally agree. If even one spouse has a sense of hope that things can change, or simply a vision to keep going no matter what, it is amazing how often that one-sided commitment keeps the marriage afloat long enough to get it sailing again. But it is tough to overcome both spouses having a sense of futility.

The Big Cultural Problem

The problem is that we have a culture-wide sense of futility when it comes to marriage, feeling that, as you will see in the following chapters, is based on conventional wisdom that simply isn't true!

I hear it everywhere. A sense of discouragement about marriage, and the evidence that seems to justify it, saturates our culture. The idea that half of all marriages end in divorce, for example, is accepted as fact.

For years, and with all good intentions, we have been thinking and talking about marriage as being in trouble. We comment on the “unhealthy” state of our unions and the “skyrocketing rate of divorce.” I cannot count the number of times I myself have referenced the 50 percent divorce rate from the stage in my marriage conferences! Many books, TV shows, radio programs, speeches, and sermons also discuss just how often happiness fades in marriage. Married couples talk about beating the odds, while live-in couples ponder, *Why should we bother getting married?* And in the process we are absorbing a vastly inflated sense of futility. Because although there are indeed plenty of legitimate concerns about marriage, there are others—a lot of others!—that are closer to myth than reality.

I am guilty of spreading every one of those myths myself. But not anymore. After an eight-year investigative study, I now know that although there *are* plenty of challenges, most marriages are still far stronger, happier, and longer lasting than most of us realize. It is so important for us to get that truth out there because, as mentioned earlier, the belief otherwise can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Another consequence of our cultural discouragement is that many couples avoid marriage altogether for the same reason. I recently read an excerpt of a popular book, *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage*, in which the author explained why she avoided marrying her boyfriend for eleven years: “By not marrying Karl, we could never get divorced. By not marrying him, he would never be lost to me.”¹

After years of interviews and surveys, I have heard this type of fatalistic reasoning more times than I can count, and it is undoubtedly one reason for some of the cultural concerns that *are* accurate and that worry those who care about marriage. For example, more people today *are* living together as their first step, instead of or before marrying.² More than four million children *are* being born to unmarried women.³ And one reason for these trends is the sheer number of people who think getting married is futile.

Those who work directly with couples are just as concerned as the couples themselves. I know I sure used to be, as I would speak at a marriage conference, look out over the audience, and wonder how many of them would be divorced in a few years.

And in the church community where I often do those marriage conferences, I find that pastors, priests, and counselors are even more discouraged. They, after all, are often the ones most likely to be contacted when a marriage goes wrong. I can no longer count the number of pastors who have expressed, “It is so discouraging to marry a young couple and know that they have only a one in two chance of making it.”

And it's not just in the Judeo-Christian world that clerics are troubled. After seeing in a church conference advertisement that I would be sharing my research about the small things that make a big difference in marriages, a local Muslim imam came for the day to take notes. Afterward, we spent some time talking, and he explained his concerns for those he ministered to:

In my community, we have a lower divorce rate, I think. But that doesn't mean we have a better feeling about marriage. It doesn't mean we have figured out how to do marriage well. We have many couples from other countries; some are in arranged marriages. Traditionally, a couple gets married expecting to be together for life, whether or not they are happy. But now, here [in America], that isn't enough. Usually a family is here because they want the American pursuit of happiness. They see it on TV and they want that great life, that good marriage, but don't always know *how*. And they don't always have the structure around them to help—the grandparents or the friends. And when one person in our community gets divorced, they worry that they will be next. They need this encouragement that they can make it.

Bad News Isn't Motivating

Thinking that there is so much turmoil in marriage, those who work with marriages—therapists, clergy, writers, or speakers like me—are caught between a rock and a hard place. We feel we have to get across just how seriously the couple has to take the situation and how hard they may have to work, but we know that doing so could potentially discourage the couple before they start.

One pastor told me, “I do premarital counseling and require a couple to have three sessions with me before they get married. When I begin premarital counseling, I start off with the facts of reality. ‘Do you know how many people get divorced? It’s about 50 percent. That’s discouraging, but you need to face the facts that marriage is not easy. So you need to get the education.’ ”

But instead of seeing the couple being motivated to work hard, he sometimes sees a damaging fear set in instead. Here's how he put it: “The thought that the divorce rate is 50 percent can be very, very discouraging and frightening. Especially when someone actually starts struggling, they are so wrapped up in their emotional experience that they aren't thinking right then, and it's easy to just say, ‘It's a slippery slope, so why fight it?’ ”

Essentially, the subconscious bad-news beliefs about marriage and divorce are like a slow-acting poison. It is not that a couple starts out halfway expecting to fail (although that might be the case for some). Most start out believing—truly believing—that they will beat the statistics. *We're going to be in the 50 percent that make it*, they think on their glorious wedding day. But the first time they have a major string of arguments, some start worrying. Somewhere down deep they start thinking that they might be in the wrong half, after all.

If things get worse and they don't know how to make it better, all they see is pain ahead. Eventually many believe they've passed the point of no return and will be one of the statistics, and they give up. They think, *Well, 50 percent of other marriages couldn't make it either*. And they don't realize that those particular statistics are erroneous and that there is no inexorable downward pull to the ending of a marriage, as if gravity were pulling water down a bathtub drain. They don't realize that most marriages *are* doing well and that it is very likely that theirs can survive this hard time and thrive again. All they can see is the pain.

Here's how one woman put it when she was sharing with me the situation surrounding her divorce four years before:

It's a season of crisis when making the decision to split—you just want the pain to end. You will grasp at anything to justify it. It is only later that the consequences to you and your family—your kids—become clear.

If I thought divorce was much more rare, especially in the church, I would have worked harder. I think the 50 percent statistic makes it easier to just give up and divorce. People like me view our divorce as a painful failure, but when supposedly 50 percent fail anyway ... well ... failing doesn't seem so bad because you have a lot of company.

Think how different it would be if a friend could honestly tell a struggling couple, "I know it is hard right now, but statistically you're going to be just fine." Or how different it would be if the struggling couple felt *This isn't the end of the world. We'll get through this because most couples do.* Or how different it would be if an unmarried couple who was unsure about the benefit of marriage knew that most marriages not only survive but thrive.

The Good News

By the end of this book, I hope you'll agree that despite some real concerns, there is also a great deal more good news out there than many of us have believed before—and that knowing it changes everything. In the chapters that follow, I will confront five demoralizing myths about marriage and show you these five good-news truths instead:

1. The actual divorce rate has never been close to 50 percent.⁴ It's significantly lower and has been declining over the last thirty years.
2. Most marriages aren't just so-so. The vast majority are happy.
3. The rate of divorce in the church is not the same as among the non-churchgoing population. It too is significantly lower.
4. Remarriages aren't doomed. A significant majority survive and thrive.
5. Most marriage problems aren't caused by big-ticket issues, so being in a marriage, or fixing a troubled one, doesn't have to be as complicated as people think. Little things can often make a big difference.

Will there be exceptions to the truths above? Yes, sadly, millions of them. And among the roughly sixty million marriages that currently exist in our country,⁵ there are still too many that struggle. Some of the big-picture troubling issues surrounding the state of marriage are very real.

But we have spent years hearing about all the bad news. Everyone is all too aware that those problems are out there. What we often don't know is the very real good news or that some of the bad news isn't accurate. So that is what we will be focusing on in this book. This is not a measured, equal treatment of both sides. This is a rigorous, fair, and accurate attempt to reclaim a whole other side of the truth about marriage!

This is a rigorous, fair, and accurate attempt to reclaim a whole other side of the truth about marriage!

Important Points to Keep in Mind

Before we dive into what we found, let me emphasize a few key goals and caveats.

First, Tally and I are analysts, not statistical demographers. But we have made a good-faith effort in eight years and thousands of hours of research to investigate, understand, and bring to you what we view as the most representative, most important information in each of the five areas mentioned above. We also try to give you a quick primer for evaluating this type of data yourself as you go forward. But it is imperative to emphasize that this was an extremely complicated area of study, an inexact science, and a moving target.

Second, our ultimate goal wasn't just to uncover the precisely correct answer within a bunch of complex data (although we certainly tried to do so), but to reclaim one whole side of the story and, as a result, start a much bigger-picture conversation: Should we change how we think and talk about marriage and divorce? If people are discouraged by the mythical bad news, should we vocally celebrate the very real good news? But if we do so, what amount of sober realism is needed for people to take marriage seriously? And so on. Although Tally and I will inevitably hear from those who might disagree with this number or that percentage calculation, the reality is that *many* of the numbers in the pages ahead could be adjusted without changing the ultimate conclusion that there is a great deal of unrecognized good news about marriage out there, and we need a paradigm shift in how we focus on it.

Third, despite the challenges posed by the complexity of the research, we were extremely rigorous about the process. Because this book needed to counter the pull of contemporary myths, we went straight to the data, studies, and, wherever possible, to the researchers themselves and tried to stay clear of articles, reports, or comments drawn from the studies. This approach was necessary because we found that when we tried to track secondary articles or news stories back to the actual data source, there were dozens of cases where a well-intentioned journalist, analyst, or even marriage expert quoted key information incorrectly or even quoted studies that, it turned out, didn't exist. (I chuckled when one marriage leader said, "You're like Snopes for marriage!") We also found countless cases where a news story emphasized the small negative details and ignored the large positive ones. So we have made it our goal to always eyeball the actual research and examine the raw data in hundreds of studies. We have also had dozens of interviews, phone calls, and e-mail exchanges with the researchers behind many of these studies, the preeminent researchers in the area of marriage and divorce. I have personally met with the authors of several key studies you'll read about in these pages.

Yet, fourth, despite our best efforts, I am quite sure there will be legitimate questions about certain facts, our reasoning, or conflicting statistics that Tally and I might have missed. Again, we are making our best judgment, and even the experts who have been studying this for decades do not always agree with one another. And frankly, as that first expert told me in 2006, we have seen for ourselves that this is indeed an arena in which there often isn't one right answer. There can even be many different ways of looking at things within the same data set. New information will also inevitably arise after this book goes to print; in fact we actively hope it does, as researchers start investigating the positive data sets and not just the negative ones!

Ultimately, we simply think it is important for you to hear the truth we found in the

numbers and see the very real, overwhelming evidence for some heartening conclusions about marriage, not just the discouraging ones you have heard up until now.

Yes, some very real bad news is out there. But the good news is out there too. And it can give some much-needed encouragement to marriages today. Remember the pastor quote earlier, who was talking about the scariness of the current notions about a 50 percent divorce rate? After I shared with him the truths I was learning, here is what he concluded:

This good news about marriage being stronger than we think—especially in the church—will be so helpful. It will be helpful for me as I work with couples who are thinking of getting married. It will be helpful for my counselors who work with couples in trouble. And it will be helpful also for the public. It will be such an encouraging thing to know that, despite everything we hear, we still can believe in marriage today.

We still can believe in marriage today. Yes we can. Get ready to dig in.

Summary

- Much of the key divorce information in news articles and other common references is inaccurate or interpreted incorrectly, downplays the positive findings, or, in some cases, quotes studies that don't exist.
- People believe a lot of bad news about marriage—much of which isn't true—and there is a need for a paradigm shift, to reclaim the very real good news as well.
- Because there really is good, encouraging news, we need to seriously consider changing how we think and talk about marriage and divorce—not just discussing problems, but emphasizing the very real hope.
- The sense that *We probably won't make it* is itself one reason why some marriages *don't* make it. The couple thinks, *Well, at least we have a lot of company* instead of *Most marriages make it and we can too*. But if even one spouse believes there is hope, the marriage has a much better chance of surviving.
- Many people also avoid marriage altogether, thinking, *Why bother?*
- Although we know there is much more good news about marriage and divorce than we realized, getting to the truth is inexact and extremely complicated.

Till Death Do Us Part

How Most Marriages Actually Do Last a Lifetime

Let me introduce you to a young couple I met at a marriage conference a few years back. I will call them Joe and Jana, but they are like hundreds of other couples I've met—and perhaps you have too.

Married eighteen months and with no kids yet, Joe and Jana are still in the newlywed phase. They enjoy living in a little apartment in the city, working full time, and going out to eat or to the movies. As they spoke to me, they were still clearly in the first blush of new love: holding hands and leaning into each other.

A few minutes into our conversation, Jana said, "Being married has been so wonderful. I'm glad we did it. And I think we'll probably make it."

Her husband was nodding happily, but I was jarred.

"Probably make it?" I asked, casually. "Why just 'probably'?"

"Well, there's no guarantee, you know." Her sober words were a surreal counterpoint to her sweet smile and the tender way she held her husband's hand. "Not when half of all marriages *don't* make it. But we're the type to work hard, so I think we'll beat the odds."

"*There's no guarantee.*" "*Half of all marriages don't make it.*" "*I think we'll beat the odds.*" Most couples don't verbalize these impressions about marriage so forthrightly, but I've found that they are there underneath. And all too often they lead to the dangerous (usually subconscious) feeling of *probably*. Not *We'll be together for life and make it work, no matter what*, but...*probably*.

So ask yourself: What happens when Joe and Jana encounter some inevitable difficulties, pain, and heartache? Is their "probably" mind-set going to help or hurt their chances of staying together? Will thinking *Half of all other marriages don't survive either* make a breakup less likely? Or more? The answer is obvious. For too many couples, believing that half of all marriages end in divorce is a reason why some marriages end in divorce. Or even if a couple stays together, the subconscious worry about not beating the odds can still be damaging. One or both partners might hold back. Maybe they're on guard. Perhaps they keep separate bank accounts, just in case.

But the marriage union is designed to be all in, where a couple can be vulnerable, transparent, and forgiving—not on guard. The actions that come from being on guard create distrust, build walls, and sabotage marriages. They set in motion the very outcome the couple

didn't want—an outcome that too often comes *because* it feels inevitable—because couples have a sense of futility when they most need hope instead.

There's a passage in the Bible that says that without a vision, people perish. And the irony is that the hope people need—the good-news truth that will give them strength to reclaim their marriage—is actually there. They just don't know it yet!

The Hope-Worthy Truth About the Divorce Rate

In the pages ahead, we'll be bringing you good-news truths about the divorce rate that you need to know. By necessity, we will be simplifying an *extremely* complex field of study; it took us years to understand just this one topic enough to investigate and analyze it to an *extremely* helpful degree.⁶ And that is why we think it is important to give you not just our conclusions but some highlights of how we arrived at those conclusions. Both in these pages and in the FAQ section at the back of the book, we will provide a tutorial to help you cut through the confusion and evaluate any reports you may see in the future.

So to start, here are the four big-picture, good-news truths we think are most important (and which are, with a few exceptions, undisputed among most experts):

- Half of all marriages today are *not* ending in divorce; the overall prevalence of divorce is nowhere close to 50 percent and never has been.
- The divorce rate has been declining overall for years; it has declined substantially since its peak around 1980.
- Even the good-news averages don't tell the whole positive story. Several actions and patterns dramatically lower couples' chances of divorce even more.
- From the 1970s right up to today, many respected researchers continue to believe in and refer to a 40 to 50 percent divorce rate, but these are always *projections* based on assumptions about what will happen in the future, and although some higher-risk groups have certainly hit that projected divorce rate, the average has never come close.

So let's take a closer look at these four vital facts that can encourage many people.

Fact 1: The Prevalence of Divorce Has Never Been 50 Percent

Although experts mean many different things by “the divorce rate,” the most familiar and simplest way of discussing it is to determine what percentage of marriages have ended in divorce. Put another way, of those today who have ever been married, what percent have been divorced? We can call this the “prevalence” of divorce or the “current” divorce rate (and although we'll share other ways of looking at divorce, this will be the main way we refer to divorce in this book). Although this rate is popularly believed to be 50 percent, it has never been close.

Let's take a quick look at the encouraging truth about first marriages and then look at what we know about the broader picture of *all* marriages in our culture.

Seventy-Two Percent of Those Who Have Ever Been Married Are Still Married to Their First

Spouse!

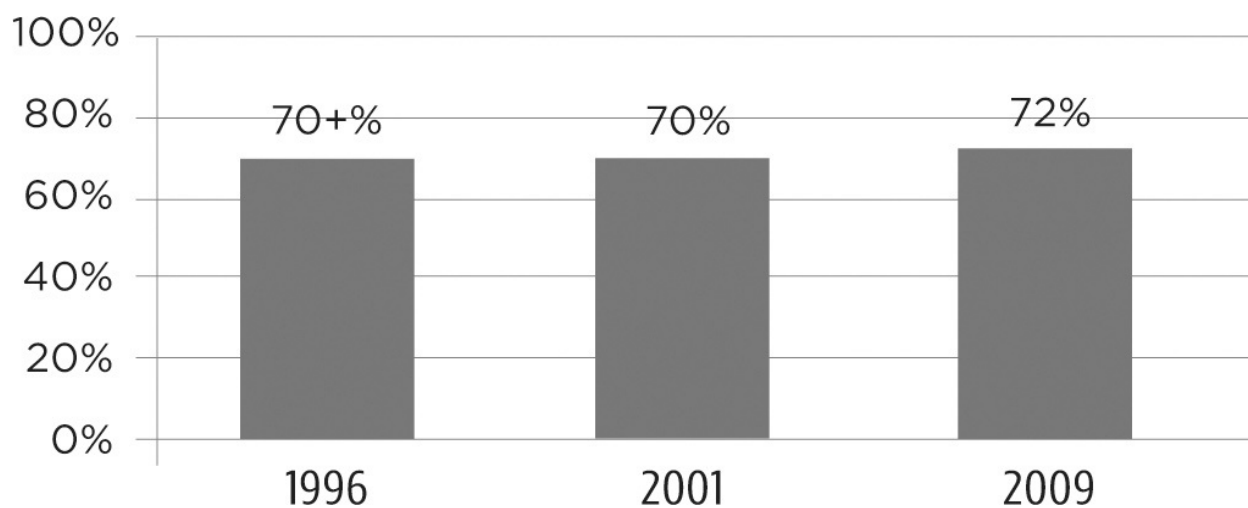
Right now, according to one of the most recent Census Bureau surveys, 72 percent of people who have ever been married are still married to their first spouse.⁷ In other words, *more than seven out of ten people are still married to their first spouse.*

Can we conclude the remaining 28 percent are divorced? Nope! They could be either divorced *or widowed*, since that percentage includes everyone who was married until a spouse died! Although there is no way to break out just divorce versus widowhood from this data, we can make a back-of-the-envelope estimate. Since the same data shows that around 1 percent of women have ever been widowed, we can make an educated guess that around 27 percent of first marriages may have ended because of divorce rather than widowhood.

Importantly, that percentage has been stable for years. (See [graph](#).) The “still married to first spouse” number was slightly over 70 percent in 1996,⁸ and we can infer a similar number from another type of census survey even back in 1985, which was close to the year of the highest divorce rates of 1980.⁹ (Before the 1970s spike in divorce, at any one time about 85 percent of first marriages were still intact. Since then, the number has been about 70 to 72 percent.)

It is imperative to note that the actual rate of divorce (rather than widowhood) for first marriages could be even lower than our estimate of 25 percent. According to the most recent Family Needs Survey of 6,171 people conducted by the large family organization FamilyLife, of the marriages that were no longer intact, eight percentage points of that number were due to death rather than divorce!¹¹ So theoretically, starting from our 28 percent of non-intact marriages, the average first-marriage divorce rate could be closer to 20 percent.¹²

Percent of First Marriages Still Intact (Not Ended Through Death or Divorce)



Source: Census Bureau, 1996, 2001, 2009¹⁰

Now, estimating that somewhere around 20 to 25 percent of first marriages end in divorce is still nothing to do handsprings about, but it is a whole lot better than the popular notion that the rate is double that!

Looking at Everyone (Including Those Married Multiple Times), Only Around Three in Ten

Have Experienced Divorce

Of course, discussing just first marriages doesn't give a full snapshot of society. Although you'll see in a later chapter that most remarriages last a lifetime as well, let's look at the current divorce rate for *all* marriages and, thus, society as a whole.

The broadest way to get a handle on this is to look at the many surveys that ask those who have ever been married a question like “Are you now or have you ever been divorced?”

At first glance, you might think this “ever divorced” number would be a simple, uniform assessment of the actual divorce rate. However, we found that this number swings widely depending on how the study is conducted and reported, which is one main reason for today's overall confusion and misunderstanding about the divorce rate. For example, a survey of divorce rates among women between the ages of eighteen and sixty will return a radically higher number than a very similar-looking survey of divorce rates among men between the ages of twenty-one and eighty. Nothing is simple in divorce land.

Furthermore, several highly publicized studies seem, on the surface, to suggest that nearly half of all subjects have ever been divorced. But when we looked at their methodology, none were a good reference for a national average.

For example, in the FAQ section in the back of the book, we discuss the Centers for Disease Control's data on marriage, from the National Survey of Family Growth, 2006–2010, which is regarded as a go-to report on divorce and very widely quoted. But it was primarily a study of fertility and heavily surveyed those who married very young. As you will see shortly, those couples typically have a much higher divorce rate, and because they are a very small portion of the married population, this study should *never* be used for the purpose of generalizing divorce rates. I am actually a bit stunned to see how many researchers have used those numbers wholesale to draw national conclusions!

Among the studies that are more representative for age at marriage, the “ever divorced” number for all marriages (not just first-time marriages) ranges from 23 percent to 37 percent with a median around 32 percent.¹³ In our judgment, the most authoritative of these studies is the Census Bureau 2009 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), which revealed a rate of 30.8 percent.¹⁴ In other words, for society as a whole, among those who have been married, about three out of every ten have experienced divorce. Here is a quick list of several studies (some of which will be referenced again in later chapters).

Survey Results: What Percent of Marriages Have Ended in Divorce?

Study	Percent “Ever Divorced”
US Census Bureau, 2009 SIPP (men and women; first marriage only)	<28% (probably less than 25%)
US Census Bureau, 2009 SIPP (women only; first or subsequent marriage) ¹⁵	30.8%
University of Chicago, General Social Survey, 2012 ¹⁶	35.5%
University of Texas–Austin, National Fatherhood Initiative Marriage Survey, 2005 ¹⁷	23.4%
Barna Group, 2008 ¹⁸	33%
Marist Poll for the Knights of Columbus, 2010 (divorced or annulled) ¹⁹	37%

*of those ever married

As we'll discuss in more detail in the FAQ section, the 30.8 percent "ever divorced" number (and others) is only a snapshot in time and is for society as a whole, not for individual. Obviously if a survey taker were to survey a group of five thousand people one year and find that 30.8 percent were divorced, and then go back to that same group a few years later, most of that group would probably be divorced. Although an individual person's chance of getting divorced can only increase, not decrease, the bottom-line truth is still that the vast majority of people will not end up divorced.

For example, the same 2009 census study that found the 30.8 percent number also shows that even among one of the highest-risk age groups of baby boomers—women who were the between the ages of sixty and sixty-nine—only 37 percent had ever been divorced. Even better, nearly seven in ten of their *first* marriages were still intact!²⁰ In other words, even among these high-risk age groups, most marriages *do* last a lifetime!²¹

Imagine the difference to our collective consciousness if we say "Most marriages last a lifetime" rather than "Half of marriages end in divorce."

Looking at how vastly different this truth is from what society believes, imagine the difference to our collective consciousness about marriage and divorce if we began to say "Most marriages last a lifetime" rather than "Half of marriages end in divorce." And how encouraging it would be for people to know that, even better, the picture is only improving. Let's look at that next.

Fact 2: The Divorce Rate Has Been Declining for Years

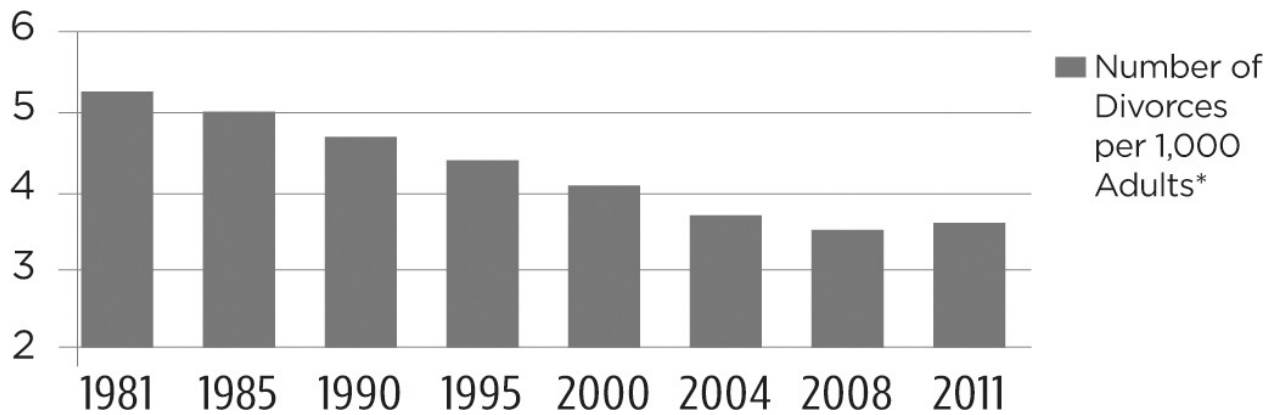
Most people have no idea that not only is the divorce rate not as bad as believed, but it has been declining for years.²² One of the best ways to see this truth is to look at what is called the "crude divorce rate," which is the number of divorces per one thousand people. Because this number is based on municipalities' reporting of actual divorces, not projections or surveys, it is the best option we currently have for trying to understand an actual *trend* over time.²³

After the introduction of no-fault divorce in the 1970s, there was a divorce boom as people rushed to take advantage of the fact that they could now get divorced just because they wanted to, without having to convince a judge there was a reason to grant it. But very quickly, people began to see the havoc this trend wrought, and the rush toward divorce cooled, hitting a peak around 1980 and then decreasing. In 1981, as you can see in the [graph](#), about 5.3 people out of every 1,000 got divorced, and that number has been falling overall since then, declining to 3.6 in 2011 (a drop of more than 32 percent overall).

There are additional key demographic reasons why divorce has continued to decline, and one of them is of particular concern for sociologists and society watchers. Today, more people are choosing to live together, either before they marry or instead of tying the knot. A recent study by Wendy Manning, Susan Brown, and Krista Payne at Bowling Green State University summarized, "Among women about three-quarters (74%) of first unions formed

the late 2000s were cohabiting in contrast to just over half (58%) 20 years earlier. The greatest increases in cohabitation as a first union appeared among working class women and men (high school graduates).²⁶ The study also points out that overall, 60 percent of women had cohabited at some point between the ages of nineteen and forty-four.²⁷

The Declining Rate of Divorce Since the Peak Year



*Note: This "crude divorce rate" is the only one for which we have a complete apples-to-apples comparison over this length of time.²⁴

Source: Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract 2012 (table 78) and CDC/NCHS National Marriage and Divorce Rate Trends (2011).²⁵

Since sociologists have found that cohabiting before marriage increases the risk of divorce later,²⁸ they speculate that those who cohabit would be the type to break up more easily if they *had* gotten married. Thus, one likely reason divorce is declining is simply that those folks are not getting married to begin with.

But another, and more positive, demographic reason for the decline in divorce is that people are getting married later than they used to, and those marriages are simply more likely to last for a lifetime. (See discussion of the Dana Rotz study [here](#).)

Fact 3: Certain Patterns and Actions Can Dramatically Change the Chance of Staying Married

There are a number of demographic factors and lifestyle choices that, statistically, quite dramatically reduce or increase a couple's chance of getting divorced. First, the demographic factors:

- *How old are the individuals when they get married?* Couples who marry in their midtwenties or later have a much greater chance of making it to their twentieth anniversary.
- *Do the individuals have a college education?* Statistically, college-educated people are far more likely to get married later and stick with their marriages.
- *Is it a first marriage?* First marriages appear to have a greater chance of success than subsequent marriages.
- *How long has the couple been married?* By and large, the greatest spike in divorces occurs not with the infamous "seven-year itch" but with those who never make it to their fifth

Now, that said, even those who are newlyweds, who get married young, who are on a second marriage, or who aren't college educated still have a great chance of having their marriage last a lifetime. But those who marry in their midtwenties or later, are college educated, and/or have already made it to the fifth anniversary of their first marriage find their chances of divorce dropping dramatically.

The highly respected researcher Andrew Cherlin has, for example, found that a college education alone drops the divorce rate to around one in six marriages (about 17 percent) for the first decade after the wedding.³⁰ And several other noted marriage researchers have informally told me that although the existing studies don't break it down this way, the divorce rate of people in those lower-risk categories could easily be as low as 5 to 10 percent.

Although existing studies don't break it down this way, the divorce rate of people in lower-risk categories could easily be 5 to 10 percent.

One great example of this can be seen in a longitudinal study of residents of Framingham, Massachusetts, a small community where people tend to marry later and are more likely to have some college education. As a second wave to an earlier study, in 1971 researchers began tracking 5,124 adults and their marriages. Thirty years later, despite living through the divorce boom of the 1970s, only 9 percent of that group were divorced.³¹ For many people reading this, that 9 percent divorce rate will look a lot like other communities around the country where people don't tend to marry very young and where getting a college degree is a bit more common.

In some cases, in fact, depending on a few factors such as the longevity of the marriage, the divorce rate drops to almost zero. Although there has been much press about older couples divorcing, especially among the baby boomers who have significantly higher divorce rates, couples who have been married several decades have a minuscule chance of divorce. Well-known sociologist Scott Stanley, the author of *A Lasting Promise*, recently put it this way: “If two people have been married to each other for many years (let's say forty years or more) and it is the first marriage for both, the likelihood of their marriage ending in divorce is near zero. Divorce is increasing rapidly among those older than fifty, but the great increase is among those who are remarried and/or in shorter duration marriages.”³²

Beyond the big-picture patterns mentioned above, various lifestyle choices, such as church attendance (see [chapter 4](#)), the decision to not live together before marriage, and/or being part of a community with supportive friends and mentors, drop the chances of divorce significantly as well.

For example, Dr. Stanley and his colleagues Howard Markman and Galena Rhoades at the University of Denver have spent years studying the implications of cohabitation. Stanley even keeps a blog about the subject, aptly named *Sliding vs. Deciding*, reflecting the fact that couples who cohabit tend to slide into a long-term relationship and even marriage without making a decision of commitment prior to living together, which, as noted earlier, then increases the

risk of divorce. This doesn't mean that couples who choose to cohabit are doomed, but it does mean that waiting until marriage to live together makes the marriage more likely to last a lifetime.

One case study of 143 couples fascinated me, because in many ways it covered several of these lifestyle factors that make a difference. Dan Chun, a senior pastor in Honolulu and the head of Hawaiian Islands Ministries, shared some important data arising out of his time as the singles pastor at a large California church. Plenty of the singles Dan worked with were higher-risk groups, but he purposefully encouraged them to regularly attend church, meet each other in a healthy environment, be equipped with good teaching, avoid risky decisions like living together before marriage, and stay in a supportive community.³³ Of the marriages of hundreds of singles he worked with between 1986 and 1992, there were 143 marriages. As of the end of 2013, twenty-one to twenty-seven years later, only fourteen of those couples have divorced, less than 10 percent. Since all these marriages are well past the primary risk years, it is very possible that the rest of those marriages will stay intact for a lifetime.

In other words, instead of a 30.8 percent rate of divorce (as seen in the census numbers earlier), the divorce rate of those who stayed in a supportive community and so on was only a third of that! What Dan Chun did as a pastor, and what those couples did differently, captured in his book *How to Pick a Spouse*.

As one noted researcher privately told me, "The magnitude of the shift in divorce is huge if you take a lower-risk path. That is just not in dispute."

Fact 4: Experts Continue to Project a 40 to 50 Percent Divorce Rate—Which We've Never Hit

So, now, let's conclude this chapter by looking at one of the other main reasons why the notion of a 50 percent divorce rate has become so embedded in our culture: because we continue to see articles, studies, and sophisticated analyses by great researchers that seem to measure it that way.

Paul Amato at Pennsylvania State University, Scott Stanley at the University of Denver, Andrew Cherlin at Johns Hopkins University, and Kelly Raley at the University of Texas at Austin have all consistently said that the chance that a new marriage will end is between 40 and 50 percent.³⁴ The key word there is *will*. These are *projections*, not measurements. If a starry-eyed couple gets married today, what are their chances of getting divorced before they die? Or for people born in such and such a year, what are their chances of making it to their thirtieth anniversary, based on various demographic trends? Or what percentage of people in this ethnic group or that geographic region are likely to stay together for a lifetime?

This is where we get into complex projections far into the future, based on various assumptions. Although I am not an expert like these researchers, it looks like their assumptions may not have accounted enough for the positive trends we've seen. Ever since the divorce boom of the 1970s, several generations of researchers have predicted that the prevalence of divorce would be 50 percent or higher by now.³⁵ And yet divorce rates have been dropping instead, which is why we've never come close to the projected overall "eventually divorced" rates we "should" have by now. The reality has always been more positive than what it was projected to be.

Now, certainly, there are some higher-risk groups that have hit a 50 percent divorce rate

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