

Are you a little bit MARRIED

You're committed in every way, but don't have that ring

IS IT TIME TO HEAD
DOWN THE AISLE, WALK
OUT THE DOOR OR STAY
PUT? HANNAH SELIGSON
EXPLAINS THE NEW
RELATIONSHIP RULES

“At first, it was domestic bliss,” says Rachel, 26, referring to the two years she and her university boyfriend, Jason, lived together in their shoebox-sized city apartment. They enmeshed themselves in each other’s lives: Rachel became an adopted member of Jason’s family (even speaking to his mother on the phone at least once a week) and they resisted living with gaggles of friends as they had at uni, instead opting to move in together.

Their lives were in sync, or so it seemed. “I had no desire to ask where the relationship was headed. It was just fun,” Rachel recalls. That fun, though, had about a two-year shelf life. In the midst of concentrating on their fledgling careers, Rachel fell to the bottom of Jason’s priorities. “We essentially became flatmates,” she says. →

RELATIONSHIPS

By this point, their *laissez faire* approach to the relationship stopped working. “I didn’t need him to propose to me right then and there, but the open and ambiguous future was draining. I wanted to know where we stood,” says Rachel. Jason couldn’t tell her if he was sure about their future, so three years after they moved in together, Rachel moved out. “The relationship,” she says, “was this kind of contradiction: an intense commitment and investment, but no long-term commitment.”

Sound familiar? That’s because it’s the reality for a growing number of couples. Research by the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that in the last 20 years, the proportion of couples who now choose to live together before getting hitched is nearly 78 per cent. And if they do reach the altar, the bride will be close to 28 years old and her groom will be pushing 30 (compared to 24 and 26 respectively, two decades ago).

Relationships like Rachel and Jason’s were once expected, without question, to quickly culminate in marriage. But as more and more couples choose to postpone walking down the aisle, other new dating rituals like prolonged courtship and cohabitation have become socially acceptable. In fact, they’re now seen as the stepping stones to marriage.

“Dating is certainly not what it was 50 years ago,” says clinical psychologist Dr Cindy Nour. “When compared to the 1970s, religion doesn’t generally play as much of a role with regards to cohabitation. People also tend to have more of a disposable income and are not living at home for as long. In this process of getting to know each other there is a try-before-you-buy approach.”

Young couples who live together no longer rush to reach the milestones that once marked adulthood – marriage, kids and a permanent home. But the desire to put off “growing up” isn’t the only factor driving this trend. This in-between stage has become the norm because it’s no longer a social faux pas to admit that the prospect of marriage is daunting or downright terrifying, especially for members of a generation spooked by their parents’ marital histories. After all, it was the baby boomers who pioneered the culture of divorce.

Take Tom, 26, who endured his parents’ acrimonious break-up when he was 12 and explains the end of a two-year

relationship with his girlfriend like this: “It’s made me scared about getting married. I just want to be sure, and I didn’t have that certainty. And that’s because I was so scarred by the model of my parents’ marriage.”

Given that men like Tom now have a far different familial basis upon which to build their relationships, it begs the question: how does being “a little bit married” affect women? Does it feel like a comfortable holding pattern where she can enjoy her freedom and the benefits of a marriage-like relationship? Or is it a state of hell-like limbo that wastes her time and money?

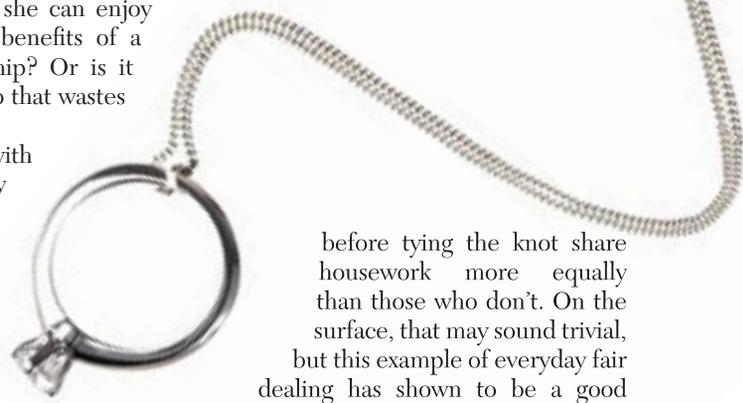
Let’s start off with the bad news. Quickly leaping into a cosy living arrangement while in the throes of an early romance may only be setting you up for huge disappointment a bit further down the domestic track. “People who cohabit tend to move in together early in the relationship while they are in the ‘relationship bubble’ when things are rosy and quite removed from reality,” says Dr Nour. “Research shows that the bubble tends to burst around the three-to-six-month mark.”

Even if you do survive the reality check that time brings, being a little bit married can also bring with it the angst that many women say is endemic to this period of marriage life. Rachel’s situation is a textbook example: being in a long-term relationship can feel like you’re driving aimlessly and when you turn to your co-driver to help you navigate, he gets huffy and annoyed that you want to highlight a route on a map, asking, “Why can’t we just keep going like we are and see where we end up?”

While women now become CEOs and leaders of political parties, there’s still a gender imbalance when it comes to setting the marriage timetable. In most cases, this remains up to the guy, which leaves women hitting their heads on a relationship glass ceiling. And this is where things can take a turn for the worse. Ambiguity can motor a relationship for a few years, but not forever.

It isn’t all doom and gloom, though. University of Queensland research shows that married couples who live together

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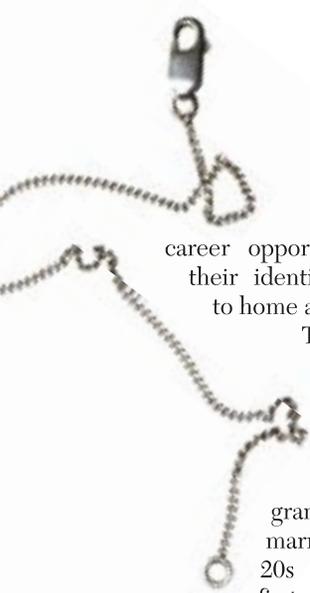


before tying the knot share housework more equally than those who don’t. On the surface, that may sound trivial, but this example of everyday fair dealing has shown to be a good indicator of the longevity of your relationship. “Cohabiting couples are more egalitarian and more liberal about housework than married couples, and it seems if you cohabit before you marry, it’s likely some of those egalitarian patterns will carry over into the marriage,” says the university’s professor of sociology, Janeen Baxter. “Cohabiting couples are ... less traditional in terms of who does what – cohabiting men do more indoor tasks than married men and cohabiting women do more outdoor ‘male’ tasks.”

The importance of sharing housework shouldn’t be underestimated: a study by the Pew Research Centre in the US found that sharing household chores ranked third of nine items associated with successful marriages, behind faithfulness and sexual fulfilment.

More importantly, many women in these partnerships see them as a valuable test phase. As Stephanie, 28, put it: “It’s given me a big window of time to see how he interacts with my family and friends and feel more confident about taking the next step.” Plus, delaying marriage can help a couple’s careers and, consequently, their bank balances.

Michael Kimmel, a gender studies professor and author of *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*, says, “The advancing age of marriage benefits both women and men, [giving them] more time to explore



career opportunities [and] establish their identities before committing to home and family.”

To that end, being a little bit married can be the working girl's best-case scenario. Instead of following the path by their mothers or grandmothers – getting married in their early 20s and popping out their first child a few years later – women are taking their 20s and early-30s to build a solid career base while at the same time getting most of the benefits of a marriage.

And there's more good news. In the process of delaying wedlock, couples might also be signing on for a marriage that has a greater chance of lasting. US research has found that women who get hitched before their mid-20s are significantly more likely to divorce than those who tie the knot later. In fact, contrary to popular belief, Australian statistics show that marriages now have more mileage than they did two decades ago. A new union is likely to last 2.5 years longer than it did for younger couples who walked down the aisle in 1988. Why? Postponing marriage till later in life – when most of us are established in our careers – means eschewing the financial hardships that afflict many who marry earlier.

So are these try-before-you-buy couples attempting to have their cake and eat it too? Yes and no. While there can definitely be a honeymoon period before marriage, human biology has a different agenda. “In general, women look forward to growing up and the milestones that come with that [such as having babies],” says Kimmel. “Guys can kind of dread it. Some men view adulthood as the negation of boyhood, a period in your life where you get to piss on bonfires and burp and not have to apologise for it. They look at adulthood as having to wear a tie and take orders from a boss.”

So whatever stage you're at, if you feel it's crunch time in your relationship, there are several paths you can take:

YOU CAN WALK DOWN THE AISLE: Those who decide to get hitched should really do some relationship homework. In their

research on couples, psychologists Stanley Blumberg and Mark Markman found: “Prior to the wedding day, most couples have had few tests of their ability to handle conflict. They simply have not encountered many significant issues or disagreements during courtship.”

Money, for starters, is always a tricky one. Have you decided how you'll handle day-to-day expenses and whether you'll combine bank accounts? Who will pay the household bills? Will there be only one breadwinner? Time is another issue. Now that you're married, will you scale back on your 60-hour work weeks? Have you talked about how to deal with each other's family get-togethers? Does being married mean you take all your annual leave together and don't go out on your own anymore?

Then there's children. Any couple who plans to be married and hasn't come to a sturdy agreement on this issue is pretty much fooling themselves. Are you on the same page about when – or if – you want to have them? And how many? Will one of you quit your job to stay home with the kids? These questions must be asked.

Relationship red flags

(WHEN TO WALK AWAY)

♥ HE REACTS POORLY IN A CRISIS – OR DOESN'T

REACT AT ALL What might his response be if you told him you were quitting your job to write a novel? What would he say if you were diagnosed with diabetes, or worse, cancer? It helps to know that the person with whom you're contemplating walking down the aisle with is well-equipped to cope with life's uncertainties.

♥ **HE THRIVES ON NEGATIVITY** All couples fight; it's normal to have disagreements. What does matter – more than you might realise – is how many positive interactions a couple needs to share. Research by relationship guru Dr John Gottman shows that happy couples have about a 5:1 ratio between positive and negative interactions. To wit: for every criticism, ill-tempered remark or dismissive shrug that passes between a couple, there should be at least five positive experiences – such as laughing, holding hands or simply listening to one another.

♥ **HE DOESN'T FIGHT FAIRLY** When problems arise, are you always apologising? Do you both actively participate in a discussion, even if it's uncomfortable? (Somebody who shuts down when you want to raise a serious issue is a walking red flag.) Note whether he fights dirty or tries to land below-the-belt shots. Nasty name-calling, abusive and controlling behaviour and aggression should never be tolerated.

YOU CAN WALK OUT THE DOOR:

Let's talk relationship maths for a minute: when the equation *three years invested + fear of being single = staying together* seems to make perfect sense, then it's probably time to pack your bags and leave. If you figure you've gone this far and therefore might as well keep going, more serious consideration needs to be given to your true options.

Yes, the fear of returning to the muddy dating trenches can be paralysing, but an ongoing state of uncertainty is a shaky foundation for marriage.

Visualise yourself wedded to this person a year from now. Do you imagine you'll still have the same doubts? If the answer is yes, then it might be time to dust off the suitcase under your bed.

YOU CAN REMAIN A LITTLE BIT

MARRIED: There are times when the best decision is no decision and it's worth considering whether your future has to be a strictly binary option between getting betrothed and breaking up.

Charlotte, 29, recalls a tough period she and her long-term boyfriend, Neil, 33, went through because she felt trapped between the two. “The model seemed to be either he proposes to me or that I leave him – and I'm not sure I wanted either,” she explains.

The couple have found a sweet spot by living together and putting marriage on the backburner, but they make sure to communicate about the parameters of staying a little bit married. These discussions include everything from just how permanent they want this arrangement to be to whether or not they would be willing to raise children as an unmarried couple.

In the end, no matter which of these choices you make, don't be afraid to ask yourself the hard questions and – to the best of your ability – to visualise and try to anticipate how you'd feel in each of the above scenarios. If you're unsure, consider seeing a relationships counsellor or psychologist about your concerns. Most importantly, get crystal clear with your partner about what it all means. Yes, playing house sounds innocuous – and even fun – but if it comes at the expense of your emotional, financial, and psychological wellbeing, it's most definitely not. **m**