
Working with cohabitation in relationship education and therapy

**ABSTRACT**

Cohabitation is increasingly common in the United States, with the majority of couples now living together before marriage. This paper briefly reviews research on cohabitation, its association with marital distress and divorce for those who marry (the cohabitation effect), gender differences, and theories underlying this association. Suggestions are made for future areas of exploration in this field, and the implications of the existing research for relationship education efforts and clinical intervention with couples are discussed.

In relationship education, it seems important to help individuals explore their own expectations about cohabitation as well as how cohabitation may or may not change their relationships and influence future relationship goals. With regard to cohabiting couples presenting for therapy, clinicians may need to help them consider how cohabitation may have affected their commitment levels, plans for the future, and power dynamics. For married couples in therapy, it may be useful for some to look at the process by which they married and to recommit or clarify commitments made together. Across all of these forms of clinical practice, we recommend a focus on building communication skills so that individuals and couples have the skills necessary to talk about issues, particularly issues related to commitment.