

Deciding you don't before you say 'I do'

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Is there any benefit of waiting 'til you're wed before you go to bed? A recent study seems to think so

'SEX, MONEY and power are three of the most common causes of rows in relationships. So I guess if you delay the sex until after marriage, then it could be fair to say that you may not have as many issues in your marriage,' says family therapist David Kavanagh.

His comments are backed up by a recent study led by academic Dean Busby from Brigham University in Utah, which lent some support to the idea that the longer a couple delays sex before marriage, the better chance the marriage has of lasting.

Busby and his team of researchers surveyed more than 2,000 couples, ranging in age from 19 to 71 years, and found that communication, sexual quality, perceived stability and relationship satisfaction were better for those couples who had waited until after marriage to consummate their relationship.

The bottom line from the study seems to be that if you want to give marriage the best chance of survival, it's best to make each other wait. The academics who pioneered the study did so because of a lack of empirical data on how the timing of sex between a couple impacts on the longevity of a marriage.

"What was out there was really more about adolescent sexual debut as well as research exploring how old adolescents were when they had their first sexual experiences," says Busby. "We found nothing within the last two decades that really considered the influence of sexual timing on the current couple relationship."

The findings have drawn a certain amount of comment from both liberal and conservative groups alike. The study itself though doesn't quite go all the way, and questions as to why delaying sex might impact on the longevity of a marriage remain unanswered.

"Some conservative people accept the findings without question because it reflects their values," says Busby, "while some more liberal people, in terms of sexual behaviours, won't accept any of the findings no matter what is said. Many people in the middle are saying things like, 'Yeah, there have been times where I should have been smarter in the decisions I made about sex'.

"We also get a number of people who insist that sexual compatibility is the most important issue in a relationship. They say things such as, 'There is no way I'm going to marry someone if I don't know whether we are sexually compatible.'

"Of course, it would be a mistake for any of us to marry someone who we were not sexually attracted to, but what does sexual compatibility mean and how important is it?"

One of the significant findings of the study, which came as a surprise to the research team, was the fact that sexual timing has a stronger influence on relationship stability than on relationship satisfaction.

"It appears that when a couple is sexual early, this might plant a seed of distrust or concern about commitment that can interfere with trust," Busby says. Couples who have sex very early on in a relationship may do so to the detriment of other aspects of their union.

"When sexual behaviours are involved very early in the relationship, they become very powerful and maybe even dominate the relationship experience, so that communication and other basic relationship skills do not develop as well," he notes.

Yet what are the chances that we could see a societal change and a return to the days when relationships were often only consummated after marriage?

Family therapist David Kavanagh believes a move to less sex before marriage is highly unlikely. "I would say that I have met approximately only 1 per cent of couples who are prepared to say that they are waiting for marriage before sex.

"I would think that we are a long way off a reversal to this form of relationship as the societal pressures to live together and the loosening of religious affiliations makes a huge impact on people's lives today."

Kavanagh says that despite the benefits of delaying sex highlighted in this study, a liberalised view of the role sex plays in relationships has developed in society.

"When parents tell children aged 18 or younger that it is okay for their boyfriend or girlfriend to stay over, the lesson is surely that sex is more recreational than commitment forming. Unless parents adopt a radically different view in the near future, I don't see this changing," he adds.

The last word then should go to married father of two Seán Morgan. When asked whether couples should consciously limit sex in their relationship before walking down the aisle, he replied: "That's what happens after you get married."

Two couples share their experience in delaying sex until after they were married:

PATRICK and THERESE McCRYSTAL

What was your attitude to sex before marriage?

Patrick : "Growing up, my mum instilled in us that pre-marital sexual activity before marriage would deeply offend God. This was a strong enough motivation in all my relationships at university and afterwards to maintain my purity, so that I could save myself as an unspoiled gift to who would be my future wife – whoever she would be!"

Therese : "I made the decision at a reasonably early age, about 13, that I would not ruin my virginity before marriage. I was neither a prude nor naive, as I had two sisters both conceive babies as teenagers. The heartache it caused the whole family probably helped strengthen my resolve.

My parents were nothing less than heroic in their support of my sisters and that taught me a lot too. I was a virgin on my wedding day and so was my spouse. In fact, most of our friends present were too, so it's not as unusual as you might have thought."

How do you think this has impacted on subsequent married life?

Patrick : "Waiting until marriage has meant we were free to give ourselves freely to one another and what a gift this was!"

"My friends who did sleep with others before marriage tell me that there was a discontent sowed in their hearts towards their wives, because they had all these other experiences to compare her with. I am truly glad I waited and would fully recommend it to every young person."

Therese : "The biggest impact is I trust my husband and I know he respects me. Our decision to marry was not based on physical involvement or emotional dependency.

"We were, of course, attracted to each other but just had clearer heads than if we had been sexually active. It also meant it didn't take too long to figure out if this was 'the one' or not. Ten years on he's still the one!"

"Marriage was, for me, automatically associated with children. The two were one in my mind."

Do you see any changes in Irish society in relation to this issue?

Patrick : "The marital act is the exclusive gift of husband and wife to one another. The unrestrained promotion of contraception has caused a desecration of the marital act, and its widespread abuse.

"Couples who refrain from sexual activity before marriage are just going to be happier. We see this from even all our friends and people we know."

Therese : "Not too long ago Ireland was great talking about God and sex was a taboo subject.

"Today, the media would have you believe that sex is the god and God (particularly anything to do with Catholic beliefs) is now the taboo."

TOM and JACKI ASCOUGH

What was your attitude to sex before your marriage?

Tom : "For our relationship, we realised how important it was to be able to show restraint before marriage, so we could be strong for each other when married. It is a very difficult transition to be all for sex before marriage with multiple partners and then suddenly have to maintain an exclusive relationship.

"Succeeding in an exclusive married relationship is something that comes more easily if the concept has already been applied before marriage. This implies saving sex for marriage. This is not a popular concept, but neither is the truth always popular."

Jacki : "When Tom and I met there was an instant attraction. Very early on we had to make some tough decisions about how far we were going to go sexually. Because the attraction we felt was so strong, it took a lot of self-restraint on both our parts to draw a line and not cross it.

"But we both felt our relationship had the potential to be long term, and that kept us motivated to save sexual intercourse. It wasn't always easy. Because when you are in love and the attraction is so strong, the desire is to get closer and closer physically.

"We both wanted to save sex for marriage whether that was going to be with each other or with someone else. A big key for us was communication. As our relationship progressed, we discussed it a lot! When I felt weak and wanted to give in to my sexual feelings, Tom would stay focused and remind me what we were at and visa versa. It wasn't always easy, but because we loved each other so much, we managed."

How do you think this has impacted on subsequent married life?

Tom: "Neither of us fears disloyalty from the other. We feel stronger knowing that we were able to show practical commitment to each other before we married. Our focus now is on being a strong family. The idea of considering other potential partners just doesn't enter the picture for either of us."

Jacki: "It has had a huge impact on our married life. We have a bond that is amazing. We've been married 15 years now. We are a normal couple with ups and downs in our relationship, but overall we have a very healthy and strong marriage. Because we both know that we are capable of controlling our sexual desires, I think that has built more trust into our relationship now.

"I trust Tom to stay faithful to our marriage vows, and he trusts me. That kind of trust doesn't just happen – it is built. Our time together before marriage is the foundation that we have built our marriage on for today."

Do you see any changes in Irish society in relation to this issue?

Tom : "There has been a marked increase in relationship breakdown along with the sexual boom of recent decades. Although not the only factor, it is a major one."

Jacki : "Yes. Logically it seems like a good idea to have sex before marriage and even live together to see if you are a compatible couple. Many people would say if you're in a committed relationship, then why not have sex if you love each other? But from my own personal observations, it seems to me those kind of relationships seem to have more difficulties. They don't go the distance. Why? I'm sure there are many factors. Relationships are complex, but I know I wanted to do whatever I could to give the best start to our marriage. For us, that meant waiting to have sex until after we said, 'I do'."