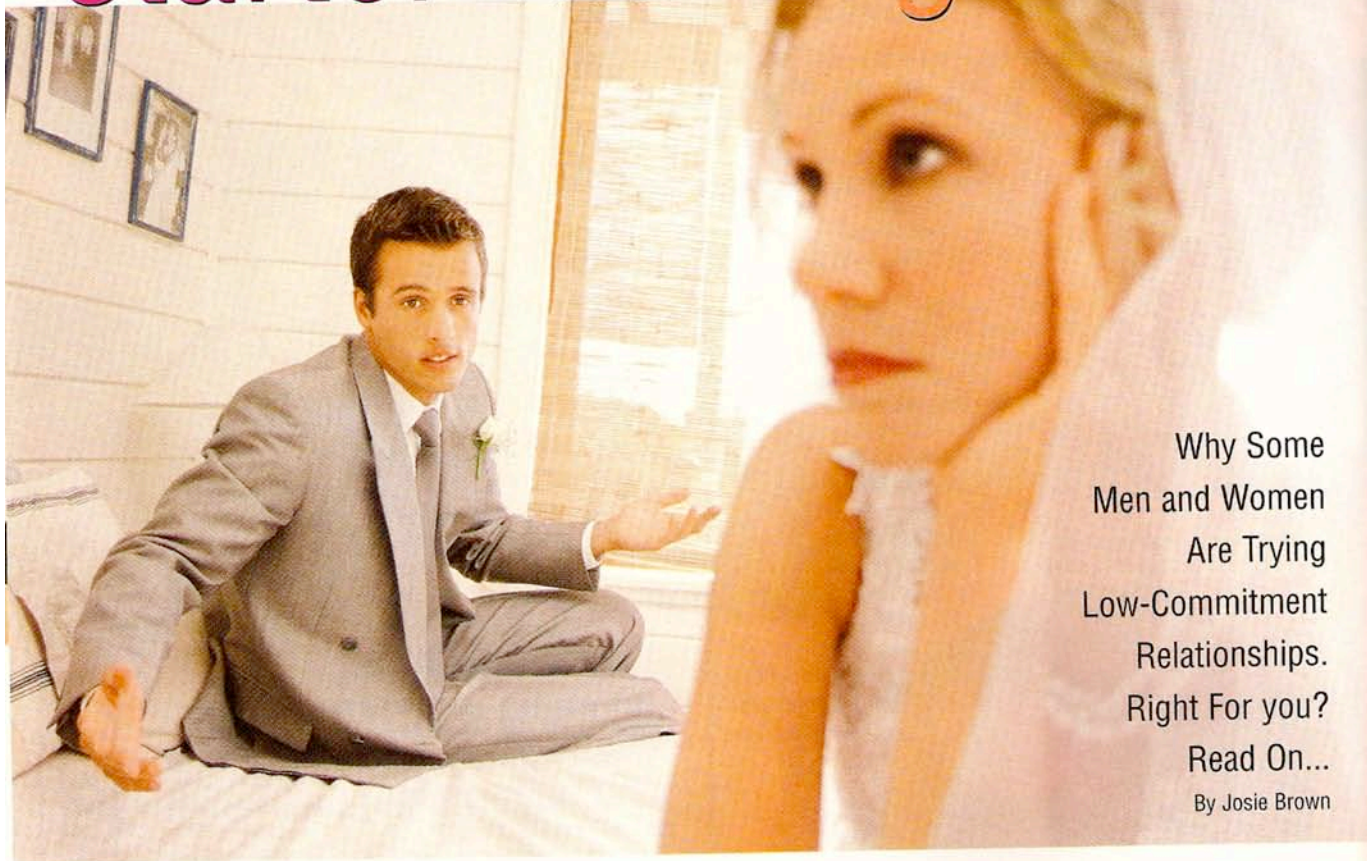


# starter marriages



Why Some Men and Women Are Trying Low-Commitment Relationships. Right For you? Read On...

By Josie Brown

Shelly\* remembers the tiniest details about her wedding. "My dress was made of oyster duchess satin, with inverted side pleats and hand-beaded Alençon lace over just one shoulder. My six bridesmaids wore strapless Belsoie gowns, in periwinkle. My bouquet was a mix of blue hydrangeas, lilacs and pink spray roses. The five-layer cake was adorned with cascading rose buds made from rolled white fudge and sugar pearls. We had 200 guests, black tie. It was truly the most wonderful day of my life."

But ask her why her marriage fell apart a mere 15 months later, and Shelly, 27, shrugs before giving her answer. "I guess we were so caught up in all the fine points, that we never really addressed big-picture stuff, like how he felt about my quitting work, his feelings about having kids, all the things you really need to know..."

Then she laughs. "Heck, we couldn't even agree upon a

\*Name has been changed.

name for the dog!" The one thing they did agree upon was the fact that their marriage was not working. "It got old, fast," she says. "Neither of us wanted to stick it out. So we divided up our things—he got the dog—

then went our separate ways. It was totally no-fault. 'Disposable,' you could say, and certainly, in the end, forgettable."

## Modern Brides

Contact lenses. Cameras. Cell

phones. So many things in our lives are disposable, so why *not* our marriages? That's what it's come to, says Pamela Paul, author of the book, *The Starter Marriage and the Future of Matrimony* (Random House). The statistics back her up: 25 percent of divorces occur within the first two years of marriage, and 43 percent within the first five years.

What has created this new attitude toward marriage? According to Paul, many variables from our past, present and future have sabotaged the once rock-solid institution of marriage.

"Baby boomers rebelled against their parents' vision of marriage, which was 'until death do us part.' Subsequently, many of Generation X's parents divorced, possibly before their children's fifth birthdays, so *that* generation never experienced growing up in two-parent households. In that situation, you are more likely to fantasize what 'could have been' if you had grown up with two parents, and

**Happily ever after**—or biding your time? Here are some tell-tale signs:

### Starter Marriage

- Rushed into marriage
- One partner was dragged into marriage
- Few common values
- Separate bank accounts
- Open marriage
- Long-distance relationship
- Sex is rare
- Deny any problems
- Always separate vacations
- Spend down time with friends
- Best friends are old friends, family
- Co-dependent with each other

### Happily Ever After

- Worked out issues
- Both went into marriage willingly, happily
- Shared opinions, goals
- Joint accounts
- Monogamy
- Live together
- Sex is a constant
- Talk through your issues
- Travel together—and apart
- Free time is spent together
- Best friends are primarily each other
- Depend on themselves, their partners and others

Models in photo used to illustrate story only.

you may now ignore what is really going on in your own relationship."

It may also be the reason why 53 percent of Gen-Xers favor marriage over careers, and why 9 out of 10 adults between the ages of 18 and 24 view marriage as the end-game for "the good life."

While starter marriages may be a trend, that's not to say they are a goal. Despite such high divorce statistics, a full 86 percent of people think that, if they got married today, they would stay in their partners' arms for the rest of their lives.

### Can't Hurry Love

Then again, is marriage *really* for everyone? Author Paul doesn't think so. Once again, statistics support her contention: Households with never-marrieds, divorced, widowed and persons living alternative lifestyles outnumber married couples by three-to-one. Unfortunately, explains the author, society isn't ready to accept the reality that not everyone will fall in love—let alone fall in love while they are still in their 20s.

Which, Paul says, begs the question: Are you marrying for yourself, or for others? "Women in their 20s are under a lot of pressure—from their families, their friends, their 'biological clocks,' society in general—to get married. They think, 'Oh my God, I'm 28, and I'm still alone. This summer, I have five weddings to go to, and I'm a bridesmaid in three of these. I don't always want to be the third wheel. If I can't get married, there must be something wrong with me.'"

And our media culture nurtures this fear: Wedding magazines, their covers adorned with blushing brides wearing virginal white, bombard us at the newsstand. Movies like *My Best Friend's Wedding* and *The Wedding Planner* enforce the stereotype that we won't be happy until Mr. Right sweeps us off our feet and carries us into the Chapel of Love.

And the sooner, the better—despite proof to the contrary: People under the age of 28 experience 25 percent of all failed marriages.

What about him? A man's concern over the stigma of perennial bachelorhood will also put him on the path to the altar—albeit at a considerably slower pace. "These guys may have dated the same girl since

college," explains Paul. "Perhaps it was a long-distance relationship. Then they moved in together, because it was the 'logical next step.' Now they are getting married because it's less scary than breaking up and starting out with someone new—or, worse yet, ending up alone."

### Moving Forward

Is it better to live together first, as a way to "test the waters," before getting married? Definitely, asserts Paul, because it gives you more opportunities to work out relationship kinks. Still, she cautions not to assume that marriage is synonymous with the term, "happily ever after." "Marriage is not an immediate path to happiness. It will not just suddenly make you or your partner different people," she explains. "The same issues you had before saying 'I do' will be facing you after the honeymoon."

Also, partners with a history of jumping from one co-habitation situation to another are not good candidates for any marriage in the first place. "Going from one partner to another, whether you're married or not, is a tell-tale sign that you lack the ability to commit." To keep from becoming a starter statistic, Paul also advocates some deep soul searching before tying the matrimonial knot.

"Don't do it because all your friends happen to be doing it. You wouldn't get a divorce because your best friend's marriage didn't work out, would you? Do it because the time—and the person—is right for you."

She also suggests that the couple look outside their marriage for additional emotional support. "After they've walked down the aisle, couples tend to shut themselves off, particularly if they are having communication problems. They don't want their friends and family to think they've made a stupid mistake. What they don't realize is that marriage can't survive in a vacuum. Every relationship needs some outside perspective, an extended support system, in order to survive." In other words, it takes a village to make a marriage.

That's why Paul advocates going into marriage with your

## What Do You Think Of Starter Marriages?

Is low-commitment love a trend? *CW* asked, and you told...



"Maybe I'm more traditional, but I think that once you get married you should stay married. I think people aren't taking marriage as seriously today, which is good and bad—you shouldn't stay in a marriage if it really isn't working. But I don't get that mentality that says, 'Let's give it a couple of years.'"

—Camille, 19, student



"Unless there's a kid involved, it doesn't seem like a starter marriage hurts anyone but the two people involved. And if you've been hot and heavy for 10 years, but it ends, there's no reason to be with that person any longer."

—Terry, 23, purchasing agent



"People should learn to wait, get to know the person. You find out a lot about the person after marriage. I dated my husband for 10 years, and we've been married for 5. We don't fight, we don't argue, we know each other's quirks, we're soulmates—and maybe that's because we knew each other so well before we got married. There's a lot to marriage, and when you're young, you don't get it."

—Mary, 31, customer service



"I think people should give themselves time in a relationship. I know people who got married too young and ended up committing adultery. If you're not ready to be married, then don't—it doesn't hurt to wait until you're more mature. A lot of people think they're ready when they're not—and those marriages are doomed to failure."

—Nydia, 21, cashier



"People are getting married too young—and marriage is not easy. They don't know each other, they haven't thought about it enough. You should wait until you get more mature, and you've thought about life."

—Fred, 22, entrepreneur



"I was in a starter marriage—I was 23 and he was 24 when we got married. I think people need to take more time to develop personally and professionally, because too much of that takes place in your 20s and even your 30s. I think it's so easy to be able to get out of a marriage, now that there's not the level of commitment there was 50 years ago."

—Christy, 28, accountant



"No one has any right to comment on how anyone else is living their life. It's so easy right now to divorce—there's no social stigma, and now it's no big deal."

—Matthew, 22, supervisor

eyes wide open. "If people spent less time in planning their weddings, and more time thinking through their lives together, the odds might be substantially different," she says.

And, if it doesn't work out? Don't despair, says Paul. "Happiness takes many different forms. You can't be afraid to accept what other choices might work best for you." **CW**