8 things science says predict divorce

Shana Lebowitz Mar. 11, 2018, 7:07 PM

It's not all guesswork. Universal Pictures

No one can say with 100% certainty that a couple is heading for disaster.

But social scientists have gotten pretty good at predicting who's most likely to wind up there. These couples share certain commonalities — in the way they fight and the way they describe their relationship, but also in their education level and employment status.

Below, we've rounded up seven factors that predict divorce.

Getting married in your teens or after age 32

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The best time to get married is when you feel ready, and when you've found someone you think you can spend a lifetime with. Don't force anything — or put it off — because a study told you to do so.

That said, research does suggest that couples who marry in their teens and couples who marry in their mid-30s or later are at greater risk for divorce than couples in their late 20s and early 30s. The risk is especially high for teenage couples.

That's according to research led by Nicholas Wolfinger, a professor at the University of Utah. After age 32, Wolfinger found, your odds of divorce increase by about 5% every year.

As Wolfinger wrote in a blog post for the conservative-leaning Institute for Family Studies, "For almost everyone, the late twenties seems to be the best time to tie the knot."

Other research, published in 2015 in the journal Economic Inquiry, found that the odds of divorce among heterosexual couples increase with the age gap between spouses.

As Megan Garber reported at The Atlantic:

"A one-year discrepancy in a couple's ages, the study found, makes them 3% more likely to divorce (when compared to their same-aged counterparts); a 5-year difference, however, makes them 18% more likely to split up. And a 10-year difference makes them 39% more likely."

Having a husband who doesn't work full-time

Sean Gallup/Getty Images

A 2016 [Harvard study](#), published in the American Sociological Review, suggests that it's not a couple's finances that affect their chances of divorce, but rather the division of labor.

When the researcher, Alexandra Killewald, looked at heterosexual marriages that began after 1975, she learned that couples in which the husband didn't have a full-time job had a 3.3% chance of divorcing the following year, compared to 2.5% among couples in which the husband did have a full-time job.

Wives' employment status, however, didn't much affect the couple's chances of divorce.

The researcher concludes that the male breadwinner stereotype is still very much alive, and can affect marital stability.

Not finishing high school

It doesn't seem fair that couples who spend more time in school are less likely to get divorced. But that's what the research suggests.

A post on the Bureau of Labor Statistics website highlights a result from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1979), which looked at the marriage and divorce patterns of a group of young baby boomers. The post reads:

"The chance of a marriage ending in divorce was lower for people with more education, with over half of marriages of those who did not complete high school having ended in divorce compared with approximately 30 percent of marriages of college graduates."

It may have to do with the fact that lower educational attainment predicts lower income — which in turn predicts a more stressful life. As psychologist Eli Finkel previously told Business Insider:

"What I think is going on is it's really difficult to have a productive, happy marriage when your life circumstances are so stressful and when your day-to-day life involves, say three or four bus routes in order to get to your job."

Showing contempt for your partner

John Gottman, a psychologist at the University of Washington and the founder of the Gottman Institute, calls certain relationship behaviors the "four horsemen of the apocalypse." That's because they predict divorce with scary-high accuracy:

1. **Contempt**: Seeing your partner as beneath you. (Gottman calls this behavior the "kiss of death" for a relationship.)

2. **Criticism**: Turning a behavior into a statement about your partner's character.

3. **Defensiveness**: Playing the victim during difficult situations.

4. **Stonewalling**: Blocking off conversation.

As Business Insider's Erin Brodwin reported, these conclusions are based on a 14-year study of 79 couples living across the US Midwest, which Gottman conducted along with University of California-Berkeley psychologist Robert Levenson. And while that particular study was small, another decade of research supports the findings.

Being overly affectionate as newlyweds

If you're not inclined to hug and kiss and hold hands as newlyweds, that might be a problem. But if you practically have to be pulled apart, well, that might be a problem, too.

Psychologist Ted Huston followed 168 couples for 13 years — from their wedding day onward. Huston and his team conducted multiple interviews with the couples throughout the study.

Here's one fascinating finding, from the resulting paper that was published in the journal Interpersonal Relations and Group Processes in 2001: "As newlyweds, the couples who divorced after 7 or more years were almost giddily affectionate, displaying about one third more affection than did spouses who were later happily married."

Aviva Patz summed it up in Psychology Today: "[C]ouples whose marriages begin in romantic bliss are particularly divorce-prone because such intensity is too hard to maintain. Believe it or not, marriages that start out with less 'Hollywood romance' usually have more promising futures."

Weathering daily stress

Don't underestimate the toll that stress can take on a marriage.

A 2007 paper, published in the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, looked at the factors that led to divorce in European couples and found that daily stress was an important reason behind the decision to divorce in many couples.

Seemingly trivial experiences like forgetting an appointment or missing the bus turned out to create tension between spouses.

The authors even found that "participants reported the accumulation of everyday stress as a more relevant divorce trigger than falling in love with another person, partner violence, or even a specific major life event that would have instigated changes in their private life."

Withdrawing during conflict

'The Break-up'/Universal Studios

When your partner tries to talk to you about something tough, do you shut down? If so (or if your partner is guilty of that behavior), that's not a great sign.

A 2013 study, published in the Journal of Marriage and Family, found that husbands' "withdrawal" behaviors predicted higher divorce rates. This conclusion was based on the researchers' interviews with about 350 newlywed couples living in Michigan.

Meanwhile, a 2014 study, published in the journal Communication Monographs, suggests that couples engaged in "demand/withdraw" patterns — i.e. one partner pressuring the other and receiving silence in return — are less happy in their relationships.

The lead study author, Paul Schrodt at Texas Christian University, says it's a hard pattern to break because each partner thinks the other is the cause of the problem. It requires seeing how your individual behaviors are contributing to the issue and using different, more respectful conflict-management strategies.

Describing your relationship in a negative way

In 1992, Gottman and other researchers at the University of Washington developed a procedure called the "oral history interview," in which they ask couples to talk about different aspects of their relationship. By analyzing the conversations, the researchers are able to predict which couples are heading for divorce.

In one study, published in 2000 in the Journal of Family Psychology, Gottman and colleagues put 95 newlywed couples through the oral history interview. Results showed that couples' scores on certain measures predicted the strength or weakness of their marriage. Those measures included:

1. Fondness for each other
2. "We"-ness: How much each spouse emphasizes unification in the marriage
3. Expansiveness: How much each partner elaborates on what the other is saying
4. Negativity
5. Disappointment in the marriage
6. How much the couple describes their marriage as chaotic