

The institution of marriage is not what it used to be

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Marriage used to be relatively simple: a man and a woman met, fell in love and got hitched.

But over the past several decades, tying the knot has become increasingly complex. Living together without marriage has become more socially accepted, as have premarital sex and divorce.

And, of course, the question of whether gay and lesbian couples should marry is the hot topic of the day.

With so many issues at play one thing is clear: Marriage ain't what it used to be.

"It's been my perception for a long while that traditional marriage has really disappeared," said the Rev. Thomas Beveridge, a counselor at the Pastoral Counseling Center in Glastonbury.

Beveridge, a retired Methodist minister who counsels on family and relationship issues, said that changes, such as the sexual revolution and the advent of birth control, have combined to forever alter the meaning of marriage.

Other relationship experts agree that though marriage is still a goal for most people, many don't view it as idealistically as they once did.

"Certainly marriage is still a respected institution and people still want to couple up," said Fred Bader, a Trumbull-based relationship therapist. "But the complexity of life is such that it's more of a challenge to keep relationships together."

Making marriage last

One of those challenges is the possibility that a marriage will someday end. More than half of marriages end in divorce, and Fairfield psychotherapist Andrea Goodman said that may make couples more tentative about marriage.

"We have a high divorce rate in this country, and people are aware of that," said Goodman, who does some work with couples. "I find that folks I'm working with in their 20s and 30s are not jumping into relationships as quickly."

Linda Olson, host of the syndicated radio talk show "America's Love Doctor," agrees that many people view marriage more critically because of the high divorce rate.

"This has resulted in many couples questioning the quality and structure of marriage," Olson, a clinical psychologist based in New Canaan.

But she still feels that marriage is a

worthy institution and one that shouldn't be taken lightly.

Along those lines, Olson supports President Bush's plan to put \$1.5 billion toward training to help couples develop interpersonal skills necessary for marriage. The money would only be available to heterosexual couples.

Though she doesn't think it should be used as a way to persecute gay and lesbian couples, Olson said that the underlying concept of the proposal — promoting educated marriages — is positive.

"Would you ever drive cross country without taking a single driving lesson?" Olson asked. "Relationship skills can be taught."

Both Olson and Goodman said that the marriages that fail often do so because partners don't know enough about each other or the nature of their relationship before they get married.

That's why therapy and relationship education are so important, Goodman said. "Couples often don't talk as much as they should about the issues that are going to affect them down the line," she said. "Many don't know each other as fully as they should."

Sharing space without vows

Another factor shaping attitudes about marriage is the growing

Marriage myths

- **Marriage benefits men much more than women.** Both men and women live longer, happier, healthier and wealthier lives when they are married. Typically, husbands gain greater health benefits and wives gain greater financial advantages.
 - **The more educated a woman becomes, the lower are her chances of getting married.** Today's women college graduates are more likely to marry than their non-college peers.
 - **Marrying puts a woman at greater risk of domestic violence.** Being unmarried — and especially living with a man outside of marriage — is associated with a considerably higher risk of domestic violence.
 - **Cohabitation is just like marriage, but without "the piece of paper."** Cohabitation typically does not bring the benefits — in physical health, wealth and emotional wellbeing — that marriage does.
 - **Having children brings couples closer.** The arrival of the first baby often pushes couples farther apart and brings stress to the marriage.
- THE NATIONAL MARRIAGE PROJECT AT RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

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