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4 factors contribute to lasting marriage

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You are sitting in a church, the "Wedding March" starts up, and the bride walks down the aisle, her gown a white confection, her eyes shining, on the arm of her father.

What's not storybook perfect about this picture? Her parents divorced, her father has remarried, and his 5-year-old son from his second marriage is the ring bearer.

The guests in the church are watching what comes next: After Dad takes his daughter to the altar, is he going to sit down with his first wife, the bride's mother? Or is he going to sit down with his second wife?

As I watch today's weddings, I must admit that I secretly ask myself, "Will this marriage last?"

The statistic, endlessly repeated in the media, is that 50 percent of marriages will end in divorce. Don't believe it!

This number came close to the truth for marriages in the 1970s where 48 percent of marriages dissolved within 25 years, report **Betsey Stevenson** and Justin Wolfer in their 2007 paper "Marriage and Divorce: Changes and their Driving Forces," written for the National Bureau of Economic Research.

But the 50 percent divorce rate is now a myth.

"For first marriages that occurred in the 1980s, the proportion that had dissolved by each anniversary was consistently lower, and it is lower again for marriages that occurred in the 1990s," according to Stevenson and Wolfer.

When we look at couples getting married right now, we aren't really interested in the national divorce rate. What we want to know is, "What are the odds for this particular couple?"

Let's ask the four most important questions:

1. Has the couple graduated from college?

The divorce rate for college graduates in recent years has been plummeting, dropping far more rapidly than for those without a college degree.

Only about 16 percent of college graduates married between 1990 to 1994 have gotten a divorce within their first 10 years of marriage.

2. Does the couple have a good income?

If the couple has an annual income of over \$50,000 a year, the divorce rate during the first 10 years of marriage declines substantially. Couples without much money have a lot more strains on their marriages.

3. Is the couple older when they get married?

Couples who marry when they are 25 years or older have a lot more experience and a lot better odds of having their marriages work out.

4. Does the couple come from homes where the parents stayed married?

These couples have experienced marriages that stayed together so they're more likely to know how it's done, even if they can't put their experience into words.

We all know exceptions, but these are important predictors of whether a marriage will last.

As I watched the couple in the church promising to stay together "till death do us part," I asked these four questions. The couple is college-educated, older and has a good income. Yes, the bride's parents had gotten a divorce, but this could also have made her more aware of the impact of divorce on children like herself and more careful about making the right choice.

My bet is that this marriage will stick.

Aware of the impact of divorce on children like themselves, people are choosing their mates more carefully. They are also marrying later, when they have had more education, more experience and can make better judgments.

More and more people are living together before marriage. If the relationship doesn't work out, they may be more likely to break up before getting married at all. (Divorce rates are a bit higher among people who cohabit but this may be happening because people who don't cohabit are more religious and religious people are a bit less likely to divorce.)

Internet dating services are also a wild card. More and more people are finding compatible marriage partners on the Internet, specifying in advance the characteristics they want, like "Must love dogs." Like an arranged marriage, the Internet could result in more compatible matches.

On the other hand, many people using Internet dating services are already married! Such secretive shopping for a new mate could increase divorce rates.

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