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Why we value marriage but behave as if we don't

THE article, 'Break-ups spark marriage debate' (July 20), should also raise the question of the value of marriage in Singapore. We agree with Dr Ron Haskins that 'marriage has been under assault for a long time, but it has been holding up well'. A recent local survey revealed that marriage is still on the cards for the majority of Singaporean singles, even though divorce is also on the increase.

So why do we value marriage but act as if we don't? Family historians and sociologists have identified some key shifts in social attitudes:

From marriage as an honoured institution that lays claims and responsibilities upon two people, it is now seen in our consumer age as a relational vehicle focused primarily on self-fulfilment.

Divorce, which was once viewed as a family tragedy, is now viewed as a new kind of success - an assertive move, especially by women, to take control of one's life.

Cohabitation is the fastest growing family form today as a placeholder relationship until Mr/Miss Right comes along, or to see if Mr/Miss Right is really all that right. However, rather than strengthening marriage, cohabitation is more likely to harm it because the relationship is less defined in terms of commitment and solidity. Research consistently shows that the most sexually satisfied adults are married couples with no premarital sexual history. The trivialisation of premarital sex has unfortunately led us to unwittingly bring our sexual histories into the marriage bed, plaguing the relationship between husband and wife.

Sex and gender roles are less important with the view that marriage is not necessarily about children nor male or female. The result is confusion as to how to be men and women in the family today.

There is a virtual ocean of sociological, medical and psychological research data published over the last 40 years illuminating how marriage positively contributes to every vital measure of well-being for men and women, children and society at large. Interestingly, happy and unhappy couples experience similar amounts of marital conflict, involving similar issues. However, what distinguishes a good marriage from a bad one is how the couple are able to resolve these differences.

Marriage is still around because it is not simply a civil or religious institution; it is still relevant because of every person's desire for genuine, deep intimacy with another, and for that connection to last - for a lifetime.

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Focus On The Family

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