

## **The Benefit of Friends: The Importance of Sexual Restraint and Friendship in Marriage Formation**

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**FOR YOUNG ADULTS TODAY, THE WORD “FRIEND”** has multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings. For example, the term “friend” can refer to one’s “best friend (BFF)” or “boyfriend” or “girlfriend”—labels that typically convey an ongoing relationship of commitment and concern between two people. But at the same time, someone can be “friends” with several hundred people on their Facebook page, many of whom he or she never associates with or barely knows. And even a stranger is considered “friendly” when he is nice or courteous, even though there is no ongoing form of friendship in that association. In our modern society the word “friend” can be used to refer to some of the most significant relationships in our lives and also to transitory and insignificant associations between loosely connected individuals. In fact, the use of the word “friend” has become so ambiguous that it could be argued that the word has experienced what could be called “verbacide”—or the death of a word. The word is still in use, but its exact meaning has become lost.

Perhaps the most blatant distortion of the term “friend” in the modern teen and young adult vocabulary is the phrase “friends with benefits.” This phrase is commonly used to describe two friends who have casual sex without a monogamous relationship or any kind of commitment. In this example, the term “friend” is used to intentionally convey a lack of

ongoing commitment or involvement with the other person. The pattern of being “friends with benefits” is tied to the hook-up culture that is increasingly common among young adults today, and is viewed by many as part of the harmless process of young people “sowing their wild oats” in ways that will eventually prepare them to settle down and marry. But is that what actually happens?

For years, the phrase “sowing wild oats” has been used to describe the sexual activity of single adults, and particularly of young men. Most single adults in the United States today desire to one day have a successful, lifelong marriage. However, they also report desiring to have multiple sexual partners before they get married. In fact, recent studies show that most college students would like to have multiple sexual partners each year.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, college men, on average, desire to have ten sexual partners before getting married, while women, on average, desire to have four sexual partners before they marry.<sup>2</sup> And data from the National Survey of Family Growth shows that the majority of young adults have in fact had multiple sexual partners by the end of their young adult years.<sup>3</sup> Are these patterns of “sowing wild oats” in the single years compatible with the desire to have a loving and lasting marriage later?

What does the phrase “sowing wild oats” actually mean? There are some contradictions in how it is used. Traditionally, the phrase is referring to a European grass species with the formal name *Avena fatua*, which is often called “wild oats.” Farmers for centuries have hated this plant because it is a useless weed whose seeds are difficult to separate from those of useful cereal crops, so the seeds tend to survive from year to year and ruin the harvest. Wild oats were a negative thing, and the saying itself carried with it that negative connotation.

However, modern uses of the phrase often cast the saying in a positive light. This is a useful, and perhaps even needed, part of young adult

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1. Allan Fenigstein and Matthew Preston, “The Desired Number of Sexual Partners as a Function of Gender, Sexual Risks, and the Meaning of ‘Ideal,’” *Journal of Sex Research* 44 (2007): 89-95.
  2. William C. Pedersen *et al.*, “Evolved Sex Differences in the Number of Partners Desired?” *Psychological Science* 13 (2002): 157-61.
  3. “Number of Lifetime Sexual Partners,” National Survey of Family Growth, 2006-2008: Analyst: Dr. Samuel Sturgeon.

development where a young man gets out all of his promiscuous and impulsive sexual desires before “settling down” and getting married. The thought process is that if “he got all the sex out of his system before he settled down he would be more likely to remain faithful to his wife” later in marriage.<sup>4</sup> The same perspective is now applied to single adult women too.

These two uses of the phrase “sowing wild oats” seem to be based on very different views of healthy sexual development. The current use of the term implies a “*get it out of your system*” hypothesis that contends that having multiple sexual partners helps young adults gain greater appreciation of the range of possibilities in a sexual relationship. By experimenting with these possibilities, individuals will discover their personal sexual preferences and be better able to form an eventual marriage with “sexual chemistry.”

However, the traditional use of the term “sowing wild oats” implies that sexual promiscuity creates unrecognized problems, like a field full of weeds, that will emerge later in committed marriage relationships. This perspective implies a “*get it into your system*” hypothesis that suggests that numerous sexual experiences might produce “wild attitudes” that separate sex from emotional intimacy in a relationship in ways that might make staying in a committed relationship less likely.

Until recently, studies on the effect of “sowing wild oats” before marriage have been limited. However, several recent studies provide evidence that having multiple sexual partners before marriage inhibits healthy relationship formation and leads to higher rates of divorce.<sup>5</sup> In a recent study of nearly 2,700 married individuals, my colleagues and I found that spouses who had multiple sexual partners before marriage

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4. Z.A. Aarons, “Normality and Abnormality in Adolescence: With a Digression on Prince Hal—‘The Sowing of Wild Oats,’” *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 25 (1970): 309–39.
  5. Cf. Tim B. Heaton, “Factors Contributing to the Increasing Marital Stability in the United States,” *Journal of Family Issues* 23.3 (2002): 392–409; Joan R. Kahn and Kathryn A. London, “Premarital Sex and the Risk of Divorce,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53.4 (1991): 845–55; Anthony Paik, “Adolescent Sexuality and the Risk of Marital Dissolution,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 73 (2011): 472–85; Jay Teachman, “Premarital Sex, Premarital Cohabitation, and the Risk of Subsequent Marital Dissolution Among Women,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65 (2003): 444–55.

had lower levels of sexual quality, communication, and relationship stability in their current marriage, even when controlling for a wide range of variables including education, religiosity and relationship length. These findings were similar for husbands and wives. We found no evidence that increasing the number of sexual partners before marriage benefitted later marital outcomes.<sup>6</sup>

These research findings also suggest that the negative consequences associated with “sowing wild oats” may reach beyond just marriage outcomes. Numerous studies have shown that getting married and staying married is linked to several aspects of individual health and well-being, such as better financial status<sup>7</sup>, improved physical health<sup>8</sup>, enhanced mental health<sup>9</sup>, and higher sexual satisfaction<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, if sexual experimentation before marriage increases marital instability and the likelihood of divorce, it may also cause people to miss out on these other benefits of marriage as well.

While recent studies shed some light on the question of whether it is best to experiment sexually during young adulthood, the findings of these studies generate as many questions as they do answers. Primary among these is the question: Why does sexual restraint benefit marriage formation? While there are likely several answers, one compelling explanation is found in the *principle of friendship*. There are two simple reasons for this connection between sexual restraint and friendship. First, friendship is an important foundation for lasting marital intimacy. Simply put, spouses who are truly friends with each other have the right foundation for lasting love in their marriage. Second, sexual restraint is a needed pattern for developing the virtue of friendship before and during

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6. D.M. Busby, B.J. Willoughby, and J.S. Carroll, “Sowing Wild Oats: Does It Produce Valuable Experience or a Field Full of Weeds?” *Personal Relationships* 20 (2013): 706-18.
  7. Aver Ahituv and Robert I. Lerman, “How Do Marital Status, Work Effort, and Wages Interact?” *Demography* 44.3 (2005): 623-47.
  8. Charlotte A. Schoenborn, “Marital Status and Health: United States, 1999-2002,” *Advance Data* 351 (December 15, 2004): 1-36.
  9. Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).
  10. D.M. Busby, J.S. Carroll, and B.J. Willoughby, “Compatibility or Restraint: The Effects of Sexual Timing on Marriage Relationships,” *Journal of Family Psychology* 24 (2010): 766-74.

marriage formation.

There are at least three ways that sexual restraint and friendship benefit marriage formation:

**1. “Just Friends”: Interpersonal Competence.** First and foremost, friendship can be seen as a developmental capacity. Individuals who have learned how to form and maintain meaningful friendships through their life develop higher levels of interpersonal competence—which serves as a foundation for later marital competence. Sexual restraint in a young person’s personal dating history fosters a full range of social and friendship experiences which will provide him or her with the greatest opportunity to develop the level of maturity needed to be ready for marriage.

**2. “Just Friends, For Now”: Intentional Partner Selection.** A second reason friendship benefits later marriage development is that it facilitates intentional partner selection. Proper partner selection may be skewed for sexually involved individuals who experience strong physiological rewards in a relationship, thereby causing them to ignore or minimize incompatibilities in the relationship. Sexual restraint permits young adults to form committed relationships that are built primarily on friendship, true compatibility, shared goals, good communication, and emotional intimacy.

**3. “More Than Friends”: Sexual Symbolism and Marital Intimacy.** A third reason why friendship benefits marriage development is that marital intimacy is inherently symbolic. This means that the quality of intimacy a couple can share in marriage is inseparably tied to the amount of emotional intimacy they share in their relationship. Friendship is a central part of emotional intimacy.

The remainder of this article will discuss each of these three aspects of friendship and briefly outline why they are so vital to marriage readiness, mature couple formation, and lasting marital intimacy. Before discussing these three aspects of friendship, however, I will briefly discuss Aristotle’s typology of friendship and how thinking about different types of

friendship can help us have a better sense of what is involved in true friendship—the type that will help each of us create a loving and lasting marriage.

Leading marriage scholar Dr. Blaine Fowers suggests that friendship is an important feature of lasting marriages.<sup>11</sup> However, Dr. Fowers also notes that not all “friendships” are created equally and, in fact, only the right type of friendship will benefit marriages. In his work, Dr. Fowers draws heavily from Aristotle’s *Typology of Friendship*. According to Aristotle there are three types of friendships. He describes advantage friendships as those characterized by mutual benefit, pleasure relationships as those characterized by mutual pleasure, and character or virtue friendships as those based on the friends’ recognition of each other’s good character and on the pursuit of worthy goals. *Advantage friendships* are based on the mutual benefits the friends provide for each other, like associates in business or political circles. These types of friendships are based on two or more people helping one another further their personal interests. *Pleasure friendships* are similar to advantage friendships, but friends offer one another enjoyment rather than advantage. The gratifications found in pleasure friendships can vary widely, including enjoying each other’s company, sharing a hobby, exchanging sexual pleasure, and so on. Many friendships take this form—two people are friends because they simply like each other and find it pleasant to be together.

Using Aristotle’s typology, Dr. Fowers emphasizes that it is not necessarily bad to have advantage and pleasure friendships in our lives, but that these kinds of relationships have serious limitations. One important drawback is that advantage and pleasure friendships tend to be primarily self-serving. Another difficulty is that these two types of friendships last only as long as the mutual advantage or pleasure endures. Because of this, these types of friendships are only appropriate when such a self-serving perspective is mutually held and understood by both people. However, sometimes these types of relationships become manipulative, as the parties use each other for personal gain. These relationships are particularly

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11. Blaine J. Fowers, *Beyond the Myth of Marital Happiness: How Embracing the Virtues of Loyalty, Generosity, Justice, and Courage Can Strengthen Your Relationship* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

problematic if they become the template for marriage, family, or meaningful friendships. When this happens people begin to view marriage and other meaningful relationships with the investment mindset of a consumer and stay committed to others only as long as they feel their personal wants and wishes are being met.

By way of comparison, *character friendships* are different from pleasure and advantage friendships because they involve friends who share an understanding of what is good or worthy and a mutual commitment to work as a team or partnership to achieve those goals. Because of these foundations, character friendships involve loyalty and generosity. Character friendships are enduring because they involve deep commitment, forgiveness, sacrifice, and a dedication to the well-being of the other. When marriage and family relationships become partnerships devoted to worthwhile aims, they give us much more than emotional satisfaction; they help to make our lives rich and meaningful. Couples with a deep foundation of friendship do experience happiness in their relationships, but there is much more to their marriages than emotional attachment or personal pleasure. The teamwork that emerges from their character friendship brings the couple's dreams to life and adds a crucial dimension that makes marriage more intimate and lasting.

Aristotle's definition of character friendships is a useful one because it helps us evaluate the types of friendships and relationships that tend to mark young adult life. Some young adults develop meaningful character friendships with their family members and friends, while others have more of an advantage or pleasure friendship orientation. It is also clear that advantage and pleasure friendships are widely encouraged in the hooking-up "friends with benefits" patterns that permeate young adult culture. A critical question for the rising generation is how these different approaches to friendships influence young adults' development and readiness for later marriage and family relationships.

A starting point for understanding how friendship forms a foundation for marital intimacy lies in appreciating that friendship is a developmental capacity. Most theories of human development define the capacity to form and maintain intimate relationships in adulthood as outgrowths of *developmental competencies* formed during childhood and adolescence. This means that an adult's ability to develop a loving and

lasting marriage is an evolving capacity that emerges from, though it is not fully specified by, earlier social capacities such as friendship.

Central to most developmental theories of social competence is the capacity to love. *Love* is defined as the ability to be emotionally available to others, especially in times of need—that is, when loved ones are hurting or are fearful of being hurt—without requirements of performance, perfection, problem-solving, or production.<sup>12</sup> In general terms, a person's ability to love can be assessed through their expression of the virtues of caring, seeing the good in others, and forgiveness. One's ability to love others is also dependent upon recognizing that certain aspects of family life—including love, presence, and regard—should not be negotiated in families. If these elements of marriage and family life become open to negotiation, the exchange of love will be seen as conditional or self-serving, and will ultimately be compromised. (Notice how this definition fits with the definition of character friendships noted earlier.)

When we appreciate how an individual's personal readiness for marriage is inseparably linked to his or her social experiences in adolescence, a natural question arises: *How well do current social patterns foster experiences during adolescence that encourage the formation of needed friendships?* For some teens, the answer to this question is very positive, as their teenage years are full of developmentally appropriate experiences of hanging out with friends and initiating dating experiences at school dances, community events, church socials, and casual get-togethers. However, for many others, their teenage experience is dramatically impacted by early sexual experiences and pairing off in exclusive dating relationships. Boyfriend and girlfriend relationships are a norm in high-school dating and are increasingly becoming a common pattern of junior-high age teens. It is also not uncommon to hear of grade-school age children paring off. Simply put, many adolescents today have boyfriends or girlfriends before they have boy friends or girl friends.

Early coupling patterns among teens need to be understood in connection with adolescent patterns of sexual experimentation. In a

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12. Luciano L'Abate, *The Self in the Family: A Classification of Personality, Criminality, and Psychopathology* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1997).

meta-analysis of sexual behavior studies conducted in the United States from 1943 to 1999, Wells and Twenge indicated that the average age of first intercourse has been decreasing for both genders and is currently at about 15 years of age for both men and women.<sup>13</sup> Other authors have documented that approximately 6% of adolescents engage in sexual intercourse before age 13.<sup>14</sup>

Do these patterns really matter? Is there really any harm in junior-high and high-school age teens coupling in exclusive dating relationships? Are there any lasting effects of teenage sex? From the lens of sowing wild oats, teenage coupling and sexual experimentation are seen as normative adolescent experiences that foster personal growth and self-awareness. However, when viewed from the lens of friendship and interpersonal competence theory, teenage coupling and sexuality patterns are of grave concern. Researchers have found that early sexual debut is associated with increased sexual risk-taking and more sexual partners prior to marriage,<sup>15</sup> which in turn have been linked with poorer couple outcomes after marriage.<sup>16</sup> These negative outcomes are in part explained by the fact that teenage coupling causes young people to *skip needed stages of development* that are focused on broad social experience centered on developing friendships with same-gender and opposite-gender peers. Early dating and teenage sex distorts young people's view of healthy relationships and increases the likelihood that these relationships will be based on advantage and pleasure perspectives of friendship. This limits social experiences and friendships in ways that hinder proper preparation for marriage. In addition, premarital sexual intimacy can distort young people's sexual conditioning and attach feelings of guilt, shame, and regret to sexuality. These are feelings that can negatively impact proper sexual intimacy later in marriage. Furthermore, while the "get it out of

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13. Brooke E. Wells and Jean M. Twenge, "Changes in Young People's Sexual Behavior and Attitudes, 1943-1999: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis," *Review of General Psychology* 9, 249-61.

14. "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2005," *Surveillance Summaries: Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 55.SS5 (June 9, 2006), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, available at <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/PDF/SS/SS5505.pdf>.

15. Theo G.M. Sanford *et al.*, "Long-Term Health Correlates of Timing of Sexual Debut: Results from a National US Study," *American Journal of Public Health* 98.1 (2008): 154-60.

16. Busby *et al.*, "Sowing Wild Oats."

your system” hypothesis is widely held among young adults, there is growing evidence that such patterns merely serve to “get it into your system,” as many individuals bring their permissive and non-monogamous sexual attitudes into marriage.

As noted previously, a second reason friendship benefits later marriage development is that it facilitates intentional partner selection. Stanley and colleagues have proposed a concept of marriage formation that they call “*relationship inertia*.”<sup>17</sup> The central idea of inertia is that some couples who otherwise would not have married end up married partly because they become “*prematurely entangled*”<sup>18</sup> in a relationship prior to making the decision to be committed to one another. Inertia suggests that it becomes harder for some couples to veer from the path they are on, even when doing so would be wise. Thus, some couples are “sliders,” while others are “deciders.”<sup>19</sup> Although the authors’ development of the concept of relationship inertia stemmed from their research on cohabitation, they proposed that similar consequences are possible when couples “slide” into couple transitions, such as sexual involvement, without deliberate choice and commitment.

When teens and young adults slide through major relationship transitions, the decreased level of deliberation may lower the odds of pro-relational behaviors. Furthermore, sexual involvement without clear commitment can represent an ambiguous state of commitment for many partners. The ambiguity of early sexual initiation may undermine the ability of some couples to develop a clear and mutual understanding about the nature of their relationships. In contrast, commitment-based sexuality is more likely to create a sense of security and clarity between partners and within their social networks about exclusivity and a future.

Today’s young adult dating culture is one characterized by casual attitudes toward sexual relationships. For many young adults, single life in

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17. Cf. Scott M. Stanley, Galena K. Rhoades, and Howard J. Markman, “Sliding vs. Deciding: Inertia and the Premarital Cohabitation Effect,” *Family Relations* 55 (2006): 499-509.

18. Norval D. Glenn, “A Plea for Greater Concern about the Quality of Marital Matching,” in Alan J. Hawkins, Lynn D. Wardle, and David Orgon Coolidge, eds., *Revitalizing the Institution of Marriage for the Twenty-First Century: An Agenda for Strengthening Marriage* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002): 45-58.

19. Cf. Stanley *et al.*

American culture has become synonymous with sexual experimentation in non-committed romantic relationships.<sup>20</sup> Also, the pace of sexual initiation is very quick for many couples: approximately 50% of premarital young adult couples becoming sexually involved within the first month of dating, 25% initiate sex one to three months after beginning to date, and only a small proportion of couples wait until marriage before initiating sexual relations.<sup>21</sup> The primary concern with these patterns is that proper partner selection may be skewed for sexually involved individuals who experience strong physiological rewards in a relationship, thereby causing them to ignore or minimize incompatibilities in the relationship. This type of poor partner selection occurs because rapid sexual initiation has the potential to create *counterfeit intimacy* by fragmenting or separating expressions of physical intimacy from emotional intimacy. Dr. Victor L. Brown explained this phenomenon:

Fragmentation enables its users to counterfeit intimacy . . . If we relate to each other in fragments, at best we miss full relationships. At worst, we manipulate and exploit others for our gratification. Sexual fragmentation can be particularly harmful because it gives powerful physiological rewards which, though illusionary, can temporarily persuade us to overlook the serious deficits in the overall relationship. Two people may marry for physical gratification and then discover that the illusion of union collapses under the weight of intellectual, social, and spiritual incompatibilities . . . sexual fragmentation is particularly harmful because it is particularly deceptive. The intense human intimacy that should be enjoyed and symbolized by sexual union is counterfeited by sensual episodes which suggest—but cannot deliver—acceptance, understanding, and love. Such encounters mistake the end for the means.<sup>22</sup>

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20. Jesse J. Owen *et al.*, "'Hooking Up' Among College Students: Demographic and Psychosocial Correlates," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 39.3 (2010): 653-63.

21. Sharon Sassler and Claire M. Kamp Dush, "The Pace of Relationship Progression: Does Timing to Sexual Involvement Matter?" Paper presented at a National Center for Family and Marriage Research Conference, March 25, 2009, Bowling Green State University.

22. Victor K. Brown, *Human Intimacy: Illusion and Reality* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Parliament Publishers, 1981), 5.

Counterfeit intimacy occurs whenever teens and young adults share themselves sexually in ways that do not integrate physical intimacy with emotional intimacy within enduring relationships. Counterfeit intimacy can cause young people to “fall in love” and become attached to someone who is not a right person for them in marriage. A couple may also never fully develop the foundation of partnership and friendship needed in a mature marriage if they base their early associations on physical attraction and gratification.

Developmentally, young adults need a period of dating that is focused on refining social skills and gaining experience with a range of potential marriage partners. In this stage, post-high-school age teens and young adults can broaden their dating experiences and deepen their understanding of the types of people that best complement them in relationships. The purposes of this type of dating can only be accomplished when young people pair off with multiple other individuals without becoming couples. After this type of dating, young adults will be much better prepared to initiate a steady dating relationship characterized by sexual restraint that allows the couple to explore the full potential of the relationship. This type of dating pattern allows young people to intentionally explore a potential relationship with a specific person and to come to a decision whether they should move forward with the relationship toward engagement and marriage or move back to a non-coupled dating stage to explore relationships with other people.

One of the central tenets of sexual restraint theory is that the relative sequencing of sexual behavior, relationship commitment (*i.e.*, sex precedes commitment *vs.* commitment precedes sex), and attachment is a critical factor in determining how sexual initiation may impact overall couple development. In addition to helping young adults intentionally choose a marriage partner, patterns of sexual restraint also require couples to prioritize communication and other social processes as the foundation of their attraction to each other. This pattern creates a developmental difference that becomes particularly critical as couples naturally move past an initial period of intense physical attraction and excitement into a relationship characterized more by companionship and partnership. Early sex may also increase the risk for asymmetrical commitment levels, less developed communication patterns, more constraint

to leaving the relationship, less sexual satisfaction later in the relationship, and less ability to manage adversity and conflict.<sup>23</sup>

The value of sexual restraint and friendship for committed couples moving toward marriage is best understood when couples appreciate that intimacy in marriage involves at least three types of intimacy. The first type is *emotional intimacy*. Emotional intimacy exists in a relationship when two people experience a sense of security, support, trust, comfort, and safety with one another. Each of us can experience this type of intimacy with a wide range of people—a parent, sibling, friend, boyfriend or girlfriend, or spouse—since emotional intimacy is not restricted to a single person. In dating, a couple's level of emotional intimacy can be measured by each partner's ability to be emotionally open, allowing for vulnerability and a deeper understanding. When partners develop emotional intimacy in a relationship, they do not have to edit or filter their true thoughts and feelings; they are able to be authentic and real. In dating, the person with whom you become emotionally intimate comes to know you from the inside out, not just outside in.

As a dating relationship progresses through the stages of emotional intimacy, it is natural and appropriate that couples will desire to share physical expressions of their affection for one another. The second type of intimacy, *affectionate intimacy*, involves any form of physical touch that communicates care, concern, and affection but *does not arouse* the sexual response of our bodies. Finally, *passionate intimacy* involves any form of physical touch that communicates love, commitment, and passion but *does arouse* the sexual response of our bodies. A common error for some marriage partners is to believe that in marriage passionate intimacy replaces affectionate intimacy. In healthy marriages this is not the case. Passionate intimacy is added to the foundation of emotional and affectionate intimacy created in dating. Within this perspective, sexual restraint is best understood as engaging in sexual behaviors at the right time and for the right reasons, rather than avoiding or abstaining from sexual behaviors.

These types of intimacy are overlapping in most marriages, and

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23. Stanley *et al.*

spouses tend to have personal preferences for the relative ratio. By gaining a deeper understanding of these three types of intimacy, young adults and dating couples can more fully appreciate sexual symbolism. One of the primary goals of dating and courtship for couples should be to develop deep levels of friendship that involves emotional and affectionate intimacy, which will serve as the ongoing foundation for passionate intimacy in their marriage.

Most of the scholarly investigation on coupling and sexuality patterns in young adulthood is *descriptive* in nature. In fact, a growing body of research studies is examining the prevalence of hanging out and hooking up patterns among young adults, particularly on college campuses across the United States. Some scholarly work is *evaluative* of these patterns, with scholars and educators weighing in on the consequences of casual sex and ambiguous coupling patterns among teens and young adults. However, very little scholarly work on young adult coupling patterns is *prescriptive* or *interventive* in nature. This is unfortunate, because my experience is that as young adults learn about the erosion of the dating culture and the risks involved in the hooking up culture their primary question is: *What should I do about this?* This question is a complex one. Navigating today's dating culture is often a frustrating and uncertain process for young adults desiring to date and couple in mature and healthy ways. Sexual restraint theory and developmental perspectives give us at least a starting point to discuss what developmentally appropriate coupling patterns would look like. Optimally, teens and young adults will be taught and encouraged to follow a dating pattern that helps them avoid premature entanglement by delaying pairing off and sexual initiation until developmentally appropriate times. This type of pattern fosters the development of needed friendship experiences and encourages intentional selection of romantic partners and spouse. Of course, following these developmental ideals is easier said than done in today's eroded dating culture. Serious discussion needs to be given to the types of education, family supports, peer supports, media messages, and other factors that influence young adults' decision-making on issues of sexuality and coupling. Knowing what to do is helpful, but until we find ways, both personally and collectively, to change the dating experiences young adults are having, we will likely continue to see too many marriages built

upon a diminished foundation of friendship.

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