

The Neglected Heart: The Emotional Dangers of Premature Sexual Involvement

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In discussions of teen sex, much is said about the dangers of pregnancy and disease — but far less about the emotional hazards.

I lost my virginity when I was 15. My boyfriend and I thought we loved each other. But once we began having sex, it completely destroyed any love we had. I felt he was no longer interested in spending time with me — he was interested in spending time with my body.



- AMANDA,
A COLLEGE STUDENT

I wish someone had been preaching abstinence in my ear when I was in high school. That was when my sexual activity started. I don't even want to think about my college years. I wish I had saved this for my wife.

MIKE, A 26-YEAR-OLD HUSBAND

There is no condom for the heart.

- ABSTINENCE EDUCATION POSTER

In discussions of teen sex, much is said about the dangers of pregnancy and disease — but far less about the emotional hazards. And that's a problem, because the destructive psychological consequences of temporary sexual relationships are very real. Being aware of them can help a young person make and stick to the decision to avoid premature sexual involvement.

That's not to say we should downplay the physical consequences of uncommitted sex. Pregnancy is a life-changing event. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) — and there are now more than 20 — can rob you of your health and even your life. Condoms can reduce but do not eliminate these physical risks. About 15% of adults who use condoms to prevent pregnancy find themselves pregnant over the course of a year.¹ Consistent and correct condom use during vaginal sex can reduce the risk of sexual transmission of HIV/AIDS by about 85% but only if a

person uses them correctly 100% of the time. Consistent condom use reduces by only 50% the risk for chlamydia² — the cause of a substantial proportion of female infertility. And few people achieve consistent/correct use.³ Although there is some evidence that 100% condom use may reduce the risk for human papillomavirus⁴ — the cause of virtually all cervical cancer in women — a significant risk remains. Some STIs can be passed on by skin-to-skin contact in the entire genital area, only a small part of which is covered by a condom.

Sex and the human heart

For human beings, of course, sex is about much more than the body. It's the emotional or psychological dimension of sex that makes it distinctively human. Our entire person — mind, body, and feelings — is involved. That's why sexual intimacy has potentially powerful emotional consequences.

Why is it so much harder to discuss sex and emotional hurt — to name and talk about the damaging psychological effects that can come from premature sexual involvement?

For one thing, most of us have never heard this aspect of sex discussed. Our parents didn't talk to us about it. The media don't depict the emotional consequences of sex; indeed, television and the movies typically depict sex as consequence-free. And the debate over what to teach about condoms in schools or whether teens should have over-the-counter access to the "morning after" pill usually fails to address the fact that condoms and pills do nothing to make sex *emotionally* safe. When it comes to trying to explain to their children or students how premature sex can harm one's personality and character as well as one's health, many adults are at a loss for words or reduced to vague generalities such as, "You're too young," "You're not ready," or "You're not mature enough."

Some of the psychological consequences of premature sex — such as feelings of regret — are beginning to get more attention. A 2004 survey conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy asked teenagers, "If you have had sexual intercourse, do you wish you had waited?" Two-thirds said yes.⁶

We've actually known about the emotional consequences of sex for a long time. Dr. Armand Nicholi, Jr., clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, describes a study he helped to carry out in the 1960s:

"Not long after the sexual revolution was underway, clinicians observed that the new sexual freedom was creating a psychological disaster. We began to study Harvard students who complained of emptiness and despondency.

"There was a gap between their social conscience and the morality they were practicing in their personal lives. The new sexual permissiveness was leading to empty relationships and feelings of

self-contempt. Many of these students were preoccupied with the passing of time and with death. They yearned for meaning, for a moral framework.

"When some of them moved away from moral relativism to a system of clear values — typically embracing a drug-free lifestyle and a strict sexual code — they reported that their relationships with the opposite sex improved, as did relations with peers in general, relationships with their parents, and their academic performance."⁷

The Harvard study, besides showing the negative effects of uncommitted sex, also shows that individuals can choose to change their sexual behavior and reap the rewards of sexual self-discipline.

Ten Emotional Dangers

What are the specific emotional dangers of premature, uncommitted sex? These vary from person to person. Some emotional consequences are short-term but still serious. Some last a long time, even into marriage and parenting. Many of these psychological consequences are hard to imagine until they've been experienced. In all cases, the emotional repercussions of sexual experiences are not to be taken lightly. A moment's reflection reminds us that emotional problems can have damaging, even crippling, effects on a person's ability to lead a happy and productive life.

Let's look at ten emotional dangers of premature sexual involvement.

1. Worry about pregnancy and disease

For many young people who have become sexually active, the fear of pregnancy or getting a sexually transmitted disease is a major emotional stress.

One high school girl told a counselor:

"I see some of my friends buying home pregnancy tests. They are so worried and so distracted every month, afraid that they might be pregnant. It's a relief to me to be a virgin."

Says Russell Henke, a public school health education coordinator:

"I see kids going to the nurse in schools, crying a day after their first sexual experience, and wanting to be tested for AIDS. For some, it's enough to cause them to stay away from further sexual involvement."

2. Regret and self-recrimination

Both guys and girls can suffer sharp regret following a sexual relationship, but girls are

usually more vulnerable. One abstinence speaker asks his teen audiences:

"What happens when a girl has sex with a boy? She typically feels closer to him. You might think it would be the same with a boy. Not necessarily."

Research, in fact, finds a gender difference: *"Women are likely to have sex to strengthen relationships and increase intimacy, whereas men are likely to have sex to gain physical pleasure."*⁸

A girl who sees sex as a way to "show you care" may feel cheated and used when the boy doesn't show a greater romantic interest after the sexual experience. Says a 15-year-old girl: *"I didn't expect the guy to marry me, but I never expected him to avoid me in school."*

Bob Bartlett, who teaches a freshman human sexuality class in a Richfield, Minnesota, high school, shares the story of "Sandy" [the names of young people in this article have been changed]:

"Sandy, a bright and pretty girl, asked to see me during lunch period. She explained that she had never had a boyfriend, so she was excited when a senior asked her out. After they dated for several weeks, he asked her to have sex with him. She was reluctant, but he persisted. She was afraid of appearing immature and losing him, so she consented."

"Did it work?" I gently asked. 'Did you keep him?'

"Sandy replied: 'For another week. We had sex again, and then he dropped me. He said I wasn't good enough. There was no spark. I know now that he didn't really love me. I feel so stupid.'"9

Even when there are "new rules" about sex — as in "hooking up," a practice increasingly common on college campuses (and spreading to younger ages) that explicitly permits sexual interaction from kissing to intercourse, even without affection and with someone you may hardly know — girls typically end up more vulnerable, often hoping after the sexual contact that the guy will call.¹⁰ Sometimes the regret goes in the opposite direction: You feel trapped after the relationship turns sexual. Says Karen, age 16:

"I truly regret that my first time was with a guy that I didn't care that much about. I am still going out with him, which is getting to be a problem. Since that first night, he expects sex on every date. When I don't feel like it, we end up in a big argument. I'd like to end this relationship and date others, but after being so intimate, it's awfully tough."

Sexual regrets can last for many years. Not long ago, I received a letter from a 33-year-old woman, now a psychiatrist, who said she is very much concerned about the sexual pressures and temptations facing young people today. She wanted to share the lessons about sex that she learned the hard way. After high school, she says, she spent a year abroad as an exchange student:

"I was a virgin when I left, but felt I was protected. I had gotten an IUD so I could make my own decisions about sex if and when I wanted to. I had steeled myself against commitment. I was never going to marry or have children — I was going to have a career. During that year abroad, I was very promiscuous.

"But the fact is, it cost me to be separated from myself. The longest-standing wound I gave myself was heartfelt. That sick, used feeling of having given a precious part of myself — my soul — to so many and for nothing, still aches. I never imagined I'd pay so dearly and for so long. This woman says she is happily married now and has a good sexual relationship with her husband. But she still carries the emotional scars of those early sexual experiences. She wants young people to know that 'sex without commitment is very risky for the heart.'"

Guys who get both sexually and emotionally involved with a girl can also suffer a lot of hurt. Here's a guy with deep regrets:

"A year ago I started dating a girl two years younger. We fell head over heels in love. Our parents gave us total freedom. When I'd go to her house, her folks would go to bed early so we could be alone.

"It was wonderful. We were alone together sometimes as often as six nights a week. We started necking a little, then all the time. I started getting a little fresh, and she resisted, but she finally gave in for fear of losing me. One thing led to another, and before we knew it, we had gone too far.

"We told ourselves that we were in love and as soon as she was out of school, we'd be married — so what difference did it make? Then one night we had a terrible argument, and though it had nothing to do with sex, I know it would never have happened if we had been behaving ourselves.

"Anyway, she hit me, and I hit her back. I have never forgiven myself for that. She went running home and told her mother EVERYTHING that happened between us. You can imagine what happened after that.

"I was going to college at the time. I couldn't keep my mind on my studies. I just wanted to lie down and die. Finally, I knew I was flunking out, so I quit college and joined the Navy. I saw her on the street just once before I left for basic training. She cried and told me she still felt the same about me and was sorry for what she had done, but it was too late then.

"I'd give anything in the world if she had stuck to her guns and I hadn't been so persistent. Any girl who thinks she has to put out to keep a guy is crazy. I would have stayed with her if she had only let me hold her hand. — A Sorry Sailor"¹¹

3. **Guilt**

Guilt is a special form of regret — a strong sense of having done something morally wrong. Guilt can be a healthy moral experience if you take it as a sign that your conscience is alive and working — and as a reason to avoid in the future the behavior that caused you to have a guilty conscience.

Girls are more likely than guys to report guilt about a first sexual experience, and the guilt is greater if the experience occurred under the influence of drugs or alcohol.¹² Both guys and girls are more likely to report guilt if their first intercourse occurred with a casual partner.¹³

In his book for teens, *Love, Dating, and Sex*, George Eager offers this advice to young men: *"When the break-up comes, it's usually a lot tougher on the girls than it is on the guys. It's not something you want on your conscience — that you caused a girl to have deep emotional problems."*¹⁴ A 16-year-old boy in California said he stopped having sex with girls when he realized and felt guilty about the pain he was causing: *"You see them crying and confused. They say they love you, but you don't love them."*

Guilt after sex may also stem from one's religious convictions. The major world religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, all teach that sex is a beautiful gift from a good God but that God reserves sex for the committed love relationship of marriage.

A December 2002 *Newsweek* cover article on the "new virginity" (most high school students now report that they have not had sexual intercourse) included a story about a young man who regretted going against his religious beliefs about sex. Lucian Shulte, a Roman Catholic, said his parents taught him the importance of chastity and he had always planned to "wait until marriage." But then one warm summer night, he found himself with a girl who was very willing — and they had intercourse. It was over in a hurry and lacked any sense of intimacy. He said:

*"In the movies, when people have sex, it's always romantic. Physically, it felt good, but emotionally it felt really awkward. I was worried that our relationship was now going to be a lot more serious than it was before. It was like, 'Now what is she going to expect from me?'"*¹⁵

Lucian felt guilty about what he had done. He also worried about pregnancy and disease. He promised himself, never again. Now, as a college student, he's still faithful to that decision. He says, *"I'm looking forward to intimacy with my wife, someone I'll truly love and want to spend the rest of my life with. It sounds corny, but it's for real."*

Abortion.

Many teens — an estimated 300,000 a year — turn to abortion when they find themselves facing a pregnancy. As both sides of the abortion debate now acknowledge, abortion ends a developing human life (there's a beating heart at 18 days, measurable brain waves at 6 weeks). Many women report distressing emotional consequences after abortion — such as depression, nightmares, loss of self-worth, and guilt — sometimes right away,

sometimes not until later.¹⁶

In his book, *Making Abortion Rare: A Healing Strategy for a Divided Nation*, David Reardon reports research finding that more than 70% of women who had an abortion said they felt it was wrong — the taking of a human life — but that they went against their conscience because at the time they felt they had no other choice.¹⁷ Sometimes moral misgivings about their abortion decisions did not occur until years later. Here, for example, is the testimony of a young mother, now in her early 30s, concerning the abortion she had when she was in college:

"It was my sophomore year. I came back from winter break sick as a dog. The doctor in the campus infirmary took a urine test and told me in a non-judgmental way that I was pregnant. 'What would you like to do?' he asked.

"I want to get rid of it," I said, without even blinking an eye.

"He wrote down the phone number and address of a nearby women's health clinic. The 'procedure' was surprisingly simple. There was strong cramping, but I could handle that. If someone had asked me right then how I felt about what I had just done, I would have said, 'Wow, this is great! I have my health back, I have my life back!'

"Go ahead, ask me now. I am, at this moment, crying.

"How callous I was. Just a kid, really. Self-centered and shallow. There were, and are now, so many other alternatives.

"I am humbled by my two amazing living children. Most of all, I am humbled by my friend, Amy. She felt so strongly for her miscarried unborn child that she gave the child a name and a funeral. I didn't give mine a second thought — until I grew up."¹⁸

Guys, too, can suffer from the emotional aftershocks of abortion. I once listened to a young man, a freshman at our college, speaking to an audience of peers about the guilt he felt — including difficulty sleeping and studying — after he helped his girlfriend get an abortion. Bottom line: Regardless of how you feel about what the law should be regarding abortion, we can agree that abortion is not a quick fix. Its effects can reverberate for years. Indeed, national networks have formed to provide counseling for both men and women suffering emotional aftereffects of abortion.¹⁹

4. Loss of self-esteem and self-respect

Many persons suffer a loss of self-esteem after they find out they have a sexually transmitted disease. Larry had not heard of human papilloma virus (HPV) before he had sex with his girlfriend. Soon after, he noticed some small bumps on his penis. His physician told him he had genital warts caused by HPV. The warts did not respond well to acid treatment, laser techniques, or surgery. After protracted unsuccessful treatments, Larry began to worry if he would ever be able to marry because of the warts.²⁰

Sometimes the loss of self-esteem after uncommitted sex leads a person into further casual sex, leading to further loss of self-esteem in an oppressive cycle from which it may be hard to break free. This pattern is described by a young woman who is a residence hall director at our college:

There are girls in our dorm who have had multiple pregnancies and multiple abortions. The ironic thing is that practically all the girls who talk to me say they hate the whole scene — the bars, the parties, the attitudes and sexual expectations of guys. But because they have such low self-esteem, they will settle for any kind of attention from guys, and they keep going back to the same kind of situations that got them into trouble in the first place.

On both sides of dehumanized sex, there is a loss of dignity and self-worth. A college guy confided: *"You feel pretty crummy when you get drunk at a party and have sex with some girl, and then the next morning you can't even remember who she was."*

Another college student described the loss of self-respect that followed his first sexual "conquest":

"I finally got a girl into bed — actually it was in a car — when I was 17. I thought it was the hottest thing there was, but then she started saying she loved me and getting clingy. After four weeks of having sex as often as I wanted, I was tired of her. I finally dumped her, which made me feel even worse, because I could see that she was hurting."²¹

Oral sex and self-respect.

Surveys indicate that many young people today are having oral sex and don't consider it "a big deal."²² Some boys are reportedly demanding oral sex from their girlfriends the way they used to expect a good-night kiss. An April 2000 *New York Times* article, "The Face of Teenage Sex Grows Younger," quoted psychologists counseling young girls who were emotionally distraught because of their involvement in oral sex.²³

In response to these concerns, TV talk show hosts Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Phil each devoted an entire program to the issue of oral sex. On Dr. Phil's program, a 13-year-old girl looked into the camera, tears streaming down her face, and said to other kids who might be watching:

"Don't do this . . . please don't do this. You will lose all your self-respect. Things will get worse for you, much worse."

Here are six important points to communicate to young people about oral sex:

1. It is definitely a sexual act. As one 15-year-old boy said, *"Why do you think they call it oral sex?"*
2. It is usually something boys ask girls to perform on them. There are also some girls

who make the mistake of initiating oral sex because they think they can give a guy what he wants while avoiding pregnancy, but then discover that oral sex actually reduces intimacy.

3. No boy who truly respects or cares about a girl would ask her to do this.

4. Many sexually transmitted diseases — including herpes, chlamydia, and human papilloma virus — can be passed on through oral sex.²⁴

5. If you're a girl and you engage in oral sex, you risk experiencing the same emotional hurts — such as feeling used and degraded — that frequently follow uncommitted sexual intercourse.

6. If you're a boy and getting girls to do this, you're disrespecting the girl (would you want somebody doing this to your sister?) and disrespecting your future spouse if you marry someday (is this something you'd want that person to know?).

5. **The corruption of character**

When we treat others as sexual objects to be used for our selfish pleasure, we not only lose self-respect; we change our character — the kind of person we are becoming. Every choice we make in life affects our character, for good or for ill. Good choices strengthen our character. Bad choices deform our character.

Our conscience is the part of our character that distinguishes right from wrong and helps us make good choices. In our current permissive sexual environment, many young people have a badly distorted conscience that accepts as "okay" behaviors that are in fact very wrong. For example, the Rhode Island Rape Crisis Center conducted a survey of student attitudes toward "forced sex." It asked 1,700 students grades 6 to 9: "Is it acceptable for a man to force sex on a woman if they've been dating for more than six months?" Nearly two-thirds of the boys said yes. More surprising, so did 49% of the girls.²⁵

Sex can also corrupt character by leading people to lie to get sex. Common lies are: "I love you" and "I've never had an STD." One young man spoke of how his sexual activity, like an addiction, undermined his self-control:

*"It was like a drug. The more sex I had, the more I wanted. I couldn't control myself, yet I wasn't satisfied at all."*²⁶

Pornography. With the rise of the Internet, pornography has become more readily available and consequently one of the most common (typically male) sexual addictions.²⁷ In his best-selling book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*, Sean Covey writes of pornography's corrosive effects on conscience:

"Like any other addiction, pornography sneaks up on you. It reminds me of a story I once read about frogs. If you put a frog in boiling water, it will immediately jump out. But if you put it in lukewarm water, the frog will get cooked before it has the sense to jump out."

*It's the same with pornography. What you look at today may have shocked you a year ago. But because the heat was ever so slowly turned up, you didn't even notice that your conscience was being fried."*²⁸

Dr. Victor Cline, a psychotherapist who over 25 years has treated hundreds of adult men for pornography and sex addictions, writes:

*"I found that nearly all of my adult sexual addicts' problems started with porn exposure in childhood or adolescence."*²⁹

6. Shaken trust

Young people who feel used or betrayed after the break-up of a sexual relationship may experience difficulty trusting in future relationships. They don't want to be burned again. Brian, a college senior, tells his story:

"I first had intercourse with my girlfriend when we were 15. I'd been going with her for almost a year, and I loved her very much. She was friendly, outgoing, and charismatic. We'd done everything but have intercourse, and then one night she asked if we could go all the way.

*"A few days later, we broke up. It was the most painful time of my life. I had opened up to her more than anybody, even my parents. I was depressed and nervous. I dropped out of sports and felt like a failure. In college, I've had mostly one-night stands. I'm afraid of falling in love."*³⁰

7. Depression and suicide

Depression becomes more common in the teens, but recent research shows it's not an automatic consequence of being a teenager. Teens who abstain from risky behavior — such as sex, drugs, and drinking — are the least likely to get depressed. Both guys and girls who engage in high levels of risky behavior are the most likely to get depressed.³¹ And for a girl, even experimenting once with sex or drugs significantly increases her risk of depression.³²

In some cases, depression leads to the tragedy of suicide. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15- to 24-year-olds. Nearly one in five teens say they have seriously considered suicide in the past year.³³

In *Sex and the Teenager*, Kieran Sawyer writes:

*"The more the relationship seems like real love, the more the young person is likely to invest, and the deeper the pain and hurt if the relationship breaks up."*³⁴

Given what we know about the emotional aftermath of broken sexual relationships, it's reasonable to think that the pain from such break-ups is a factor in the depression and suicide deaths of some young people.

Research confirms this link. A study in *Pediatrics* found that the attempted suicide rate for sexually experienced girls between the ages of 12 and 16 is six times higher than it is for girls that age who are virgins.³⁵ Recently, the *National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health* found that both boys and girls who are sexually active are more likely to feel depressed and attempt suicide than peers who are not sexually active.³⁶

8. Damaged or ruined relationships

Sex can turn a good relationship bad. Other dimensions of the relationship soon stop developing. Negative emotions enter the picture. Eventually, they poison the relationship. Says a young man who identifies himself as a 22-year-old virgin:

"I've seen too many of my friends break up after their relationships turned physical. When you use sex too early, it will block other means of communicating love and can stunt the balanced growth of a relationship."

Jennifer, age 24, shares her story:

"With each date, my boyfriend's requests for sex became more convincing, and within two months I gave in. Sex became the center of our relationship. Like a cancer, it took over. New things entered — anger, impatience, jealousy, and selfishness. We just couldn't talk anymore. We grew very bored with each other. I desperately wanted a change."³⁷

Relationships with parents.

Sex can also negatively affect relationships with people other than the person you're sexually involved with. Most parents say they do not want their teenagers to engage in sexual activity³⁸, and by going against that standard, teens may create conflict or distance in family relationships. Many teens who are having sex do everything they can to keep their parents from finding out because they know how much it would upset them. Here is one young girl's story:

"Becky, 13, first had sex with her 15-year-old boyfriend. She knew her parents and other family members would be very hurt if they found out. When she missed her period, she went into a panic. She even had thoughts of committing suicide. To her great relief, a pregnancy test was negative. She decided she didn't want to go through that again and broke up with her boyfriend."

9. Stunted Personal Development

Premature sexual involvement not only can stunt the development of a relationship; it can also stunt one's development as a person.

Teenagers who are absorbed in an intense relationship are turning inward at the very time in their lives they should be reaching out — forming new friendships, joining clubs and teams, developing their interests and skills, taking on bigger social responsibilities. The

teen years are a critical period for learning and development that will lay the foundation for a young person's future. Opportunities missed then can never be regained. If young people don't take advantage of these opportunities, they may never develop their full potential.

The risk appears to be greater for girls who get sexually involved and thereby close the door on other interests and relationships. Says New York City psychiatrist Dr. Samuel Kauffman:

"A girl who enters into a serious relationship with a boy very early in life may find out later that her individuality was thwarted. She became part of him and failed to develop her own interests, her sense of independent identity."³⁹

10. Negative effects on marriage

Most teens say they dream of being happily married someday. We should encourage them to ask themselves, "What sexual decisions at this point in my life will help me realize my dream of a happy marriage? What problems might I cause for myself or my future spouse by being sexually intimate before marriage?" Here are four such problems:

Comparisons and flashbacks. If you have had sex with someone other than your marriage partner, there may be a tendency, sometimes beyond your control, to compare your spouse with previous partners.⁴⁰ Says one young husband: "When I make love with my wife, I think, 'My old girlfriend could kiss better,' or 'This girl could do that better.' I can't get rid of the comparisons." Both men and women may also experience "sexual flashbacks" — mental images of previous partners — that can disrupt marital sexual intimacy.⁴¹

Infidelity. Adultery can end a marriage. Estimates of the percentage of people who cheat on their spouses vary, but many experts believe that infidelity on the part of both sexes has risen in recent decades.⁴² One possible reason: Sexual activity before marriage has increased. The ability to resist temptation is part of our character — something that is developed over time, through practice. If we haven't practiced saying "no" to sexual temptations before marriage, it may be harder to resist such temptations after marriage.

Infertility. Many newly married American couples cannot conceive a baby. Infertility can be a tremendous stress on a marriage. If it was caused by a sexually transmitted disease such as chlamydia, the stress is even greater. (Chlamydia can cause pelvic inflammatory disease and scarring and narrowing of a woman's fallopian tubes; this condition may prevent her eggs from being able to reach the uterus to be fertilized by the man's sperm.) A 33-year-old wife says:

"Sometime during my wild college days, I picked up an infection that damaged the inside of my fallopian tubes and left me infertile. I am now married to a wonderful man who very much wants children, and the guilt I feel is overwhelming. We will look into adoption, but this whole ordeal has been terribly difficult."

A greater chance of divorce. Researchers have found that living together before marriage is associated with a greater risk of divorce.⁴³ One 2003 study of women found that "the elevated risk of divorce is particularly great for women who cohabited with both their husband and another man."⁴⁴ The more live-in partners you have before marriage, the greater your chance of marital breakdown.

The research doesn't tell us why living together or having sex before marriage might contribute to a greater probability of divorce. One plausible reason is that sex can keep you from getting to know the other person in a deep way and finding out whether you have the shared beliefs, values, and goals on which a lasting marriage can be built. John and Kathy Colligan, who have spent many years counseling couples preparing for marriage, offer their observations:

"We see many engaged couples who are living together. We find out by talking with them that they have little in common. They haven't discussed their values and goals. But the sexual attraction and involvement are very strong. When we suggest that they not live or sleep together, that they try to become friends and get to know each other to find out if they're really compatible, they often resist. We can see that this is a marriage likely to fail — and time after time, it does."⁴⁵

Dr. Carson Daly says that when she was a college English professor, many students — usually young women but sometimes guys — would come to see her, ostensibly about a paper they'd written for her course. Once into the conversation, they would tell her about problems they were having in a relationship. Sex was almost always involved. She says:

"I don't think I ever met a student who was sorry he or she had postponed sexual activity, but I certainly met many who deeply regretted their sexual involvements. No one prepares young people for the aftereffects: the lowered self-esteem; the despairing sense of having been used; the self-contempt for being a user; the unease about having to lie about or at least conceal one's activities from family members and others; the difficulty of breaking the cycle of compulsive sexual behavior; and the self-hatred of seeking, after each break-up, someone else to seduce in order to revive one's fading self-image. No one tells young people that it sometimes takes years to recover from the effects of these sexual experiences, if one ever fully recovers."⁴⁶

Ten rewards of waiting

It's important to know about the emotional dangers of premature sex, but it's equally important to be able to identify the benefits of saving sex for a truly committed love relationship. Here are ten rewards of waiting⁴⁷:

1. Waiting will make your relationships better because you'll spend more time getting to know each other.
2. Waiting will increase your self-respect.

3. Waiting will gain you respect for having the courage of your convictions.
 4. Waiting will teach you to respect other people — you won't tempt or pressure them.
 5. Waiting takes the pressure off you.
 6. Waiting means a clear conscience (no guilt) and peace of mind (no conflicts, no regrets).
 7. Waiting will help you find the right mate — someone who values you for the person you are.
 8. Waiting means a better sexual relationship in marriage — free of comparisons and based on trust. By waiting, you're being faithful to your spouse even before you meet him or her.
 9. By practicing the virtues involved in waiting — such as faithfulness, good judgment, self-control, modesty, and genuine respect for self and others — you're developing the kind of character that will make you a good marriage partner.
 10. By becoming a person of character yourself, you'll be able to attract a person of character — the kind of person you'd like to marry and to have as the father or mother of your children.⁴⁸
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Don't Think, "It's Too Late For Me"

Many teens who have already been sexually involved make the mistake of thinking, "It's too late for me to change even if I wanted to." But the truth is that all of us, no matter what our age, have the freedom at any point in our lives to make different choices.

Teens need real-life stories of young people who were sexually involved once but have made a fresh start. We can point to the Harvard study showing the benefits to college women who adopted a strict sexual code after having been sexually permissive. We can point to Lucian Shulte, the student featured in Newsweek who had sex with a girl in high school, then resolved to abstain and is still living that lifestyle in college. And here is Cathy, a high school girl who is putting her mistakes behind her:

"I've had sex with a lot of guys, but I was always drunk so I didn't think it mattered. Now I realize that I gave each of those guys a part of myself. I don't want all that pain anymore. I'm going to make a new beginning and not have sex again until I'm married."⁴⁹

Stories like these teach a vital life lesson: We can't change the past, but we can choose the future.

Sex can be a source of great pleasure and joy. But it's clear that it can also be the source of deep wounds and suffering. What makes the difference is the relationship within which it occurs. Sex is most joyful, meaningful, and fulfilling — most emotionally safe as well as physically safe — when it occurs within a loving, total, and binding commitment. Historically, we have called that marriage. Sexual union is then part of something bigger — the union of two people's lives.

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