

# Finally: NFP & divorce stats to hang your hat on

It's long been a favorite cry of the NFP crowd: Couples who practice NFP have a very low divorce rate!

CCL has been part of that crowd in the past as well, as old editions of CCL's manual contained statements about a low divorce rate among NFP users.

But how reliable were those claims? In more recent years we reviewed the "data" available and found serious flaws in its reliability and removed any reference to divorce rates among NFP users in our materials.

We are currently aware of three published scientific studies that examined divorce among NFP users; two of them have serious shortcomings, but the third brings some welcome news.

The first study was conducted by Mercedes Wilson in 2002. Wilson is the founder and president of the Family of the Americas Foundation which teaches and promotes the Ovulation Method. Her study, "The Practice of Natural Family Planning versus the Use of Artificial Birth Control: Family, Sexual, and Moral Issues," was the result of a survey sent by NFP teachers to NFP users who the teachers thought "would be good to address these questions."

The response rate was low (at least 40 percent did not return the survey) but did show that among the responders, the divorce rate was 3 percent. For comparison, Wilson took a completely different population-based survey (the U.S. National Survey of Family Growth) and claimed that among non-NFP users, the divorce rate was 15 percent.

According to CCL Executive Director Mike Manhart, Ph.D., this is a flawed comparison. "This is, frankly, comparing two extremely different populations and asking completely different questions," he said.

More recently in 2013, another survey-based study also reported a 3 percent divorce rate among NFP users. "Natural Family Planning as a Family Binding Tool: A Survey Report" was published by the Institute for Natural Regulation of Conception, which is the Austrian organization for the Roetzer Method. Their survey was sent to more than 1,100 households in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, but the response rate was only 43.5 percent. Clearly, the non-responding households could have dramatically shifted the outcome had they participated.

"While these surveys do support the idea that among those who adopt and live the NFP lifestyle, divorce rates are low," Manhart said, "exactly how low or in comparison to some other group is not something these studies support in any way."

## Solid science brings welcome news

Recently, however, Richard Fehring Ph.D., Professor Emeritus and Director of the Marquette University College of Nursing Institute for Natural Family Planning, has published a much more robust and scientifically reliable study on this issue.

"Dr. Fehring compared apples to apples," Manhart explained. "He took a population-based dataset (the most recent National Survey of Family Growth data) and compared divorce rates among greater than 5,500 women who were ever married based on whether they had ever used NFP. And the difference was significant."

Among women who had ever used NFP, the divorce rate was 9.6 percent, yet it was 14.4 percent among those who never used NFP. When examining the influencers on divorce, the odds of divorce were reduced among NFP users and those who were regular church attenders, while the odds of divorce were doubled among those who used contraception, were sterilized or had an abortion.

"This is solid research from which I believe we can conclude that the use of NFP is clearly associated with lower divorce rates than among the general population," Manhart said.

"Association, however, does not imply causality; experienced NFP users will understand that the skills and behaviors to use NFP are the same skills that support maintaining and growing a healthy marriage. But Fehring's study clearly demonstrates use of NFP is associated with lower divorce rates and its methodology is robust. More importantly, it for the first time demonstrates the dam-aging effects of our contraceptive culture on the stability of marriage."

Fehring believes there will be more research in the future that provides evidence that NFP is good for a marital relationship. "I just recently returned from an International NFP Conference in Treviso, Italy, where I learned of an NFP group that works closely with family therapy psychologists. They have developed a family/marriage assessment tool that they will be administering to couples several times over a year or more. This data could be used to show positive marital dynamics over time," he said.

"And continued use of the NSFG surveys that are conducted every five to seven years could show trends in divorce rates and the use of NFP."

— Ann Gundlach