

Dr George Blair-West is an author, researcher and medical doctor specialising in psychiatry in private practice in Brisbane, Australia. In an actionable, eye-opening talk, psychiatrist George Blair-West shares three keys to preventing divorce — and spotting potential problems while you're still dating.

Here is the full text of Dr. George's talk titled "**3 Ways to Build a Happy Marriage & Avoid Divorce.**"

Dr George Blair-West - TRANSCRIPT

Almost 50 years ago, psychiatrists Richard Rahe and Thomas Holmes developed an inventory of the most distressing human experiences that we could have.

Number one on the list? Death of a spouse. Number two, divorce. Three, marital separation.

Now, generally, but not always, for those three to occur, we need what comes in number seven on the list, which is marriage.

Fourth on the list is imprisonment in an institution.

Now, some say number seven has been counted twice. I don't believe that.

When the life stress inventory was built, back then, a long-term relationship pretty much equated to a marriage. Not so now.

So for the purposes of this talk, I'm going to be including de facto relationships, common-law marriages and same-sex marriages, or same-sex relationships soon hopefully to become marriages.

And I can say from my work with same-sex couples, the principles I'm about to talk about are no different. They're the same across all relationships.

So in a modern society, we know that prevention is better than cure. We vaccinate against polio, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, measles. We have awareness campaigns for melanoma, stroke, diabetes — all important campaigns. But none of those conditions come close to affecting 45% of us.

Forty-five percent: that's our current divorce rate.

Why no prevention campaign for divorce?

Well, I think it's because our policymakers don't believe that things like attraction and the way relationships are built is changeable or educable. Why? Well, our policymakers currently are Generation X. They're in their 30s to 50s. And when I'm talking to these guys about these issues, I see their eyes glaze over, and I can see them thinking, "Doesn't this crazy psychiatrist get it? You can't control the way in which people attract other people and build relationships."

Not so, our dear millennials. This is the most information-connected, analytical and skeptical generation, making the most informed decisions of any generation before them. And when I talk to millennials, I get a very different reaction. They actually want to hear about this. They want to know about how do we have relationships that last?

So for those of you who want to embrace the post- "romantic destiny" era with me, let me talk about my **three life hacks for preventing divorce**.

Now, we can intervene to prevent divorce at two points: later, once the cracks begin to appear in an established relationship; or earlier, before we commit, before we have children. And that's where I'm going to take us

now.

So my first life hack: **millennials spend seven-plus hours on their devices a day**. That's American data. And some say, probably not unreasonably, this has probably affected their face-to-face relationships.

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Indeed, and add to that the hookup culture, ergo apps like Tinder, and it's no great surprise that the 20-somethings that I work with will often talk to me about how it is often easier for them to have sex with somebody that they've met than have a meaningful conversation.

Now, some say this is a bad thing. I say this is a really good thing. It's a particularly good thing to be having sex outside of the institution of marriage.

Now, before you go out and get all moral on me, remember that Generation X, in the American Public Report, they found that 91% of women had had premarital sex by the age of 30.

Ninety-one percent! It's a particularly good thing that these relationships are happening later. See, boomers in the '60s — they were getting married at an average age for women of 20 and 23 for men.

2015 in Australia? That is now 30 for women and 32 for men. That's a good thing, because the older you are when you get married, the lower your divorce rate. Why?

Why is it helpful to get married later?

Three reasons. Firstly, getting married later allows the other two

preventers of divorce to come into play. They are tertiary education and a higher income, which tends to go with tertiary education. So these three factors all kind of get mixed up together.

Number two, neuroplasticity research tells us that the human brain is still growing until at least the age of 25. So that means how you're thinking and what you're thinking is still changing up until 25.

And thirdly, and most importantly to my mind, is personality. Your personality at the age of 20 does not correlate with your personality at the age of 50. But your personality at the age of 30 does correlate with your personality at the age of 50.

So when I ask somebody who got married young why they broke up, and they say, "We grew apart," they're being surprisingly accurate, because the 20s is a decade of rapid change and maturation. So the first thing you want to get before you get married is older.

Number two, John Gottman, psychologist and relationship researcher, can tell us many factors that correlate with a happy, successful marriage.

But the one that I want to talk about is a big one: 81% of marriages implode, self-destruct, if this problem is present.

And the second reason why I want to talk about it here is because it's something you can evaluate while you're dating. Gottman found that the relationships that were the most stable and happy over the longer term were relationships in which the couple shared power. They were influenceable: big decisions, like buying a house, overseas trips, buying a car, having children.

But when Gottman drilled down on this data, what he found was that women were generally pretty influenceable. Guess where the problem lay?

Yeah, there's only two options here, isn't there? Yeah, we men were to blame.

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The other thing that Gottman found is that men who are influenceable also tended to be "outstanding fathers." So women: How influenceable is your man? Men: you're with her because you respect her. Make sure that respect plays out in the decision-making process.

Number three, I'm often intrigued by why couples come in to see me after they've been married for 30 or 40 years. This is a time when they're approaching the infirmities and illness of old age. It's a time when they're particularly focused on caring for each other. They'll forgive things that have bugged them for years. They'll forgive all betrayals, even infidelities, because they're focused on caring for each other.

So what pulls them apart?

The best word I have for this is reliability, or the lack thereof. Does your partner have your back? It takes two forms.

Firstly, can you rely on your partner to do what they say they're going to do? Do they follow through?

Secondly, if, for example, you're out and you're being verbally attacked by somebody, or you're suffering from a really disabling illness, does your partner step up and do what needs to be done to leave you feeling cared for and protected?

And here's the rub: if you're facing old age, and your partner isn't doing that for you — in fact, you're having to do that for them — then in an



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already-fragile relationship, it can look a bit like you might be better off out of it rather than in it.

So is your partner there for you when it really matters? Not all the time, 80% of the time, but particularly if it's important to you.

On your side, think carefully before you commit to do something for your partner. It is much better to commit to as much as you can follow through than to commit to more sound-good-in-the-moment and then let them down.

And if it's really important to your partner, and you commit to it, make sure you move hell and high water to follow through.

Now, these are things that I'm saying you can look for. Don't worry, these are also things that can be built in existing relationships. I believe that the most important decision that you can make is who you choose as a life partner, who you choose as the other parent of your children.

And of course, romance has to be there. Romance is a grand and beautiful and quirky thing. But we need to add to a romantic, loving heart an informed, thoughtful mind, as we make the most important decision of our life.

Thank you.

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