

Free sex and broken relationships are costing us a fortune - up to £9 billion a year. For that you could pay for a quarter of the health service or 5,000 primary schools.

{Article written in 1998)

Here are some examples. Over 580,000 people a year need treatment for gonorrhoea, herpes, chlamydia, warts, HIV and other sex infections, costing £270 million, mostly for AIDS. Cervical cancer tests and care cost £113 million, largely caused by a sex virus.

Legal aid for divorce costs £180 million. Every year 170,000 divorcees need new homes - a quick way to poverty. Each divorce may cost £20,000 over five years. That's £3.5 billion.

Then there are 66,000 children in care at up to £30,000 each - total £1 billion. If half are there because of family break up then the bill is £500 million.

Then there's another £22 million for extra social work time, £16 million extra for health visitors, £1 million on family therapists, £4.2 million on child psychiatrists (10% only), £9 million for children with learning difficulties because of home problems. marriage guidance costs £15 million a year. Then there is soaring youth crime, almost half of all offences committed. If just one youth crime in five is linked to family break up then the bill is £1.4 billion a year.

I know the situation is far worse than any figures can ever show because the biggest costs of all can't be measured in cash terms. Look for example at the pain of broken relationships and a generation of emotionally damaged children.

There are no easy answers but something has to change. We can't go on for another forty years down this suicidal dead end. We'd have most people divorced almost before they got married and not a single child raised in a loving family by their own mum and dad. It wouldn't

matter so much if we were all happier than we were as a result of "more sex" but where's the sign of that? Just read the "agony" columns.

Marriage is usually good for your health but separation makes you four times as likely to need psychiatric help, the same for children. As every teacher knows, when children are settled they find it easier to learn. When home breaks up, school work often suffers. And that can affect them for life. "Quickie divorce" should be banned where children are involved. I've sat in court listening to case after case where parents are at war over their children.

You can divorce a partner after sixteen weeks but children join you for life. They are made from both of you. That's why divorce hurts them so much. People used to say "stay together for the sake of the children". Then they said "better a good separation than a bad marriage". But research shows that children usually prefer parents to stay together even when there is conflict.

You would think by now that most people would be cynical about "true love". But we are still a nation of romantics. Even when we stop dreaming for ourselves we carry on dreaming for our children. We all want to believe it's possible to find a wonderful person to love us forever. That's what most people hope for on their wedding day.

New research is unlocking the secrets of long term happiness.

Experts can predict which couples are likely to remain together and who will divorce - before they even get engaged. Living together first carries a 60% greater chance of being divorced after ten years.

The safest age to get married is between twenty and thirty. Friendship, shared interests, communicating and spending time together are more important than skill in bed. Alcohol problems, constant arguing, thumbs down from family or friends, coming from a broken home or being married before are added risks. The quickest way of all to wreck a marriage is to have sex with someone else.

We are far more conservative than you might think. Six out of ten agree that children need a mum and a dad. Eight out of ten think divorce is now too easy.

And there's a lot less sex going on anyway than you might think.

Take school leavers going to higher education. Despite the headlines, three out of four are still virgins on their first day at college. Most adults are monogamous. The pendulum is swinging already, not to Victorian prudery but towards stable relationships rather than adventure. It has to.

Total cost of sexual revolution in UK (1995)

- £9 billion a year
- Sickness/death/years lost £1 billion
- Divorce/separation/break-up £5.1 billion
- Family disintegration
- (other support) £0.6 billion
- 20% of youth crime £1.4 billion
- Single parenting (proportion) £1.1 billion
- Last 40 years: £124 billion

What individuals can do:

1.

Reduce number of partners to stay healthy

2.

Consider longer term relationships

3.

Choose a partner very carefully

4.

Carry on making the relationship special

5.

Make the children a priority

6.

Consider extending your family to include others - grandparents, single people for example.

7.

Seek professional help early

What the government should do

1.

Stop making it cheaper for some couples to separate than stay together.

2.

Replace flat rate marriage allowance with "Wedding anniversary" allowance that increases with length of marriage.

3.

Minister for the Family whose sole remit is policies affecting family life.

4.

Schools education on partner choice and long term relationships.

5.

Make it harder to get married and harder to get divorced so a marriage certificate means something again.

6.

Increase child benefit for the poor and take it from the rich.

7.

Encourage adoption and make it easier.

8.

Further changes to the Child Support Agency.

9.

Regulate teenage sex magazines just like videos.

10.

Extra resources for pre-marriage counselling, marriage support and for alcohol and drug dependency.

Dr Patrick Dixon is author of The Rising Price of Love (Hodder £6-99).