

# Try Before You Buy?

Not If You Are Looking for a Marriage That Will Endure Inevitable Trials

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by Greg Koukl

If you want a guaranteed nomination for oddball of the year, announce to your friends or co-workers that you think sex is only for marriage. Most view such archaic notions as eccentric and even bizarre. Virgins are made to feel like nerds. If you haven't "gotten lucky" by age 18, it's probably because you're a social reject.

Yet in spite of the social pressure, a growing number of brave singles are making the promise to wait. Still others who have been sexually active in the past are committing to what might be called a "second virginity." Regardless of their history, they're making a commitment to start over, to live as "virgins" until they make a lifelong commitment in marriage.

The reason is not that they've got crooked teeth, bad complexions, or don't bathe. Rather, they're choosing to wait because they believe the Judeo-Christian tradition holds the best insight on building strong relationships and durable marriages.

This is not the conventional wisdom of today, however. To many, it just makes sense to test the sexual waters before agreeing to settle down with one person. Those who are courting, according to this view, should find out if they're sexually compatible. Furthermore, it's just more realistic. Peer pressure on singles is intense. "Just say no" may work with drugs, but not with sex.

Is it wise to "test-drive" a potential mate in bed to check for sexual compatibility? Is chastity unrealistic given the realities of modern life and the pressures adolescents and adults face?

I think not. This notion reflects mistaken ideas on the nature of human sexuality, creates serious practical problems, and runs aground of millennia of wisdom.

## More than Mechanics

The first problem with the "try before you buy" approach is that it reduces sex to physical mechanics. The title of a well-known book, *Sex Begins in the Kitchen*, makes a great point: A critical part of our sexual fulfillment has nothing to do with what goes on in the bedroom, a truth women understand better than men.

Simply put, the power of sex and the effectiveness of a good sex life are not to be found merely in mechanics, but are primarily—though not entirely—relational. A good relationship can be improved by better mechanics, but good technique can't build a sound partnership. Ironically, "good" sex can actually be a danger sign. Some of the most unhealthy relationships are accompanied by tremendous sexual intensity. The cycle of conflict, then reconciliation, which is characteristic of unstable unions, can really launch the libido. That's why making up is so sweet.

Later in life, though, this emotional seesaw gets old. The eroticism dissipates, but the fighting and distancing remain. The very pattern that stimulated passion ends up ruining the marriage. Conversely, qualities that make for a healthy marriage—respect, self-control, kindness, charity, sensitivity, patience—do not lend themselves to sexual intensity at the outset. In the long run, however, these virtues stabilize the relationship and contribute to a satisfying sex life.

Is your sweetheart patient, sensitive, self-sacrificial, understanding, kind, and concerned about your particular needs? Those qualities make the real difference in the long run, and you can discover them without jumping into the sack together to test the machinery.

## Love versus Pleasure

The "try before you buy" view misrepresents the nature of sexuality a second way: It diminishes lovemaking to physical pleasure. Sex is not just for procreation and recreation. It's also for identification: two become one.

One of the most powerful aspects of physical intimacy is the bonding that results from surrender, vulnerability, and physical and emotional transparency. These elements create a deep identification, a collapse of the ego boundaries, forging a profound union. This is not a skill that's developed through short-term sexual adventures. It's a oneness that is only built over time, in the protective environment of stability and commitment.

Some people do have unhealthy inhibitions, but I'm not convinced that testing the sexual waters is going to bring them to the surface. Some "problems" are merely the product of naiveté, inexperience, and simple modesty. They could easily be overcome with kindness, patience, and a little time, but they can be magnified in the performance environment of a sexual test run.

In fact, that's part of the problem with the test-drive view. How comfortable would anyone feel jumping into bed to have his or her sexual competence tested? Will this environment bring out a person's best performance?

No, sexuality is developed in its deepest and most satisfying way in an atmosphere of safety and commitment, where neither person is concerned that his performance is going to disqualify him.

Furthermore, sexual tastes are malleable. They change with time. After all, what do two young people experimenting with sex really know about what they want? That's the beauty of marriage, which brings two people together who are committed for life and who know little about what they like. They begin growing and experimenting together, developing their sexual tastes with one another, so that each can become the other's sexual ideal.

### **Sex versus Intimacy**

Sex is powerful and can easily get out of control if given the reins. If sex is on the agenda, it quickly goes from being the dessert to being the main course. Men and women both know this from experience. Men know it viscerally, in their gut; they go for the gold the first chance they get. Women know it as a vague but growing sensation of being used.

Soon, every date ends up in the sack or rolling around in the back seat. Instead of channeling energy into discovering each other's unique differences, couples spend it probing each other's body, robbing the relationship of its depth.

When sexual exploration becomes part of the acquaintance-making process, it quickly becomes the first part, rather than the last part, and then often the only part, rather than one part of many. Often the result is the illusion of intimacy when there is no true safety, the false impression of closeness between strangers. If sex is not an option before marriage, then all of a couple's energies are directed toward developing more "soulful" or interior dimensions of their relationship, allowing them to build a stable foundation for a healthy future sex life to rest upon.

### **Passion & Judgment**

There's another problem. Sex distorts judgment. Just as a blazing torch can twist a solid piece of steel, the heat of passion can bend a relationship all out of shape, warping a person's focus and twisting his good judgment.

When a couple is thinking of marriage, they need to be able to assess the strength of their love and commitment. Even under the best of circumstances this can be difficult, but sexual involvement complicates the issue. In *Finding the Love of Your Life*, psychologist Neil Clark Warren warns:

If we continue telling single persons that sexual intimacy is healthy at whatever stage of their relationship, they will continue getting married for all the wrong reasons. Once they have made this fundamental error, their marriage—and ultimately their family—will evolve into a struggle with no winners. 1

How do you know, for example, that the closeness and intimacy you feel are a result of strong partnering skills? If your libido jump-starts the relationship, how do you know if the two of you are good in life together or just temporarily good in bed? It's a lot easier to discern this if you're not sexually involved.

When the foundation for a life commitment is a couple's shared personal depth, then sexual favors in marriage become the gilded edge. They are a type of "relationship glue" designed by God to bind the good stuff together when the going gets tough, which inevitably happens even in the best marriages.

The glue works in unhealthy couplings, too. It's no secret that many lousy relationships survive on sex drive alone long after they should have been abandoned on their own merits.

### **Sex Is Dangerous**

Finally, sex is physically dangerous, now more than ever. Sexually active young people face the risk of a parade of sexually transmitted diseases—syphilis, chlamydia, herpes, gonorrhea—that have been increasing at alarming rates annually. Then there's the human immunodeficiency virus, the deadly HIV, which makes other sexually transmitted diseases look like diaper rash.

There's also the risk of pregnancy. The experience of becoming a parent should be one of the most wonderful events in life. Instead, the beautiful phrase, "I'm going to have a baby," is often transformed into a lament. Once a proclamation of joy, it now signals tragedy and remorse.

Even deeply committed pro-lifers often waver when they're the ones facing an unplanned pregnancy. Abortion starts looking like a reasonable alternative. Reports show that abortions among Christians are surprisingly common given their professed beliefs. 2

The courageous women who do carry their children to term face a host of overwhelming difficulties. Education plans are postponed or abandoned altogether. Career hopes are dashed. The financial burden can be staggering, especially for young adults.

Often a mother finds herself deserted, facing all these problems alone. She nurses her heartache in solitude, overcome by the responsibility of caring for another human being with little or no help from others.

The children are often robbed of a stable home anchored by two parents, which is best for children. Frequently, there's hardly a parent in the home at all. Little boys and girls are raised by daycare center staff because mom must work to support the family by herself.

Unplanned pregnancies are not always this bleak, but they're always much more difficult than anyone imagines in advance. Frequently, there's a heavy strain on the extended family, which has to share parenting chores. There's very little extra money and no extra time. Add to that the difficulty of courting when you're a single parent, and it's easy for life to seem hopeless.

In fact, a woman's life will never be the same, and the clock cannot be turned back. The private act of sensuality that "isn't hurting anybody" becomes a public concern that robs everyone of the best, especially the children. Unfortunately, many become convinced of the wisdom of abstinence long after it's too late. Rx for Safety Sex is powerful. It's so powerful that we must manage it with care. The best protection I know of is being accountable to a third party for your sexual behavior. This may seem like strong medicine, but it's a compelling incentive to do what's right.

Here's the reason we need this. When we exceed our limits, retreat is very difficult because the law of diminishing returns sets in. What thrilled us last week is ho-hum today, so we have to go further next time to get the same sexual wallop. It changes the whole equation, though, when a third person enters the picture.

Here's how it works. First, enlist the aid of someone who will take this issue seriously—a parent, a conscientious friend, or a pastor. Next, set precise, well-defined limits you both agree on. Finally, schedule regular check-ups and be honest when you've crossed your boundaries.

### **A Different Drummer**

Virginity and sexual chastity are nothing to be ashamed of. They're not unnatural, and some wonderful benefits accrue for those who are willing to "just say no" and delay sexual gratification.

The "try before you buy" mentality, on the other hand, shows a profound misunderstanding of the nature of human sexuality. It can be emotionally destructive and physically dangerous.

"Try before you buy" may feel good in the short term, but it's a dead end in the long haul. Those who live their lives in fidelity, regardless of what the contrary pressures may be, are the ones who reap lasting rewards.

I once owned a cleverly worded T-shirt that said, "Practice safe sex. Get married and stay faithful." This simple truth offers more peace of mind than a closet full of condoms and more wisdom than any "safe sex" curriculum. •

This article is adapted from the Stand to Reason booklet, *Try Before You Buy?: The Case for Premarital Chastity*, by Gregory Koukl, available at [www.str.org](http://www.str.org)

### *Endnotes*

1. Neil Clark Warren, *Finding the Love of Your Life* (Focus on the Family Publishers, 1992), p. 85.

2. According to a 2008 poll by the Guttmacher Institute (an arm of Planned Parenthood), 20 percent of all abortions were performed on women who identified themselves as born-again Christians. When you add in those who identified as either Protestants or Catholics, the number shoots up to 65 percent.