

# WHAT ARE THEY THINKING?

A NATIONAL SURVEY OF MARRIED INDIVIDUALS  
WHO ARE THINKING ABOUT DIVORCE



A REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL DIVORCE DECISION-MAKING PROJECT  
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SPONSORED BY THE FAMILY STUDIES CENTER, BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

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# CONTENTS

In Brief	1
Introduction	4
Thinking About Divorce	5
Soft and Serious Thinking	7
Repair Work	15
Survivors and Thrivers	16
So, What Does It All Mean?	18
Summary of Key Points	20
Some Recommendations	21
Appendix A: Study Details	27

# IN BRIEF

Almost everyone wants a happy marriage and wants it to last a lifetime. But most also know the scary U.S. statistics: nearly 50% of first marriages and more than 60% of second marriages end in divorce. Researchers have discovered a lot about the struggles that lead to marital breakdown. Strangely, however, researchers know little about how people consider the option of divorce. This area of study is mostly uncharted terrain. What are people thinking? How often and how long have they been having these thoughts? Who do they talk to about their thoughts and feelings? (Do they talk to anyone?) What marital problems are they facing? What do they do to address their problems and how helpful are these efforts? How do they make decisions about divorce or whether to stay together?

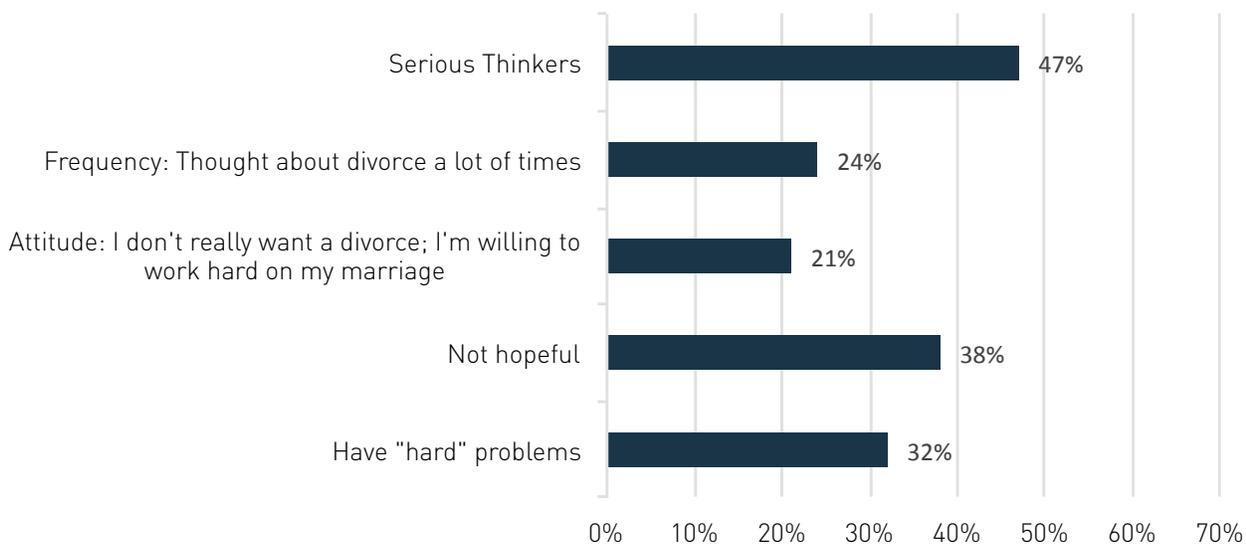
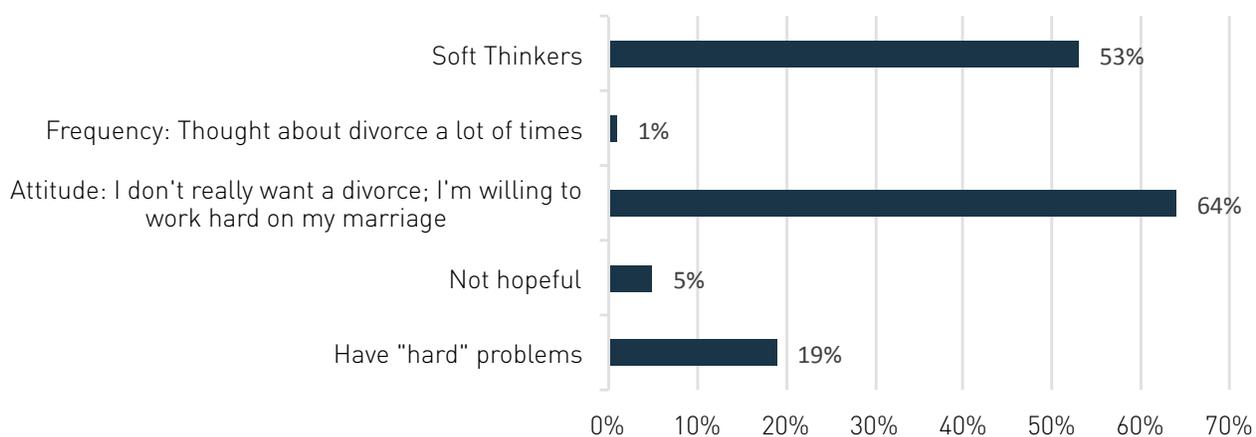
This report provides findings from a new national survey of 3,000 individuals that closely represents married people ages 25–50 in the United States who have been married at least 1 year. The survey asked a set of questions about what we labeled “divorce ideation”: what people are thinking about and doing when they are having thoughts about divorce. We also conducted in-depth interviews with a small sub-sample of current thinkers to get a more fine-grained perspective.

Overall, we found that one in four spouses in our national survey had thoughts about divorce in the last 6 months. But most of this group had been thinking about divorce only a few times, rather than a lot. About half had been thinking about divorce for more than a year. A significant number said they didn’t really want a divorce and they were willing to work hard on the marriage (43%), or they were willing to work on the marriage if their spouse got serious about making some important changes (23%). Only a few (5%) said they were done with the marriage.

These recent but infrequent thinkers were reasonably hopeful that their relationship had what it takes to overcome their challenges. They were experiencing the less intensive, and easier to change, marital problems (57%) more than the tougher problems of infidelity, abuse, and addiction (43%). (Less intensive problems included things like growing apart or losing connection, losing romantic feelings, not paying enough attention to the marriage, and money disagreements.) Even for those experiencing the harder problems, a third said they really didn’t want a divorce and were willing to work hard on the marriage; another 25% said they would work hard on the marriage if their spouse made some major changes. Ninety percent of thinkers had not taken legal action for a divorce. Also, most thinkers were trying to take some action to work on the relationship, although from our in-depth interviews, it was clear that many were struggling with just how to move forward. Thinking about divorcing or staying married occupied a considerable amount of emotional energy and was not something they took lightly.

More sophisticated statistical analyses combined responses to many of these questions in the survey and confirmed that there are two distinct groups of thinkers. One group was much more likely to be thinking about divorce frequently. In addition, they had higher levels of problems in their marriages, both the more common as well as the more severe

types of problems. They were less hopeful about the future of their relationship than the other group. Moreover, they were much more likely to say they were done with the marriage (although this was still a small proportion of the group) or to say they had mixed feelings about a divorce. A label of *serious thinkers* seems to fit this group well. In contrast, nearly 90% of the other group said they had been thinking about divorce only a few times; only 1% said they had been thinking about it a lot. This group had lower levels of reported marital problems of all types and they were more hopeful about the prospects for their marriage. Also, they were almost three times more likely to say that they did not want a divorce and were willing to work hard to keep the marriage together. We labeled this second group *soft thinkers*. Based on this analysis combining many questions, 53% of those thinking about divorce recently were *soft thinkers*; 47% were *serious thinkers*.



Divorce is a scary thing to think about so we tend to assume there is a high personal tolerance of marital problems before people start having such thoughts. But maybe in a culture with high divorce rates and widespread concerns about the fragility of marriage it is hard *not* to have some thoughts about divorce when problems and disappointments exist in the marriage. It's hard to swim upstream against such a strong cultural current. But maybe thoughts about divorce can be the spur needed to take some action to try to strengthen or repair a relationship. Thoughts about divorce don't have to be a sign of impending marital doom.

Yes, sometimes those thoughts are frequent and stem from serious, even dangerous, problems, so thoughts about divorce appropriately take people in that direction. But usually thoughts about divorce are just that—thoughts, not concrete actions, decisions, or even deep doubts. Among those in our study with more serious reasons for thinking about divorce recently, few said that they were done with the marriage; a third said they didn't really want a divorce and were willing to work hard on their marriage. (About half had mixed feelings.) So even those confronting the more serious reasons for divorce are usually looking to save the marriage.

Does this mean that *soft thinkers* are not at risk for divorce? Probably not. Thoughts are different from actions but they clearly can influence them over time. Even soft, occasional thoughts about divorce can color perceptions of a relationship, shaping feelings in more negative ways that can make marriages less satisfying and more fragile. Also, we need to be sensitive when labeling some thinking about divorce as "soft," because soft isn't the same as trivial, fleeting, or painless. In fact, in our in-depth interviews we discovered that *soft thinkers* still can be confused, discouraged, and hurting. Decisions to stay with the marriage could be short-term strategies rather than long-term decisions. And the threshold for divorce in our society may not be especially high.

On the other hand, some people we interviewed who had reported thoughts about divorce a few weeks earlier now said they were not thinking about divorce. And we also know that many people go through tough times in their marriage and not only survive but thrive. In fact, our survey found that more than one in four respondents (28%) had thought their marriage was in serious trouble at some point in the past but not recently. And nearly 90% of them said they were glad they were still married; less than 1% were not glad to be together. So it seems people regularly do work through or outlast their problems. When these *survivors* were asked what helped them through their rough patches, more than 90% said, "Over time, things changed and just got better or weren't as hard." A similar proportion said, "My commitment to keeping my marriage/family together was strong." Also, "I/my spouse worked at fixing some problems and improving our relationship," was endorsed as helpful by nearly all who reported serious marital problems in the past. About one in four got some counseling (together or alone) and most of them (75%) said it was helpful. Patience, perseverance, promises, and some relationship perspiration helped many people resolve their marital problems.

We give a lot more details in the report that follows, but this is the big picture of what we found. And overall, we find some encouraging news for marriage in the responses of people who have been thinking about divorce. While thoughts about divorce are common, both recently and in the past, it is clear that most people are committed to their marriages, patient with their problems, and often able to work through their challenges. The findings from our study can help those who are thinking about divorce understand what is common in these personally difficult circumstances and perhaps provide them some direction and hope. In addition, the findings provide a better map of this mostly uncharted terrain of divorce ideation that can inform professionals and lay people who are trying to help those thinking about divorce.

# WHAT ARE THEY THINKING?

A National Survey of Married Individuals Who Are Thinking about Divorce

*"I think ultimately we grew apart, we didn't realize we had to [put] this much work into our relationship over the last 20 years as we did when we were dating. ... So ... we got to this point where we hardly knew who the other person is because we have both changed so much. ... I think it's just because people tend to grow apart unless you put the work into staying together, which I didn't realize until we had grown apart." — "Mattie,"<sup>1</sup> married 22 years*

*"[A few] years ago it seems that my wife ... become discontent with married life and family life and it felt almost as if she ... she's like, 'I'm gonna go back to school,' you know, without conferring with most of the family and I think the stress of that brought out some mental illness. ... And there [was] some infidelity in that time, as well. So, that's kind of why I'm at where I am right now." — "Mike," married 11 years*

## INTRODUCTION

Almost everyone wants a happy, healthy marriage and wants it to last a lifetime.<sup>2</sup> But almost everyone also knows the scary U.S. statistics. About half of all first marriages and more than 60% of second marriages end in divorce, although the risks are lower for some than others, such as well-educated and religiously devout couples.<sup>3</sup>

Given the value that individuals place on marriage and the benefits that marriage provides adults, children, and communities,<sup>4</sup> we would expect that people would need to be experiencing very serious problems and having deep concerns about the relationship—like Mike's situation in the above quotation—to be thinking about divorce. But is this always the case? Mattie's quotation above suggests that, for some, thoughts about divorce can be less frequent and a result of less serious problems in a marriage. How many married people have had recent thoughts about divorce or thoughts in the past? How often and how long have they been having those thoughts? How intense are those thoughts? Who do they talk to about their thoughts and feelings? (Do they talk to anyone?) What marital problems are they facing and what do they do to try to address their problems? What does it really mean when someone is thinking about divorce? Does it mean that divorce is imminent? Are they willing to keep working on the marriage, or are they looking for a way out?

Strangely, researchers know very little about what people are thinking when they are thinking about divorce. We know a lot about what may cause a divorce or how families may struggle in the wake of a divorce.

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<sup>1</sup> We used pseudonyms for all quotations from our in-depth interviews in this report.

<sup>2</sup> Wilcox, W. B. (2010). When marriage disappears: The retreat from marriage in Middle America. In W. B. Wilcox (Ed.), *The state of our unions: Marriage in America 2012* (pp. 13–60). Charlottesville, VA, and New York: National Marriage Project and Institute for American Values.

<sup>3</sup> Kennedy, S., & Ruggles, S. (2014). Breaking up is hard to count: The rise of divorce in the United States, 1980–2010. *Demography*, 51, 587–598; Sawhill, I. V. (2014). *Generation unbound: Drifting into sex and parenthood without marriage*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.; Stark, R. (2012). *America's blessings: How religion benefits everyone, including atheists*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press.

<sup>4</sup> Wilcox, W. B., Scholars. (2011). *Why marriage matters, 3rd edition: Thirty conclusions from the social sciences*. New York & Charlottesville, VA: Institute for American Values and The National Marriage Project.

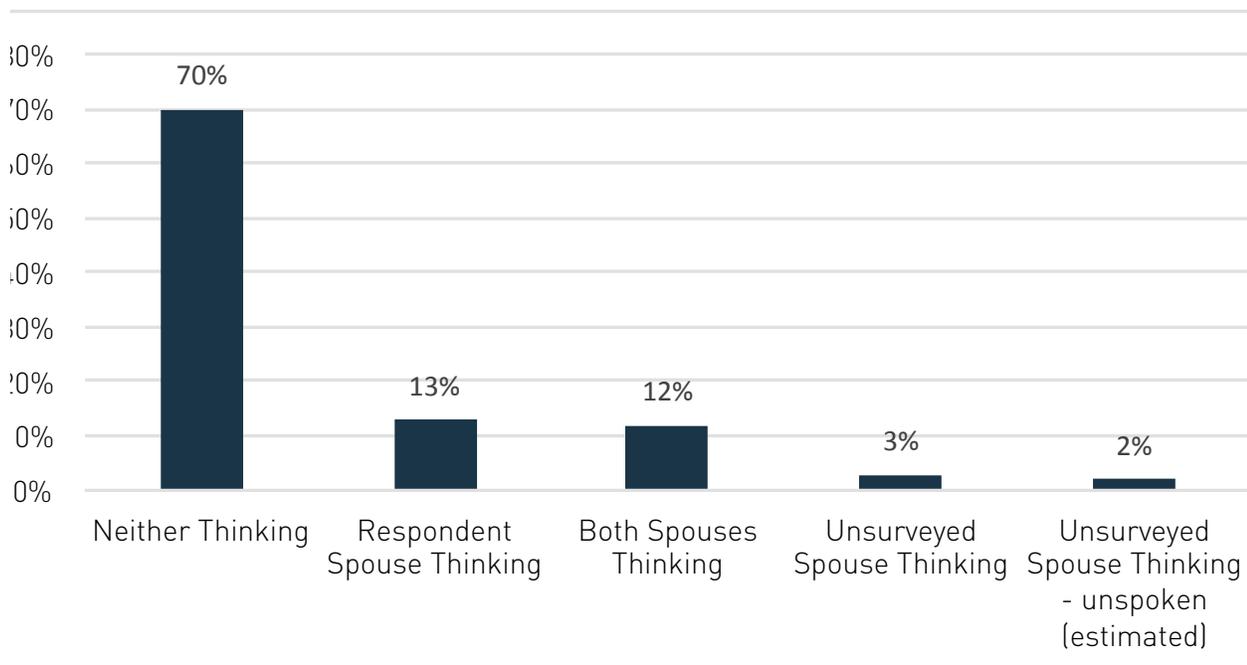
But the actual thinking about divorce is mostly uncharted terrain. So we set out to explore these kinds of questions as part of our National Divorce Decision-Making Project. **This report provides findings from the first phase of a study that included a new national survey of 3,000 individuals closely representative of married people ages 25–50 in the United States who have been married at least one year.** The survey asked a set of questions about what we label “divorce ideation”: what people are thinking about and doing when they are having some thoughts about divorce. Also, we conducted in-depth interviews with a small sub-sample of those who were having thoughts about divorce to delve deeper into their thoughts and attitudes and behaviors. (More methodological details about this study are available in Appendix A.)

## THINKING ABOUT DIVORCE

We asked survey respondents: “In the past 6 months, have you had serious concerns about your marriage that included thinking about a possible divorce?” Notice that the question asks for more than an assessment of serious marital concerns; it adds the condition that these concerns included thoughts about a possible divorce. It is certainly possible that some individuals with serious concerns had not allowed themselves to think about the possibility of divorce, although in a culture like ours, where divorce is common and is not highly stigmatized, it may be hard to avoid such thoughts completely, even with high levels of commitment to the marriage. **Overall, we found that 25% of our sample reported some recent thinking about divorce** (respondent thinking about it = 13%; respondent and spouse both thinking about it = 12%; see Chart 1).

We also asked these thinkers if they had talked to their spouse in the last 6 months about their thoughts about divorce; 40% said they had, 40% said they had not, and 20% said, “Maybe, we sort of talked about it.” Presumably, those who reported this ambiguous response had more vague and indirect conversations about marital prospects, perhaps without really saying the “D-word.” But a full four in 10 had not talked to their spouse about their thoughts. **So almost half the time divorce ideation is a private problem instead of a couple concern.**

CHART 1. DIVORCE IDEATION



We also asked respondents, “In the last 6 months, has your spouse mentioned to you that he or she has been thinking about the possibility of divorce?” **In almost half of those cases in which the surveyed spouse was thinking about divorce, they reported that their (non-surveyed) spouse also had been thinking about divorce.**<sup>5</sup> Again, it is worth noting here that divorce ideation can be mutual but often is not shared. Also, we found in another 3% of all cases, the surveyed spouse was not thinking about divorce but his or her spouse was, or at least had told the surveyed spouse that she or he was. Of course, it is likely that more non-surveyed spouses had thoughts about divorce but had not spoken about them yet. Putting all the numbers together, we estimate that in about 30% of marriages in our study, one or both spouses have had recent thoughts about divorce, either spoken or unspoken<sup>6</sup> (see Chart 1, above).

Also, we wondered if divorce ideation declined with the length of the marriage. **We found that the percentage of individuals thinking about divorce was steady up to 15 years of marriage.** Then it began to decline (16–20 years = 14%; 20+ years = 12%). So divorce ideation is not reserved for married individuals in just the first decade of their marriage.

We found recent divorce ideation was a little more common among some demographic sub-groups in our study, but these differences were not especially large, and not always as expected, given previous research on divorce rates. Women were a little more likely than men (27% vs. 22%) to have had recent thoughts of divorce. Past research has found that wives are much more likely to want the divorce compared to their husbands and twice as likely to initiate a legal divorce petition,<sup>7</sup> but the difference between men’s and women’s divorce ideation appears to be small. (Women, however, apparently are more likely to act eventually on their thoughts than men.) Parents with minor children were a little more likely to have had recent thoughts about divorce (27% vs. 21%), perhaps because of the strains associated with parenthood.<sup>8</sup> Divorce ideation was a little more common among Black (32%) and Hispanic respondents (28%) than White (24%) and Asian respondents (15%). These figures may reflect the known higher risks of divorce for Black and Hispanic people.<sup>9</sup> Individuals with some college education were slightly more likely (28%) than those with just high school (or less) (23%) or a college degree (23%) to have had recent thoughts about divorce. This is interesting because actual divorce rates are higher among the least educated.<sup>10</sup> In our sample, the least and the most educated share similar rates of divorce ideation, although current research would suggest that the least educated probably are more likely to end up actually getting a divorce. Interestingly, there was very little difference in divorce ideation between those who said religion was an important part of their lives and those who said it was not (24% vs. 25%).<sup>11</sup> Previous research confirms that the more devout are less likely to actually divorce,<sup>12</sup> but apparently they are just as likely to have had recent thoughts about it.

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<sup>5</sup> For various reasons, the study did not include giving a parallel survey to the spouses of those individuals who took our survey.

<sup>6</sup> This figure is close to another study with a national sample that estimated the proportion of married individuals who were in a distressed marriage: 31%. Whisman, M. A., Beach, S. R. H., & Snyder, D. K. (2008). Is marital discord taxonic and can taxonic status be assessed reliably? Results from a national, representative sample of married couples. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 76*, 745–755.

<sup>7</sup> Brinig, M., & Nock, S. L. (2000). “These boots are made for walking”: Why most divorce filers are women. *American Law and Economics Review, 2*, 126–169.

<sup>8</sup> Cowan, C. P., & Cowan, P. A. (2000). *When partners become parents: The big life change for couples*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

<sup>9</sup> Bramlett, M. D., & Mosher, W. D. (2001). *First marriage dissolution, divorce, and remarriage: United States*. Advance data from vital and health statistics; no. 323. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.

<sup>10</sup> Wilcox, W. B. (2010). When marriage disappears: The retreat from marriage in Middle America. In W. B. Wilcox (Ed.), *The state of our unions: Marriage in America 2012* (pp. 13–60). Charlottesville, VA, and New York: National Marriage Project and Institute for American Values.

<sup>11</sup> Although the differences were relatively small in all of these comparisons, they were statistically significant:

Gender:  $\chi^2(1) = 11.6, p < .001$ ; Parental status:  $\chi^2(1) = 14.4, p < .001$ ; Race/Ethnicity:  $\chi^2(4) = 16.7, p < .01$ ; Education:  $\chi^2(5) = 12.0, p < .05$ ; Religiosity:  $\chi^2(4) = 17.4, p < .01$ .

<sup>12</sup> Stark, R. (2012). *America’s blessings: How religion benefits everyone, including atheists*. West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press.

## SOFT AND SERIOUS THINKING

“I’M CLEAR THAT IF I HAD ENOUGH MONEY TO NOT BE HERE THEN I WOULD 95% NOT BE HERE. BUT I DON’T [HAVE MONEY], SO YOU HAVE TO MAKE THE BEST OUT OF WHAT YOU DO HAVE. HE’S NOT THE WORST PERSON. IF HE WAS THE WORST PERSON, BELIEVE ME, IF HE WAS ABUSIVE OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT, I WOULDN’T BE HERE. ... BUT IT’S NOT LIKE THAT. I’M NOT CRAZY ABOUT YOU ALL THE TIME BUT EVERYTHING YOU DO DRIVES ME CRAZY... .”

— “LORI,” MARRIED 19 YEARS

But what does it mean when individuals report that they have recently had thoughts about divorce? As we examined the overall pattern of responses in our study, it became clear, as seems to be the case in Lori’s quote, that this did not mean that marital problems were irreconcilable or that divorce was imminent. In fact, it appears that for most who were thinking about divorce, their thoughts were soft. Their responses to a number of questions on our survey led us to this interpretation.

We didn’t just ask survey respondents if they had recent thoughts about divorce; we asked them how often they had been thinking about divorce. Asking the question in this way may have captured more individuals who were willing to report some thoughts about divorce because most said they had been thinking about divorce only “a few times” recently.

**Seventeen percent of our survey respondents reported thinking about divorce, “Yes, a few times,” while 8% reported thinking about divorce more often.** So for most (70%) of those who had recent thoughts about divorce, those thoughts were not frequent (see Chart 2). Moreover, in our

in-depth interviews, we learned that thinking about divorce is not a static thing; some people can go from thinking about divorce a lot to more casual thinking and then to not thinking about it at all, only to return to seriously thinking about it again when another tough issue arises.

For most, divorce ideation was closer to chronic than acute. Thirty-seven percent reported that they had been thinking about divorce for 2 years or more, with another 16% thinking about it 1–2 years. Less than a third (32%) had been thinking about it 6 months or less. Those who had been thinking about divorce more frequently were more likely to have been thinking about it for an extended time (68%).<sup>13</sup> Perhaps numbers like these challenge the notion that many people make rash decisions to divorce.

We also asked thinkers to select from a set of statements describing personal attitudes about getting a divorce. **Only one in 20 checked: “I’m done with this marriage; it’s too late even if my spouse were to make major changes,” and these were mostly those who have been thinking frequently about divorce** (see Chart 3). In fact, most thinkers’ responses indicated openness to fixing problems and saving the marriage. **The response category with the largest endorsement (43%) was: “I don’t really want a divorce; I’m willing to work hard to keep us together.”** (Almost 90% of individuals who endorsed this option had been thinking about divorce only a few times in the last 6 months.) Another 23% of thinkers endorsed: “I would consider working on my marriage and not divorcing if my spouse got serious about making some major changes.” This response also suggests some openness to working on the marriage, although it places the onus for change on the other (non-surveyed) spouse rather than on the self, which is a more difficult condition for repairing the relationship.

<sup>13</sup>  $\chi^2(8) = 34.6, p < .001$ .

CHART 2. DIVORCE IDEATION: HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT DIVORCE IN THE LAST 6 MONTHS?

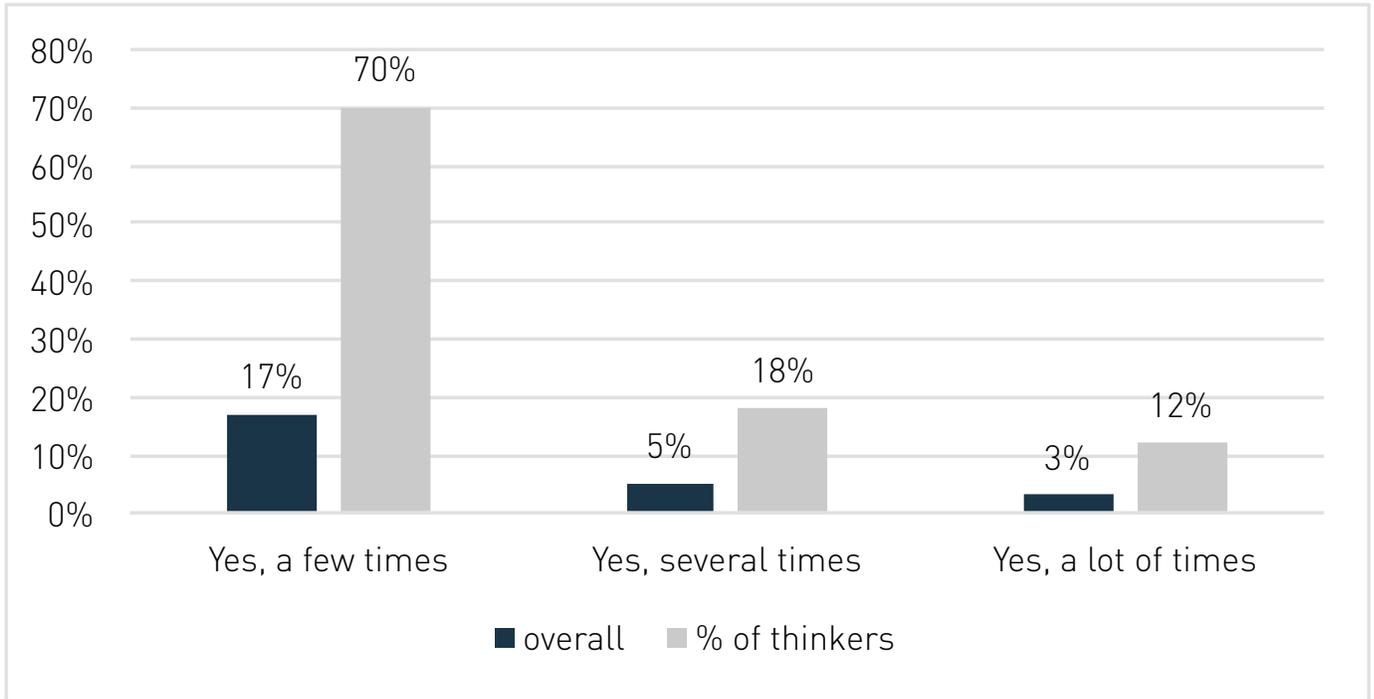
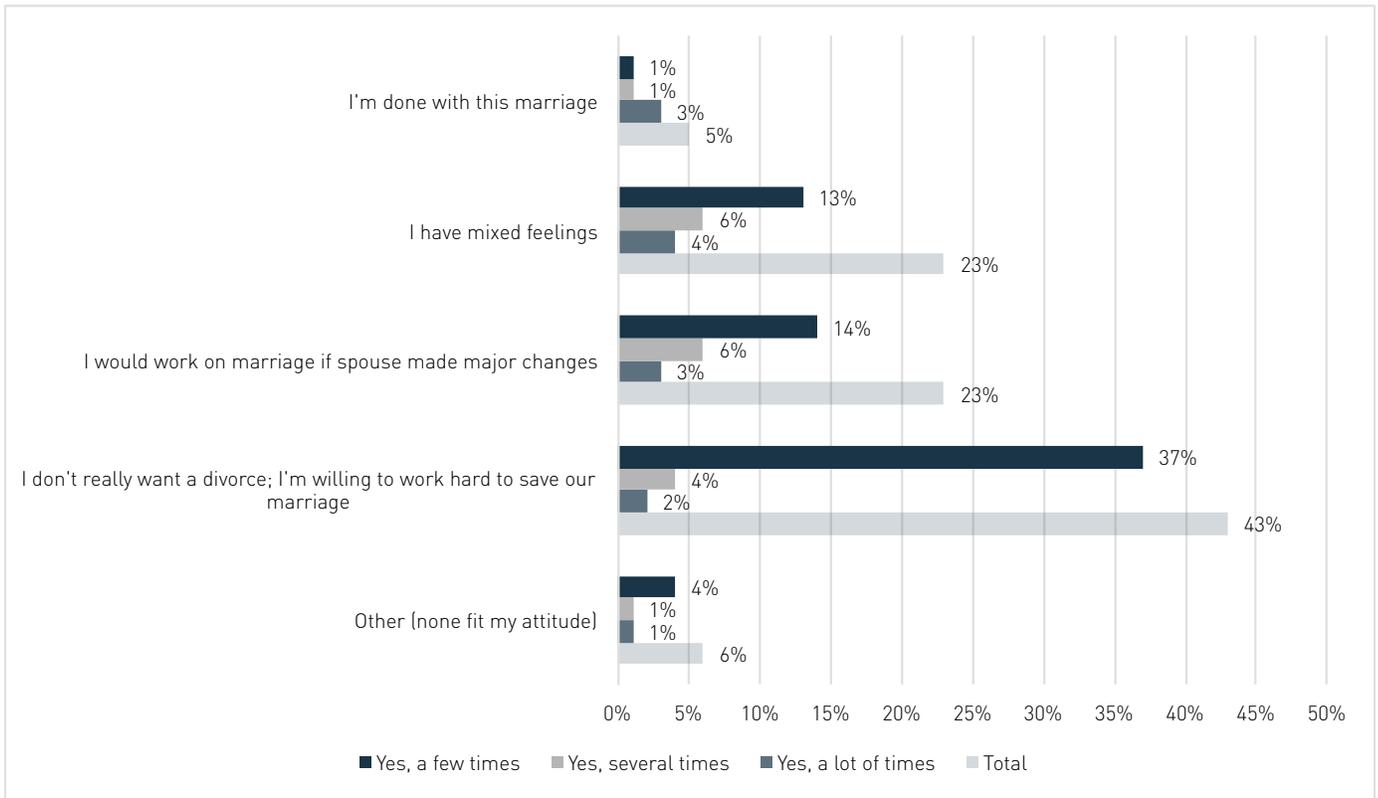


CHART 3. ATTITUDES ABOUT GETTING A DIVORCE (BY FREQUENCY OF THOUGHTS ABOUT DIVORCE)



“DECIDING TO DIVORCE ... IS LIKE JUMPING OFF A CLIFF ... INTO THE UNKNOWN. IT’S THE NOT KNOWING WHAT’S ON THE OTHER SIDE.”

“LINDA,” MARRIED 15 YEARS

Also, these thinkers were not cavalier about divorce. We asked survey respondents if they agreed or disagreed with the statement: “I would feel like a failure if my marriage were to end.” More than half (55%) agreed (a quarter agreed strongly). Only one in four thinkers disagreed. (Another 20% were caught in the middle between agree and disagree.) And the relationship between frequency of divorce ideation and this question was not partic-

ularly strong.<sup>14</sup> This hardly suggests that the thinkers we surveyed were cavalier with their thoughts about ending their marriage; most would feel a personal sense of failure with divorce.

**We think it is noteworthy that most of the thinkers reported that they were fairly happy in their marriage.**

**Similarly, they were relatively hopeful about their future together and that they had what it takes to make the**

**relationship work for the long-term** (see Charts 4a and 4b).<sup>15</sup> Those who had been thinking about divorce frequently were, on average, farther down the marital happiness scale, but those who had thought about divorce only a few times recently reported, on average, that they were pretty happy (almost a 7 on a 10-point scale). The same pattern held for relationship hope. Although those who had thoughts about divorce a few times were a point below those who did not have recent thoughts about divorce, they were still pretty hopeful about their marriage (average 5.6 on a 7-point scale). Those who had been thinking a lot about divorce, however, were clearly struggling with maintaining hope for the marriage.<sup>16</sup>

We also asked those who said they had recent thoughts about divorce to report the major marital problems they were experiencing from a list of 16 potential problems ranging in intensity. (More intense reasons were: infidelity, alcohol/drug abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse. Moderately intense reasons were: mental health problems, arguing too much, sexual relationship problems, handling money. Less intense reasons were: personal habits, working too much, dividing domestic labor, unable to talk together, losing romantic feelings, not committed enough.) About one in eight said they were experiencing only the less intense problems, such as growing apart or dividing domestic labor. Not surprisingly, the large majority of these individuals had been thinking about divorce only a few times. About four in 10 said they had none of the more intense problems but were experiencing at least one moderately intense problem, such as handling money or arguing too much. **Similarly, about four in 10 reported they were experiencing at least one of the more intensive problems, such as adultery or abuse (and they often had other less intense problems, too). Of those who were thinking a lot about divorce, most had at least one of the more intense problems.** But even among those reporting at least one of the more intense problems, a majority said that they had only thought about divorce a few times recently (see Chart 5).

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<sup>14</sup>  $\chi^2(12) = 23.9, p < .05$ . But only those who indicated the strongest level of disagreement possible on the scale with this question were more likely to be thinking about divorce more frequently.

<sup>15</sup> Happiness question: “Taking all things together, on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is completely unhappy and 10 is completely happy, how happy would you say your relationship with your spouse is?” Relationship hope was an average of the following five questions (7-point scale, 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*): “I believe we can handle whatever conflicts will arise in the future”; “I am very confident when I think of our future together”; “I’m hopeful that we can make our relationship work”; “I’m hopeful that we have the tools we need to fix problems in our relationship now and in the future”; “I feel like our relationship can survive what life throws at us.”

<sup>16</sup> These linear relationships were statistically significant: Happiness  $F(3, 2,995) = 499.9, p < .001$ ; Relationship Hope  $F(3, 2,995) = 636.9, p < .001$ .

CHART 4A. HOW HAPPY ARE YOU IN YOUR MARRIAGE?  
(BY FREQUENCY OF DIVORCE IDEATION)

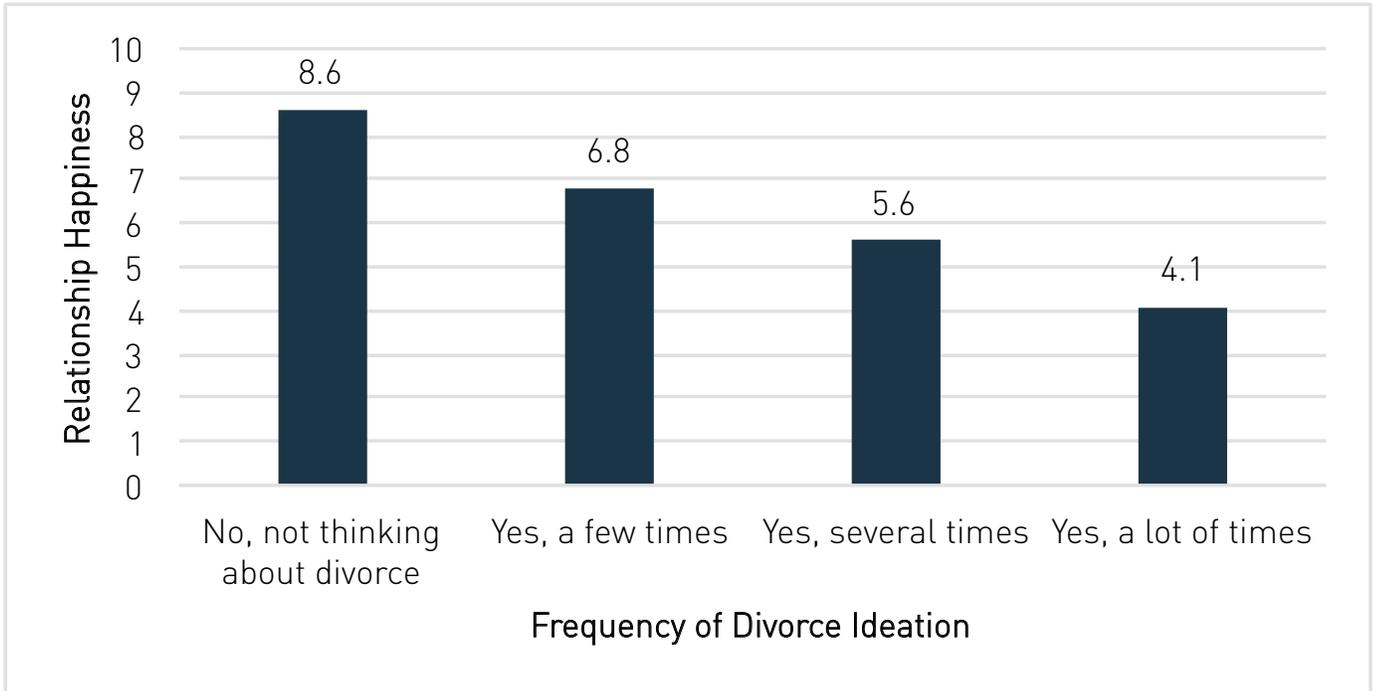
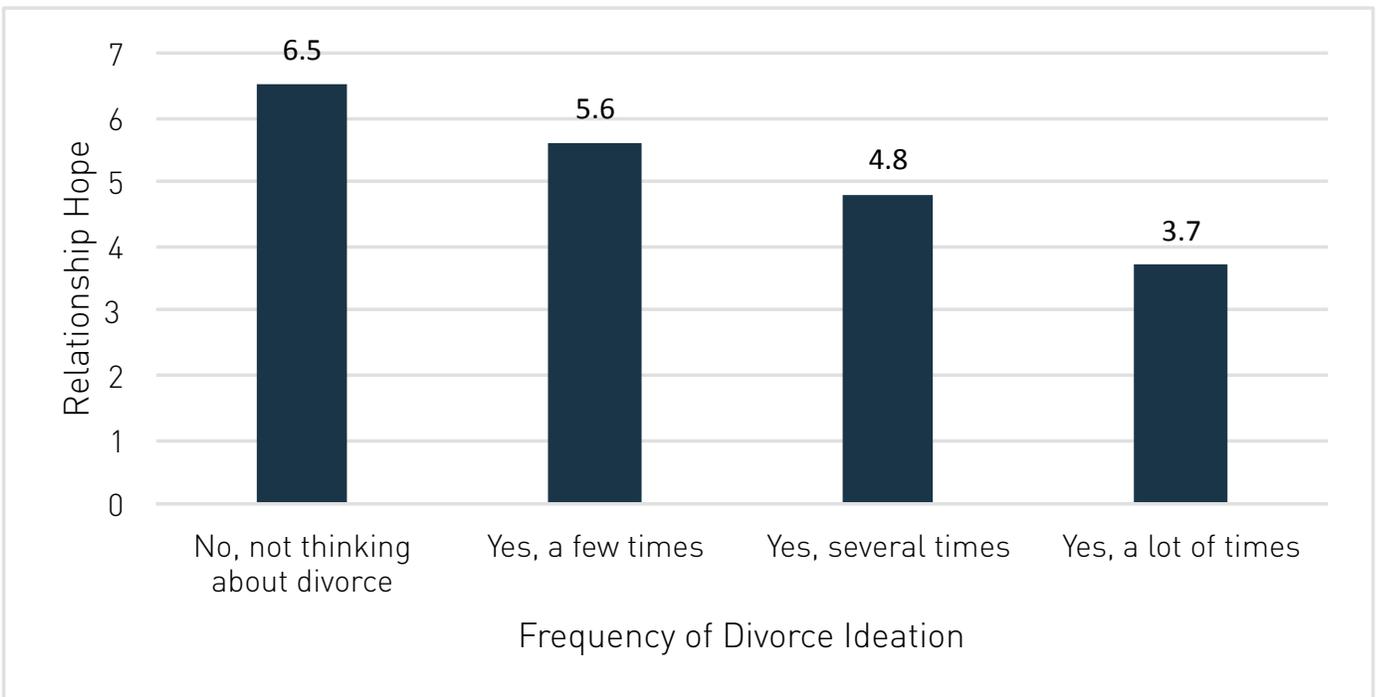


CHART 4B. HOW HOPEFUL ARE YOU ABOUT YOUR MARRIAGE?  
(BY FREQUENCY OF DIVORCE IDEATION)



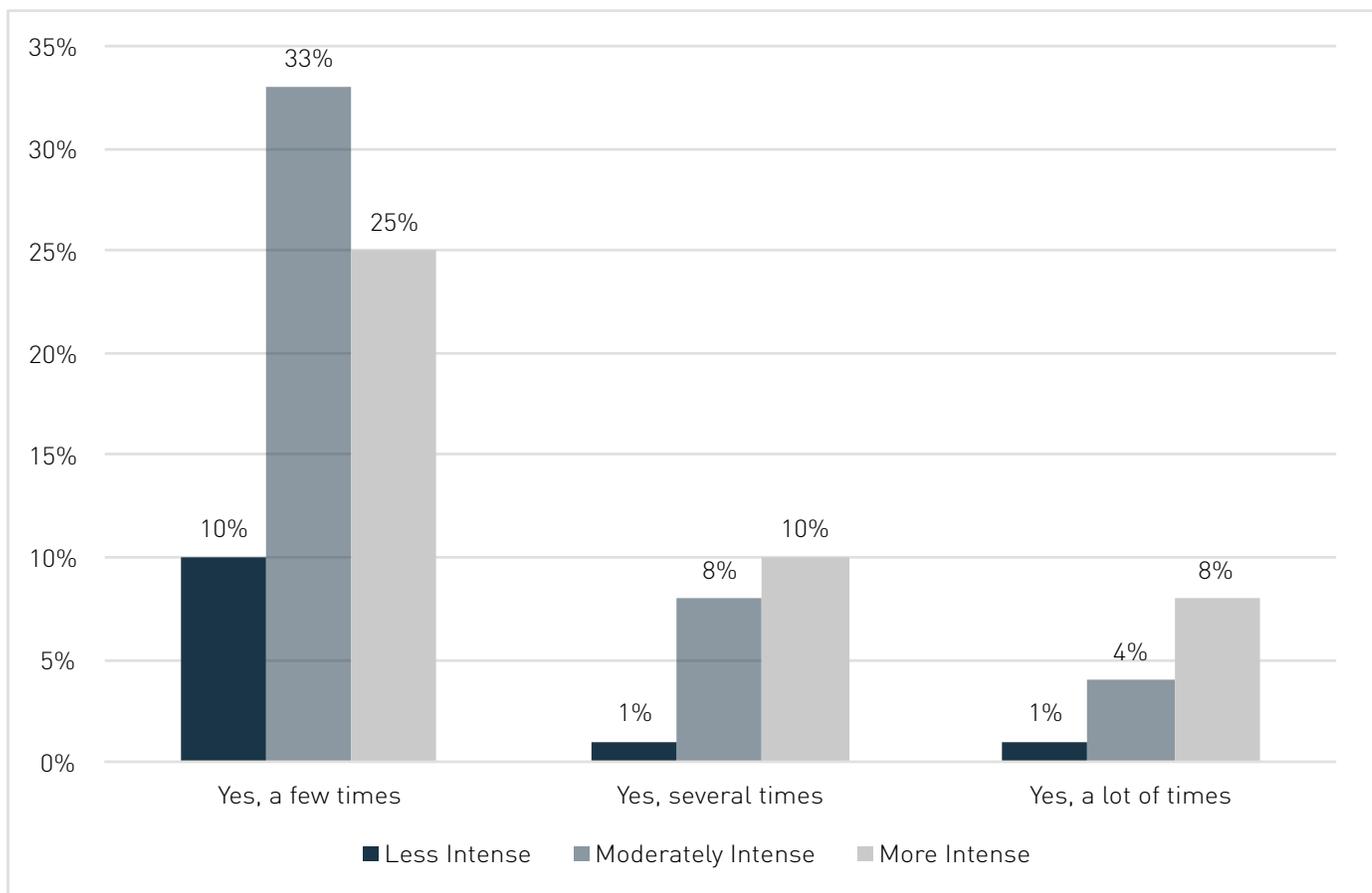
We also looked at attitudes about getting a divorce, specifically among those experiencing more intense problems. Surprisingly, we found that only about one in 10 (9%) of them said, “I’m done with this marriage.” A third (32%) said, “I don’t really want a divorce; I’m willing to work hard to keep us together.” And another 25% of those experiencing some of the more serious marital problems said, “I would consider working on my marriage and not divorcing if my spouse got serious about making some major changes.” Three in 10 (29%) were ambivalent: “I have mixed feelings about a divorce; sometimes I think it is a good idea and sometimes I’m not sure.” So even those who are experiencing some of the most disruptive and stressful marital problems usually still want to work to save their marriage.

“AND HERE’S WHY I LAUGHED— BECAUSE—I AM STUCK! I’M REALLY STUCK! I DO NOT HAVE A GOOD CHOICE! THE ONLY CHOICE THAT I HAVE IS TO CHOOSE TO BE STUCK ... THAT IS A GREAT DESCRIPTOR OF WHERE I AM.”

— “WARREN,” MARRIED 20 YEARS

Other questions we asked in the survey shed more light on the lack of clarity and indecision about divorce suggested in some of our respondents’ answers, such as Warren’s. A third of the respondents had not made a decision yet to divorce or stay together; two-thirds had made that decision. But this does not mean that they had made a decision to divorce. In fact, it likely indicates just the opposite. **Only 7% had actually filed for divorce.** (Three percent had filed but withdrew the petition.) So for those who had made a decision, it seems that most were not going to divorce, at least at this time.

CHART 5. REASONS FOR THINKING ABOUT DIVORCE (BY FREQUENCY OF DIVORCE IDEATION)



“A LOT OF INSIGHT CAN COME OUT OF A RANDOM CONVERSATION WITH SOMEONE YOU DON’T KNOW OR THAT YOU DO KNOW. IT’S JUST A MATTER OF HEARING YOURSELF SAY THOSE THINGS THAT YOU’RE FEELING. AND YOU CAN FEEL THOSE THINGS AND THINK THEM IN YOUR HEAD BUT IT’S ENTIRELY DIFFERENT THING TO HEAR YOURSELF ... PUT THOSE IDEAS INTO WORDS AND TELL SOMEBODY ELSE.”

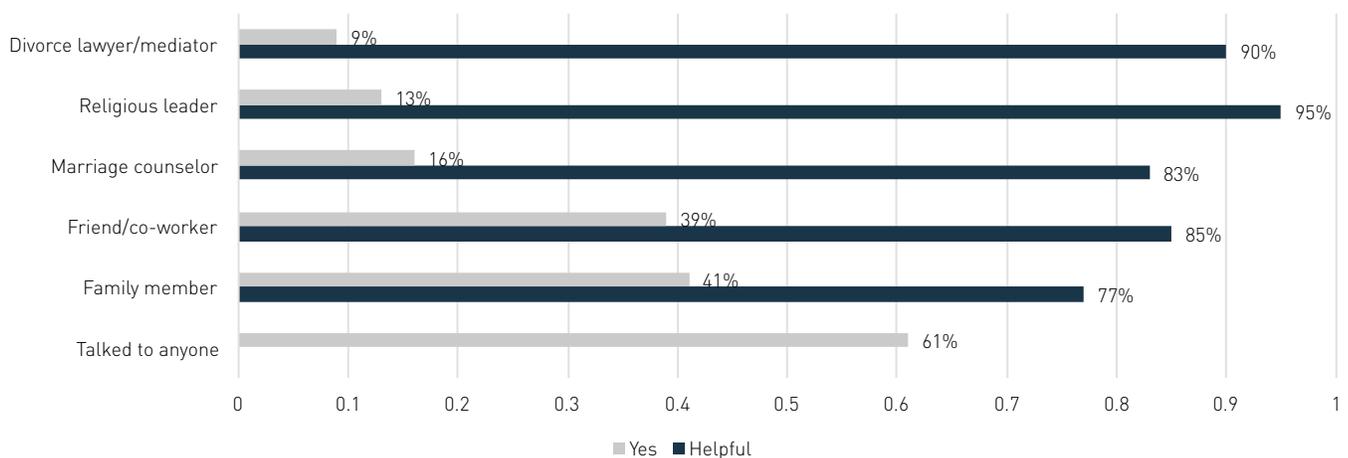
— “MARCUS,” MARRIED 16 YEARS

Perhaps seeking more clarity about which direction to go or what to do about their marital problems, many of our thinkers had talked to others about their thoughts about divorce. **Sixty percent had talked to at least one other person, most commonly to a family member or a friend/co-worker, and a large majority reported that such talks were helpful** (see Chart 6). This is interesting because sometimes people worry that talking about marital problems with others violates marital boundaries and may harm the relationship. While it certainly is important to consider how we talk about those problems to others outside the relationship, there may be therapeutic value in discussing problems with others in appropriate ways, as “Marcus” seems to suggest. Not surprisingly, those who had thought about

divorce only a few times were less likely to have talked to someone about it than those who had thought about divorce a lot.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, only about one in six had talked to a marriage counselor and only about one in eight had talked to a religious leader about their thoughts, although almost all said that such discussions were helpful.

**So, overall, we find that most individuals who are thinking about divorce don’t seem to have one foot out of the marital door. Quite the opposite; for most, their thoughts about divorce were infrequent, they did not want a divorce and wanted to work on the relationship, and they were relatively hopeful about the prospects for the marriage long-term.** Many had already decided for now to stay; few had filed for divorce. This doesn’t mean that their problems were fleeting or trivial or that they weren’t discouraged or hurting in their marriage. Our in-depth interviews certainly uncovered the confusion and pain that some were feeling, even when they weren’t thinking seriously about divorce. But even those who were dealing with the most intense problems, such as infidelity, abuse, or drug addiction, and thinking more seriously about divorce, generally were still hoping to avoid divorce and willing to work at the marriage, especially if their spouse was willing to make some changes. Our in-depth interviews also uncovered how transitory thoughts about divorce can be. Some that we interviewed who had reported thoughts about divorce a few weeks earlier in the survey now said in the interview that they were not thinking about divorce. A few couldn’t even remember that they had reported such thoughts.

CHART 6. TALKED TO OTHERS ABOUT DIVORCE IDEATION



<sup>17</sup>  $\chi^2(2) = 50.1, p < .001$ .

“DECIDING TO STAY MARRIED IS LIKE...  
RUNNING A MARATHON. IT’S GRUELING, IT’S  
LONG, AND I DON’T — WE’VE GOT A LONG  
RACE, AND I’M NOT NEAR THE FINISH LINE.  
AND IT TAKES SOMETIMES EVERYTHING I HAVE  
TO KEEP RUNNING.”

— “LESTER,” MARRIED 20 YEARS, 2ND MARRIAGE

Of course, among the recent thinkers, some do appear to be at high risk for divorce. We found a subgroup that expressed low hope for the future of their relationship. **About 20% of thinkers (about 6% of all respondents in our survey) were below the midpoint of the relationship hope scale.** Looking specifically at these low-hope individuals, like “Lester,” we found that 40% had been thinking about divorce a lot recently, and another quarter had thoughts several times. More than half (53%) of them had been thinking about divorce for 2 or more years. Only 10% checked that they didn’t really want a divorce and were willing to work hard to save the marriage. Nearly 40% said: “I have mixed feelings about a divorce; sometimes I think it is a good idea and sometimes I’m not sure.” A nearly equal number (36%) said they would consider working hard on the marriage if their spouse got serious about making changes. Interestingly, still only about one in 10 (11%) of these low-hope individuals said that they were done with the marriage. Reflecting the mixed feelings shown above, nearly two-thirds of this group was struggling to come to clarity about their decision to divorce or stay together. More than half (53%) reported at least one of the more intensive reasons for thinking about divorce. This group of low-hope individuals is clearly more likely to find a divorce over the horizon.

Building on the descriptive analyses presented so far, we put many of these questions together into a more sophisticated multivariate statistical analysis to see if there was support for the idea that there are more and less *serious thinkers* among those thinking about divorce in our study.<sup>18</sup> This analysis explored if distinct types of thinkers could be identified and whether the set of questions that we asked in the survey could reliably differentiate between different types of thinkers. Indeed, this analysis confirmed that there were two relatively distinct groups (see Chart 7). One group was much more likely to be thinking about divorce more than a few times; about half (51%) of them had recently thought about divorce several times or a lot. Also, they had higher levels of problems in their marriages, both the more common kinds as well as much higher levels of the more severe kinds of problems. A third had at least one severe problem. They were considerably less hopeful about the future of their relationship than the other group. Moreover, they were much more likely to say they were done with the marriage (although this was still a small proportion of the group—9%). They were much more likely to say they had mixed feelings about a divorce, or were willing to work on the marriage if their spouse got serious about making major changes. They were also more likely to be struggling to find clarity in their decision about a divorce. Almost two-thirds (63%) had been thinking about divorce for a year or more. A label of *serious thinkers* seems to fit this group well.

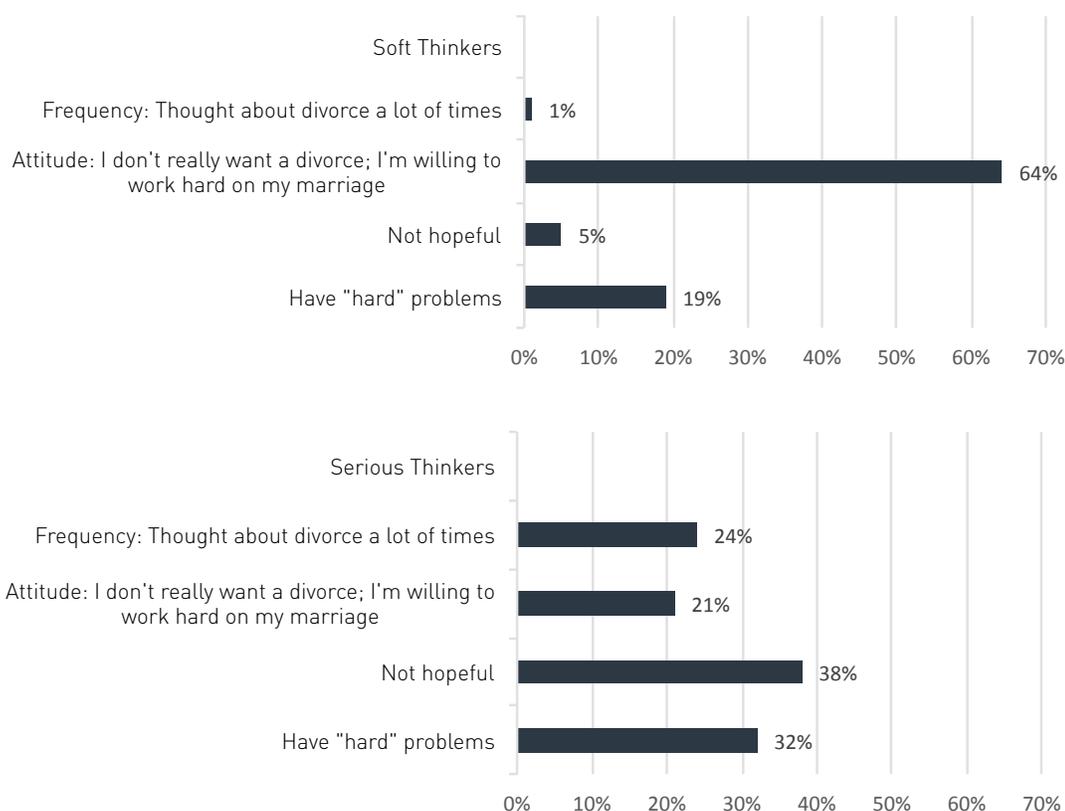
In contrast, nearly 90% of the second group said they had been thinking about divorce only a few times recently. This group had lower levels of reported marital problems of all kinds; less than one in five (19%) reported at least one of the more severe problems. They were not struggling nearly as much to come to clarity about a decision to divorce or stay together. Also, they were much more hopeful about the prospects for their marriage than those in the other group. And they were three times more likely to say they did not want a divorce and were willing to work hard to keep the marriage together (64% vs. 21%); virtually none (1%) said they were done with the marriage. We think *soft thinkers* is an appropriate label for this second group. (But don’t think soft means “squishy” or “silly” in this context. Think of

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<sup>18</sup> We used latent class analysis (LCA) to identify subgroups within our sample. Similar to cluster analysis methods, LCA identifies individuals that have similar scores across a range of characteristics. Statistical tests determine the number of subgroups within the sample and how well the groups can be differentiated from one another. Model fit indices suggested a 2 class solution was the best. Loglikelihood = -7886.41; AIC = 15862.81; BIC = 16070.41; SABIC = 15927.52; LMR p-value = .48. The two groups were also well-differentiated: Entropy = .815.

soft more in terms of “soft clay” and less frequent thinking.) **Using all of these questions together in a statistical analysis suggests that 53% of those thinking about divorce recently were *soft thinkers*; 47% were *serious thinkers*.**<sup>19</sup> (Among all 3,000 respondents in our survey, including those who had not thought about divorce recently, 14% were *soft thinkers* and 11% were *serious thinkers*.)

CHART 7. SOFT THINKERS (53%) VS. SERIOUS THINKERS (47%)



**We did not find a lot of demographic differences between the *soft thinkers* and *serious thinkers* and the differences we did find were not large.** For instance, we found no significant differences by gender, length of marriage, first marriage vs. remarriage, and parental status. Those who said that religion was important in their lives were a little more likely to be *soft thinkers* than *serious thinkers*, but this difference was small and not statistically reliable. Those with college degrees were a little more likely to be *soft thinkers* and those with just some college were a little more likely to be *serious thinkers*. Black and Hispanic respondents were a little more likely to be *serious thinkers* and White respondents were a little more likely to be *soft thinkers*.<sup>20</sup> But again, the differences we found were not large. So while researchers have found notable demographic differences among those who divorce or stay married, these differences are not as pronounced for divorce ideation, that is, just thinking about divorce.

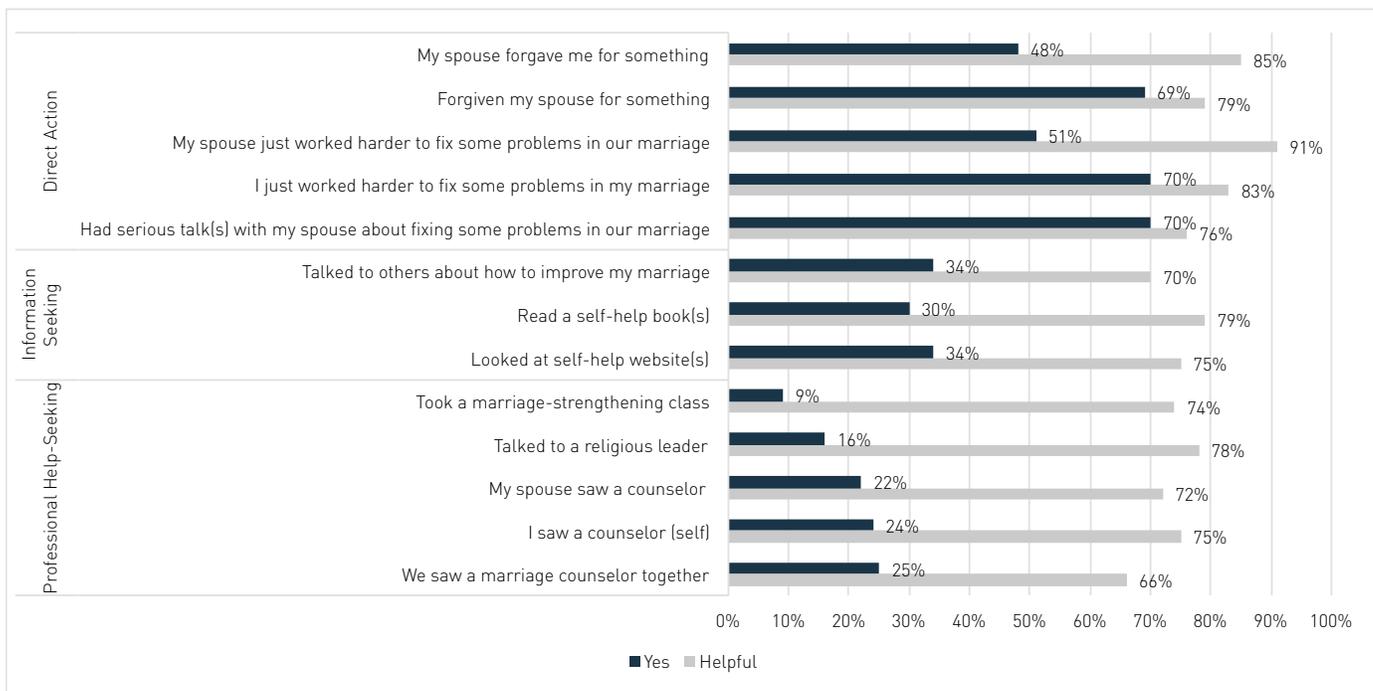
<sup>19</sup> Analyses with additional classes or groups did not yield clearer and better solutions, so we retained the more parsimonious 2-class solution.

<sup>20</sup> Gender:  $\chi^2(1) = 0.03, ns$ ; Length of Marriage:  $\chi^2(7) = 1.3, ns$ ; First Marriage:  $\chi^2(1) = 0.61, ns$ ; Parental Status (minor children):  $\chi^2(1) = 0.004, ns$ ; Religiosity:  $\chi^2(5) = 8.8, ns$ ; Education:  $\chi^2(5) = 20.3, p < .001$ ; Race/Ethnicity:  $\chi^2(4) = 23.3, p < .01$ .

# REPAIR WORK

Most thinkers—both *soft* and *serious*—were trying to do something with their thoughts about divorce; most appeared to want to work on the relationship. We asked the thinkers in our study to report on their relationship repair behaviors and how helpful they were. We asked about professional help seeking, such as seeing a counselor; information seeking, such as reading a book or visiting a website; and direct personal actions, such as having serious talks with their spouse or forgiving him or her for something. Thinkers were much more likely to report direct personal action repair behaviors than other kinds of behaviors (see Chart 8). By far, the two most frequently reported behaviors (70% for both) were: “I had serious talk(s) with my spouse about fixing some problems in our marriage,” and “I just worked harder to fix some problems in my marriage.” A large majority of respondents said these were helpful actions. Only about a quarter reported seeing a counselor, although most who did said that it was helpful. Less than 10% took a marriage-strengthening class.

CHART 8. RELATIONSHIP REPAIR BEHAVIORS & HELPFULNESS



We also looked to see if some repair behaviors were associated with a greater sense of hope for the relationship. We found six behaviors were associated with greater hope: working harder to fix problems (self and spouse), forgiving (by self and spouse), going to a marriage-strengthening class, and talking to a religious leader.<sup>21</sup>

We were particularly interested in understanding the repair behaviors of the *serious thinkers* who were struggling more with clarity about their decision. Not surprisingly, *serious thinkers* were generally about 15 percentage points higher on information-seeking behaviors and professional help-seeking than the *soft thinkers*.

<sup>21</sup> Worked harder to fix some problems: self  $t(741) = 2.84, p < .01$ ; spouse  $t(739) = 11.49, p < .001$ . Forgive something: self  $t(736) = 3.88, p < .001$ ; spouse  $t(731) = 6.01, p < .001$ . Going to marriage-strengthening class:  $t(743) = 3.22, p < .01$ . Talking to religious leader:  $t(742) = 2.01, p < .05$ .

When reporting how helpful these repair behaviors were, *serious thinkers* reported them to be helpful but less helpful than the reports of *soft thinkers* on all repair behaviors (except reading a self-help book). In some instances, the discrepancy between soft and *serious thinkers* on helpfulness was quite noticeable. For instance, 64% of *serious thinkers* reported that having a serious talk with a spouse about fixing some marital problems was helpful, compared to 87% of *soft thinkers*, a 23-percentage-point deficit. Likewise, **there was a 23-percentage-point gap in reported helpfulness of seeing a marriage counselor together (56% vs. 79%), with *serious thinkers* less optimistic than *soft thinkers* about the benefits gained from seeing a counselor together.** (The differences were much smaller with respect to a spouse seeing a counselor alone.) Perhaps when serious couple conversations or counseling don't go well, then individuals are more likely to end up thinking seriously about divorce. Or, when problems are harder, serious couple conversations or counseling may be more challenging and less likely to resolve problems.

While most thinkers had taken some action to address marital problems and said they were helpful, our in-depth interviews suggested a more complex picture of help-seeking behavior. Many interviewees reported that their actions to address problems often did not really fix a problem, that they had tried different strategies and were sometimes hopeful but sometimes discouraged with the results, and that they alternated between times of action and inaction and, sometimes, even paralysis. Efforts to address problems often were not especially rational, with specific identification of a problem, straightforward steps to address it, and clear results of those actions. They tended to be non-linear and haphazard. So, we need to be careful not to overstate the effectiveness of help-seeking behavior.

## SURVIVORS AND THRIVERS

Our focus in this report so far has been on those with *recent* thoughts about divorce. But it would be a mistake to think that only those with recent thoughts about divorce had dealt with serious marital problems. We asked all 3,000 respondents to our survey whether they had *ever* thought their marriage was in serious trouble.<sup>22</sup> More than half (53%) said yes. A quarter had thoughts about divorce within the last 6 months, and we have already detailed the thinking of this group in this report. **But an even larger proportion (28%) said that they had thought their marriage was in serious trouble in the past but did not have recent thoughts about divorce. Many go through serious marital problems but stick with the marriage.** We think it is helpful to look closely at this group. (We recognize, of course, that those with past problems who already divorced were not represented in our study.)

We wondered if these respondents were just *survivors* of previous marital problems or *thrivers* in spite of them. **Nearly 90% (88%) of these respondents were *thrivers*, reporting that they were glad they were still married. Less than 1% said they were not glad they were still together, with about one in 10 (11%) reporting mixed feelings.**<sup>23</sup> The *thrivers* reported they were happy in their marriage (Mean = 8.4 on a 10-point scale), just a little lower than the average happiness for respondents who had never thought their marriage was in serious trouble (Mean = 8.9). In contrast, the few who said they were not glad they were still married obviously were unhappy (Mean = 4.0); those with mixed feelings were in between (Mean = 6.9).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The survey question was: "Sometimes couples experience serious problems in their marriage and have thoughts of ending their marriage. Even people who get along quite well with their spouse sometimes wonder whether their marriage is working out. Have you ever thought your marriage was in serious trouble?"

<sup>23</sup> The survey response was: "I have mixed feelings about still being married; sometimes I'm glad and sometimes I'm not."

<sup>24</sup> These differences in happiness scores were statistically significant:  $F(3, 844) = 45.2, p < .001$

“A LOT OF TIMES YOU KNOW YOU HAVE THAT CONTENTION AND THERE’S A THOUGHT OF BREAKING IT OFF BUT FOR SOME REASON YOU DON’T DO IT AND TIME GOES BY AND YOU FIND THAT WHATEVER ISSUE YOU HAD MAY HAVE KIND OF GONE AWAY.”

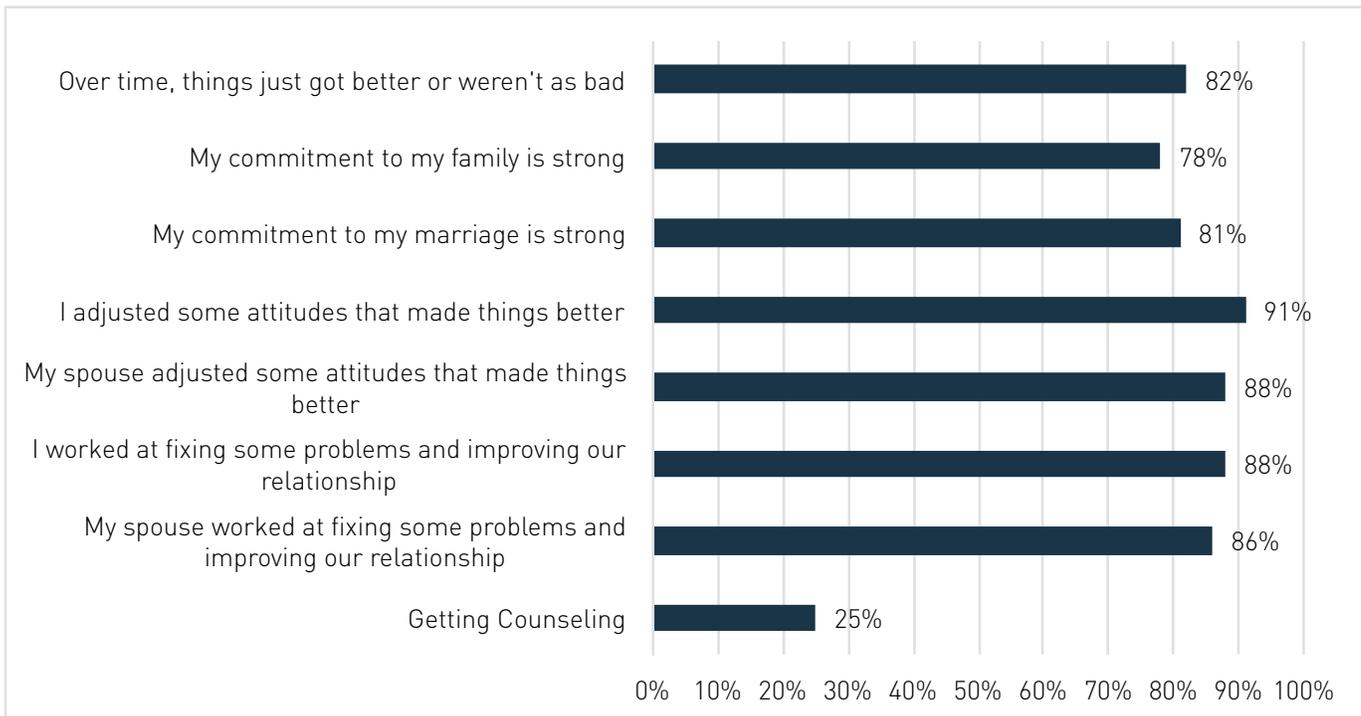
— “TERRY,” MARRIED 15 YEARS

We were curious about what helped the *thrivers* to improve the marriage versus just stay together. Large proportions of *thrivers* endorsed four strategies as helpful (see Chart 9). One strategy emphasizes the potential of patience and perspective rather than direct action, as suggested by “Terry’s” comment. More than four in five said, “Over time, things just got better or weren’t as bad.” Another strategy emphasizes the potency of promises: “My commitment to keeping my family/marriage is strong.” A third response

emphasizes persistence and some attitude adjustments: “I/my spouse adjusted some attitudes that made things better.” A fourth strategy emphasized some relationship perspiration: “I/my spouse worked at fixing some problems and improving our relationship.” Another form of relationship work—getting counseling—was less common; only about 20%–25% sought some counseling (together or separately).

Men and White respondents were slightly more likely to be *thrivers*. Also, those who strongly agreed that religion was an important part of their life were somewhat more likely to be *thrivers* than survivors, although frequency of religious attendance was not significant. Education did not differentiate *thrivers* from survivors.<sup>25</sup>

CHART 9. WHAT HELPED THRIVERS?



<sup>25</sup> Gender:  $\chi^2(1) = 19.4, p < .001$ ; Race/Ethnicity:  $\chi^2(4) = 15.6, p < .01$ ; Religious Devotion:  $\chi^2(4) = 17.4, p < .01$ ; Prayer Frequency:  $\chi^2(7) = 15.9, p < .05$ ; Religious Attendance:  $\chi^2(4) = 6.9, ns$ ; Education:  $\chi^2(5) = 6.8, ns$ .

## SO, WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Divorce is a scary thing to think about. So people tend to assume there is a high personal tolerance of marital difficulties before people actually start having such unsettling and potentially life-altering thoughts. But in our study we found that 25% of married individuals have had recent thoughts about divorce. **Maybe in a culture with high divorce rates and widespread concerns about the fragility of marriage it is hard *not* to have some thoughts about divorce when problems and disappointments exist in the marriage, as they do in most long-term unions.** It's hard to swim upstream against such a strong cultural current. And humans from time to time are wont to imagine greener grasses on the other side of their life fences.

Pardon us as we wax a bit philosophical here, but the way people talk about love and marriage has been influenced by strong American beliefs about individualism that focus on marriage as a romantic arrangement, negotiated privately between two autonomous individuals acting in their self-interest to make their lives mutually more satisfactory. Within this cultural belief of individualism, if a marriage isn't fully gratifying for one of the individuals, then it seems legitimate to question the future of the marriage.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the idea that marriage is foremost a romantic union further focuses attention on emotional fulfillment and personal happiness as barometers of marital health, setting high expectations for marriage. **When these expectations are not met because a partner does not end up being a great lover, a best friend, an ideal parent, an emotional companion, a fun playmate, and an intellectual equal,<sup>27</sup> disillusionment, disappointment, and divorce ideation are understandable results.**

Of course, there are other strong cultural beliefs about marriage that ground the relationship in the values of social obligations, life-long commitments, and ties to the larger community, as well as romantic feelings.<sup>28</sup> These beliefs are useful when making sense of the patience, promises, perseverance, and perspiration required every day to sustain a healthy marriage. But they don't fit as well when contemplating leaving an unsatisfying marriage. At those crucial cognitive crossroads, cultural beliefs about individualism and romantic love may dominate.<sup>29</sup> Within those beliefs, it's only a few quick steps from some marital frustrations to divorce ideation. Slowing those steps may require a transformation in how we understand and talk about love and marriage in America.

Perhaps this study can help to spur a new cultural conversation about marital love and create a needed re-framing of the discussion. **By normalizing the fact that a lot of people think about divorce but many do not get divorced and are happy they stayed together, we can create a more realistic and hopeful sense about love and marriage. Also, understanding that most thoughts about divorce are soft rather than serious can remove some of the danger we sense when those thoughts intrude into our consciousness.** Although individualism points people in the direction of doubting their relationship when it is not adequately meeting their current personal needs or expectations, many also use their commitments to resolve or outlast their problems, both soft and serious.

**Our study suggests that thoughts about divorce don't have to be a sign of impending marital doom.** And maybe thoughts about divorce can even be the motivation needed to take some action to try to strengthen or repair a relationship. Note how many thinkers in our study took some action to try to strengthen the relationship, including talking

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<sup>26</sup> Baxter, L. A. (2010). The dialogue of marriage. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 2, 370–387.

<sup>27</sup> Perel, E. (2015.) See:

[https://www.ted.com/talks/esther\\_perel\\_rethinking\\_infidelity\\_a\\_talk\\_for\\_anyone\\_who\\_has\\_ever\\_loved?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/esther_perel_rethinking_infidelity_a_talk_for_anyone_who_has_ever_loved?language=en).

<sup>28</sup> Baxter, L. A. (2010). The dialogue of marriage. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 2, 370–387.

<sup>29</sup> Swidler, A. (2001). *Talk of love: How culture matters*. University of Chicago Press.

about their concerns to others, and thought these were helpful strategies. Soft thinking about divorce can be a repair mechanism in and of itself. If, for example, thinking about divorce is akin to noticing one's arm is bleeding (noticing some marital difficulties), the awareness of this problem drives repairing and healing behaviors, like putting a bandage on the arm to stop the bleeding, rather than drastic elimination measures such as amputating the arm (akin to getting a divorce). Divorce ideation is not only normal, but also may be helpful when the thoughts act as an alert system that tells people their marriage may be in trouble and gives them an opportunity to try some repair behaviors. So thinking about divorce could be not only the indicator that a marriage could be in trouble, but also the mechanism by which couples can self-correct.

Yes, for some, thoughts about divorce are frequent and more likely to stem from serious, even dangerous, problems, so more than bandages are needed. Thoughts about divorce may appropriately take these people in that direction. We found that about 40% of thinkers (a little more than 10% of all married respondents in our survey) were dealing with more serious and intense relationship problems.

**But usually thoughts about divorce were just that—thoughts, not decisions or even deep doubts.** We have used the term *thinking about divorce* purposefully in this report. It does not necessarily mean contemplating an actual divorce or making a decision right now. It means ruminating on the marriage and its prospects and whether a divorce should be considered. The difference may be subtle but we think it is important. Thinking about an action is different from actually considering a decision about that action. Many think about divorce but don't do it. More than a quarter of married individuals had thought in the past that their marriage was in serious trouble but they hung on, and nearly all of them said they were happy they were still together. So when people confide that they are thinking about divorce, it probably is not a good idea to tell them just ditch the jerk or jerkette. Chances are they can take action to strengthen the marriage—and that they want to do so. For many, problems are things that can be resolved with patience, commitment, and some work. Even among the *serious thinkers* in our survey, with more intense reasons for thinking about divorce, still only about 10% said that they were done with the marriage and a third said they didn't really want the divorce and were still willing to work hard on the marriage.

Also, those who were thinking about divorce overwhelmingly reported that talking to others about their concerns was helpful. **Perhaps talking to others about marital problems can be a way to work through issues and make the thoughts about divorce less scary.** While spouses should be careful to preserve appropriate boundaries and confidences when they talk to others about marital problems, sometimes problems kept in dark, private places only grow bigger. Remember too that 40% of thinkers had not talked to their spouses about their thoughts. It's hard to know in the abstract if this is a good strategy or bad. Speaking the "D-word" when personal thoughts are infrequent and soft could elevate some personal discouragement into a full-scale couple crisis with a dynamic and momentum all its own. On the other hand, when you don't know that your spouse is having thoughts about divorce, you are less likely to work on problems to repair the marriage. This is a question that deserves further, in-depth study.

**In all of this, we don't mean to downplay the challenges *soft thinkers* are facing.** Thoughts are different from actions, but they clearly can influence them over time. Even soft thoughts about divorce can color perceptions of a relationship, shaping feelings in more negative ways that make marriages less satisfying and more fragile. Hope for the future is crucial, and even soft thoughts over a prolonged period of time likely erode hope. Also, we need to be sensitive when labeling some thinking about divorce as "soft," because soft isn't the same as trivial or fleeting or painless. In fact, in our in-depth interviews we heard that *soft thinkers* still can be confused, discouraged, and hurting, and have felt this for a long time. Decisions to stay with the marriage may be short-term strategies rather than than

long-term decisions. The threshold for divorce in our society is not especially high. Research is showing that most divorces come from marriages that are not deeply unhappy, although scholars continue to explore and debate this issue. When we look back on marriages in the years before a divorce, it seems most people reported moderate levels of happiness, relatively low levels of conflict, and pretty good communication. A steep decline in marital quality in the years before a divorce is not the common pattern.<sup>30</sup> So we shouldn't dismiss soft thoughts about divorce as petty problems that will pass. There is a need to consider how we can help both *soft* and *serious thinkers*.

## SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

Before we get to some recommendations based on our study, however, we pause to summarize the results of our research with what we think are the most central take-home messages:

- 1. Thoughts about divorce are common in our society.** More than half of married individuals (ages 25–50) say they have had thoughts about divorce, either in the past or currently, spoken or unspoken. And those thoughts are common well into the second decade of marriage.
- 2. Many in our study thought about divorce in the past but decided to stay together and almost all of them are glad they did.** They are not only *survivors* but *thrivers*. So thoughts about divorce don't have to be signs of imminent separation.
- 3. Recent thoughts about divorce are common, too; one in four in our study had thoughts about divorce in the last 6 months.** But there is a wide range of experience in this group. **A little more than half of recent thinkers are soft thinkers** whose thoughts are infrequent and their marital problems, though often discouraging and even painful, are more amenable to repair efforts. Their thoughts are just thoughts, not necessarily a prelude to marital dissolution. And possibly, they even spur relationship repair strategies.
- 4. Most recent divorce thinkers—both soft and serious—want to stay—not leave—and fix their problems. They are not cavalier about divorce.** They are willing to work on the marriage, although some put more of the onus for change on their spouse than themselves.
- 5. Patience, changed attitudes, and commitment appear to be more common tools that people employ to resolve—or simply outlast—their marital problems.** Direct action to fix problems, such as counseling, while helpful for some, doesn't seem to be the primary path for repairing relationships.

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<sup>30</sup> James, S. (2015). Marital quality of divorced women. *Journal of Family Psychology, 29*, 479–489; Amato, P. R., & Hohmann-Marriott, B. (2007). A comparison of high- and low-distress marriages that end in divorce. *Journal of Marriage & Family, 69*, 621–638.

## SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

We see some implications, based on the findings from our study, for helping those who have been thinking about divorce, and especially for those who want to work to repair the marriage. Also, we think there are implications for those who are trying to help people who are thinking about divorce.

- **For married individuals thinking about divorce:** First, understand that having thoughts about divorce is common. Our society now doesn't put a heavy stigma on actually being divorced, but individuals understandably may be afraid of thoughts about divorce due to its anticipated consequences. So perhaps some individuals still place a personal stigma on thinking about divorce. Although those thoughts can be scary, they don't necessarily mean that a marriage is in deep trouble. Many people experience serious marital difficulties, but with patience and commitment are able to work through or outlast their problems.

And maybe those thoughts about divorce, when put in the proper perspective, can motivate corrective efforts rather than paralyze action. Like physical systems, human systems, such as marriages, are subject to entropy; they are falling apart and headed toward chaos unless we regularly put energy into the system to keep order. We say it all the time—marriage takes work—but we don't always act intentionally to fight the forces of marital entropy. Acting sooner rather than later when softer problems may morph into serious ones—or just get more fossilized—is a wise strategy.

In fact, maybe it's a good idea to think about monitoring our marriages the way we monitor our health, with check-ups and preventative measures. There are some good marriage check-up options designed to help couples on a regular basis see their strengths, identify areas for improvement, and suggest some ways to work on their issues and generally strengthen their relationship.<sup>31</sup> Of course, some marital difficulties are more than problems; they indicate an unhealthy, potentially dangerous relationship. In these situations, people need to be willing to seek skilled help, and divorce still may be necessary.

- **For those with friends and family who are thinking about divorce:** One of the big take-aways of our study is that thinking about divorce does not necessarily mean acting out or pursuing a divorce. What we've reported here seems to indicate that many people may have occasional thoughts about divorce. Furthermore, these same people may approach their friends and family with concerns about their marriage. A recent survey indicates that three out of four (73%) U.S. adults have been a confidant to someone with a problem in a marriage or long-term committed relationship.<sup>32</sup>

So what can those individuals do to support a friend, if approached? First and foremost, offering a listening ear and an empathetic heart are going to go a long way in helping your friend find some relief in her or his current struggles. You might even suggest that your friend read this report. It might be surprising to people to discover that they're not the only ones thinking about divorce. In doing this you may also be offering them some valuable perspective on the current situation; that even as hard as things are right now, in most cases things can (and

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<sup>31</sup> Cordova, J. (2009). *The marriage checkup: A scientific program for sustaining and strengthening marital health*. Lanham, MD: Jason Aronson. See: <http://psychcentral.com/news/2008/11/16/marriage-checkup-works/3347.html>; Olson, D., Olson-Sigg, A., & Larson, P. J. (2008). *The couple checkup*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson. See also: <http://relateinstitute.com>.

<sup>32</sup> Lind Seal, K., Doherty, W. J., & Harris, S. H. (in press). Confiding about problems in marriage and long-term committed relationships: A national study. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*.

often do) change. Listening, giving emotional support, and offering an outside perspective are listed as the top three most helpful responses that a confidant can give to people who are distressed about their marriage.<sup>33</sup>

However, we must offer a word of caution here. Some marital problems are serious and may not be likely to go away without skilled help. These can include problems of abuse that can result in injury to family members, untreated addictions that can deplete family resources and expose family members to a host of negative consequences, and even chronic or multiple affairs where the person having the affair is unwilling to end the infidelity. These three problem areas—abuse, addictions, and affairs—are especially important to pay attention to when considering the future of a marriage. We highly recommend initially expressing concern and appreciation for a friend who confides in you about these problems but also encourage referring these individuals to qualified professionals who can assess the severity of these problems. Individuals trying to help those who are having some thoughts about divorce may want to check out an excellent website, Marital First Responders, designed to help in these situations ([maritalfirstresponders.com](http://maritalfirstresponders.com)).

- **For marriage educators:** For decades, a large number of marriage educators have been dedicated to helping improve people’s relationship skills and preventing the need for divorce with their research-based curricula, programs, and advice.<sup>34</sup> But perhaps their emphasis on early intervention to prevent problems from threatening a marriage has made these educational resources seem less relevant to a large group of married individuals—those who already are experiencing difficult problems and having thoughts about divorce. Only 4% of *soft thinkers* in our study said they took a marriage education class to work on the relationship while 15%–20% of them had sought out counseling (either together or separately).

This suggests to us that marriage educators may be missing a potentially prime target audience—those who have had some thoughts about divorce and are experiencing disappointments in their relationship, but still are hopeful they can go the distance and are probably not headed out the door any time soon. Generally about 20%–30% of *soft thinkers* in our study reported that communication problems, growing apart, and losing romantic feelings were major reasons for their divorce ideation. These are problems that marriage education programs can take on effectively.<sup>35</sup> So we think marriage educators need to do a better job of recruiting the *soft thinkers* of the world to participate in their classes. And once they do participate, we think it will be helpful for educators to normalize divorce ideation while they are giving couples better skills to deal with their challenges. Also, 15% of *serious thinkers* in our study reported that they took a marriage strengthening class, so educators need to be aware that they likely have distressed couples thinking a lot about divorce in their classes, but who are trying to fix their problems.<sup>36</sup> The line between prevention (education) and intervention (therapy) is fuzzier and more permeable than how it is drawn in textbooks.

- **For marriage counselors:** Useful application of research is important to therapists, especially when treating couples whose presenting problems include the possibility of divorce. Consider these approaches with couples

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<sup>33</sup> Lind Seal, K., Doherty, W. J., & Harris, S. H. (in press). Confiding about problems in marriage and long-term committed relationships: A national study. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*.

<sup>34</sup> Hawkins, A. J., & VanDenBerghe, B. (2014). *Facilitating forever: A feasible public policy agenda to help couples form and sustain healthy relationships and enduring marriages*. Charlottesville, VA: The National Marriage Project.

<sup>35</sup> Blanchard, V. L., Hawkins, A. J., Baldwin, S. A., & Fawcett, E. B. (2009). Investigating the effects of marriage and relationship education on couples’ communication skills: A meta-analytic study. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *23*, 203–214; Fawcett, E. B., Hawkins, A. J., Blanchard, V. L., & Carroll, J. S. (2010). Do premarital education programs really work? A meta-analytic study. *Family Relations*, *59*, 232–239; Hawkins, A. J., Blanchard, V. L., Baldwin, S. A., & Fawcett, E. B. (2008). Does marriage and relationship education work? A meta-analytic study. *Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology*, *76*, 723–734.

<sup>36</sup> Bradford, A., Hawkins, A. J., & Acker, J. (in press). If we build it, they will come: Exploring policy and practice implications of public support for couple and relationship education for lower income and relationally distressed couples. *Family Process*.

heading toward divorce but wanting to repair their relationship. (Of course, sometimes therapy will clarify that the relationship cannot be adequately repaired and divorce is necessary.)

- **Normalization.** Most notably in the first few sessions, but at any given point during therapy, it's helpful for clients to hear their experiences are not isolated. Normalizing messages such as, "Research tells us that about half of married couples have thought their marriage was in serious trouble at one time or another," or "About one in four married persons have, to some degree, thought about divorce in the last 6 months," can provide relief and paradigm shifts in thinking in session.
- **Instilling Hope.** Specific findings, such as the degree of people who had at one time considered divorce and are now glad they stayed married, can serve as powerful messages of hope for a couple. Those in shaky marriages tend to lose any sense of a long-term view and can be buoyed by messages or information instilling hope to get through the next week or month as therapeutic work progresses.
- **Resources/Tools.** Couples can feel confused about resource credibility. When the therapist shares resources to help repair the relationship, they may feel more confident in the information because the professional with whom they are building trust has verified the content. Keeping this report handy (in printed or electronic form) for couples to read may serve as a useful homework assignment between sessions.<sup>37</sup>
- **For the media:** Journalists, professional bloggers, talking heads, and others who deal with marriage and divorce in the media and reach large audiences can be more clear that divorce ideation is normal and not necessarily a sign of marital doom. The media can easily slip into black-and-white dichotomies about marriages to tell their stories: good vs. bad ones, stable and strong ones vs. rickety ones just waiting to break down. This is too simplistic. The media can help clarify that marital struggles and disappointments are common and they come in a wide range of seriousness. The media can also reflect the reality that most people who are struggling in their marriages want to save them and are willing to work to do so or are patient with the problems. Media campaigns can create change by sending simple but impactful messages, and there is emerging evidence that marriage-focused messages can impact thinking and behavior.<sup>38</sup> The media can help to change the conversation about struggling marriages and divorce to more realistic and helpful tones. Of course, there are unhealthy and even dangerous marriages, and the media can continue to acknowledge that serious reality. But most marriages are made up of a series of peaks and valleys that span the length of the relationship, not a constant climb or perpetual descent.
- **For divorce lawyers and mediators:** Some research reveals that attorneys have divergent views about how, when, or even if to raise the topic of reconciliation with clients seeking their services for divorce.<sup>39</sup> Some believe discussing a client's marital situation should be part of the intake process, while others feel ethically bound only to respond to what a client asks of them. Frequently mediators are asked to provide services for a variety

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<sup>37</sup> Another helpful resource may be: <http://YourDivorceQuestions.org>. This website is partially based on: Hawkins, A. J., Fackrell, T. A., & Harris, S. M. (2013). *Should I try to work it out? A guidebook for individuals and couples at the crossroads of divorce*. Copies at nominal cost can be ordered from amazon.com, or free pdf copies can be downloaded from: <http://strongermarriage.org/html/divorce-remarriage/should-i-try-to-work-it-out>.

<sup>38</sup> Hawkins, A. J., Higginbotham, B. J., and Hatch, D. J. (in press). Can media campaigns increase participation in marriage and relationship education? The case of the Utah Healthy Marriages Initiative. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*.

<sup>39</sup> Roberts, K. M. (2013). Multi-systemic constraints to help seeking prior to the finalization of a divorce. Order No. 3614447, Oklahoma State University. See: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1520791452?accountid=7113>.

of reasons, and some note better moments than others where couples could conceivably step back, take a deep breath, and reconsider the path they are taking. The professionals in couples' lives influence many decisions during this stressful time.

If mediators or attorneys understand that many individuals and about 10% of couples—both husband and wife—are still open to reconciliation after having filed for divorce,<sup>40</sup> they may be more willing to consider discussing the information provided in this report. Remember our finding that many of the *serious thinkers* have struggled to come to clarity about a divorce and have desires to save the marriage. Perhaps adopting language such as *soft thinkers* and *serious thinkers*, or sharing information about how many married persons have considered divorce and then decided to stay, could be ways to open up new areas of discussion for more ambivalent couple clients. Other messages could be provided based upon our study, such as those documented strategies thinkers have taken to repair their marriage, and which ones seemed to be most helpful. Consider pulling a handful of thinking points together into a card to send home with ambivalent clients or referring them to a website such as [YourDivorceQuestions.org](http://YourDivorceQuestions.org).

We think lawyers and mediators could be a sensitive last-chance check for their clients about the decision to divorce, especially after they have a clearer idea of how difficult it can be to legally disentangle lives and fortunes. When ambivalence still exists (and safety is not an issue), lawyers and mediators could encourage couples to get to a more confident place about their decision (and suggest resources for doing so). Of course, some lawyers and mediators may think that this goes against their immediate financial interests, but it seems to us to be a reasonable best practice for those working with divorcing couples (and can be done within the ethical guidelines for these professions).

- **For lawmakers and policymakers:** Individual decisions about divorce are private, but the accumulation of individual decisions and the consequences of those decisions become public when government resources are needed to help individuals and families. Divorce is one of the most common ways that women and children fall into poverty in our society. We think our study highlights the need to get good, reliable information out to people who are thinking about divorce. Our findings indicate that it's common for people to have thoughts about divorce, but most want to work things out. Similarly, most couples who have thought about divorce don't make rash decisions, and don't take their divorce decision process lightly. Rather, our data show that most people who have thoughts about divorce contemplate this action over a significant period of time. Our data show that many are actively seeking to repair their relationship by reaching out to professionals, talking with others, and seeking out books and websites. These results suggest that people want to make an informed decision, which implies a real need for getting reliable, research-based information about strengthening marriages, preventing unnecessary divorces, recognizing unhealthy marital behaviors, and the importance of positive co-parenting when divorce is necessary, into the hands of those who need it.

Previous research with more than 500 recently divorced parents in a mid-western state shows that nearly one out of three (30%) wished they had more information about what divorce would be like before they divorced. One in six divorced parents agreed that if they knew how hard things would be after divorce they might have wanted

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<sup>40</sup> Doherty, W. J., Willoughby, B. J., & Peterson, B. (2011). Interest in marital reconciliation among divorcing parents. *Family Court Review*, 49, 313–321; Hawkins, A. J., Willoughby, B. J., & Doherty, W. J. (2012). Reasons for divorce and openness to marital reconciliation. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 53, 453–463.

to work harder with their spouse to try and fix their marriage, and one in eight reported they were not confident that they made the right decision to divorce.<sup>41</sup> These numbers equate to real people and real lives.

Policymakers and lawmakers might consider ways they can get good information to some *serious thinkers* before they file for divorce, or right as they file for divorce. One possibility here is to make use of mandated divorcing parents classes. Most states now mandate an educational class for divorcing parents before a divorce can be finalized.<sup>42</sup> But only a couple of states include significant content about the possibility of reconciliation. And most of these classes are structured so that they are taken as a last step before finalizing a divorce, rather than a first step in the filing process. The earlier they can access these materials in the divorce process, the better.

Lawmakers and policymakers could refine these mandated classes to be able to help those who are unsure about a divorce, even after filing. There are existing materials (hard copy and online) that can be provided by the courts to individuals thinking seriously about divorce.<sup>43</sup> And in many communities these days, there are free classes available that are designed to strengthen marriages.<sup>44</sup> Many who attend these classes are experiencing significant distress in their relationships. Research indicates that some couples are helped by taking these classes.<sup>45</sup> Given the public costs of divorce, even a few repaired marriages will save taxpayers considerable money.<sup>46</sup>

- **For researchers:** As we mentioned at the beginning of this report, the terrain of divorce ideation has been mostly uncharted. This study has helped to map some broad outlines of divorce ideation at one point in time. But many more details remain for exploration. For instance, our focus in this study was more on cognition than emotion, more on thinking (and doing) than feeling. But it will be important to explore in more depth the emotional landscape of divorce ideation, as well. Also, this study only provides the perspective of one spouse. Knowing how both spouses are thinking about divorce should provide an even more illuminating portrait of the marriage and its prospects. Also important will be understanding how divorce ideation changes over time. We need to follow individuals who have been thinking about divorce over several years to see what they do to deal with their thoughts about divorce, how those thoughts wax or wane or remain stable, and what accounts for any change.

We plan to do this with our National Divorce Decision-Making Project, following our original 3,000 survey respondents and our small sub-sample of in-depth interviewees for the next 2 years. But we welcome more scholars to join us on this exploratory voyage to understand the phenomenon of divorce ideation so that we can better help those thinking about divorce to make wise decisions for themselves and their families about the future.

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<sup>41</sup> Unpublished data, Dr. David Schramm, University of Missouri.

<sup>42</sup> Fackrell, T. A., Hawkins, A. J., & Kay, N. M. (2011). How effective are court-affiliated divorcing parents education programs? A meta-analytic study. *Family Court Review*, 49, 107–119.

<sup>43</sup> For instance, see: Hawkins, A. J., Fackrell, T. A., & Harris, S. M. (2013). *Should I try to work it out? A guidebook for individuals and couples at the crossroads of divorce*. Download a free copy at: <http://strongermarriage.org/htm/divorce-remarriage/should-i-try-to-work-it-out>. Also, see: <http://YourDivorceQuestions.org>.

<sup>44</sup> Hawkins, A. J. & VanDenBerghe, B. (2014). *Facilitating forever: A feasible public policy agenda to help couples form and sustain healthy relationships and enduring marriages*. Charlottesville, VA: The National Marriage Project.

<sup>45</sup> Bradford, A., Hawkins, A. J., & Acker, J. (in press). If we build it, they will come: Exploring policy and practice implications of public support for couple and relationship education for lower income and relationally distressed couples. *Family Process*.

<sup>46</sup> Scafidi, B. (2008). *The taxpayer costs of divorce and unwed childbearing: First-ever estimates for the nation and all fifty states*. New York: Institute for American Values and Georgia Family Council; Schramm, D. G., Harris, S. M., Whiting, J. B., Hawkins, A. J., Brown, M., & Porter, R. (2013). Economic costs and policy implications associated with divorce: Texas as a case study. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 54, 1–24.



## APPENDIX A: STUDY DETAILS

We employed the firm, YouGov, to collect data for this study. YouGov is an international market research company with survey panels all over the world. YouGov recruits people to take online surveys a few times a year about various topics. Participants earn points by participating in online surveys. The participants can then redeem these points for cash, gift certificates, or select merchandise on the YouGov site. The survey, administered in February 2015, took about 9 minutes, on average, to complete (a little longer for those who had recent thoughts about divorce because of added questions). The final sample for this study consisted of 3,000 participants. All participants had been married (either first marriages or remarriages) at least 1 year and were between 25–50 years old. (We thought these parameters would maximize the number of parents in our study. Issues around divorce are more serious when dependent children are in the family.) The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, education, political party identification, ideology, and political interest.<sup>47</sup> As a result, the weighted data in this study closely approximates a nationally representative sample. All analyses were with weighted data, although the differences between weighted and unweighted data were minimal.

In addition, we recruited a subsample of individuals who took the survey to participate in an in-depth, qualitative interview about their unique circumstances, thoughts, and attitudes. Specifically, we identified those in the survey who had some recent thoughts about divorce and indicated on their survey that they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview (429 of 745 thinkers).<sup>48</sup> Then we stratified them according to: (a) their personal attitudes about divorce (e.g., “I’m done with this marriage,” “I have mixed feelings about a divorce,” etc.); (b) relationship hope (i.e., high, low); (c) “harder” and “softer” reasons for divorce; (d) gender; and (e) racial/ethnic diversity (i.e., White/Non-White). This yielded a set of potential interviewees who represented the range of experiences, thoughts, attitudes, and personal characteristics of those with some recent thoughts about divorce, although not fully representative of those thinking about divorce or the full sample. Then we randomly selected cases within these strata and forwarded their case identification numbers to the survey firm.<sup>49</sup> The survey firm contacted the individuals to see if they were willing to participate in the interview.<sup>50</sup> Those who agreed to be contacted and then completed an interview were sent a \$75 gift certificate. We interviewed 31 individuals over the phone.<sup>51</sup> (This was about a 4% sub-sample of those with recent thoughts about divorce.) Finally, research assistants transcribed all interviews for further analysis.

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<sup>47</sup> The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file). Data on voter registration status and turnout were matched to this frame using the November 2010 Current Population Survey. Data on interest in politics and party identification were then matched to this frame from the 2007 Pew Religious Life Survey. The matched cases were weighted to the sampling frame using propensity scores. The matched cases and the frame were combined and a logistic regression was estimated for inclusion in the frame. The propensity score function included age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of education, and ideology. The propensity scores were grouped into deciles of the estimated propensity score in the frame and post-stratified according to these deciles. Thus, in the end, weighted data closely approximates a nationally representative sample.

<sup>48</sup> About 58% of those who had recent thoughts about divorce indicated that they would or might be willing to be interviewed.

<sup>49</sup> We did not have any contact or personally identifying information about these individuals. We only had a case identification number.

<sup>50</sup> About 40% of contacted individuals agreed to be contacted for an interview.

<sup>51</sup> Participants could choose whether to interview over the phone or a video-conferencing service. All chose the former, probably preferring to keep greater anonymity.

# SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS FROM THIS STUDY

- 1. Thoughts about divorce are common in our society.** More than half of married individuals (ages 25–50) say they have had thoughts about divorce, either in the past or currently, spoken or unspoken. And those thoughts are common well into the second decade of marriage.
- 2. Many in our study thought about divorce in the past but decided to stay together and almost all of them are glad they did.** They are not only *survivors* but *thrivers*. So thoughts about divorce don't have to be signs of imminent separation.
- 3. Recent thoughts about divorce are common, too; one in four in our study had thoughts about divorce in the last 6 months.** But there is a wide range of experience in this group. **A little more than half of recent thinkers are soft thinkers** whose thoughts are infrequent and their marital problems, though often discouraging and even painful, are more amenable to repair efforts. Their thoughts are just thoughts, not necessarily a prelude to marital dissolution. And possibly, they even spur relationship repair strategies.
- 4. Most recent divorce thinkers—both soft and serious—want to stay—not leave—and fix their problems. They are not cavalier about divorce.** They are willing to work on the marriage, although some put more of the onus for change on their spouse than themselves.
- 5. Patience, changed attitudes, and commitment appear to be more common tools that people employ to resolve—or simply outlast—their marital problems.** Direct action to fix problems, such as counseling, while helpful for some, doesn't seem to be the primary path for repairing relationships.

