

In preparation for the Summit, I have been thinking about the year in review. Since we were last together in Orlando, we experienced the passing of some legends in the field of marriage and family strengthening - Ralph Jones, Bernard Guerney and Lori Gordon. This reminds me that all of us are standing on the shoulders of many who have gone before us paving a way forward and that we have a responsibility to continue being trailblazers for those who are coming behind us in the family strengthening world.

These are tumultuous times in our culture.

Since the late 2000s, the mental health of teens and young adults in the U.S. has declined dramatically. A new [study published in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*](#).

Showed a dramatic increase in teen suicide, anxiety and depression. Between 2009 and 2017, rates of depression among kids ages 14 to 17 increased by more than 60%.

The increases were nearly as steep among those ages 12 to 13 (47%) and 18 to 21 (46%), and rates roughly doubled among those ages 20 to 21. In 2017—the latest year for which federal data are available—**more than one**

in eight Americans ages 12 to 25 experienced a major depressive episode, the study found.

The same trends held when the researchers analyzed the data on suicides, attempted suicides and “serious psychological distress”—a term applied to people who score high on a test that measures feelings of sadness, nervousness and hopelessness. **Among young people, rates of suicidal thoughts, plans and attempts all increased significantly, and in some cases more than doubled, between 2008 and 2017, the study found.**

These findings were based on data collected from more than 600,000 people by the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, an annual nationwide mental-health survey conducted by a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

What's causing today's young people so much anguish? "This is always a tough question to answer, as we can't prove for sure what the causes are," Twenge says. "But there was one change that impacted the lives of young people more than older people, and that was the growth of smartphones and digital media like social media, texting and gaming."

While older adults also use these technologies, "their adoption among younger people was faster and more complete, and the impact on their social lives much larger," Twenge says.

While not all the evidence [is consistent](#), a substantial amount of research has found [associations](#) between heavy technology use and poor mental health outcomes among adolescents and young adults. Research aside, many parents, teachers, guidance counselors and others who work with young people

say social media and heavy technology use are a problem.

The way young people communicate and spend their leisure time “has fundamentally changed,” Twenge adds. “They spend less time with their friends in person and less time sleeping, and more time on digital media.”

Those of you who were with us last year heard fathering expert **Warren Farrell talk about the importance of father involvement.** Whether babies are born prematurely or full-term, the importance of the father being involved is enormous. “Prematurely-born children are more likely to develop their brains better and get out of the hospital sooner and have more psychomotor functioning when the father is visiting the hospital as much as possible, according to research from Yale University.

The father breathing on the child when it's first born helps the bonding process to occur and changes the dad's brain.

The sooner the father gets involved with the child, a whole nest of neurons in the male brain begin to develop and connect with each other that mimics the mother instinct - overlapping with mother instinct. Oxytocin levels go up, testosterone levels go down. Dads connect emotionally with their children.

Yesterday was a monumental day - For the first time ever, a dad and child were pictured on the Huggies box.

At the end of 2018 splashed all over social media and the airwaves was this headline - **Millennials are causing the U.S. divorce rate to plummet.** In fact, divorce is down 18 percent since the Great Recession. On the surface this

sounds like great news, but peeling back the layers reveals some good news accompanied by some not-so-good news.

The data from the report does indicate young couples are looking at marriage differently. They are marrying later in life, waiting until after they have completed their education and have found a job. They are also being pickier about who they marry.

In a conversation I had with Dr. Brad Wilcox at the Institute for Family Studies he said -

“Since the 1960s, we have seen a dramatic retreat from marriage with more divorce, single parenthood and unmarried childbearing. The good news is that most of these trends have slowed in recent years and some have

even reversed. In fact, divorce and unmarried childbearing have reversed course: both are down. This means a clear majority of children born to married couples today will experience a stable family life.

Wilcox believes marriage is becoming more stable, and the adults who are entering marriage are more intentional about commitment. They don't want to make the same mistake their parents often made in the 60s and 70s at the height of the divorce revolution.

The rate of children born outside of marriage has gone from 41 percent to 39.8 percent. This is a modest shift, but no less a change. Wilcox says, "The Great Recession is really the first time we have seen the unwed childbearing trend go down. Many young women and

young couples have become more cautious about having children outside of marriage.”

“We might actually see more children raised in two-parent, married families than in the past decade.”

So, there are some things we can celebrate

Now for the bad news.

“Based on the research, we are going to see a decline in marriage for millennials and those coming behind them,” Wilcox says. “They are more cautious. Many of the young men are less accomplished and appealing as potential mates, and both young men and women are more reluctant to commit.”

Census figures released in 2018 show the median age of first marriage in America is now around 30 for men

and 28 for women. While millennials may be holding off on marriage, they are not holding off on living together.

Census numbers indicate that in 2018, more Americans under 25 live with a partner than are married to one.

The second piece of bad news is, it is still the case that about one in two children born to parents without college degrees will experience family instability. By contrast, only about one-fourth of children born to college-educated parents will see their parents break up. **The class divide in American family life seems here to stay,** according to Wilcox. There is an interesting caveat to note,

“People who regularly attend religious services are more likely to enjoy stable, happy marriages,”

Wilcox shares. “This makes me think we need to expand our thinking beyond just the socio-economic factors. It turns out that religious attendance is about as important as college in predicting marital stability.

In fact, we know there are plenty of folks who are not college-educated who will enjoy good, stable marriages.

One factor that fuels stronger marriage among less educated Americans is an active faith.”

While it is true that more people who are getting married are staying married, **there is a very significant issue going on that cannot be ignored. A large portion of the population is not experiencing the benefits of marriage, and it doesn’t only impact the couples who aren’t**

marrying; it affects the children and society as a whole.

According to Pew research, 42% of adults (102 million) have a step relationship, and when you add the 11.6 million stepchildren in the U.S. (16% of all kids), an estimated 113.6 million Americans have stepkin.

Studies currently indicate that 52% of married/cohabiting couples with at least one living parent (or parent-in-law) and at least one adult child have a stepkin relationship. This means 52% of “sandwich” generation couples have at least one stepparent or stepchild. The percentage is even higher for younger households, with 62% of married/cohabiting couples under

age 55 having at least one stepkin relationship in the three generations.

Currently, 4 in 10 new marriages involve remarriage, and any couple involved in a remarriage can tell you there are definitely some complicating factors. Extended family is even more extended. Instead of parenting decisions being made between two people, there are typically at least three people involved, if not more. Visitation with the other parent involves consulting more schedules, and co-parenting is often complicated.

Some of you might remember when Elizabeth Marquardt spoke to us about the impact of the breakdown of the family on elder care. Just recently Kay Hymowitz wrote in City Journal about the rising number of adults who are

literally going at life alone - nobody to take them to doctor visits or stay with them at home much less in the hospital.

Loneliness is now being called a public health crisis
At the heart of that is often the lack of relationships

A survey Conducted by CIGNA of more than 20,000 U.S. adults ages 18 years and older revealed some alarming findings:

- **Nearly half** of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone (46 percent) or left out (47 percent).
- **One in four** Americans (27 percent) rarely or never feel as though there are people who really understand them.
- **Two in five** Americans sometimes or always feel that their relationships are not meaningful (43 percent) and that they are isolated from others (43 percent).
- **One in five** people report they rarely or never feel close to people (20 percent) or feel like there are people they can talk to (18 percent).
- Americans who live with others are less likely to be lonely (average loneliness score of 43.5) compared to those who live alone (46.4). However, this does not [apply](#) to single parents/guardians (average loneliness score of 48.2) – **even though they live with children, they are more likely to be lonely.**

- **Only around half of Americans** (53 percent) have meaningful in-person social interactions, such as having an extended conversation with a friend or spending quality time with family, on a daily basis.
- **Generation Z (adults ages 18-22) is the loneliest generation** and claims to be in worse health than older generations.

I hope all of you read Mandy Len Catron's article in The Atlantic - What You Lose When you Gain a Spouse: What if marriage is not the social good so many believe and want it to be. If you haven't read it, go find last Friday's NARME enews where you will find a link to the article along with a response written by Scott Stanley and posted by the Institute for Family Studies.

I could continue on, but I think it is clear, our culture is wrestling with some very serious issues. At the heart of all of these issues is relationships or lack there of AND that is why we were here. We've only got a few days together, but lets hunker down and take advantage of every

moment to get equipped, share with others and leave here ready to take on these challenges in our communities!