

HEALTHY MARRIAGES

Strengthening Marriages and Families Through Healthy Relationships

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MARRIAGES ARE MADE IN HEAVEN BUT WE HAVE TO MAINTAIN THEM ON EARTH

There is a saying that "All marriages are happy, it is living together that creates all the problems". There are many problems a couple faces while keeping up with busy careers, home maintenance, parenting responsibilities, and community involvement. It is unfortunate to see just how often a marriage deteriorates after years of pressure produced by day to day living.

Marital problems among Muslims in America are increasing. Divorce and marital discord are reaching epidemic proportion. Domestic Violence is increasing; Imams and Muslim social workers are concerned as 60% newly married are filing for divorce within a year of marriage. Couples who are in matrimonial relationship for many years are showing signs of marital disharmony are becoming dysfunctional family units.

HEALTHY MARRIAGE:

Marriage in Islam is not a sacrament but a civil contract between two individuals with equal rights. A healthy marriage is based on couples making decisions and resolving problems according to their faith and commitment. The spouses honor and ensure each other's rights and privileges and have realistic expectations of each other. A strong willingness to compromise and cooperate is necessary for a healthy marriage. While keeping their individuality and autonomy the couples must develop skills to resolve conflicts in a healthy manner without anger and aggression. It is not marriage that causes a problem, it is the neglect of your relationship with your spouse, which destroys a marriage.

WHY MARIAGES HAVE PROBLEMS?

There are multiple factors. The most common reasons are personality differences, differences in cultural patterns, differences in religious beliefs, differences in financial matters, parenting and hobbies. The more differences there are, the more experiences the difficulties in

building harmonious relationship. And once it has started effecting the communication, it leads to problems, which in turn leads to conflicts.

Although both partners may have the same basic religion or same basic religious beliefs, there may be differences in depth of one's belief, the daily practices, and the way it affects the daily life. The husband may be orthodox or the wife may be orthodox and they have intensely different opinions on religious matters. The second major factor is the personality. We all have different personalities and one has to develop a compromising attitude to accept the strengths and weaknesses or the partner's personality. If the personality is very strong in both partners, they have extreme difficulty. If one partner is more passive than the other, it will be easier. For example a dominant wife may do very well with a passive husband or a passive wife may do very well with a dominant husband. On the other hand, if they both recognize they have a strong personality but they are still willing to work together and accept each other's views, then those marriages have very few problems.

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Another common problem I find in my practice concerns financial matters. If the husband has a habit of overspending then there are conflicts. When both are spendthrift or both don't care much about the money the life may be harmonious. On the other hand, if one person is very cautious and prudent with financial matters and the other has a free hand, it will certainly lead to conflicts. Socialization is another issue. If the wife and husband both are socially active and enjoy socialization then the chances of conflict

are much less. On the other hand, if the husband wants to socialize and participate in multiple activities when the wife resents, then this pattern becomes the basis of conflicts. What I am trying to explain is the more you have difference of opinion on cultural issues, parenting issues, hobbies or financial matters, there are more problems and a greater likelihood of building long standing conflicts which will result in disharmonious relationship.

In addition to the long-standing problems of difference in the personality and cultural patterns there are short-term problems which also affect the marriage. The stresses of daily life, illnesses, death in the family, financial crisis, issues related to children and job may also have negative influence on the harmonious relationship. If the child is not doing well in school, instead of exploring the problem and coming with a common understanding sometimes both the spouses blame each other for the child's academic problem. When one starts blaming, that results in conflict and, instead of resolving the problem of the child, another problem is created. The relationship that will have further negative effect on the children and the harmonious life at home.

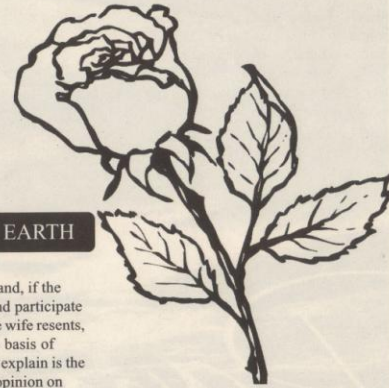
SCAPEGOATING:

Displacing or projecting your anger on your spouse also results in marital disharmony. You may have problem with the boss or any authority figure. You are unable to express anger with the fear of retaliation. You come home and project your anger on safe person, your wife or child. The family members do not understand the reasons for his anger, and your inability to communicate and express your real feelings will further increase conflict and stress.

THE PHASES OF MARITAL RELATIONSHIP:

THE HONEYMOON PHASE:

This phase lasts anywhere between 3-12 months. This is the period where two



young people feel close to each other, they don't think much about the differences, and attempt to enjoy life and the new experiences.

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FANTASIES AND REALITIES IN A MARRIAGE:

When people marry each other, they build a lot of fantasies. The fantasies continue during the honeymoon period. They overlook the shortcomings and develop and expectation that the problem will just disappear. Unfortunately, the reality that appears after some time results in disappointments.

There is a misunderstanding that if you have an arranged marriage then you will have more conflicts whereas if the marriage is taken place after a prolonged period of dating the conflicts are less. Unfortunately that is not true. I have seen many couples who have dated for three or four years and they even live together for a year or two and then got divorced just six months after the marriage*. During the entire period of dating or living together the couple has not looked into reality and they continue to live in a fantasy. Recently a lady came to see me; she was married for about two and a half years and has known her husband over 5 years. Her major complaints were that her husband was drinking excessively and had been abusive towards her. I questioned that since she knew him for about 3 years prior to marriage, did she recognize these problems. She said that he never drank excessively and he was not

abusive. The fact of the matter is that people try to paint the best picture of themselves during the dating period. So, once the honeymoon period is gone, the disappointment start coming to surface which results in conflicts.

DISCOVERY PHASE:

When they start noticing the differences in each other. This is the phase where the disappointments occur and this is the phase where one has to resolve the issues before it becomes more troublesome. Unfortunately many couples don't pay attention and they just keep on accumulating the disappointment and instead of dealing with the issues, they attempt to fix the problem in the spouse and the conflicts keep on building.

DISAGREEMENTS IN MARRIAGES:

When the conflicts start accumulating, naturally this will further increase the disharmony in relationship. Conflicts are not uncommon in any marriage. However, the three possible outcomes of these conflicts are:

1. The conflicts can be resolved and the couple will end up in happy relationship.
2. They may compromise and accept some disagreements and still build a fair relationship.
3. Give up resolving any conflicts and go their own way. When one makes this choice, the marriage problems are bound to continue.

LONG TERM EFFECT OF THE DISHARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIP:

Disharmonious relationship leads to constant arguments resulting in not listening and sometimes overt fighting. Fighting may be verbal resulting in emotional trauma and sometimes may even be physical. The constant blame, and fault finding that the other person is responsible for this disharmony is not uncommon. The fights may be covert like nagging, constant criticism and a controlling attitude. Marital disharmony certainly increases the stresses of daily living. It contributes or exacerbates medical illnesses like hypertension or coronary heart disease, diabetes, etc. It may also contribute to exacerbate emotional illnesses like anxiety or depression. Invariably marital disharmony will result in divorce or a dysfunctional family with serious consequences on children.

CONFLICTS, ANGER AND HUMAN RELATIONS:

Conflict is normal in any healthy relationship and it is not a sign of incompatibility. Conflicts are a result of different opinions, values and ways of doing things. Conflicts, if worked out, enhance the relationship and unresolved conflicts result in anger.

Some individuals experience and express anger frequently and even minor situations create anger resulting in loss of self-control. On the other hand, some individuals suppress their anger to the degree that they deny it. Both of these

situations lead to unhealthy physical and psychological consequences. Long standing feelings of anger whether expressed or suppressed leads to personality changes, anxiety, depression, mistrust, and paranoid feelings. Anger is also one of the contributory factors for hypertension, heart disease, coronary occlusion and sudden death.

Some people deal with conflicts by explosive outbursts, constant fighting or passive reactive behavior as silence and not communicating. Others deal with conflict by playing the role of a victim to gain support of the family and friends, or hold past resentments and anger and get revenge.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION:

Unfortunately, no do it yourself guide is available to fix a marriage. Two individuals who seem to have good relations may develop conflicts. Because of changing circumstances new issues will emerge. These issues will not be resolved without communication. Many couples show inability to communicate and resolve conflicts. They may employ a domineering attitude or even resort to physical violence to force their spouse to comply. They may act as if they have all the knowledge and decision making capability. They may also interpret religious teachings to achieve their goal. Other may turn to constant criticism, nagging, sarcasm, or even ridicule. They know what to say and how to say it so that the other individual involved loses self control.

*Author / publisher do NOT approve of living together without marriage.

HEALTHY WAY TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS:

The best way to prevent conflict is to take time to talk when things are going well. This will develop into a habit of communicating without anger. It is important to listen without interruption so that each partner has an opportunity to express feelings and opinions. One must avoid blaming, confrontation, and bringing up his or her past unpleasant experiences. The goal of the communication should be to find solution and ways to resolve the differences. It is necessary to compromise and show willingness to change by communicating about different perceptions and opinions one learns about their own shortcomings. This can be taken as a positive opportunity for growth and development. Learning better ways to deal with anger and conflict will result in improving relationships.

THREE STEPS TO BUILD A HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIP:

Listen, pay attention and find time to expect to explore each others' feelings. Think, feel, act, and sometimes say sorry. Mutual respect is very important in developing a harmonious relationship. Make a commitment, make adjustments and make compromises.

COUNSELING:

If the problems are not resolved seek help of a colleague, relative, the elderly or a religious leader whom you trust. IF you do not wish to do that or if that is not helping, counselor may show the techniques to reduce the conflicts and improve the relationship.

WAYS TO KEEP MARRIAGE HEALTHY

1. Keep spouse informed:
 - a) inform spouse of what is happening in your life
 - b) inform spouse of your schedule
2. Help your spouse, especially when he or she is working hard on a project. It convey sensitivity and devotion.
3. Communication: regularly taking time to talk and explore feelings, spend 30 minutes each week not focusing on work or controversial issues.
4. Non sexual affection: Affectionate, nonsexual touching reaffirms the emotional bond.
5. Elimination of irritating habits. Recognize what is irritable to your spouse and change the habit even if you do not see it as important.
6. Apologies: no one is perfect, yet many men and women hide behind false pride by never admitting that they have been wrong. It is a sign of strength to personally acknowledge a mistake or when you have hurt your spouse's feelings to directly and sincerely say, "I am sorry", it is also a sign of being caring.
7. Calmly disagreeing: You do not have to agree with each other on all matter but you must have a capability to resolve the differences of opinions.
8. Loneliness: Loneliness is the most troublesome and uncomfortable feeling a couple has when they have drifted apart. Loneliness is a psychological despair due to a sense of not being understood or accepted by those you care about. Make every effort to prevent this from happening.
9. Attempt to make sure changes have overcome the fear of change. Change of any kind is uncomfortable and with practice the discomfort will disappear.
10. Influence of peers: Relatives and friends with whom you share your problems may not support the changes you are bringing in yourself. You must do what is right for your marriage even if you must stand alone.
11. Fear of consequences: "If I do it once, he/she will expect it all the time". Remember you are changing to make your relationship better, simply because it is the right thing to do.