

Fighting for our families : Turning the Tide of Rising Divorce rates within the community

The family unit is the building block of a stable society according to our faith. A marriage, its health and distress impact not only the couple involved but have far reaching consequences on the children, the parents, extended family members and the community at large. Traditionally, marriage within our communities has been a relatively stable institution, a relationship, although one based on contract, one that could be counted on for the most part to last the lifetime of the couple.

Over the last few decades however, the couple relationship and in turn the family unit, has become increasingly fragile.

Everyone seems to have an opinion on why this is so. Here are some examples: "The youth today have no idea what it takes to make a marriage work." "Girls are too independent now. They cannot adjust to the demands of married life". "There is no toleration or compromise". "There are no good men left. These days the boys have no commitment towards their families."

It seems that wherever we go, people are discussing the dismal state of the institution of marriage. What was once a stable unit of society is now threatened from all sides. There are many opinions regarding the causes of marital failure and as many on how to reverse this trend. Most of the "solutions" are coming from well meaning community elders and clergy who are sometimes out of touch with the lived experience of the challenges faced by young families in the 21st century.

Let's examine some of the trends and pressures impacting marriage in the 21st century:

What are the trends affecting marriage today?

1) Negotiation based marriage and high expectations:

Our society, specifically the middle and upper class has seen marriages change from where virtually nothing was negotiable to ones in which many things are negotiable. People just a few years ago did not think to put in their contracts whether or not the couple will live with the in-laws and the woman's right of divorce. Today many take it for granted that these things are negotiable.

Moreover, expectations for love-based, “happy” marriages have increased. It is now seen as a right of both partners to have their emotional, physical and financial needs met by their spouses.

The massive changes in people’s expectations have led to a very different kind of marriage for most couples. We expect more out of marriage today than at any other time in history. We expect to be compatible with our spouses, to be able to communicate with them and to be “happy” in our marriage.

2) The materialistic, individualistic society:

It is a much-lamented fact that the weddings of today have become lavish, extravagant affairs. What was once a simple, family affair now involves months of planning, preparation and coordination. Inevitably, the seriousness of what married life entails is lost in the excitement and chaos of planning for the event. After the wedding itself is over and the excitement dies down, the reality of what it means begins sinking in and for the unprepared it can come as quite a shock!

To add to this, today’s individualistic society tends to value personal happiness and fulfillment over everything else. At the first sign of trouble, each spouse will ask themselves “what is in this for me”, “why am I not getting what I want” and “is it worth it for me to stay?”

3) The media

The media, especially television and movies, are giving the message that the most important elements in any relationship are romance, passion and love. This leads to an expectation amongst our youth that a marriage should, above all, bring romance to your life. A few decades ago, most people wanted to get married in order to have children, cement family alliances or own a home. Today’s youth report that they plan to get married for ‘love’.

Although this may not be representative of the Muslim Umma as a whole, we have to face the reality that the trends within the West and the rest of the world do impact our communities as well.

4) It is easier to dissolve marriage today

People today, especially women, have greater affluence and financial independence, which gives people more options if they want to leave a

relationship. Earlier, when fewer women were in the work force, the simple logistics of financial dependence kept many in unhappy relationships. Now that more women across all social segments are working, it means they are not financially dependent upon their spouses and can lead independent lives without resorting to their parents or families for help.

Moreover, the increase in societal acceptance of divorces, although a good thing, has no doubt contributed many to leave marriages, which they might have stuck out in previously.

On the positive side, it means that people can put more emphasis on their personal choices in the role of building and keeping a great marriage. It means that for some it is easier to leave abusive relationships.

On the negative side, with fewer economic, legal and moral barriers to divorce, more people choose this option – even when faced with difficulties that they may have overcome with the right kind of effort.

5) Growing awareness of the effects of marital problems on adults and children.

The damaging effects of destructive marital conflict and divorce on spouses and children are incalculable. These effects include spiritual, economic, medical and mental health problems.

Let's focus on children for a moment. There are many, many studies to show that children do best when they are being raised in stable homes by two parents who love each other, handle conflict well and provide a base of commitment that brings stability to the lives of those children. Research shows that children are hurt by marital conflict – regardless of the fact if parents stay together or divorce. These children are hurt by how their parents fight, regardless of whether they are in the same house.

Women and children suffer most economic hardship in the event of marital breakup. Marital problems are also the number one cause of depression. Criticism, blame and the threats of leaving the marriage all put individuals at much greater risk for depression.

More recently, research has also documented the powerful effects of marital distress on physical health.

Given that these are the trends in society right now, what can we do to save ourselves and our families from the devastating effects of marital unhappiness or a broken home?

Up until recently, communities have been coping with the stresses on marriage by putting together reconciliation and mediation committees made up of volunteers with little or no training in conflict resolution skills. While this has been a valiant effort from many communities, it focuses efforts on intervention once conflict has become severe. More recently, many communities across the globe have started to put together premarital counseling initiatives to better prepare young Muslims for marriage.

In the meantime, let us see what has been happening in the Western societies.

The emergence of the science of relationships

Governments in North America and Europe have recognized the enormous economic and social toll of marriage and family breakdown. For this reason, they have been investing resources into researching causes and solutions to family breakdown.

Partly as a result of this increased funding, many research initiatives and marriage education training courses have sprung up.

What researchers in the USA and other Western countries have found is that marital success and failure is highly predictable AND that most marriages can be helped with the right intervention at the right time.

When researchers working in the field of marital relationships look at individual marriages, it appears that for the most part, most couples can be helped. They therefore developed strategies to help couples build strong and happy marriages. Much money is being spent on research into topics such as communication, commitment, acceptance, friendship, forgiveness and spiritual intimacy.

Two locations of relationship research are noteworthy: Researchers based at the University of Denver in the USA and the Gottman institute in Seattle, Washington have concluded that marital failure is predictable to a surprising degree, which means that for many couples, the seeds of divorce are present prior to marriage.

They have identified the factors that greatly increase the odds of divorce. These factors can be either static such as difference in religion or personality styles, or dynamic such as communication, conflict and commitment.

As a result of this and other research, we can confidently say that relationship wellbeing is now a science. Because they know what predicts marital failure there is hope for reducing the risks.

The good news is that the dynamic risk factors, namely, communicating and identifying destructive patterns in a relationship are also the most amenable to change. Various studies strongly suggest that couples can learn skills, complete exercises and enhance ways of thinking that increase their odds of success. The researchers at the university of Denver consequently developed a program called The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) to teach couples skills which would enhance and strengthen their marriages.

In a large-scale study in Denver, it was shown that couples, who take marriage education and training, including PREP (which is being used in Toronto for the last 15 years), have much lower rates of premarital breakup and post marital divorce. They also report much higher levels of marital satisfaction. They communicate more positively and less negatively following training.

Let us now turn to an overview on the evidence of marriage education and best practices on developing such programs

Dimensions of Marriage Education

1. Content—What Is Taught?

relational skills; awareness/ knowledge/attitudes; and motivations/virtues. Importantly, we need empirically derived curricula based on faith and science, and relevant to the culture and context of young families rather than personal, idiosyncratic content.

Relational Skills

Relationship skills have been the primary emphasis of most marriage education efforts in the West in line with cultural expectations for marriage which is to bring the new couple life- long joy, companionship, growth, and sexual fulfillment.

Evaluation research provides hope that vital relationship skills can be learned

Awareness, Knowledge, and Attitudes

Since many young couples develop expectations regarding marriage from media and popular culture, it is important to include some instruction on common problems to avoid and the need to be intentional and work on a relationship to keep it healthy.

Motivation/Virtues

In addition to needed skills and basic knowledge, the motivations and virtues brought to marriage are important content domains for marriage education.

Commitment is one important motivation that usually is addressed in marriage education. A growing body of research finds that commitment is crucial to healthy, stable marriages as is the character and the motivations that individuals bring to relationships

2. Intensity—What Is the Dosage?

Proper dosage is an important part of any intervention; too little means ineffective treatment, but too much can be costly. We need to be mindful that resources are needed to implement a family strengthening strategy and these resources must be used in a strategic way to have the most impact.

In short, we need a creative and flexible approach to marriage education that varies the dosage along a continuum of intensity.

3. Methods—How Is It Learned?

Regardless of the content of marriage education offerings, decisions need to be made about how the content is presented and learned.

Instructor

The more instructors are familiar with the particular issues that participants face, the more credibility they will have. For this reason, we need to build capacity within our communities and train marriage educators from the younger demographics so they can relate to the young couples.

Learning Styles

The choice of methods requires careful and empirically informed tailoring and ideally including a variety of methods tailored to diverse learning styles, such as didactic presentation of information, showing examples (e.g., in a video), interactive discussion, and role-playing.

Maintenance

Given the steady stream of new stresses that couples face and the short duration of interventions, it would be extremely beneficial to have ongoing sessions across the marriage life span, for example, training when the couple becomes parents. Research has shown that postnatal booster strengthened marriages during the transition to parenthood in communities that offered them.

Additional support resources such as newsletters sent periodically to program graduates, regular programming from the mimbar, reinforcing what was taught might reinforce program effects and encourage ongoing maintenance activities..

Building virtual communities of graduates who can support each other over time also might be effective. Another initiative could be a marriage mentoring initiative in which couples who first receive education give back to their communities by reaching out to help other couples in some fashion, such as mentoring other couples, becoming educators themselves, and advocating in their communities for healthy marriages.

4. Timing—When Does It Occur?

Most communities time marriage programs to be delivered before the couple gets married. Something to consider is that young couples blinded by love and in the midst of wedding planning may not be the most receptive to what is being taught. Our experience has shown that couples are more ready once they are married and reality of married life is beginning to set in, anywhere from six to twentyfour months after marriage.

It is very valuable to open marriage education programs to couples who have been married a long time as the interaction between newly weds and those who have been married a long time has been very valuable for both.

5. Curriculum and the role of faith

Traditionally in Muslim homes, young men and women 'trained' for marriage by watching their parents and by informal advice given by family members on or before the wedding night. Positive remodelling was bolstered by a strong commitment to the shared religious and spiritual values amongst the families and individuals who were forming marital bonds.

The model of premarital advice worked for the time even though it lacked many essentials of good quality relationship education that have emerged since. Current day marriage education is different from traditional pre-marital counseling in many ways: unlike traditional pre-marital counseling, which is, information based, the best marriage programs are skill based. Most programs are not faith based and focus on teaching communication skills and the how-tos of conflict resolution rather than providing spiritual guidance about the marriage ahead.

Couples are therefore taught practical ways to make their marriage better, regardless of their commitment to faith. The classes are usually taught in professional classroom or workshop type settings which is helpful for couples who feel threatened about sharing private concerns in front of others. Although the programs are interactive, no couple needs to share things that they would rather keep private. The programs vary in length from a full day, a weekend to several hours spread over a few weeks. It has been shown that such programs increase couple satisfaction, improve communication skills, and reduce negative conflict behaviors including violence.

Although these programs address the how-to's of marriage relationship, they lack a major value and guiding principle for people, which is the role of religion and spirituality in family life. The reality for a significant percentage of the world population is that the first place they turn to for comfort and guidance when things are challenging in life and in marriage is to their faith and their faith communities. In recognition of this, many evidence based marriage programs have subsequently developed faith based version for the Christian population, and less so for the Jewish population. Markedly absent from these programs are Muslim versions which cater to a large percentage of the world population. There is one exception, which is a short booklet from the Gottman institute catering to Muslims, but this author found it inadequate at best.

For this reason, although communities can start the process by using evidence based manualized curricula which have been developed in the West, over the long term, we need to invest in developing curricula which would be more overtly guided by Islamic principles and also relevant to young families within our communities.

Conclusion:

Given the current stress on the institution of Muslim marriage, as we know it, we can no longer sit back and watch. We have ample evidence that marriage education has saved many marriages and enriched and strengthened many families. This has happened in the most 'at risk' groups. We need to follow the lead within our own society and make it a stated priority to initiate comprehensive marriage saving initiatives which would include both prevention strategies such as premarital counseling, marriage enrichment programs and marriage mentoring programs as well interventions to provide resources and support to couples in troubled marriages.