

Creating Happy Marriages and Strengthening Commitment to Marriage

A presentation to the women of the Muslim Educational Trust

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Marriage Is Not Easy

- Partners must balance individual needs and preferences with those of partner and family
- Commitment is important because emotions are changeable
- Life stress = marriage stress!
 - Employment
 - Childrearing
 - Finances
 - Transitions and dislocations
 - Illnesses, trauma, grief and other misfortunes
- And... we each have vulnerabilities and personal histories

Research on Marital Satisfaction

- Partners in the strongest marriages agree about the purpose of their marriage.
 - They share an understanding of what is important
 - They respect each other's efforts to work toward what is important
 - Each person must ask “What kind of wife/husband do I want to be?” “What do I want my marriage to be about?” If the answers to those questions do not fit together, watch out!
- When partners share key values, conflict between them does not have to damage the relationship.

Research on Marital Satisfaction

- Did you know...
- Conflict is not bad.
 - Some couples fight a lot and still report great respect and affection for each other (and satisfaction in the marriage)
 - *Many* couples have had long, satisfying marriages without ever learning “assertive communication” or “I statements”
 - (But these things can be helpful in particular instances!)

Research on Marital Satisfaction

- Signs that the marriage is in trouble (Gottman):
 - Harsh Startup – discussion *starts* with criticism
 - Display of
 - Criticism
 - Contempt
 - Defensiveness
 - Stonewalling
 - Emotional Flooding
 - Stress responses in the body
 - Failed repair attempts
 - Bad memories

Research on Marital Satisfaction

- Men and women often respond differently to emotional intensity in marriage.
 - Men: heart rate and blood pressure go up when emotional expression increases
 - Women: heart rate and blood pressure go down when emotional expression increases
- It is perfectly fine to avoid conflict if that works for both of you. But it won't work if one of you feels "shut out."

Good Intentions....

- If being nasty is bad, we just won't do it!
- But there is a catch:
- The more important your spouse is to you emotionally, the **STRONGER** your “irrational” response to feeling out of sync.
- Once a destructive pattern is established, the emotional dynamic gains power and it is harder and harder to undo.

Attachment (a brief detour)

- What does a happy baby look like when interacting with a skillful mother or father?
 - Mutual gaze
 - Shared attention
 - Laughter/smiling
 - Non-verbal mirroring
 - Parent mirrors child's expression – amplifies happiness and reflects and reduces distress (soothing)
- What about when parent leaves or withdraws attention?
 - Distress! Sometimes tears, sometimes rage
 - JOY when mom or dad returns

Attachment in Marriage

- Our spouses are our “primary attachment objects”
- In a healthy marriage, partners
 - Amplify joy/pleasure
 - Reflect and defuse distress
- When we are deeply attached to someone, there is a predictable sequence to losing them or feeling out of attunement
 - Attempt to regain connection
 - Protest
 - Despair
 - Detachment

Attachment in Marriage

- Why might a grown woman with good social skills become enraged when her spouse leaves crumbs behind after eating a sandwich? How could this possibly matter?!?
- **It's not about the crumbs**, it is about feeling ignored!
- The topic of the complaint or argument may be trivial, but the emotional messages are not.

- Why might a couple say their marriage is strong and satisfying even as they cope with financial strain or the illness of a child?
- They turn to each other. They are able to **express distress** (anger or sadness) and be **assured that their feelings are understood**, *even if the problem cannot be solved.*

Some Examples to Discuss

This example adapted from in [The Muslim Marriage Guide](#) by Ruqayyah Waris Maqsood

- A young wife is at home all day with small children. Her husband works a demanding job. At the end of the day, the wife is eager to share her cares and concerns with her husband. Her husband comes home looking forward to some peace and a break from dealing with people. He listens for a few minutes to her concerns and decides that they are somewhat “trivial” so he doesn’t really respond. She senses his disconnection and “explodes.” He feels attacked and withdraws to another room, refusing to speak further about it.
- What is happening here? How might this couple act to strengthen their marriage?

Some Examples to Discuss

This example adapted from in [The Muslim Marriage Guide](#) by Ruqayyah Waris Maqsood

- A husband is having difficulty at work. He struggles all day with his problem and does not know how to resolve it. When he is home with his wife, she encourages him to discuss the problem with her but he feels exhausted and doesn't want to go through it all with her, he just wants to work on it himself. He says to her that he doesn't want to talk about it. She feels hurt and shut out and goes about her evening chores. Later, he turns to her for affection and is dismayed to find that she is angry and hurt.
- What is happening here? How might this couple act to strengthen their marriage?

Some Examples to Discuss

- A wife is feels herself starting to become very irritated with her husband and worries that she is losing respect for him because of one of his habits. She notices that she is beginning to say things that are quite cutting and senses that he is starting to see her in a different way than he did when they were first married.
- What is happening here? How might this couple act to strengthen their marriage?

Our Experience Affects Our Behavior

- People who have survived trauma (violence or life threatening experiences) often have trouble staying “attuned” to partners. Trauma survivors may “tune out” involuntarily when they get flooded or may be very controlling or easily angered.
- Most of us act the way we saw our parents act, unless we have support and really good reasons to try to act another way! This is one reason that discussing values is important!
- If we know we are loved and lovable, we are much more likely to be able to respond calmly when someone near us is very upset.

Our Experience Affects Our Behavior

- Once we are in a particular relationship, a dynamic is set up that builds upon itself. If, early in the relationship, we practice turning toward each other and feel safe expressing strong feelings, the marriage will feel safe and joyful, even if anger or sadness are expressed sometimes. If we start a pattern of “demand and withdraw” or “attack- counterattack” the demands and attacks will get more and more intense, faster and faster. This dynamic feels very powerful and the couple may wish to seek couples therapy to have some support in shifting the pattern.

Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy

- Couple may feel caught in fights that are emotionally very intense and that they feel they cannot resolve.
- Therapist listens carefully to both, together, and reflects each person's concerns and perspective. After trust has been established, the therapist begins to try to help partners “soften” towards each other at the same time that the therapist is helping each of them feel heard.
- One of the central goals is to help partners understand that anger is often a “protest” that grows from fear of loss of the partner's love, attention or respect
- Partners express vulnerability in session and are supported in expressing concern and care rather than falling into old patterns.
- This kind of therapy is remarkably effective!

And then your husband says....

- “Oh, no! Do we have to talk about our feelings all the time?”
- No, of course not. There are many ways to be attuned, and to feel connected. We mirror facial expressions, do little things that show we are thinking of each other, compliment each other, smile together when someone we love is happy, share a hobby or do a job together at home, participate together in family rituals, greet each other warmly, etc...

Abuse in Relationships

- Physical: Pushing, slapping, beating, choking, grabbing, forcing sex, kicking, restraining, etc..
- Verbal/emotional: Humiliation, insulting, preventing from speaking to others, threatening, threatening family or pets, keeping away from money or other resources, jealousy and accusations, demands, cruel or demeaning humor

Abuse in Relationships

- “Reality testing” can be difficult
 - If a woman has been isolated from her family or friends or feels she should not speak about certain topics
 - If she believes what the abuser says: She somehow “deserves” the abuse or disrespect
- Just to be clear: No one deserves to be attacked or threatened

Communication Styles

- Aggressive: Trying to hurt the other person
- Assertive: Asking clearly for what you want
- Passive: Hinting about what you want or accepting whatever is happening

Assertive Communication

- Direct and very clear.
- Communication about something that has happened --
Three parts:
 - Description of a *specific* action or occurrence.
 - Description of impact of the action or occurrence
 - Sometimes includes request for future action
- When _____ happened, I felt _____. In the future, I would like _____.
- Example: “When you told that joke about young wives, I felt ashamed and lonely. In the future, I would appreciate it if you would not tell that kind of joke.”

Assertive Communication

- “When you raised your voice and said I was stupid, I felt frightened and angry. In the future, please say you are frustrated instead of acting it out by raising your voice or calling me a name.”
- How are these different?
 - “When you had your temper tantrum and attacked me, I felt you were acting like a fool.”
 - What about.... “When you told that rude joke, I felt ashamed and lonely.”

Assertive Communication

- Stand or sit straight. Speak slightly louder than normal conversational tone.
- Set clear boundaries. “Please step away from the door so that I can go through.” “Please do not criticize me in front of the children”
- The “broken record technique” – Repeat your statement over and over in the face of argument or dismissal. “Please lower your voice.” “ It is important to me that you lower your voice.”
- “Responding to requests:
 - When you say “no” do it without apologizing and without a lot of explanation
 - I need time to think about that. I’ll let you know tomorrow.”

Sexuality in Relationships

- “Personal intimacy is a minefield of opportunities to hurt each other” (p. 87, The Muslim Marriage Guide by Ruqayyah Waris Maqsood)
- It can also be a source of great joy and one of the ways that married couples bond.
- All of those moments when we are vulnerable are moments when we have a chance to be truly intimate.
- It is not what we do with our bodies which creates a sense of intimacy, but being vulnerable and finding that we are treated tenderly or that we are sharing something with our spouse.

Sexuality in Relationships

- When married people are asked about satisfaction with the sexual aspect of their relationship, we find that emotional connection is very important.
- It is normal for women to report needing to feel emotionally connected before desire arises.
- There is no “normal” for frequency of lovemaking-- As long as you and your spouse are both happy, it is fine. If one of you is unhappy, you will need every bit of practice being emotionally connected in order to start to talk about the issue.

Questions?

- Use the paper provided to ask whatever you would like, about any topic related to any part of the presentation. Please note whether you would like the presenter to answer the question or if you would like the group to discuss it.
- When you are done writing, please fold the paper over