

Fighting *FOR* Your Marriage

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“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 now there seems to be emerging hope that we can reverse this trend.

Lets start with what we *do* agree upon: we know that marriage is not simply a contract between two people for mutual benefit as long as they choose to keep it. We agree that healthy marriages make healthy families, which in turn leads to a strong community and society. When there is marital discord, it affects not only the families involved - the whole community feels its effects. It makes sense, therefore to take proactive steps to support the creation of healthy marriages and happy families.

In order to do this, lets first consider the causes of the pressure upon marriages and then reflect on what can be done about it.

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 or own a home. Today's youth report that they plan to get married for 'love'. Although this may not be representative of Pakistani society as a whole, we have to face the reality that the trends within the West and the rest of the world do impact our society 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 middle and upper class women 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 in itself, 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 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 or not 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.

Can anything be done about this?

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?

There has been a lot of research done in the USA recently about what makes marriages work. Since the government has social services for those unable to care for themselves, it has realized that there are major economic implications for the society as a whole when a marriage breaks. Women and children need to be rehabilitated and the health and psychological impact of the divorce needs to be dealt with.

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

Researchers based at the University of Denver in the USA 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. 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, 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.

What is marriage education and who would benefit?

Traditionally, a couple 'trained' for marriage by watching their parents and by informal advice given by family members on or before the wedding night.

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. 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.

Marriage education is also different from Marriage Therapy. Whereas therapy is sought when a couple is in distress or has problems, marriage education can benefit all couples, whether newly wed or married long time. Since they focus on prevention, they include eager, happy couples that are generally getting along and willing to improve their relationship skills. It must be noted that despite this, couples education can also help couples that are experiencing difficulties.

Moreover, unlike couple's therapy, Marriage Education classes are usually taught in groups, instead of one-on-one sessions with a counselor. This adds to the 'learning and having fun' element and a great many couples report that they learn much from each other as well as from the program leader.

When is the optimum time to do it – before or after marriage?

Marriage education courses can be either pre-marriage education or marriage enrichment education.

Pre marriage courses are designed primarily to encourage couples to discuss some of the critical emotional and practical issues surrounding the marriage commitment and to assist them with developing good communication skills. Such programs also give partners the experience of responding to questions about marital attitude, perceptions and expectations. When they are dealt with in a structured setting and supervised by trained leaders, they may bring to light many attitudes that one partner did not know the other had. Such courses should become a normal and intrinsic part of marriage education – just as normal as organizing a wedding reception, ordering the cards etc.

Marriage Education courses benefit married couples just as professional development courses are seen as being advantageous to career success. They can be structured in such a way as to lead onto a series of marriage education programs set at appropriate intervals in the marriage life cycle, such as the birth children, mid-life crises, and becoming in-laws.

The pre marriage courses create a mind set for the couple that they are not alone and are well supported by a community who is committed to ensuring the success of their family. It is essential that the support structure for the couples include professional and confidential counseling for couples experiencing difficulties. The primary objective of counseling should be to assist the couples to resolve problems with the aim, whenever possible, of maintaining the marriage relationship.

Conclusion:

Given the current stress on the institution of 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 marriage saving initiatives such as marriage education classes, mentoring programs and to provide resource and support to couples in troubled marriages.

JSS offers the PREP (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program) a few times a year.