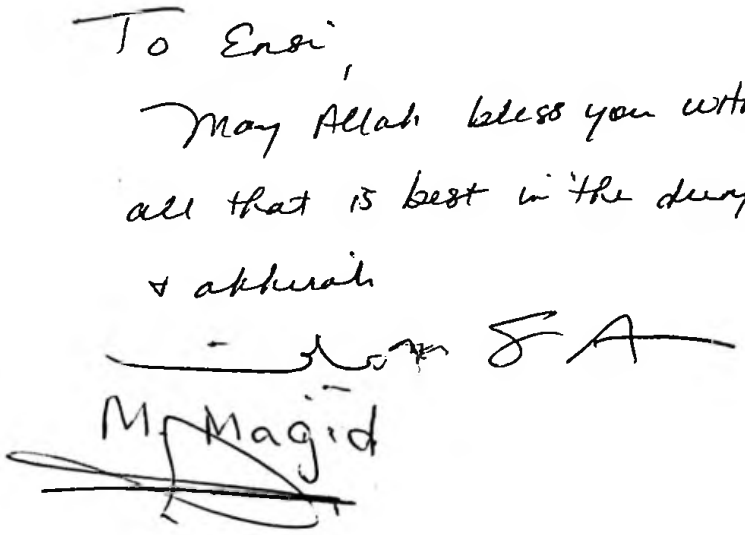
Before You Tie the Knot



A Guide for Couples

SALMA ABUGIDEIRI
MOHAMED HAG MAGID



"This book is a great read! I couldn't put it down. With marriage being the ONLY family relationship we get to choose in this life (unlike our parents, our siblings, our children), it is imperative we make a well-researched and careful decision in choosing our life partner. This book provides critical guidance and advice on how to do that. With a refreshing, open and straightforward perspective suitable for those of us living in or raised in the West, this book is a must-read. The bonus is that it reads well, hooks you with its honesty in dealing with difficult topics, and is hard to put down!"—Focus group participant

Before You Tie the Knot

A Guide for Couples

Copyright © 2013 Salma Elkadi Abugideiri and Mohamed Hag Magid
All rights reserved.

ISBN: 1493637053
ISBN 13: 9781493637058

Before You Tie the Knot

A Guide for Couples

SALMA ELKADI ABUGIDEIRI
MOHAMED HAG MAGID

Table of Contents



The Story Behind This Book ix

Acknowledgements xv

Abbreviations xvii

Introduction xix

1 The Qur'anic Model 1

2 Are you getting married for the right reason? 19

3 Factors to Consider When Choosing a Spouse 49

4 How do you find a potential spouse? 85

5 The Role of the Family 105

6 The Wedding 135

7 Elements of a Successful Marriage 171

8 Essential Skills for a Successful Marriage 209

9 Finances 243

10 Special Issues 265

Appendix 1: Premarital Questionnaire 297

Appendix 2: *Istikhaarah* Prayer 303

Glossary 305

Resources 311

Index 317

About the Authors 321

The Story Behind This Book



The seeds for this book were planted almost twenty years ago. We'll tell this story from each of our perspectives.

Salma's story:

I was a new therapist and was struggling to deal with the many couples who sought counseling as they were on the brink of divorce. They turned to me for guidance through the divorce process. Discovering how little knowledge I had regarding Islamic divorce rulings, I pulled out my dusty *fiqh* (jurisprudence) books. I quickly got lost among the different schools of thought, detailed procedures, and my own sadness and helplessness as I witnessed marriages end that might have been saved had the couples sought help sooner. I was in over my head. Taking my brother-in-law's advice, I turned to Imam Magid for help. In those days, he had just recently become the Director of the ADAMS Center, one of the largest mosques in northern Virginia and in the US. I asked him if he would teach me the *fiqh* of divorce. He smiled and firmly said, "I cannot teach you about divorce until I have taught you about marriage."

He offered to teach a course on marriage for the community that would provide me with a solid foundation. While I was thrilled that he would design and teach a course just for me, how would I answer my couples' questions in the meantime? But Imam Magid was clear. There would be no shortcuts.

I sat enraptured in those classes, moved by the beautiful stories Imam Magid shared about Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his wives. I tape recorded (yes, those were the days of cassette tapes) each class. At the time, I had been married for approximately twelve years. As my knowledge increased, I often wished I had had the benefit of both premarital counseling and Imam Magid's marriage classes prior to my own marriage.

As I reflected on my own experiences, as well as the couples I was seeing for counseling, I realized how important it was to be properly prepared for marriage. Several months after Imam Magid's course, I began transcribing the tapes so that many others could benefit from the knowledge he had shared with the class. Somewhere in the process, between moving, not backing up the computer, transferring files, and losing cassette tapes, the project came to an end.

But Imam Magid was not going to get rid of me just because the course was over. I began referring my couples to him when they needed guidance in religious matters. And he began referring clients to me when they needed more than one or two spiritual counseling sessions. Over the years, we've consulted often and shared our experiences. I imagine that due to both of us having much more experience, the current version of our writing is more comprehensive than it would have been at the time of our original project. I pray that all who read this book will find it helpful in preventing many of the common pitfalls that sometimes scare new couples into thinking their marriage must be over, and that couples will see that conflict can be used as an opportunity for growth. I also pray that couples will seek help at the first sign of trouble, rather than waiting until the problem has grown to catastrophic proportions.

As our journey in writing this book comes to an end, I want to express deep appreciation and gratitude for the opportunity to learn from and work with Imam Magid. His commitment and dedication to the community are inspirational. As my own sons have recently entered

the marriage process, we have benefited from his wisdom and guidance and experienced firsthand the intuitive ability he has to offer couples what they need as they begin their lives.

May Allah (*swt*) accept our efforts and forgive any mistakes we have made in this writing.

Imam Magid's story:

My desire to teach people about marriage in America started with the class I taught in ADAMS in the 90s at Salma's request. After that, it evolved into a workshop that I taught many times from the time that I made notes on index cards (I didn't have a computer at the time, and I didn't know how to use it or how to type) to now using PowerPoint presentations. It so happens that Salma the student became a co-teacher with me in many workshops. She represents the practical counseling/therapy experience that she accumulated through the years, and I represent the experience of an imam or a teacher of Islamic studies who deals with questions of marriage and divorce on a daily basis. After reading many books about marriage (written by Muslims and people of other faiths), giving many lectures around this subject and many counseling sessions for married people or premarital counseling, I thought we should write a book about our experiences for young couples to read. In it, we would address the needs of many people who want to know more about marriage and premarital counseling issues. And since my analysis would not be complete unless supplemented with the experience of someone versed in the professional aspect of this subject as well as the firsthand experience of growing up in American culture, the idea for me and Salma to write this book came to be realized. It is intentional that we write this together, not only because we work together but because we bring the combined perspectives of male and female, as well as imam and professional. In addition we bring combined cultural perspectives, with one of us being raised overseas and one of us being raised in the US.

Over the years, I became very busy with a lot of other responsibilities, and my counseling sessions were reduced due to time restrictions. Because I value premarital counseling, it has been institutionalized at

ADAMS and is offered by me and my colleagues. I thought it would be helpful to document our experiences and offer people a written manuscript that compensates for my inability to offer more workshops. It is still my passion to teach about issues of marriage and family, and I make time to do some of these workshops regarding healthy marriages locally and nationally with Peaceful Families Project, where Salma is one of the main trainers.

This book is also for my five daughters for whom I wish healthy marriages, especially after seeing the difficulties young people are going through in their marriages. I want to thank Salma for her patience, for dedicating her time and for accommodating my schedule so that we could make this book come to life. I want to thank my wife for giving me a valuable marriage experience that has contributed to my growth.

Acknowledgements



We thank Allah (*swt*) for making it possible for us to write this book. We are grateful to the community for encouraging us and reminding us how much this book is needed. And we thank our families for their ongoing support.

We appreciate the support of all the people who have contributed to this book at various points along the way. Nadifa Abdi, Iman Elkadi, Shazia Imam, Sam Ross, and Sanjana Ahmad provided helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this book. As participants in our focus group, Omama Altalib, Abrar Ansari, Vaseem Ansari, Saba Ghori, Obaid ulla Khan, Sana Pasha, Adam Wolfer, and Sonia Wolfer contributed valuable input, as well as suggestions for future books.

We are very grateful to Yusuf Abugideiri, CFP® for contributing to our chapter on finances. Many thanks also go to Deborah Ross for sharing her recommendations from a professional counselor's perspective. And finally, we appreciate the editing skills of Barbara Pouros.

Abbreviations



pbuh	Peace be upon him, used after Prophet Muhammad's name
ra	From the Arabic *radi Allahu 'anhu* or *'anhaa*, which means *may Allah be pleased with him or her*, used after mentioning the name of the Prophet's companions
swt	From the Arabic *subhanahu wa ta'aala*, which means *may He be glorified and exalted*

Introduction



And among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between (your hearts): verily in that are signs for those who reflect. (30:21)

Sami and Lana are very excited to get married. But they just heard about the recent divorce of their friends, Maya and Ahmad. It had been a beautiful wedding. Maya and Ahmed seemed so happy together, and their parents were thrilled at their union. They had met through mutual friends, and after a few months of getting to know each other, they decided they were ready to spend the rest of their lives together. Six months later, they decided to call it quits. Not only were the families devastated, the community was shocked. Now Sami and Lana want to know how to protect themselves and their relationship.

This story is all too familiar, a story no one wishes to tell if at all possible. In our practice, we often meet couples like Maya and Ahmad whose marriage was very brief, and others whose marriages may have lasted much longer before coming to an end. There are many reasons why these marriages do not survive. One of these reasons may be due to lack of preparation.

We have been working together for many years helping couples address the challenges they face in their relationships. We recognize the importance of sharing what we have observed. We believe that our working relationship has provided us with a unique perspective, combining the knowledge of Shari`ah and mental health in a manner that provides a more comprehensive perspective than either area of expertise alone.

By sharing our experiences through this manual, we hope to benefit individuals seeking to marry. People who are already married may also benefit from this book; however, the primary objective is to provide guidance for those who are seeking marriage, as well as for those parents who are involved in the process with their adult children. Our focus is preventive, and we hope to see a reduction in the number of couples that are in crisis or on the verge of divorce. We aim to provide couples with tools and a road map to help them navigate and manage problems before they become too difficult to resolve. Just as people spend years preparing for their careers, or weeks preparing for a job interview, they should set aside the time and energy to prepare for what they hope will be a lifetime relationship.

Many books have been written on marriage in Islam, but most have been written from a philosophical, legal or theoretical perspective. Our goal is to provide a book that is practical and that includes real scenarios from our experiences in counseling. This book is not intended to be a book of *fiqh* or legal rulings; however, what is in this book is grounded in the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. It also incorporates what is currently known about psychology and relationships. This book is particularly meant to address issues concerning Muslim marriages in the US in the light of Islamic teachings. Much of what we share may also be useful to Muslims living in other non-Muslim cultures.

We hope this book will offer something different from many of the other books on the shelves. Many relevant concepts are familiar to most Muslims at the conceptual level. However, when it comes to practice, many people are not able to apply these concepts in their daily lives. One example is the concept of *qiwaamah*,[1] which has often been misunderstood. This book will provide explanations of this and other concepts, as well as concrete examples that will enable readers to translate these concepts into practical solutions.

After working with hundreds of couples over the past fifteen years, we recognize that Muslim Americans are facing real issues in their marriages. We've tried to capture some of these experiences in the hopes that readers will become more proactive in taking steps to avoid the most common pitfalls, as well as benefiting by learning from others' mistakes.

It is part of life for people to face problems and challenges. Allah (*swt*) promises to test believers in their families, in their wealth, and in their faith (Qur'an 2:155; 3:186). Even the best marriages will encounter some stumbling blocks, and even the happiest couples will disagree and argue sometimes. However, it is possible to prevent some of the more extreme problems by being aware of factors that commonly lead to incompatibility and irreconcilable differences.

Most of the couples we've seen have approached us during times of crisis, often when they've begun to feel that there is no hope. Counseling in these cases is seen as a last resort, one final effort to save a marriage that is already significantly damaged and may be beyond repair. We strongly believe that couples can prevent their relationships from getting to this stage by engaging in premarital counseling and from seeking marital counseling before problems reach the crisis stage. Preventive care is routine for our health. Doesn't it make sense to do the same for our relationships?

We will discuss the benefits and the process of premarital counseling throughout this book. Perhaps the most important benefit is helping couples assess the potential health and success of their relationship together, giving them a chance to discover if they are incompatible

1 This concept refers to the leadership role that men have in the family, in which they are entrusted to provide care and maintenance for women (Qur'an 4:34).

before it is too late. While premarital counseling can help prevent future catastrophes, it does not necessarily prevent all future problems. It can, however, prepare couples to anticipate potential conflict areas, provide them with tools to resolve conflict, and help them recognize problems before they become overwhelming or seemingly unsolvable.

We are well aware that many couples may enter marriage completely unprepared, having received no written manual and little if any guidance before marriage. This book cannot be comprehensive, nor can it be a substitute for consulting others, reading other materials, and getting counseling. However, we hope that it will be a useful and readable guide to help couples be more prepared for the lifetime journey they will share together.

In order to achieve this goal, we will make references throughout this book to the model which Allah (*swt*) has provided in the Qur'an, as well as the example we have in the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). We will provide examples to illustrate concrete manifestations of this model which can be applied in your own marriage. We recognize that the Qur'anic model provides an ideal, the "promised land" so to speak. It is this promised land that we want you to strive for. In order to get there, you will need some practical guidelines which we provide throughout this book.

It is our goal to help couples

1. gain an awareness of themselves and an insight into what is most important to them as individuals and as couples;
2. anticipate potential pitfalls in order to avoid them if possible, and to navigate them from a position of preparedness if they find themselves in one; and
3. recognize what constitutes a problem in order to address it before it becomes a crisis.

Achieving and maintaining a healthy marriage requires commitment, patience, and perseverance in addition to communication, problem-solving and stress-management skills. A relationship needs constant attention and nurturing throughout its duration. Having a

healthy relationship with your partner must therefore be approached as a lifetime endeavor. May Allah (*swt*) guide you and bless you in your lives together, and accept our efforts to assist you in getting off to a good start.

Suggestions for Reading this Book

Take a few moments to familiarize yourself with the contents of this book, looking at the titles for each chapter so that you have an idea of what is covered. We encourage you to begin with the first chapter, so that you are familiar with the framework that shapes the entire book. While some chapter titles may not seem relevant to you at first glance, we encourage you to take a look at each chapter because the issues we've addressed are very common. We expect that as you read each chapter, you may discover something about yourself, your family, or your potential spouse that you may not have thought about before.

We encourage you to engage with the book by pausing to reflect on the questions that are posed in each chapter. Reflecting on these questions will help you get to know yourself better as you prepare yourself for marriage. They can also be used for discussion as you get to know your potential spouse and assess mutual compatibility. At the end of the book, there is also a list of Imam Magid's well-known 100 Questions that he has developed over the years providing premarital counseling.

We use a few abbreviations throughout the book. These are listed first before the Introduction. There are some words throughout the book that we have used in Arabic, like *Shari`ah*. We have included a glossary at the end of the book for those readers who may not be familiar with the vocabulary being used. We have also included a list of additional reading and resources at the end of the book.

Note about the Stories

Throughout the book, we have provided vignettes to help illustrate points we are making. Some of these stories are based on real couples whose names and other identifying information have been changed to

protect their identities. Other stories are composites of different couples we have known. And some stories have been created to clarify a specific point. Any resemblance to people you may know is purely coincidental. If a particular story seems to be describing you or someone you know, it is likely that the scenario in the story is a common one that fits many people.

A Note about References

References to verses from the Qur'an are provided in the following format: (4:1) refers to the first verse in chapter 4 of the Qur'an. References to hadith indicate the collection of hadith (Muslim, Bukhari, Tirmidhi, Abu Dawood, Ahmad) and the number of that hadith. Unless otherwise indicated, these hadith were taken from the online database www.searchtruth.com.

CHAPTER 1:

The Qur'anic Model



O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (49:13)

Core Values & Concepts

It is part of the natural order of the creation of Allah (*swt*) to live in partnership with a spouse. He says, "And of everything We have created pairs; that you may receive instruction" (51:49). In this and other verses,[1] Allah (*swt*) explains the concept of parity (*zawjiyyah*) as the foundation of all creation, including humans, animals, and plants, down to the level of the atom. When it comes to marriage, it is interesting and amazing that He deliberately created men and women differently with the

[1] "Glory to Allah, Who created in pairs all things that the earth produces, as well as their own (human) kind and (other) things of which they have no knowledge." (36:36)

identified objective of learning about each other and getting to know each other (*ta`aruf*); however, He makes it quite clear that the differences between them do not make one superior over the other. In fact, He emphasizes in the same verse that "The most honored of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you" (49:13).

While gender differences have been the subject of many studies and can often be the source of frustration as husbands and wives learn to understand each other's ways of thinking and behaving, learning about these differences becomes an opportunity for personal growth. Of course in the middle of a major misunderstanding, people might not feel so much appreciation for these differences. In fact, each person may wish the other was more like him or her. But as relationships grow and develop, and as spouses remain interested in learning about each other, the differences can become a source of enrichment for the relationship.

When we consider the creation of human beings, Allah (*swt*) tells us that He created us from a single soul from which He created its mate (Qur'an 4:1). Each mate, or each half of the pair, is created from the same substance, one *nafs* (soul). This verse, like the one mentioned above, establishes the inherently equal nature of men and women.

In Surat al-Rum (30:21), Allah (*swt*) describes creating spouses from among themselves, reinforcing the fact that each spouse comes from the same origin. In a most beautiful manner, He describes in this verse how He has placed love (*mawaddah*) and mercy (*rahmah*) between two spouses in order that they may find tranquility (*sakeenah*) in one another.[2] These verses identify the cornerstones of the Qur'anic model of marriage: equality, *mawaddah*, *rahmah*, and mutuality. It is essential, then, that a healthy marriage include these core values, and that each spouse take responsibility for acting in ways that will lead to the creation of a family environment that is peaceful, nurturing, and that provides comfort to each person. In order to fulfill this responsibility, each person should take care of his or her own spiritual growth.

For many people, the issue of responsibility seems to be focused on others, with little or no emphasis on one's own responsibility. In

2 "And among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): Verily in that are signs for those who reflect." (30:21)

counseling, we often see people making the mistake of focusing on what their partner is not doing correctly rather than looking at their own responsibility towards their partner and the relationship. They also have trouble seeing how they contribute to the problem or how they can be part of the solution. Each person should focus on becoming the best spouse possible by developing their Islamic character and by enhancing their emotional and spiritual growth. Ideally, this growth should be done in partnership so that it is a mutual growth that contributes to the enhancement of the relationship.

In order for spouses to truly connect and experience a deep level of mutual compassion, they have to be willing to be vulnerable with each other. Allah (*swt*) provides many guidelines in the Qur'an to protect this vulnerability, especially with regards to women since they are often less advantaged than men in most societies. A married person is considered shielded or protected from the vulnerability of committing sins outside the marriage because those needs are being satisfied within the marriage. Allah (*swt*) reminds men of the "solemn covenant" (*meethaq qhaleeth*) of marriage, highlighting the intimacy that a couple shares as an incentive to treat women justly and kindly.[3] Part of fulfilling the terms of the covenant or contract includes fulfilling each other's intellectual, emotional and physical needs. The description in this verse refers to the complete giving of the self that each partner engages in during marriage. Each person is exposed, both emotionally and physically. While this openness leaves each person extremely vulnerable, it is also the key to genuine connection. The solemn covenant is one that is witnessed by Allah (*swt*) and that is grounded in the guidelines of the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

Garments for One Another

They (women) are your garments and you (men) are their garments. (2:187)

The image of a tranquil and loving relationship is further deepened in the Qur'an through descriptions by Allah (*swt*) of spouses as garments

3 "And how could you take it when you have gone in unto each other, and they have taken from you a solemn covenant?" (4:21)

for one another, illustrating the mutuality that is part and parcel of an Islamic marriage. It is interesting to note that in this verse, Allah (*swt*) began by describing women as garments for men. In a male-dominated society such as Arabia, mentioning women before men established the important role of women in an Islamic model. It highlights for men that they need women. Mentioning women first in this manner also shows the vulnerability of men, not only of women. Men need the protection of women, and women need the protection of men. The need that men have for women has often been identified as centering primarily on physical needs; however, the metaphor of mutual garments is not limited to the physical aspects of the relationship. The emotional aspect of the relationship is just as important as the physical one, with men and women being equally vulnerable to emotional and psychological stressors unless they have a partner in life who can provide them with comfort and support. Women have the same role to play as men in terms of providing protection, warmth and comfort in the marriage. While each gender may offer this protection in their own way and operate differently from relationship to relationship, the roles of each partner are equally important. The significance of mutuality is clearly identified here in terms of the intimate relationship between husbands and wives, and can be generalized to all aspects of the relationship.

So how are women and men garments for one another? Consider how your clothes function for you, as well as how you choose each item of clothing. In terms of function, clothes protect us from the elements, give us warmth and comfort, beautify us, and cover our flaws. What we may look for in choosing a particular garment includes many things such as the quality of the fabric, its durability, degree of comfort, how well it fits, and how easy it is to maintain. The Qur'an is talking about a garment for all seasons, and about each person adjusting as needed in order to be a garment for the other. If a change occurs during the marriage, like a sickness or a change in personality, the other person must adapt and be willing to adjust to "fit" just as a person may have to alter a garment due to weight loss or gain, or seasonal changes. It is also important that the garment be one that is worn with pride and not shame when worn in public. This is a garment you don't hide in the closet but feel good about wearing outside.

By being garments (*libaas*) for one another, women should cover the faults of men, as men cover the faults of women. For example, there is no benefit in broadcasting each other's personal failures or sharing information that can be embarrassing. The exception of course is if one partner is abusive or oppressive in some way, and in the case of seeking help to improve the marriage.

Another aspect to this concept of mutual garments is that each partner should be flexible enough to recognize and respond to the spouse's needs. Each spouse may be able to offer different types of care and support. These roles are flexible according to what is needed and who has the ability to provide the type of care needed at any particular time.

A wonderful example of the concept of mutual garments being translated into practice is the marriage of Khadijah (*ra*) and the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). They illustrated how gender roles can be flexible and interchangeable according to the demands of the couple's circumstances. She was a garment in terms of financial support and in her level of life experience. She supported him and the early Muslim community with her wealth. At the same time, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) protected her business and her wealth at a time when she needed someone she could really trust. He provided the support, strength and physical protection she needed. When he felt down, she reminded him that he helped those in need and in difficult times, was generous with his guests, and uplifted those who were downtrodden.[4] At the same time, she could count on him to help out at home. His personality was such that if there was any emergency, he was there. We know that he was very proud of his relationship with her, publically praising and mentioning her long after her death.

Unfortunately, in some of the couples we have worked with, the spouses may appear to be perfect garments for each other in public, but at home they violate every aspect of this concept. In some cases, the wife is like a showpiece in public or social gatherings where the husband acts as if she is very important to him, asking her to sit next to him and attending to all her needs. But at home when there is no one watching, she may be completely neglected or put down, or even getting bruised

4 Bukhari, Book #60, Hadith #478.

and beaten. The epitome of what can happen when there is such a big discrepancy between what happens in public and private is often seen by us when domestic violence occurs in a couple that the community views as "perfect."

An important factor to consider in choosing a partner that will become a proper garment for you in both public and private settings is how well your "garment" suits you or "fits." Some people choose to wear clothes that are clearly too tight, and may worry that if they move a certain way, their clothes might rip. In the same manner, you should look for a partner that fits you, someone who is compatible with you, is flexible and can adjust naturally without being pushed or pulled to meet your needs. By the same token, you should be willing to accept your spouse for who they are, rather than trying to mold them or stretch them in ways that are out of character, or comparing them to others and desiring what others are "wearing."

Still another aspect to consider in terms of being garments for one another is care or maintenance. Each article of clothing comes with a care label. Just as we take the time to read the care labels before washing new clothes for the first time, we must take the time to learn how our spouses need to be cared for. This process is the *ta`aruf*, or getting to know each other mentioned above. It includes listening to, observing, and respecting one another in order to learn what is truly important to each other's wellbeing and happiness. It is a mutual process and requires communication and sharing, rather than an expectation that the other person should know what is important or meaningful. Not taking the time to know each other can lead to damaging your partner, just as you would damage a silk shirt or wool sweater by ignoring the care label and washing it in hot water. Not reading the label will lead you to misread your spouse. After a certain amount of mistreatment, your garment can be damaged beyond repair. Just as your garment can be damaged, so can your spouse.

In our contemporary society, we have been conditioned to purchase new things continuously, including clothing, and to discard what is old even though it may still be in good condition. This mentality can sometimes lead people to discard their marriages too easily just because there is a small tear that might easily be repaired. We see young couples being

less patient than their older counterparts who may have been raised to hold onto clothing and other items as long as repair was possible. So in addition to taking the best possible care of your garments so that they will last as long as possible, make sure to see if tears can be mended before being tempted to simply discard and get a new one.

Many people complain that their spouses do not know how to take care of them in the way that they need; rather, they try to show love in the way that makes sense to them. She may feel unloved because he does not say "I love you," but he feels he is expressing his love to her because he pays the bills. You have to pay attention to the special way that your garment needs to be cared for. Since most people don't wear their care labels in a manner that others can read, and often don't communicate clearly what they need in order to feel cared for, spouses should ask each other what is needed rather than trying to guess what proper care would feel like for the other person.

> *Mukthar was completely frustrated. He couldn't understand why Sana wasn't completely thrilled. After all, he had just purchased a beautiful (and expensive) designer bag for her. Didn't all women like designer bags? When he finally agreed to sit down and listen, he was surprised to learn that what Sana really wanted from him would have saved him a lot of money. Since they were both busy professionals with a growing family, she missed spending time with her husband. She was ecstatic when he understood that spending quality time together was more important to Sana than receiving an expensive gift. After their talk, he suggested they carve out some couple time on regular basis.*

Mukhtar had assumed that Sana would feel loved by receiving a nice gift because receiving gifts made him feel loved. We will talk more about love languages[5] in Chapter 3, but identifying what makes each

5 See Gary Chapman's *5 Love Languages*. or www.5lovelanguages.com.

person feel loved, valued and respected is part of what makes up each person's "care label."

The ideal "garment" is one that provides the qualities of the moral garment described by Allah (*swt*) in Surat al-A'raaf: "O Children of Adam! We have bestowed on you clothing to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment for you. But the clothing of righteousness (*libaas al-taqwaa*)—that is the best" (7:26). This complementary moral relationship is why the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "If Allah grants a Muslim a righteous wife, this helps him preserve half of his religion (faith). He should, therefore, fear Allah as regards the other half." [6] Your spouse is the garment of righteousness, coming to complete your life in a spiritual sense. In this verse, Allah (*swt*) identifies the best garment as *libaas al-taqwaa.* The word *taqwaa* comes from *taqaa*, which means "to guard" or "to protect." In other words, it is the garment that embodies the actions that are conducted for the pleasure of Allah (*swt*). When each spouse is wearing that garment of *taqwaa*, then each spouse will automatically become a protective garment for the other. As Al-Ghazali[7] said, all the goodness that one does towards oneself will lead to goodness to others. Self-reflection, accountability, and self-improvement will always lead to having better relationships with others. Spouses can perform this function by being spiritual partners, creating an environment that is conducive to, and encouraging of, spiritual growth.

*Maqaasid al-Shari`ah* (Objectives of the Shari`ah)

In addition to understanding the core concepts related to marriage introduced above, it is also important to have an understanding of the *maqaasid*, or underlying purposes and goals of the Shari`ah. Understanding these goals helps us make choices and decisions that are in line with a higher purpose, rather than choices that are driven by our own whims in the moment. The goals of the Shari`ah include the protection of human life, the protection of one's belief/faith, the protection of

6 Al-Tabarani.

7 *Ihyaa 'Uloom al-Deen.*

one's honor and progeny, the protection of one's intellect or sanity, and the protection of one's property.

In keeping with the higher purpose for which we were created, each partner in the marriage should work hard to maintain a focus on the *aakhirah* (Hereafter), while also focusing on the concept of being a servant to Allah (*swt*): "I have only created *jinn* and people that they may worship Me" (51:56). This focus guides the initial choice of a marriage partner, shapes the direction that the relationship will take, and serves as a regulating mechanism during times of conflict. Remembering that each person was created to serve and worship Allah (*swt*) helps to keep things in perspective, preventing each person from becoming too engrossed in material desires and from making issues bigger than they need to be during times of conflict. It may be a constant struggle to maintain a focus on the *aakhirah* given the recurrent, constant distractions of daily life; however, it is precisely this struggle that constitutes the internal struggle against one's whims and impulses that each person must engage in as part of life's test. It can be both motivating and reassuring to bear in mind that all efforts to please Allah (*swt*) during the course of the marriage are witnessed by Him and will be rewarded by Him.

The Qur'an clearly identifies the objective of the marriage partnership as providing a mutual source of tranquility (*sakeenah*) for each partner as outlined in verse 30:21 cited above. Living in an environment that is peaceful and full of love and compassion is an important part of each person's emotional and mental wellbeing. A healthy marriage can lead to the protection of one's psychological, intellectual and physical wellbeing, all of which contribute to one's feeling of security.

Protection of Progeny

The marriage partnership in turn allows for procreation to occur in a legitimate context. It creates the boundaries and structure in which to raise children and to nurture a healthy family. The nuclear family is the cornerstone of the Muslim community. It is critical to ensure a peaceful and nurturing family environment as part of the Shari'ah's goals

of protecting one's progeny. Partners must nurture their own relationship in order to ensure that their needs are being met, and to create a protective barrier around the family unit which can withstand external pressures and temptations. Many decisions that couples make throughout their lifetime can potentially impact the wellbeing of the children, including the type of neighborhood the family resides in, the quality of the schools, access to a broader Muslim community, etc.

Protection of Property

In terms of fulfilling the Shari`ah's objective of protecting one's property, it is essential that partners take the time to consider how they will manage their wealth and assets. Couples should develop a sound budget and fiscal plan, taking care not to waste or misuse their money. Ultimately, everything in our possession is a gift from Allah (*swt*), and we will be held accountable for what we do with it. Regardless of who pays for the home, all family members live in this home and have the right to enjoy it and to have some input about their living environment. If one family member makes a decision that jeopardizes the financial wellbeing or security of the family, then the objective of the Shari`ah has not been fulfilled. It is important to engage in mutual consultation and decision-making in order to ensure that the rights of each family member are safeguarded.

Protection of Honor

Protecting one's honor is another objective of the Shari`ah. Usually people associate the protection of honor with protection from external threats. While this is absolutely critical, it is also imperative to prevent internal threats to each family member's honor. Teachings from the Qur'an and Sunnah prohibit accusing each other falsely, insulting each other, maligning each other's character, slandering each other, or engaging in any type of behavior that would offend the other person's dignity and integrity (Qur'an 4:112; 49:11). Abiding by the Islamic etiquette of

interpersonal relationships is one way to take proper care of our respective "garments."

Protection of Intellect

It is each partner's right to expect to be protected spiritually, financially, psychologically, and physically within the marital relationship. Protecting one's intellectual wellbeing is also one of the objectives of the Shari'ah. If either person feels threatened or unsafe, then the objectives of the Shari'ah are not being met. Each partner should feel safe and comfortable enough to express opinions. The relationship should provide a space for each person to think freely without fear of being silenced, invalidated or ridiculed. If a person is being abused physically or emotionally, then the foundation of the relationship is damaged and the victim of abuse may need to consider exiting the relationship in order to regain safety and peace of mind. The issue of abuse will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 10.

Protection of Faith/Belief

Beginning a marriage with mutually accepted spiritual goals and a shared value system is extremely important to the success of the marriage and when resolving the problems that almost always occur eventually when each person subscribes to different values. Spouses should protect each other spiritually and should not distract each other from fulfilling spiritual obligations, thereby jeopardizing the relationship with Allah (*swt*). The marital relationship itself, as well as each partner, can help to fulfill the objective of protecting one's faith or belief (*deen*). While each person can help the other have a good relationship with Allah (*swt*) and can provide encouragement to do the right thing, it is important to remember the governing principle of there being "no compulsion in religion."[8] The religion that is practiced freely is the religion that is

8 "*Laa ikraaha fil deen.*" (2:256)

accepted by Allah (*swt*). Although each person can and should provide advice and guidance as appropriate, ultimately, each person is given the choice by Allah (*swt*) to practice, or not to practice, Islam.[9] Furthermore, ultimately each person will be held accountable for individual choices.[10]

Although it may be challenging to see your spouse making choices that are contrary to Islamic teachings or that contradict your interpretation of Islam, it is important to separate the relationship with your spouse from your spouse's relationship with Allah (*swt*). Using force to get someone to pray, wear *hijab,* or to go to the *masjid* defeats the purpose of those actions, which should only be performed for the pleasure of Allah (*swt*) and not to avoid the wrath of a spouse. Even Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had to accept the limits of his ability to bring people to Islam. Allah (*swt*) reminded him, "Give admonition, for you are one to admonish. You are not one to manage (people's) affairs" (88:21-22). Freedom of religion is part of free will. A marriage that jeopardizes that free will does not meet the objectives of Shari`ah. If you feel your religious wellbeing or your relationship to Allah (*swt*) is jeopardized by being in the marriage, then the marriage is not good for you. Ultimately, we can learn from the example of the Prophet (pbuh): the best way to influence others is by being an excellent role model and giving gentle advice, not by being aggressive or imposing.

Importance of Shared Values

In many cases, spouses may pressure each other to engage in behavior that is un-Islamic. A husband should not force his wife to take off *hijab*, prevent her from going to the *masjid*, or force her to drink alcohol or watch pornography. A wife should not insist on being taken to a club or to indecent movies. In these cases, the spouse would be contributing to the detriment of the other. What if, for example, the husband sets all the rules, the dos and don'ts, but the wife keeps arguing and insists

9 "Say, 'the Truth is from your Lord.' Let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject (it)." (18:29)

10 "Every soul draws the reward of its acts on none but itself; no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another." (6:164)

on consuming pork and alcohol. Although he can't impose his will on her, the marriage will clearly suffer due to the difference in values and religiosity. These commonly occurring examples highlight the benefit of spouses sharing the same value system and frame of reference from the outset.

Some people walk into a marriage knowing that their values will be compromised. In these cases, they have not sought to fulfill the objectives of Shari`ah, and they have also not done a good job of prioritizing. For example, we've seen some women who do not accept alcohol in their own lives compromise this value and agree to marry someone who drinks, because they are enticed by the income or status generated by his career. In other cases, we know that men and women are meeting each other in places like bars and clubs. After marriage, they may become more religious and object to their spouse's continued frequenting of these places. These examples illustrate how value conflicts can create situations where one or both spouses' spiritual lives can be severely compromised.

In order to minimize conflict between spouses regarding those matters that may be subject to interpretation or may be impacted by varying degrees of conservatism, couples should remember that Islam allows for differences of opinion. Anything that Islamic scholars are not unanimously agreed upon leaves room for disagreement. In these cases, couples should practice mutual respect and tolerance for each other's interpretations within the broader parameters and boundaries set by Islam. Ideally, they should come to some general value system that they are both willing to follow. In the example below, Khadija and Omar were able to work around their difference of opinion by coming together around a shared value, which informed their decision-making.

> *While both Khadija and Omar considered themselves devout Muslims, they differed on whether to eat* zabiha[11] *only. Before they had children, it was easy: each person simply ate what they deemed most appropriate. Once they had children, they had to figure out a way for them*

11 Meat that has been slaughtered according to Islamic guidelines.

to raise their children in a way that wasn't confusing and that didn't have one parent undermining the other. Since they agreed that consistent messaging was more important than each person clinging to their respective interpretations, Omar agreed to restrict his meat to zabiha *only. The couple agreed that when the children were old enough to learn* fiqh, *they would teach them the rationale behind different Muslims' interpretations related to eating* zabiha. *But until then, Omar did not feel he was compromising any of his values by restricting what he ate. On the other hand, Khadija would have felt she was compromising her values if she had to serve her children non-*zabiha *meat since she believed it was not acceptable.*

Increasing one's faith should be an objective of the marriage itself. A person should enter the relationship seeking to increase spirituality and connection to Allah (*swt*). In order for that to happen, each spouse must work hard to create an environment that is conducive to spiritual growth. Spirituality and spiritual growth can be compromised when there is a lack of tolerance, flexibility and consideration for the other person. When a person feels mistreated by a spouse and the issue is not addressed, resentment can lead to a spiritual gap. In these cases, we hear from couples that they don't want to pray together, or a wife may be uncomfortable praying behind her husband as the imam if he has neglected or hurt her. Sometimes the spouses don't like to pray together because they see the hypocrisy when the other spouse does not observe the tenets of Islam.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was quite attuned to the ways in which people's spirituality could be negatively impacted. In one case, Mu'adh ibn Jabal was leading the prayers and recited for a very long time, to the extent that a man praying behind him left the prayer. Mu'adh criticized this man, who then explained to Prophet Muhammad that he had to leave because he had business to attend to. The Prophet pointed out to Mu'adh that he was jeopardizing people's spirituality and should

recite smaller chapters when leading others in prayer.[12] Similarly, spouses should make it easier, not harder, for each other to practice their religion and should avoid criticizing or trying to impose things that might dissuade their spouse from practicing. We hear about spouses, especially men, who force their wives to wake up for *tahajjud*, for example. While it is good to invite your spouse to engage in spiritual activities, there should never be pressure or criticism if your spouse does not want to participate.

We know that the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was extremely tolerant and patient. Anas ibn Malik, who lived with the Prophet for ten years, said "When I did something, he never asked me, why did you do so? When I did not do a certain task, he never asked me why I did not." [13] We can learn from this beautiful model that nagging and criticizing are not part of our Sunnah. And we know for a fact that nagging and criticism rarely promote the results we want. A wise newlywed suggested that spouses should make it easier for each other to be more spiritual. For example, rather than nagging his tired wife for not getting up for prayers, he could help her get to bed earlier by doing some of the chores or putting the children to bed. This newlywed clearly knows the secret of making his wife happy, and hopefully, helping her to achieve more of her spiritual goals.

Conclusion

Marriage in Islam is a means to many things, but primarily should be thought of as a way to seek the of pleasure of Allah (*swt*) by fulfilling one's needs and pursuing spiritual growth within a relationship that has been sanctioned by Allah (*swt*). It requires hard work, dedication and commitment as does any other endeavor we wish to succeed. For those of us raised on fairy tales and living "happily ever after," just remember that Allah (*swt*) promises to reward us with everlasting joy **after**

12 Bukhari. Book 73. #127.

13 Abu Dawood. Book 41. #4756.

we work hard every day to earn it. Taking the time to prepare yourself through education, self-examination, and getting to know your future spouse can go a long way in making your lifetime journey easier and more fulfilling *inshAllah*.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- ❑ What is your concept of marriage? Describe your vision of what marriage looks like, identifying the primary goals and how you think they will be achieved.

- ❑ What is your understanding of an Islamic marriage?

- ❑ What is the role of religion and spirituality in your life?
  - Where do you go for spiritual guidance?
  - Where do you go for answers to specific *fiqh* questions?

- ❑ What can you offer your spouse spiritually?

- ❑ What are you struggling with spiritually?

- ❑ Reflect on the verse we have discussed earlier from Surat al-Rum (30:21). What does it mean to you? What do you imagine you and your spouse will do to apply the concepts of *sakeenah*, *rahmah*, and *mawaddah* in your marriage? Give specific examples to help you identify what your expectations and vision are.

CHAPTER 2:

Are you getting married for the right reason?



A woman is normally sought as a wife for her wealth, beauty, nobility, or religiousness, but choose a religious woman and you will prosper.
(Bukhari, Book 62, #27 & Muslim)

At a dinner celebrating their sixtieth wedding anniversary, Laila and Malik described themselves as spiritual partners. He identified one key to their success was doing many activities together, such as praying taraweeh *(night prayer during Ramadan) and going to the masjid. He described Laila as his anchor, saying she could calm him down when he was angry by touching his face gently. She said the trick was that they continued to treat each other as they did when they first fell in love. Throughout their relationship, they surprised each other with gifts or nice gestures, were always trying to be mindful of each other and attuned to each other's emotional needs, responding with unconditional love.*

Marriage is the social norm in most parts of the world. It is particularly important for Muslims because, as an institution, it addresses several basic human needs within a legitimate framework. Marriage provides individuals with companionship, family, a legitimate means of satisfying sexual and emotional needs, and a structure within which to provide the stability, guidance and nurturing that children need in order to become healthy members of society. In addition, marriage can provide the opportunity for a spiritual union between two people striving to please their Lord in order to fulfill their spiritual needs and the purpose of creation. Through this union, you each have the opportunity to grow and learn more about each other. You will discover your capacity to love and to be connected to another person in a way that's different from the attachment to your parents or your closest friends.

Young people raised in the United States may wonder why they should wait for marriage, given the changing views and the increasing tendency for people to live together without getting married. All around them they may be seeing people choosing to have long-term dating relationships, believing that marriage may actually ruin their relationship. They may also feel wary of marriage because of the commitment, fear of getting stuck with one person, and the added responsibility of taking care of another person. Many dating relationships may feel easier because there may not be any strings attached. These relationships may also seem to be better because people tend to present their best selves as long as they are courting.

A Muslim perspective of life centers on the belief that we were created to worship Allah (*swt*). Each of our decisions, large and small, are shaped by this belief. In the context of getting married, each of the decisions around whether to marry, who and how to marry are made more clear when they are filtered through the lens of what is most pleasing to Allah (*swt*). The ultimate purpose in getting married, as with any other venture we undertake in life, is to secure our Hereafter. This perspective does not always make life easy; we live in a secular society that often bombards us with temptations and choices that are contrary to the guidelines laid out for us by Allah (*swt*).

It's understandable that people might wonder why they should wait for marriage when getting into a relationship could be quite easy and often satisfying, especially in the short term. However, Muslims are

instructed to live their lives on earth for the long term; they should wait until they are able to have a relationship that is not only acceptable to Allah (*swt*) but also a source of reward as the couple strives to get closer to Allah (*swt*) through their relationship with each other. Everything in the relationship, including material aspects, is then viewed as being in service of this ultimate goal. Laila and Malik, in the example above, had this mindset throughout their marriage and had plenty to celebrate. Those people who don't understand this focus are the ones who get disappointed when the relationship doesn't work or material expectations are not fulfilled. When emphasis is placed on aspects such as physical attributes or financial status, rather than on those qualities that will help the couple achieve a higher level of spirituality, relationships are not as deeply meaningful.

Reasons People Get Married

Over the years, we have asked participants in marriage workshops conducted in colleges and universities around the country, "Why do you think people get married?" Here we will share with you some of the most commonly identified reasons, analyzing the positives and negatives of each one. Our objective is to provide some clarity for individuals who are embarking on the path towards marriage.

1. Preserving Chastity

Protecting oneself from seeking physical enjoyment in an unlawful way (*zina*, committing adultery or fornication) is one of the reasons that Islam institutionalized marriage. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "O young people! Whoever among you can marry, should marry, because it helps him lower his gaze and guard his modesty (i.e., his private parts from committing illegal sexual intercourse etc.), and whoever is not able to marry, should fast, as fasting diminishes his sexual appetite."[14]

14 Bukhari. Book 62. #4.

Some people take this hadith to mean that the only purpose of marriage is to satisfy physical and sexual needs. Sometimes people find themselves attracted to someone and decide to get married right away simply to gratify these needs. In order to legitimately satisfy sexual needs, it is necessary to get married; however, physical attraction is not sufficient for having a meaningful long-term relationship. A marital relationship is much more complex than simply a sexual relationship, as can be seen from the description of the Qur'anic model in Chapter 1. When marriage is used solely for sexual gratification, then it is being misused.

Many times, young people come to me (Imam Magid) to get married. They don't want to participate in the premarital counseling I encourage for each new couple because they are in too much of a rush to get married. They tell me, "Either you marry us or we will commit *zina* (fornication)." One couple was in such a hurry, they called me at 10:00 at night. When I suggested they come to my office in the morning, they emphasized the urgency of the situation. I told them I was already in my pajamas at home. I was shocked when they told me they were sitting in the car outside my home, desperate to get married because they could not control themselves any longer.

Getting married simply to satisfy sexual needs can also occur when a man wants to take a second wife as a way to deal with unresolved intimacy issues, without trying to address the problems directly with the first wife.[15] In either case, these couples are abusing the institution of marriage to impulsively satisfy their sexual urges without realizing the much broader commitment they are making to each other by completing a marriage contract.

Young people in dating relationships are often under tremendous pressure from their parents or others around them to take the girlfriend or boyfriend as a spouse in order to alleviate a moral or social issue without helping the couple explore whether they are actually compatible for the long run, or whether the dynamics of their relationship are healthy. In these cases, when the couple succumbs to social pressure without doing the preparatory work before marriage, divorce is often

15 The example given here deals with a real scenario, although both of us discourage taking a second wife because it's illegal in the US.

the typical outcome. These relationships may have been based solely on having fun and may not have all the requisites for an enduring, healthy marriage.

Some of these *nikaah* or *kitaab* (marriage contracts) are conducted without any civil or written contract, simply to avoid the stigma of dating or being together without being married. On college campuses, there is a phenomenon where the students get together without their families' knowledge in some cases. These young adults, as well as some older adults, approach the imam to do an easy "in and out" marriage. It is based solely on the physical relationship dimension without considering all the consequences of the relationship.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, marriage in Islam is considered to be the vehicle for protecting oneself, and it is the means through which physical and sexual desires can be legitimately satisfied. However, it is only one of the purposes of marriage and is not enough by itself to lead to a successful long-term relationship.

2. Companionship

Seeking companionship and a life partner is an excellent reason to get married and is in line with fulfilling the Sunnah and living out the concept of *zawjiyyah* (parity). The concept of a companion in Arabic (*saahib*) refers to a person who stays with another person for a long time, sharing each other's lives, engaging in mutual experiences, and enjoying each other's company. Companionship is a wonderful outcome of marrying a person who shares common values, priorities, goals, and interests.

Sometimes people envision this companionship in an idealistic or romanticized manner. They might imagine that the long-term companionship during the marriage will be an extension of the engagement period or the honeymoon. They may look forward to lots of fun-filled days with romantic outings and intimate conversations late into each evening. We encourage couples to work hard to keep the romance and fun alive during their marriage. We also encourage couples to have realistic expectations that after the honeymoon, most people must turn to

the business of living life. We have met many young women who feel abandoned when their husbands work long hours in order to support the family, as well as many young men who feel disappointed when they come home at the end of the day to a wife who is exhausted and frazzled after a day of taking care of young children.

The notion of companionship includes sharing the fun and good times, as well as sharing the responsibilities that are part and parcel of life. The quality of *sakeenah* (tranquility) comes about when each person feels that that there is a partner to rely on during difficult times, share troubles as well as joys, develop shared visions for the family, and simply be there for each other. When spouses work together to overcome challenges, deal with adversity, or celebrate accomplishments, they are able to deepen and strengthen the feeling of companionship between them.

We sometimes get complaints that a person feels the spouse is not their friend. People with these complaints have an expectation that they can play with their spouse, joke with him or her, and rely on the spouse as a confidante. They are seeking the emotional support of friendship which leads them to consider the issue of rights and responsibilities in the context of friendship; they demand things of one another but also want to confide in each other. They are seeking an intimate type of communication and the enjoyment of each other's company. Other couples distinguish between their spouse and their friends, defining different roles for each one. For example, the spouse may be the one to provide financially or to take care of the home, but is not the person viewed as someone to have fun with. Some spouses say they need their friends to release their stress and relax so that they can maintain a good relationship with their spouse. Many men consider a companion to be a woman who is there in the house, serving the tea, attending to his needs, and keeping him company without confiding in her or sharing with her.

The Qur'an refers to women as *saahibah* (companion),[16] suggesting that the marital relationship is one that includes a deep friendship. An Islamic marriage includes both the obligations and responsibilities of

16 Qur'an 80:36.

taking care of each other in addition to the enjoyment of each other's company. In order to have a healthy relationship, you must first define what you mean by companionship and friendship, and then learn what your spouse means by these terms. You should also remember that while your spouse could be a wonderful friend and companion, each of you should also have other friends in order to have a balanced and healthy life together.

3. Family and Children

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "Marriage is from my way (Sunnah). And whoever does not practice my way is not from me. And marry [and procreate], for indeed I will outnumber the other nations by you" (Sunan Ibn Majah 1846).

Procreation is part of the natural order of creation and one of the purposes that the Shari`ah identifies for marriage. During the process of selecting a spouse, attention should be given to the qualities in that person that may make him or her suitable as a co-parent. It is important to inquire about attitudes related to child-rearing, discipline and gender roles, in addition to ideas about the roles of each parent.

Couples are sometimes short-sighted and decide to marry because they feel compatible romantically without looking ahead to the years when their roles will be more than husband and wife. It is not unusual in these cases for one or both partners to be surprised when they realize that their spouse has completely different ideas about how their child should be raised. This problem is especially apparent when couples come from different ethnic, racial, socioeconomic or faith backgrounds. We have met many couples who have either agreed to disagree if they have different faiths or values, or who believe that the values of their country of origin are not that important, only to discover upon having children that they want to raise them according to their own religion or cultural norms. This "discovery" can be extremely challenging to deal with if the couple has not spent time before getting married to discuss how their respective values, beliefs and traditions will be incorporated into child-rearing.

On the other hand, there are people who view marriage purely as a means to having a family. In these cases, the issue of personal compatibility may be completely overlooked due to a complete focus on finding a partner who can be a good parent. What often happens is that the partners realize they don't have much in common other than their children, and they struggle to have a fulfilling relationship with each other as a couple. It is important to remember that while children can be an immense source of joy and pleasure, there are years before having children and after children are grown up during which the couple will need to enjoy each other's company.

Another important consideration is that not everyone is able to have children. Individuals pursuing marriage should discuss the degree of importance they accord to having children, the size of the family they wish to have, and what response they might have if they were to learn that the other partner is not fertile. Although we may not know exactly how we would respond in any given situation, having these discussions forces people to think about what is most important to them. Some people value having children a great deal and would be likely to consider options like infertility treatment. While Islamic guidelines accept in vitro fertilization, sperm donors other than the spouse are not acceptable. If either spouse knows prior to marriage that there may be difficulties with conception, these issues must be disclosed.

Others may feel that if they discover one partner is infertile, they might consider divorce in order to marry another person. Still others might feel that if one partner is infertile, that is something to accept and live with. None of these responses is better or worse than any other; what is most important here is that the couple takes time to discuss these issues ahead of time to determine if they share a similar outlook in the event fertility becomes an issue.

Stating one's expectations regarding children and family must be done up front in order to give each person the opportunity to evaluate if their values, attitudes and needs are compatible. In general, we discourage pregnancy during the first year, regardless of the age of the couple, simply to provide more time for the individuals to know each other and develop their relationship before adding more family members to the mix. Those couples whose primary purpose of getting married is having

children may rush into having a family without taking time to build the relationship. They may discover after having several children that they don't have much in common, or that their emotional and physical needs as an individual are not being satisfied. While it is ultimately Allah (*swt*) who decides when a child will be born, to the extent that we can plan, it is helpful to spend time preparing the environment for children by establishing your relationship together as a couple. Reflecting on how birds take their time to build their nest before they lay eggs illustrates how natural it is to take time to develop the home environment before becoming a parent.

A final issue regarding children is the struggle some couples experience with the question of whether to adopt if they cannot have children themselves. Islam encourages people to take care of orphans, but the couple must learn the Islamic guidelines of seeking this option. Infants are easier to raise within Islamic boundaries than older children. General guidelines for Islamic adoption should be researched if this case applies to you. Children must be told at some point in their lifetime that the adoptive parents are not the biological parents. If the adoptive parents know the biological parents, this information must be provided to the child. The child's identity cannot be absorbed by the adoptive parents; he or she should know the biological father's last name. However, the child can take the adoptive parents' last name for legal purposes as long as the biological identity is not concealed. If the biological parents are not known, the child should know that he or she was adopted. This information should be shared when the child is developmentally able and mature enough to handle the information. Some scholars suggest that the child can be given a last name that is generic, like Abd Allah, or Abd al-Rahman, if the father's last name is not known.

In dealing with issues such as infertility treatment and adoption, there are many questions to reflect on in order to address the psychological impact of these decisions. Is the couple ready to raise a child that is not their own? Is the couple prepared to support each other through the sometimes long and difficult process of fertility treatment? Is there a difference if it's the husband who has fertility issues or if it's the wife? Sometimes there are different expectations from extended family members depending on which spouse has the fertility issue. It can seem very

unfair when a man may be encouraged to divorce a wife who is unable to have children, while a wife may be encouraged to be patient and continue living with a husband who is sterile.

Although many people may be reluctant to identify any potential problems with fertility prior to marriage, we encourage everyone to have a thorough physical evaluation for any physical problem that might impact the marriage. In this way, each person enters the marriage informed, to the best of each person's knowledge and ability at the time, providing ample opportunity to discuss these matters ahead of time.

4. Financial Security

Another factor that weighs heavily in some people's motivation to get married has to do with the desire to be financially secure. It is important to take finances into consideration when deciding to get married. Individuals should be aware of the other person's financial situation, including income and outstanding debts. Conversations should include discussions about expectations, spending and saving philosophies, and interpretations of Islamic teachings regarding finances.

On the other hand, one should be careful that a focus on finances does not overshadow other important factors in establishing a healthy marriage. A prioritization on finances can be manifested in multiple ways. One look at the matrimonial section of some Muslim magazines and websites illustrates this point. Parents often place ads seeking physicians or engineers for their daughters, seemingly prioritizing this profession over other qualities that are important in a successful marriage. In other cases, new immigrants struggling to find a job may choose to marry an employed American professional in order to depend on his or her income. And in other cases, individuals may seek out wealthy partners in order to escape existing financial problems, including paying off tuition or debt.

When money and financial status become the sole driving force in spouse selection, the risks for an unhealthy and unhappy marriage increase. Other important criteria for compatibility may be ignored or dismissed when the sole objective is to marry someone who earns a

certain-figure income or belongs to a particular profession, regardless of differences in age, values or beliefs that may lead to significant discord. In extreme cases, this focus on money can lead people to seek a divorce simply to obtain the property settlement even if the problems in the marriage are not that severe.

One of the problems we are seeing is financial misrepresentation by some men who are going overseas to get married. It is easy to go to a family back home and claim to have a particular profession and socioeconomic status. Later, when the wife arrives in the US, she may discover that he did not portray an accurate picture. Misrepresentation of financial stability can be devastating when the truth is discovered after marriage. A young woman's family may decide they are comfortable sending their daughter to the US based on believing that she will be provided for adequately. Those people who are going overseas to marry must practice complete disclosure and explain the reality of life in the US, what they will and won't be able to provide and what lifestyle the spouse can expect upon arrival.

We recommend that when a couple gets to the point of being very serious about the marriage, they should put all their financial information on the table. Sometimes men are afraid if they disclose how much they have, women will be greedy. Other times, a man may over-represent his financial assets, showering a woman with gifts at the beginning of the relationship, thereby giving the impression that he is wealthy and generous. If the woman discovers after marriage that he can barely make ends meet, there is a feeling of betrayal and disappointment. It is within a woman's right to know her future husband's financial situation, and it is within her right to ask to see a tax return. For men, regardless of how much money the woman has, this information does not affect his responsibility of providing for her.

Knowing each other's financial situation is important for building mutual trust, and for making well-informed decisions. Furthermore, in the case of a crisis or in the event of death, it is critical for couples in the US to have full access to each other's financial information, including a history of bad credit or bankruptcy which can have long-term implications for the couple. Misrepresenting yourself and your condition can lead to a miserable marriage. Discovery of a betrayal is almost a

guarantee that the marriage will be ruined. Transparency is a key issue for a successful marriage and healthy relationship.

5. Escape

There are many reasons that might lead young people to get married in order to escape their existing situations. People who feel stuck or trapped in their native country, in their family of origin, or in their socioeconomic class may see marriage as a way to end what they feel is intolerable or as a way to move towards a better life. Young women especially may utilize marriage as a socially acceptable avenue to leaving an abusive situation at home. Using marriage as a way to escape a current situation often leads people to jump into a relationship that is not healthy because the immediate need to escape may prevent the needed exploration of compatibility for long-term success.

We hear from many women, in particular, who agreed to leave their native country to come to the US, thinking that their lives would be easier and better. Sometimes, these women have no idea of what life is like in the US. They may not realize how alone and isolated they might feel when they are away from their family and friends. They may not realize that their lives may be harder if they have to work to help provide for the family.

Both men and women may get married to escape the pressure that is put on them by community and family members to get married if they are approaching whatever age is considered too old by that community's standards. Relatives and friends should be aware that this type of pressure can often lead to getting married just for the sake of being married and complying with social pressure. It is certainly more important to be married to the right person than simply to be married.

Some people may think they are attracted to a person who offers what they are missing emotionally in their lives, even if the person is not really a good match. For example, a young woman who insists on marrying a man who is two or three times her age may be looking for a father-replacement figure rather than a spouse, if her own father was abusive or absent. While she may feel comfortable in the early stages of

marriage, eventually she will feel dissatisfied and conflict may ensue. In this scenario, he is looking for a wife while she is looking for a father. In addition to struggling with differing expectations, they will each be going through different stages of life with different interests, different energy levels, etc.

It is important to think not only about the short term and what may provide you immediate relief from a current situation that feels uncomfortable, but also to consider your long-term future. Things may feel great after the initial escape, but that immediate relief will gradually wear off. It is worth taking the time up front to ensure that the person you are escaping to, or with, is someone you will want to spend the rest of your life with, rather than becoming another situation to escape from down the road.

6. Settling Down

We come across many people who have chosen to live their single lives having a series of relationships that are not serious but are designed to fulfill emotional and physical needs without the long-term commitment of marriage. By the time they reach their thirties or forties, they are ready to settle down and start a family. At this point, men in particular seek a spouse who is a practicing Muslim, a virgin, and someone who has never been in a relationship. They may have had their fun with someone else, then want to settle down with a religious person. Women are often quite frustrated with the double standards this scenario presents. The fact that the husband has had a previous life with other women often lays the ground for a significant amount of jealousy, suspicion and insecurity. He may compare his inexperienced wife with previous women he has been with; he may be overly controlling in order to keep his wife "pure," or he may have unrealistic expectations (sexually) that she engage in behaviors he experienced before settling down.

Increasingly, as a function of societal changes, we are seeing a reverse scenario in which the woman is the one who has had previous relationships prior to marriage. The same concerns mentioned above apply when women have a history of prior relationships. Men also can feel jealous, suspicious and insecure. In these cases, it is important to

reflect on how you feel about your potential spouse having previous relationships, and what you need from each other in order to protect your marriage from jealousy and insecurity.

There are many scenarios in which people express their intention to marry but they are not really stable enough themselves to enter a marital commitment. It is not realistic to seek stability through marriage; rather, you must be stable first yourself in order to have a stable marriage. Women should be wary of men who may be getting out of a bad marriage but have still not completed the divorce process, or men who insist on keeping the marriage secret for one reason or another. Men should not approach women for marriage who may be in their *`iddah* (waiting period for divorce). Both men and women should be wary of people who talk confidently about their intentions for a stable future but have not actually taken any steps to materialize these intentions. And anyone coming out of a very bad or abusive marriage will need time to heal before moving into a new marriage.

In other cases, people are determined to get married in order to settle down but are completely "unsettled" themselves because they have improper immigration documents. In these cases, the natural response is to be suspicious about the intention of their marriage to a US citizen or green card holder. Families are not keen on having their daughter or son be used as a means to gain lawful residency in the US. It is important whenever possible to have taken care of these types of issues before seeking marriage in order for the intention to be clear.

7. False Hopes and Dreams

Sometimes people fall in love with a person who is not really their peer. For example, it is easy for students to fall in love with their teachers, patients with their physicians, or for employees to fall in love with their employers. In these cases, what is often happening is an idealization of the person in the leadership position. The student or employee is looking up to the other person, seeing only one aspect of this person's personality and nature. Usually people in a professional or public capacity are bringing their best self to the job or professional context. Their time may

be dedicated in that setting to taking care of the needs of the students or employees; since they are the leaders, their own needs are often not disclosed or shared. It is important to realize that these leaders have personalities that may be quite different in their personal or social lives. We are not saying that it is never appropriate to marry a teacher or an employer; however, it is crucial to take the time to get to know that person in other settings, and to bear in mind that the original context in which you met the person is very different from the relationship of marriage. A student who marries a teacher may soon get annoyed if the teacher insists on playing that role in every aspect of the marriage.

By the same token, the person in the leadership role may take great pleasure in "teaching" or "guiding" their future spouse, feeling gratified by the immense respect and admiration that is being received. What often happens a few years into the relationship is that the other person grows and wants to be an equal partner, sometimes being taught and other times teaching. This shift in dynamics can be very frustrating for both partners if there is not enough flexibility in the relationship with room for mutual respect.

In some cases, the person who has the greater power in the relationship (the teacher or the employer) may be taking advantage of the other person. Unfortunately, some public figures (including imams) may take advantage of this power in order to entice a woman who wants to get married, even taking her as a second or third wife. She may be falling in love with the public image, only realizing after marriage that she has been taken advantage of. The fact that someone is amazing as a community leader does not guarantee that he or she will be just as amazing at home. Make sure to take enough time to know this person away from the public life he or she leads in order to determine if you are also as comfortable with how he or she acts in private.

8. Feelings of Obligation or Guilt

It is not uncommon for us to hear people say they married a certain person because they felt a sense of duty or obligation. This sense of obligation could come about for numerous reasons. It might be that a person

provided a lot of support and help at a time of need and then proposed, leading to a feeling of indebtedness. Or it may be that during the course of a dating-type relationship, an obligation to marry arises in order to make the relationship "*halal*" (permissible) even though there may be some awareness that the two people will not make good life partners for each other. We believe it is better to correct any improper situations by ending them, not necessarily by getting married. It is important to end the inappropriate relationship first, then step back and assess whether or not the two people are compatible. If the relationship was sexual, it is important to wait to make sure there is no pregnancy before marrying someone else.

In other cases, we hear people say that they were praying for Allah (*swt*) to send the right person to them. The next person that comes into their lives is then perceived as having been sent by Allah (*swt*). Even when the person feels a lack of attraction or compatibility, he or she may feel obligated to marry that person. The truth is, however, that the answer to one's prayers may or may not be immediate. You should assess any person who comes into your life for compatibility, regardless of whether you have prayed for this person.

Other situations in which people get married out of a sense of obligation or guilt are related to family pressures. Parents may plan or arrange for their adult child to marry a relative or other person without really considering their child's input. The adult child may be completely opposed but remain silent out of a desire to please and obey the parents. In these situations, difficult as they may be, it is critical to voice your opinion and remember that making a marriage work requires you to like the person and have many things in common. It is also important to remember that the intended spouse has the right to a partner who *wants* him or her; an injustice occurs when you marry someone and cannot be a proper spouse due to lack of attraction or compatibility.

The Issue of Pregnancy before Marriage

When a dating relationship results in a pregnancy, it is natural to panic and to try to "fix" the situation in a way that is culturally

acceptable. People often say that for the benefit of the child you have to get married. While this may be a good short-term solution to avoid embarrassment or shame, or to provide a legitimate relationship for the child, it does not really take into consideration the long-term success of the marriage or the wellbeing of the individuals, including the children, in the long run. You cannot correct the situation with another mistake. First, end the *haram* or illegitimate relationship. Then assess whether the relationship can work in the long term.

If there is a pregnancy and the couple decides to get married, they have to remember that the child was conceived out of marriage. They don't have to announce it publically, but at some point, they may have to tell the child that they made a mistake. The couple should also realize that sometimes the secret may be breached by an extended family member or someone else. A child may also determine this if there is a big discrepancy in the date of childbirth and the date of the marriage. These situations are not easy and should be given a lot of time and reflection so that the situation will be handled in the best possible way, with the least possible damage to all involved.

Pregnancy should never be used to manipulate a man to marry a woman. Some women may engage in premarital sex with the hope of getting pregnant as a way to "force" someone they love to stay with them. Other women may feel they were pressured into having premarital sex, only to discover that upon pregnancy, the man wants nothing to do with her. Each person needs to think very carefully about the choices being made along the way and how these choices can have life-long implications. Sadly, too many young Muslims are engaging in premarital sexual relationships without considering the long-term consequences they may have to suffer. Even worse, many Muslim women are choosing to have abortions as a means to deal with an unintended pregnancy. Abortions, too, have long-term psychological and spiritual consequences.

If there is a pregnancy before marriage, and the decision is not to get married, then the child must be connected to the biological father. It takes two people to get pregnant. It is not right to let men get away without any responsibility and have the female bear all the responsibility. Sometimes a woman may choose to keep information about the

pregnancy secret as a way to punish the man for leaving her. It is a misconception that denying the father of his fatherhood is a punishment to the man; in reality, it is a punishment to the child.

9. Caring for a Widow or Orphan

In many cultures, it is customary that when a wife passes away, her husband may marry her unmarried sister to raise the children. This is done out of a belief that the maternal aunt is the person closest to the children after their mother. Allah (*swt*) prohibited marrying a woman and her sister at the same time;[17] however, after her death this prohibition does not exist.

Another common situation in some cultures is for a woman to marry her brother-in-law if her husband passes away. In this situation, she may or may not be the first or only wife. Each of these scenarios may be beneficial to the surviving spouse and children, or it may be detrimental, depending on the specific circumstances.

In an American cultural context, these scenarios may feel uncomfortable because they are not as common. It may be difficult not to compare the original spouse to the sibling that is now the current spouse. From the children's perspective, the step-parent is also the aunt or uncle. In some situations, when a person marries their former brother or sister-in-law, some people may suspect there was an affair. In the case of a husband marrying his sister-in-law, he should take into consideration that there are grief issues to contend with, and logistical issues such as the new wife not wanting to live in her dead sister's home. Furthermore, while the deceased spouse's sibling may make an excellent step-parent, there is no guarantee of compatibility since siblings often have very different personalities. Although we have limited counseling experiences with these situations, we wanted to address these scenarios in order to raise potential challenges, while recognizing these can also be ideal solutions for the children.

17 Qur'an 4:23.

Appropriate Age for Marriage

Marriage is a long-term commitment that requires each spouse to have a certain level of maturity in order to take care of one's own needs as well as the needs of the spouse. There is no specific age that determines maturity. Some people are mature at eighteen (or even younger); others may not be mature even at twenty-five or older. The years between the late teens and early twenties are generally a time of great change physically, emotionally and intellectually. It is natural to experience shifts in priorities, attitudes and beliefs as the brains of young adults are still developing. Experiences during this age range lead to greater self-awareness, increased life experiences, and broader perspectives. Many young adults who are graduating from high school are completely unprepared for the responsibilities that come with married life. Still others may be graduating from college and still are not ready for those responsibilities. On the other hand, others may have had experiences that have prepared them to live as responsible, mature, independent adults at a younger age than their peers.

We are seeing different trends that are pushing the age of marriage in opposite directions. In some communities, the trend is to get married very young, with the intention that marriage would serve as a protection from un-Islamic relationships. At the other end of the continuum, marriage is being delayed until college and graduate school are completed, and a career is well underway. There is no "right" age or best approach. Each situation must be evaluated individually, considering the maturity of the individuals involved, their needs and expectations, and the type of support they may or may not need from extended family.

There are pros and cons for both early and delayed marriage. Those waiting until they have established a career may find difficulty finding a spouse due to a smaller pool of unmarried individuals. We hear from an increasingly growing number of young professionals about the frustrations they face as they try to get married, struggling to find the appropriate venue in which to meet the right person. Questions arise about whether one is being too picky, too rigid or too demanding. At the same time, by this stage in life, each person may be very clear on what they need from a partner. Sometimes it becomes tempting to settle for

someone who does not quite meet the outlined criteria because of loneliness and the fear that marriage may not happen otherwise.

At the same time, these young professionals may be more stable financially and emotionally, and fully ready to embrace the commitment of marriage. They may be bringing more into the marriage and, having already had many experiences as a single person, feel very ready to share their life with another person.

Young single Muslims are under a great deal of pressure to maintain chastity in a society in which they are surrounded by messages and living examples promoting promiscuity, premarital sex, and instant gratification. As a way to protect themselves, young people may rush to perform the *nikaah* or *kitaab* (marriage contract) to legitimize a dating-type relationship, with the intention of delaying living together until they are more prepared emotionally or financially. For some of these couples, their idea of marriage is simply about having a companion, but they have not really given much thought to what it means to live a shared life in all aspects. They may also struggle with adjusting to the changes each person may be experiencing as they continue to grow, supporting themselves financially, and juggling multiple demands such as school, job and the new marriage.

Early marriages are an option that parents and potential spouses should explore in depth, considering all the pros and cons, potential risks and resources needed for a successful marriage. Parents and the potential spouses should discuss each person's maturity level, how the couple will support themselves or be supported, long-term and short-term goals, and who they will rely on for emotional support. Otherwise, the decision could result in a burden on the parents and other family members instead of being a solution as originally intended. Attention must be given not only to how individuals will protect themselves physically, but also to how they will take care of themselves and each other emotionally and spiritually.

In order for an early marriage to succeed, the couple must have support from the family and/or the community. This support may be financial and/or emotional. Couples should be educated about healthy relationships, their roles and responsibilities, and Islamic laws pertaining to marriage. We also recommend that young couples give themselves

time to know each other and get settled in their new life as married people before adding the additional role of mother or father. Allowing this time also provides an opportunity to make sure the spouses are compatible. We see couples who rush into having children, only to realize they can't stand each other and feel stuck because they now have a small child to raise.

Types of People Seeking Marriage

1. Single, Never Married, No Prior Relationship

People who have never been married have no experience with marriage and may enter the marriage with a fantasy or an understanding that this is a new learning experience. If they enter with an open mind, they are likely to enjoy it and experience it as an opportunity for growth. If they enter with idealistic or false expectations, they may be disappointed. They should realize marriage has both ups and downs, includes hard work, and that it is a big responsibility. They should also bear in mind that it is important to enter marriage after adequate preparation that includes self-reflection, learning about marriage in Islam and what makes marriages successful, and taking time to make sure that the potential spouse is compatible. Reading this book is a good first step in getting prepared. It is also useful to talk to married couples to learn from their mistakes and what they did well, as well as listening to friends and family who can advise you and help you learn how others view you.

2. Single, Previous Engagement or Relationship

It is important to recognize that anytime a person is in an intimate relationship, it takes time to heal and put closure on that relationship when it ends. Sufficient time and processing must be allowed in order for this closure to occur, allowing the person to move forward without bringing unresolved pain into the new relationship. While the amount of time needed to heal varies from person to person, it is generally a good

idea to wait a full year before moving into a new relationship. In cases where the person seeking marriage is not the one who broke off the prior relationship, there may still be an attachment to the first person. This attachment can lead to comparing future suitors to the first "love," not being fully present in the new relationship, and ongoing preoccupation with the previous relationship. In cases where people struggle to move forward after ending a prior relationship, counseling can be a helpful resource.

3. Divorced, No Children

It is important to consider the reasons that led to the divorce. People who have come out of abusive marriages, or marriages in which there was significant betrayal, will need to heal before being able to trust a new spouse. There may also be issues related to feelings of failure that need to be processed and resolved so they are not carried into the next relationship. People should not rush into a new marriage thinking that this new relationship will heal the effects of the divorce. Post-divorce counseling can be very helpful in resolving issues related to the marriage that has ended and in integrating lessons learned from the experience in order to move forward in a positive manner.

4. Divorced with Children

In addition to what is noted in the category of divorced without children, divorced individuals with children must also give consideration to how the divorce has impacted the children. In addition, they must consider how the new spouse will relate to the children, and how to prepare both the new spouse and the children for integrating into one family. This is a complex process in which counseling can be very helpful in identifying and addressing the issues that are relevant in each specific case.

One of the fascinating lessons we've witnessed is that while it is easy to blame the other person for previous relationship problems, we quickly discover that similar problems or patterns seem to penetrate

subsequent relationships. Each person always has some contribution to the problem, sometimes to varying degrees. It is critical to take time to reflect on your contribution before moving on to the next relationship. We've seen people have multiple divorces simply because they hoped the next spouse would be better than the one before, without doing any work on themselves.

5. Widows and Widower

It may seem that men are able to remarry more quickly after the death of their wife than women who lose their husbands. While this may be true in some cases, in other cases, men may take time to grieve before remarrying, or they may never remarry. The Prophet (pbuh) took a year to grieve the death of Khadijah before he married again. Even throughout the rest of his life, subsequent wives got jealous of his continued attachment to her. When a good relationship ends due to the death of a spouse, it can be very difficult to accept another woman in the first wife's place. If the relationship was not too close, or if there are children needing a parent figure, it may be easier to move on more quickly. Each situation is unique.

Women may be more vulnerable after the death of a husband, feeling that the chance to remarry is more limited. In order to avoid being alone, she may end up agreeing to marry someone with a considerable age gap, or agree to be a second wife, or settle for someone with a known history of domestic violence. In other cases, we've known women who may have suffered through a bad marriage for many years, only to be compensated by Allah (*swt*) with a second husband that may even make up for the bad years in her first marriage.

Regardless of the specific situation, there must be a time for healing and grieving and understanding that when there are children in the picture, marrying the widow or widower means taking care of the orphans. Because the surviving children are orphans, there are strict guidelines for how to raise them and treat them, adding more responsibility to the marriage. From my own experience (Magid), and our experiences in counseling, the parent must use a great deal of sensitivity towards the

new spouse who will be involved in raising the children, and to the children who have lost a parent.

Remarrying with Children

In these situations, parenting can be a challenge because of the emotional issues involved. My stepmother (Magid) is an example of an ideal stepmother who treated us as her own children. Nevertheless, the society was very critical of her as a stepmother. For example, if I had a missing shirt button, people would automatically assume my stepmother was not taking care of us properly, although my own mother could have missed that, too. Criticism especially came from maternal aunts who were very watchful over how we ate, dressed and were treated overall. Because of an inherent assumption that the stepmother will mistreat the children, others may be overly vigilant.

A widower or divorced person with children should be very thoughtful about the age of the new wife, taking care not to marry someone too close to his children's age. A spouse who is too young will not be able to adequately play the role of parent. Furthermore, there can be ensuing emotional conflicts and even inappropriate sexual relationships if an attraction develops between the young spouse and an older child. This scenario may be hard to imagine if the children are young at the time of the marriage, but it is important to remember the age difference when the children become teenagers or young adults. For example, a child may be twelve at the time his father remarries, so it may be difficult to imagine any romantic attraction developing with the young wife. However, when the child is a teenager, feelings can change and become confusing to the child. For this reason, it is important to maintain proper boundaries, modesty in dress, and sufficient privacy.

6. Married, Seeking a Second Wife

Despite the fact that American law does not allow polygyny, there are Muslims in the US who do practice it. Islam allows a man to have

up to four wives[18] under certain conditions, and as long as justice is not compromised.[19] One of the first conditions that must be met is the ability to marry, which includes physical, financial and emotional ability.[20] In this case, emotional ability refers to the ability to be just and fair to each wife, as required by verse 4:129.

The fact that a second wife cannot be legally recognized in the US can automatically create an injustice, because the second wife can neither have her rights enforced, nor is her marriage recognized. Muslim men seeking an additional wife often claim that they are looking out for her because she has no husband. These men are not considering the potential harm they may be committing in the process. In most cases, the first wife is usually devastated when her husband decides to take a second wife, especially when he does so behind her back. From an Islamic point of view, a healthy second marriage cannot be built on the destruction of the first marriage.

There are many women who do choose to enter polygynous relationships for a variety of reasons, but most often because they have not been able to find a suitable husband who is not already married. This is especially true in certain communities where there may be a shortage of men due to war, incarceration, or other circumstances. While polygyny can resolve some difficulties for women in situations where they have either lost a husband, or are unable to find a husband, these situations work best in societies that recognize and support such marriages. Women who choose to enter polygamous relationships in the US should be fully aware of what they are getting into.

---

18 "If you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry (other) women of your choice, (even) two or three or four; but if you fear you shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then (only) one, or (from among) those that your right hands possess, that will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice" (4:3). This verse addresses the issue of protecting the vulnerable, such as widows and orphans, such as in the case of war.

19 "You are never able to be fair and just between women, even if it is your ardent desire. But turn not away from a woman altogether, so as to leave her (as it were) hanging (in the air). If you come to a friendly understanding and practice self-restraint, Allah is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful." (4:129)

20 "*Asbaab Ta'addud al-Zawjaat*," www.islamicway.com, retrieved October 19, 2013.

a. As stated above, having more than one wife is illegal in the US. To get around this problem, people conduct the second marriage Islamically but cannot register the marriage in court. The result is that the second wife's marriage is not recognized, and her children are not considered legitimate by most states. While many Muslims in these types of relationships insist it is only important for Islam to recognize the marriage and the legitimacy of the children, in the event of maltreatment or death of the spouse, no court will be able to provide her the rights she would have had if her marriage was registered and legal in the US.

b. Although polygyny exists in many religions, people must understand the context in which it is allowed in Islam. It is not permissible for Muslims in the West who live under a law that only allows monogamy to jeopardize themselves by having multiple wives. From an Islamic perspective, preventing harm takes priority over gaining benefit.

c. One common misconception about polygyny is that the man can marry a second wife without telling his first wife, thinking she has no right to know. This introduces three problems: lying, betraying, and violating her right to get a divorce if she so chooses. If a man wants a second wife, the first wife has the right to decide if she wants to stay or leave. We believe it is **not** acceptable for a man to take a second wife secretly. While some scholars argue that this second marriage contract is valid, they overlook the fact that the first marriage contract has been violated because the implicit understanding of the contract is that there will be no dishonesty or betrayal.

d. No woman should accept keeping her marriage secret. Keeping a marriage secret violates the conditions of marriage that include *ij-haar* (publicizing the marriage) and compromises the dignity and honor of the second wife if she accepts to live in the shadows. A woman who has been approached to accept such a marriage has a moral obligation to refuse in order to avoid becoming part of the lies and deception towards the first wife. She should put herself in the first wife's shoes and imagine if her husband decided to secretly take a third wife. A woman who accepts a

secret marriage will likely never have a happy marriage herself because she is marrying a man who sneaks around, has a double life, and makes bogus trips while she has to be hidden, living like a mistress in an undignified situation.

We do recognize the argument for cases in which taking a second wife is actually for the benefit of all parties. For example, if a woman has a physical or mental condition that might restrict her abilities to function fully as a wife, and the husband does not want to abandon her by divorcing her, they may both agree that taking a second wife is an acceptable option. There are many other examples in which polygyny may actually provide a solution, and that is the reason it is allowed in Islam. However, given the legal prohibition in the US, the risk for abuse and injustice from unequal treatment and unenforceability of legal rights, we believe that polygyny should not be practiced in a society where it is illegal and socially unacceptable. In addition, it should not be practiced without mutual consent, or when there will be any type of harm, including emotional, inflicted upon any of the parties. In this regard, before taking any decision one should remember the hadith of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) who said "A Muslim is a brother (or sister) of another Muslim, so he (or she) should not oppress him (or her)."[21]

Conclusion

People get married for many reasons, some of which are ideal and some of which are related to the real circumstances in which they are living. Even if the marriage has occurred for the wrong reasons or within difficult circumstances, it is possible to shift one's attitude in order to have a healthy relationship. Marrying for the wrong reason does not necessarily doom the marriage. It is possible to overcome the obstacles with hard work, counseling, and the spiritual work of repentance and becoming closer to Allah (*swt*).

21 Bukhari, Book 43, #622.

What is important to remember is that regardless of the primary incentive for getting married, the relationship is one that is complex and multi-faceted. In order for each person in the relationship to fulfill the terms of the marriage covenant, the relationship must be one that is mutually satisfying. At the bare minimum, marriage is a contract in which there are rights and obligations for each spouse that must be fulfilled. At its best, a healthy marriage helps each person to grow to his or her greatest potential. Although people may get married for any of the reasons listed in this chapter, it is important to look at the essence of marriage. At the moment of commitment and saying "I do," you must mean it and live up to this oath. Several scholars have interpreted the meaning of a solemn covenant (*meethaq ghaleeth*; Qur'an 4:21) as living together honorably and on good terms or separating with kindness.[22]

In addition, you must be aware of your status (legal, social, etc.) and the status of the person you are marrying. It is important to take into consideration how your status may affect your future spouse's, as well as how circumstances change over time. Remembering that ultimately marriage is something we do to seek the pleasure of Allah (*swt*) will help ensure that conscientiousness guides the decisions that you make throughout the process.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- ❑ What is your objective in getting married?
- ❑ Which reasons for getting married apply to you?
- ❑ What is the objective of the person you are considering for marriage?
- ❑ Why are you considering this particular person?

22 Tabari. *Tafsir al-Tabari*. Volume 8. p. 130.

- ❑ Are the qualities you are looking at permanent qualities or changeable? In other words, are you focusing on a person's appearance, size and age, or personal qualities such as integrity and piety?

- ❑ What is the environment or context that you are marrying into? What are the external factors (family, finances, social pressure, etc.) and the internal factors (desire to have companionship, desire to have children, etc.)?

- ❑ What are your family and friends telling you about your level of maturity and readiness for marriage?

- ❑ What can you point to in your life that indicates you are stable and ready for the responsibilities of marriage?

- ❑ If you have been in a previous relationship, including marriage, have you given sufficient time to process the experiences you had, and time to heal if there are feelings of loss, betrayal or abuse?
    - Have you taken time to reflect on your contribution to the ending of that relationship?
    - What changes have you made that you will carry into your next relationship?

CHAPTER 3:

Factors to Consider When Choosing a Spouse



Our Lord! Grant us wives and offspring who will be the comfort of our eyes. (25:74)

What matters most to you?

Fatima bint Qais (ra) reported that her husband divorced her with three pronouncements and made no provision for her lodging and maintenance allowance. She (further said):

"Allah's Messenger (pbuh) said to me: 'When your period of `iddah is over, inform me.' So I informed him." (By that time) Mu`awiya, Abu Jahm and Usama ibn Zaid had given her the proposal of marriage.

Allah's Messenger (pbuh) said: "So far as Mu`awiya is concerned, he is a poor man without any property.

So far as Abu Jahm is concerned, he is a great beater of women, but Usama ibn Zaid . . . She pointed with her hand (that she did not approve of the idea of marrying) Usama.

But Allah's Messenger (pbuh) said: "Obedience to Allah and obedience to His Messenger is better for you."

She said: "So I married him (Usama), and I became an object of envy." (Muslim, Book 9, # 3526)

In order to begin the process of identifying a good match for yourself, it is critical to spend some time alone reflecting on your values and priorities. Think about the types of people you get along with best, and which personality types you feel most comfortable with. Then think about what your values are and write these down, ranking them in order of importance. Highlight the items that are "nonnegotiable," or that you are not willing to live without. Next, list the qualities you desire in a spouse, again ranking them and marking the ones that are musts. Then talk to your family members and friends who know you very well; ask them to share their perceptions of you including what you value. Finally, ask yourself what you can offer as a spouse, noting your strengths and your weaknesses. It is important to be absolutely honest with yourself. Friends and family may be quite happy to help you with this part as well. Take the time to write all of these things down. As you discover or realize other important things, add them to your list.

As you go through this process of learning about yourself and what you value in a spouse, it may be helpful to consider the common issues that couples may struggle with. Through our experiences, we've seen these issues come up over and over again as areas in which the couple has conflicting values, beliefs, or behaviors. Some of these factors include: religion, culture, age, education, health, physical attraction, and gender roles.

Key Factors to Consider

1. Religion

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) encouraged Muslims to prioritize religion when considering a spouse. He said, "If a man whose religious commitment and moral conduct you approve of proposes for marriage to your daughter, then marry her to him; otherwise, trials will prevail and great corruption will spread upon the earth."[23] This hadith highlights the importance of piety, and the type of character that indicates a person is truly God-conscious and is living a life that is focused on the Hereafter.

Many Muslims oversimplify the issue of religion, limiting it to the external behaviors associated with worship, such as prayer or manner of dress. While following the guidelines of Islam is an essential part of being a good Muslim, spirituality is equally important. Spirituality refers to the inner dimension of worship and is related to our connection with Allah (*swt*). It can contribute to building and strengthening relationships as people feel connected to each other and strive to attain the pleasure of Allah (*swt*) by being kind, thoughtful, and loving.

People vary in the degree of importance they give to religion when it comes to marriage, as well as the way they measure religiosity. Some people believe that any two "good" Muslims can get married and have a successful relationship. For others, many conditions may be made as to the degree of practice, the particular school of thought (*madhhab*) that is followed, whether or not a woman wears hijab or a man has a beard, etc. Still others wonder if it is really necessary to marry a Muslim at all and may feel constrained due to having difficulty meeting a Muslim that is compatible.

Determining someone's level of religiosity and spirituality can be tricky since it ultimately is a matter of the heart. Assessing a person's

23 Narrated by Al-Tirmidhi & Ibn Maajah (Maajah n.d.).

character and moral conduct can only happen by spending time together, asking questions that help to identify a person's attitudes and beliefs, and asking others what they know about this person. The outward appearance should match the internal compass that shapes behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions. A person can be religiously sound in terms of the rituals and formalities of Islam while being abusive, rigid, close-minded, stingy or arrogant in terms of character (*khuluq*).

Unfortunately, too many people confuse these outward appearances with a genuine Islamic character. Carrying prayer beads, wearing hijab, or keeping a long beard do not necessarily guarantee that a person has good character. The converse is also true: the fact that someone does not have this outward appearance does not indicate bad character. For some people, these outward manifestations of Islam are much easier to practice than the true Islamic character, which has to do with how people treat each other.

Like any religion, Islam can be practiced to varying degrees and with various interpretations. Even among practicing Muslims, there may be differences that can lead to incompatibility in marriage. At a practical level, for example, marriage between a person with a literal perspective and a person with a more mystical perspective may not be a good idea due to differences in the lifestyles each person may prefer, as well as their attitudes and convictions, which may contradict each other. For the same reasons, it may also not be a good idea for a passionate Shi`i nd a passionate Sunni to get married. In the case where one person is Shi`a and the other is Sunni, but they are both secular, the religious differences will not pose a problem. Similarly, it may be challenging for a very secular Muslim and an observant Muslim to have a successful relationship. These differences can translate to differences in behaviors, lifestyles, and interpretations of events that can lead to unnecessary conflict. The same applies when marrying a person of another faith tradition. When both are not practicing their respective religions, there are usually few problems related to matters of religion. However, if one person adheres to his or her religion while the other does not, there may have to be compromises in order for the marriage to be successful.

There are also some special considerations when it comes to converts, particularly those who are newer to Islam. Not all converts have

the same experiences, but in many cases, converts may lose their family support system. Being aware of how painful this may be, and how alienated the person may feel, should lead to the "new" family being more compassionate and more conscientious in how they treat him or her. It is vital to be respectful of this person's opinions and preferences, even if there is no extended family to act as an advocate. It's also important to bear in mind that a convert is changing religions but does not have to change their entire culture; converts to Islam do not have to adopt South Asian or Arab culture in order to be good Muslims.

Converts may be at different stages in their development when they get married. Some may be solidly identified with Islam and may have integrated and internalized its teachings. They may want an Islamic ceremony without feeling the need to have a Christian or Jewish ceremony; however, they may try to make some accommodations for their parents to increase their comfort level at the Islamic wedding. Others may have converted to Islam primarily in order to marry a Muslim, but they may still be attached to their original religion, or they may not have an affiliation to any faith. People in this situation may insist on having another ceremony in the church or synagogue, even if the excuse is that it's really for the parents' sake. In between these two stages is the new convert who is still adjusting to being Muslim and has not fully developed an Islamic identity. This person may want to have both a Muslim wedding and one in the church or synagogue, reflecting their evolving identity.

> *Yasmin and Anas were introduced to each other at an iftaar party in Ramadan and decided to get married within a couple of months. It wasn't long before they were fighting all the time. Anas could not accept the fact that Yasmin saw nothing wrong with drinking alcohol at weddings or other social events. He also realized soon after marriage that her idea of being religious meant fasting in Ramadan and avoiding pork. Although he did not consider himself a strict Muslim, he had looked forward to having a wife who would pray daily with him, especially fajr and `isha.*

Anas had not taken the time to learn from Yasmin how she practiced Islam. They both assumed that as "moderate" Muslims, they interpreted and applied Islam in the same ways. Having some conversations in which they shared how they each practiced Islam might have saved them both a lot of unnecessary heartache.

There are many common conflicts that occur around the interpretation of religion. Some people may consider television or music completely *haram*, or they may not believe it is acceptable to attend wedding parties where there is dancing, or they may only eat *zabiha*. All of these standpoints are legitimate; however, having these beliefs and marrying someone who enjoys watching television, loves music, enjoys dancing, and eats the food of the People of the Book may lead to daily disagreements.

Some couples who experience these types of conflicts choose not to fight, and instead resort to living parallel lives, with each one living according to his or her values. While this arrangement may prevent arguments and hostility, it can also limit connection between the spouses due to most aspects of their lives being completely separate. People may be unhappy even if they are not fighting. When there are children involved, these divergent views can significantly impact parenting, usually creating significant confusion for the children. In the worst cases, children may decide that Islam is the problem, and they may turn away from Islam altogether. In other cases, one parent will lie to the more conservative or strict parent, hiding behavior that the other disapproves of, and thereby contradicting universal principles of integrity.

Sometimes, one person will try to change or "fix" the spouse, hoping to instill more similar views. However, you cannot impose religion on others; trying to do so usually turns people away from the religion. There are cases when it may be the opposite, and one spouse tries to limit the other one's practice. For example, there are women whose husbands do not want them to wear hijab. For instance, Laila, and many others in her situation, compromised her beliefs by only wearing hijab when she went out without her husband. He wanted her to fit in with his colleagues' wives and believed that hijab was inconsistent with being modern and successful in the US. Laila believed that pleasing her husband was part of pleasing God, but she ended up feeling miserable because in trying to

avoid upsetting her husband, she was not being true to her values. This type of conflict often leads to a spiritual crisis, in addition to the marital crisis that is inevitable in these cases.

Learning as much as you can about a potential spouse does not guarantee that there will be no surprises after marriage, since there are some things you can only know about someone when you live with them. However, asking close family and friends will help to reduce the risk of a major surprise or disappointment. Ask specific questions, like "Did you observe him/her to pay attention to praying on time? What is this person's reaction when things don't go his/her way? How does this person deal with money? What are the best qualities about this person? What are the worst?" These types of questions will yield more useful information than a generic "Is he/she a good Muslim?" since "good Muslim" means different things to different people. Also, when you visit a potential spouse, observe how siblings and parents are treated. Over time, you will learn a lot about the family dynamics. This information will be critical in assessing compatibility.

Some people do a good job of choosing someone compatible in the beginning, but during the course of the marriage, one or both spouses may change. It is important for spiritual and intellectual growth to be shared as much as possible; otherwise, the couple may grow apart. When people do grow apart, it is important to assess the relationship and look for the strengths that can bind the couple together despite their differences. Tolerance and flexibility should be practiced as much as possible during marriage, especially regarding those changes that do not actually violate the spirit or law of Islam. However, sometimes one person becomes more religious and begins to criticize the spouse for not being a "good" Muslim.

> *Sarah and Sami were raised in similar backgrounds. Their families observed the basic pillars of Islam, while also enjoying many cultural practices and traditions. As Sarah became more knowledgeable about Islam through some of her friends in graduate school, she wanted to spend her free time going to classes in the mosque instead of playing cards or going to dinner parties. Sami missed the fun*

times he had with his wife, but he was not really interested in going to the mosque so often. Before long, they realized they had grown apart. In an effort to save their marriage, the couple decided to focus on what they still shared in common (basic Islamic practice, their children and their love for each other), and to each compromise a little to share activities that the other person enjoyed. So Sarah agreed to "have fun" with Sami one night of the week, and he agreed to attend a couple of classes with her.

Sarah and Sami knew that their differences did not have to separate them. They were willing to negotiate changes each could make in order to preserve their marriage. They are a good example of how people can learn to work around their differences, especially when they have a solid and loving foundation. In the next example, Amina and her husband were not so fortunate.

Amina reflected on the reason for her divorce. "If I knew I would be annoyed by too much religion, I wouldn't have married him. He does Islamic activities in all his free time. I really enjoyed socializing and going to parties. We were physically attracted to each other and were professionally compatible, but we didn't see eye to eye in the area of religion, so we divorced." She said she should have asked herself, "What type of person am I in terms of religiosity? And I should have asked more questions about his faith." They thought they could live in two worlds in terms of religious practice, but their social lives and interests didn't mesh.

In summary, the most important thing in a Muslim's life in terms of religion is to understand that two things make you a good Muslim: fulfilling the obligations of Islam (like prayer and fasting) and avoiding the major sins (like *shirk*,[24] murder, adultery and fornication, etc.).

24 Worshipping a deity other than Allah (one God).

Equally important is how you deal with your fellow human beings. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "Be conscious of Allah wherever you may be, follow your bad deeds with good deeds to erase them, seek repentance and forgiveness and deal with people in the best manner."[25]

Questions for Self-Reflection

It is important that you assess your own degree of religiosity and level of spirituality honestly before assessing a potential spouse. Take time to reflect on your own view of religion and how you feel about it.

- ❑ Do you use Islam as a frame of reference? If so, how?
- ❑ How would you feel if your spouse quotes religious texts to get you to do certain things?
- ❑ How well connected are you to your religion or belief system?
- ❑ Do you consider yourself an activist? If so, what does this mean to you?
- ❑ Do you enjoy going to Islamic conventions, lectures, or seminars?
- ❑ To what degree do you consider yourself a practicing Muslim? Give examples to illustrate your assessment of yourself.

2. Culture

Sonia, a Palestinian, was introduced to Ali, a Turkish businessman, by a common friend. Sonia was raised with ten siblings in a small home, with multiple

25 Narrated by Tirmidhi, found in *An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith*, #18.

siblings sharing a room. Her family was very expressive emotionally, and her siblings were heavily involved in her decision-making. In addition to language barriers (neither Ali nor Sonia were fluent in English), Ali soon got very concerned about the openly affectionate relationships Sonia had with her brothers, as well as the degree of involvement her family seemed to insist on. Ali had no siblings, and he did not recall ever seeing his parents express affection in front of him.

Ali and Sonia got along socially, so they assumed they would get along in marriage. However, their different backgrounds had taught them different values. Both of them were attached to the ways of their respective families of origin and had a hard time accepting the other's ways. Although they decided to stay together, their marriage was very turbulent with lots of fighting and misunderstandings.

We are products of the cultures we grow up in and are affected by many different aspects of our respective cultures. Muslims in the United States come from at least 77 different countries,[26] illustrating tremendous diversity. We see a trend of Muslims marrying across cultures, which suggests that people do not necessarily view culture as a barrier. At the same time, we have experienced couples struggling to overcome cultural differences if they have not done enough exploration of these differences up front. Cultural differences can serve to enhance the relationship and make it richer when both sides value diversity and have taken the time to explore cultural variations.

Even when each person comes from the same country, there can still be cultural differences that play out during the relationship. There can be significant differences in sub-cultures, such as between different racial groups, rural and urban environments, different socioeconomic levels, and different regions of the country. In addition, each family has its own cultural expectations about behaviors, emotions, manner of speaking and dress, family relationships, and more.

---

26 Pew Research Center, *Muslim Americans: No sign of growth in alienation or support for extremism.* http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/Muslim%20American%20Report%2010-02-12%20fix.pdf, retrieved December 11, 2012.

Between cultures, there are different levels of divergence: ethnicity + class + degree of conservatism. It is easier if there is divergence in one area (ethnicity) while maintaining similarity in other areas (class, degree of conservatism). There are also different levels of divergence. For example, although Egyptian and Syrian cultures are different, they are much more similar than American and Pakistani cultures. The degree of cultural gap that exists may be determined by the levels and degree of divergence. The bigger the cultural gap, the more challenging the relationship will be.

In the case of Sonia and Ali above, the differences in their respective cultures and the cultures of their individual families of origin contributed to the conflicts they struggled with. These conflicts were exacerbated by frequent miscommunications that resulted from not even sharing fluency in a common language. When they met, they were both lonely and liked each other's personalities. They never anticipated the multiple layers of cultural difference or the ways in which their upbringing would impact their current relationship. And they didn't anticipate that while their lack of a common language did not interfere with them having fun, it would certainly interfere with their ability to work through difficult or contentious issues.

Conflicts or challenges related to cultural differences may arise at particular points during the lifespan of the marriage. Often, the first conflicts manifest when planning the wedding. Other significant points are the birth of a child, whenever in-laws visit, holidays and other times when rituals are important, including funerals. It is not uncommon for people who have lived in the United States and perceive themselves as acculturated to be caught off guard when they discover that their culture of origin is actually very important to them. This awareness may sometimes first arise when children start getting older, and each parent wants to see more of himself or herself reflected in the children. Or, in some cases, the extended families develop conflicts with each other as each side tries to assert more cultural influence than the other.

> *Sixteen year old Amina began to resent being a product of two cultures, both of which she felt equally at home in. But she could not wear her* 'abaya *when she visited*

her Pakistani grandmother, and she could not wear her shalwar kameez *when she visited her Syrian grandmother. Otherwise, she was subject to comments which felt critical and insulting of her other "side." Her parents had managed to bridge between their cultures at home, but their parents had never fully accepted the bicultural marriage. While Amina's parents felt they could deal with their own parents' challenges, they had not realized the impact the grandparents' disapproval would end up having on the children.*

Intercultural marriage is very challenging. That is not to say we discourage it in any way. Both of us are married to spouses from a different culture. However, it is important to go into such a marriage with open eyes and an awareness of the possible challenges that the marriage will encounter. The tips and issues shared here are based on our experiences working with many couples over the years.

1. It is important to remain open-minded enough to learn from each other and to share cultures, rather than expecting one person to give up his/her culture. If you are not accepting of the other person's culture, or you know in your heart that you would really prefer someone from your own culture, it is best to marry someone from your own culture.

   Let your spouse choose the aspects of your culture that she or he is comfortable with and wants to adopt. It is important not to select a spouse because of physical attraction and aspects related to American culture, for example, but then feel embarrassed when you are with your own people because your spouse is not abiding by your cultural codes. We hear many people marrying outside their culture then talking badly about the spouse's culture, disrespecting their culture and their spouse.

   Allison was a new convert when she met Ahmed *at the halaqah. Although he was Egyptian, he had lived in the*

United States since he was a university student. Due to some family and political problems, he had never gone back home. Soon after marrying Allison, he started to make negative comments when they experienced some disagreement. "If I had an Egyptian wife, she would know how to treat her husband," or "I always imagined I'd have a wife who knew how to cook my favorite childhood foods." Not only was Allison hurt by these comments, she began to worry that Ahmed might leave her for an Egyptian woman. When his political situation was resolved years later, and he had the opportunity to visit his family, he couldn't understand why she was so anxious and fearful and did not share in his excitement about the upcoming trip.

Ahmad and Allison had not fully explored the differences in their respective cultures or what they expected from each other. Ahmad's comments were very insulting and reflect his own lack of self-awareness (knowing what was really important to him) and a lack of taking responsibility for his own choice in marrying someone outside of his culture.

2. You may need to have thick skin if your family is not as open to other cultures. You must always be proud of your spouse. You can prevent problems by paving the way and warning your family of potential cultural conflicts so no one is surprised during a family gathering when the spouse does not know how to act in accordance with your cultural norms. If you choose to bring a spouse from another culture into your family, then you must be willing to take a stand to support your spouse if he or she is being criticized or judged and not change your own behavior towards your spouse because you are feeling bad in front of your family.

Homeira and Khalid knew what they were getting into when they decided to get married. Khalid's parent's had picked a cousin of his in Egypt for him to

marry; Homeira's parents had their heart set on her marrying someone from Bangladesh. Both Homeira and Khalid valued their parents' input and wanted their blessings, but they both felt it would be really difficult to marry someone who had not grown up in the US like they did. They eventually convinced their parents, but each set of parents still carried some disappointment which they expressed as disparaging remarks in their own language. Homeira and Khalid provided each other support when they got frustrated and hurt by this behavior. They also gently reminded the offending parent that what they really needed was support, and that these comments only created strained relations. Over time, both sets of parents came to love and appreciate their new family member. It took time, patience, and a thick skin.

3. Celebrate both cultures. The husband and wife must point out what they like about each other's cultures and make a point to practice aspects of each one. Sometimes a problem is that the spouses may be open-minded but not excited about each other's culture; it is more like mutual tolerance. This tolerance may manifest itself as, "I accept that you have to go to this function, but I won't go with you." While this may work in some couples, it may also gradually lead to increased distance between them. What is most important is that there is no disrespect towards either culture or either person's family when differences in culture influence the relationship.

Mona and Harun were very excited for their wedding celebration. They had spent time learning about their respective cultures, and they collaborated on integrating aspects from Afghan and Syrian traditions. They had grown much closer during this process, and their families felt respected and comfortable with the couple's commitment to being inclusive.

They fully embraced and respected each other's traditions, loved tasting food from each other's culture, and began learning each other's language to better communicate with extended family members who spoke limited or no English.

4. Be aware of the external expectations that will impact your relationship. In your home, you may be comfortable having a mixed culture but there are external expectations from the society at large, or from environments you may visit that are part of one culture or another. For example, while it may be customary in some Eastern cultures to have visitors at any time of day or night, sometimes with little or no advance notice, you may not like having guests at midnight. However, you may find yourself having to accommodate expectations of guests or relatives who may interpret your request for advance notice as being rude. Flexibility, good communication, and patience will go a long way to preserve good relationships despite differences in expectations due to culture.

5. Take the time to learn about the other culture, and try to immerse yourself in each other's cultures as much as possible. As you learn more about the differences, you will be better prepared to ask questions, clarify expectations, and determine if you are really prepared to make the adjustments that may be necessary for smooth family interactions. Initially, each person may need to serve as a guide or a cultural interpreter of his or her respective culture.

Culture can govern almost every aspect of life, some of which are private and may not impact the spouse too much. Other aspects, such as expectations around social interactions, will have a much greater impact. For example, gender segregation is very normal and comfortable in certain cultures. A person from a purely American background may find it uncomfortable to be at a social gathering with traditional or conservative families, not only adjusting to a different cultural context, but sitting apart

from the spouse, who may otherwise have served as a translator or decreased anxiety simply by being present. This discomfort may lead to people choosing to avoid these social situations, thereby distancing themselves from the circle of friends and family of one of the spouses. Or a spouse may need to stretch out of their comfort zone to adjust to a new and unfamiliar way of doing things. Many couples over time are able to create a new, third way with their own unique integration of both spouses' respective cultures.

Ideally each person will adjust and adapt to the other, but sometimes, one person will do more adjusting and accommodating. It is important to have realistic expectations about how much each partner will or can change. It is unfair to expect a person whom you've chosen to marry, knowing what their cultural background is, to simply adopt your culture now that you are married. It is also unfair (and un-Islamic) to presume that one culture is superior to another, which is the message that can be conveyed when one person is highly critical of the other's culture, or expects too much accommodation. We see this dynamic frequently in marriages across Eastern and Western cultures.

> *No matter how hard she tried, Lisa always felt she managed to offend Abdallah and his parents. How would she ever learn all the rules? Was it rude for his family to show up unannounced without any indication of how long they were staying, or was it rude that she requested they let her know of their plans in advance? She thought she would be a better hostess if she had time to plan, but Abdallah said his mother had always been prepared for visitors and was always a gracious host. Why couldn't she be more like that?*

In this situation, Abdallah needs to recognize that Lisa's cultural background did not prepare her for the more fluid and less boundaried way that extended family members may interact in

Arab culture. While she might eventually become more comfortable, he should be patient and encourage his family to recognize her cultural background by calling ahead of time and by checking what time is most appropriate for visits. This simple change in their behavior could allow Lisa to feel more relaxed, thereby increasing the chances of her ability and willingness to develop more solid relationships with his family. As these relationships develop, it may be less important to her to maintain a formal arrangement in terms of scheduled visits.

6. When it comes to raising children in an intercultural marriage, it is important to consider which culture you want them to adopt. It is one thing to accept a spouse from another culture. It is entirely different to imagine your children being raised in a culture that is not your own. It is important to visualize what it may be like when your children are visiting your extended family members or your in-laws who may have culturally different expectations about children's behavior, attire, manner of speaking, etc. You should also anticipate that your children may feel pressured or judged if they are not able to act according to the extended family culture. How will you respond if your children or you are criticized because your children don't act sufficiently Sudanese, or Kashmiri, or Pakistani? You need to be willing to defend and protect your children so they will not be negatively impacted by these pressures. Conversations about cultural differences can be wonderful learning opportunities for children (and adults) to appreciate the beauty of the diversity Allah (*swt*) has created, and can go a long way to help them be equipped to deal with a wide range of people and cultures.

Questions for Self-Reflection

- ❑ How do you identify yourself culturally?
- ❑ How is that similar or different to the way your parents identify themselves?

- ❑ How does your cultural background play out in your daily life?
- ❑ Do you prefer to marry someone from a particular ethnic background or race?
- ❑ How does your family feel about marrying someone from another culture or race?
- ❑ If you wanted to marry someone from a different culture and your parents were unhappy about this choice, how would you handle the situation?

3. Age

There are various points of view when it comes to determining the preferred age gap between spouses. Historically, in many Eastern and South Asian countries, men were often significantly older than women by the time the men completed their education and were able to afford marriage and support a family. An age gap of ten to twenty years may not have been unusual in many cases. Today, in the US, many young Muslims prefer to have a narrower age gap, or to be the same age. For the most part, there does still seem to be a preference among most couples for men to be at least slightly older than women. Sometimes the preferences regarding the age difference can be a source of conflict between parents seeking a spouse for their adult children and the person actually getting married. There can also be a lot of social pressure for men to avoid marrying older women, and for women to avoid marrying younger men.

Many people argue that a large difference in age should not be a problem, using the example that it worked for their parents. Over and over again, however, we have seen that when there is a big age gap, especially if the difference is more than 15 years, there can be significant problems. The older spouse typically has more life experience and may tend to treat the younger spouse like a child because the older one knows more about life. Younger spouses may complain that they still

want to try things and live life. People who promote large age differences between spouses use the example of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), who was fifteen years younger than his first wife Khadijah, and more than thirty years older than his youngest wife, Aisha.

While these examples certainly illustrate the permissibility of having large age differences in either direction, as well as the possibility of having a healthy relationship, there are many other factors that contributed to the successes of these marriages. In the case of Khadijah (*ra*), she and the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had a mutually respectful and loving relationship where each person contributed significantly and equally (although in different ways) to the relationship. While exceptional in many ways, their marriage contained all the core principles we have addressed in Chapter 1. Their context was also significant in that her status, age and life experience afforded her the ability to provide the support and guidance he needed as his prophethood was established.

In the case of Aisha (*ra*), the marriage was designed to fill a particular purpose in the history of Islam. Their relationship provided a model of a widower marrying a woman who had never been married. Aisha outlived the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) for many years, thereby serving as a vehicle for sharing his life and his model to younger generations who had not witnessed his lifetime. As a person who narrated the greatest number of recorded hadith, she became a major source of transmission of Sunni Islam. During their marriage, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) recognized her needs as a young lady and accommodated her, while at the same time, allowing her to treat him as an equal/peer. He was at a stage in his life where he did not need his wife to provide him with the same type of comfort and support that Khadijah had provided for him early in his career as a prophet.

In considering the appropriate age difference for a healthy relationship, it is important to remember that there is no right or wrong answer. Rather, there are many factors to take into consideration to assess whether a particular age difference is appropriate. A major factor is what expectations people have from marriage. Historically, marriage was often for financial and social stability, having children, and uniting tribes or clans. Some cultures still place a value on a husband marrying young so that he can "mold" his wife. This cultural practice is often not

acceptable to women in the US or current generations. Traditionally, the woman's function in the marriage has been to satisfy the man and take care of him.

In contrast, contemporary couples are often looking for a friendship and partnership. Seeking happiness and love may be the primary focus. And most modern women are expecting their husbands to take care of their emotional needs, not just their financial ones. In increasing numbers of couples, women are not dependent financially at all. So as gender roles have evolved over time, so have expectations from marriage. While there are certainly many cases of close friends across generations, typically it is easiest to have a close friendship with someone from your peer group who shares common interests and common experiences.

Another factor to consider is the aging process. Large differences in age mean that each spouse will be at a different developmental stage at any given time in their life. While this is not necessarily bad, it can pose certain challenges down the road that couples may not be aware of in the beginning of their relationship. A young man married to a much older woman may find that with time, she is not as attractive to him. He may then begin showing interest in another woman, wanting more children when she is past childbearing age. Often, these marriages are based on the wrong reasons (an affair, physical attraction, needing a green card, needing a mother figure for children from a prior marriage). When the woman no longer fulfills his needs, some men may pressure her or mistreat her until she wants out of the marriage. We have also heard many complaints from younger spouses that the older spouse "never wants to have fun anymore," or fears that they will be stuck taking care of an elderly spouse while simultaneously caring for elderly parents. All of these issues should be explored and discussed thoroughly if you are contemplating marriage to a person where there is an age difference of ten or more years.

Age can become an issue even when people are close to the same age at the time of marriage, as one person may age more quickly than the other. It may be that they have physically exhausted themselves when younger, or that they just naturally age more quickly, or that they develop some health conditions that affect aging. In these situations, commitment must come into play. This is an example of a time when spouses must adjust and adapt to meet each other's changing needs.

Questions for Self-Reflection

- ❑ Do you prefer your spouse to be within a certain age range? Why or why not?

- ❑ Think about couples you know, including your parents. How does the difference in age play out when the woman is older than her husband? When there is a large age gap? When there is a small or no age gap?

4. Education

Education is another area that weighs heavily in spouse selection for many people. Again, parents may clash with their children regarding expectations about education. In some immigrant cultures, families seeking spouses for their children limit their search to physicians and engineers. In other families, the professional degree may not be as important as the level of education itself. In traditional families, there may be a value on the husband having a college degree equal to or exceeding his wife's. In some cultures where men have traditionally been more dominant and marital relations very hierarchical, men may feel the need to find ways to assert their dominance if they feel they are somehow inferior to their wives educationally. In one case, a twenty-year-old woman was married to her cousin, who was ten years older. He was not educated, but she was pursuing a college degree with the hopes of having a professional career. Because he felt threatened, he forced her to stay home, thereby insuring she would not surpass him educationally or professionally.

A woman who is highly educated is not likely to appreciate a husband excluding her from decision-making or expecting her to comply with all his wishes simply because he is older. A healthy relationship is one in which each person brings their respective knowledge, talents, and skills to the table for the betterment of the relationship. If a woman has a degree in finance, for example, it makes sense for her to have significant input relating to financial decisions rather than for her to be excluded because the finances are "his domain."

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) did not use his status of being divinely inspired in matters of religion to dominate over others or to exclude others. He often consulted his companions of various ages, as well as his wives, in matters where he had no expertise. When he entered the home, he was Muhammad the husband. In situations where his opinion was not a matter of divine inspiration, his wives would engage him in discussion. Hafsah, in particular, was known to be very opinionated and did not hesitate to express her personality. The Prophet (pbuh) was not known to have used his prophethood as a way to pull rank or impose his authority as a husband. In the same way, spouses should not use their degree, age, or other elements of status to control or dominate the other. An attitude of "I am the one who knows more" can lead to a power struggle, which in traditional couples, will boil down to gender being the determining factor of who has authority.

Many educated women do want to pursue a professional career, while others may not. Some women feel their career/education will be wasted if they stay home or they may want to work in order to feel fulfilled. Other women may be educated but are not necessarily interested in pursuing a career or working outside the home. While many men may seek a woman who is educated, they may not prefer for her to be a career woman. Other men may have a clear expectation from the outset that their wife will be a professional.

We have seen successful relationships in which there is a disparity in education, even when spouses switch the traditional roles. These couples are people who are willing be flexible in their roles, lifestyles and responsibilities. It is quite possible for the husband to have an undergraduate or high school degree while his wife has a PhD, as long as the level of education is not used as a measure of superiority. These cases require each person to value qualities other than the actual educational degree.

In the couples we see, there may be less value placed on a particular level of education or a particular professional background, although these values are still very important to many people. As with the other factors we have discussed in this section, the most important thing is to be honest with yourself to determine what you value and what you expect/desire in a spouse.

Questions for Self-Reflection

- ❑ How important is education to you? To your family?
- ❑ Do you have particular beliefs about who should be more educated in the family?
- ❑ How do you imagine you would view your spouse if he or she had more education than you? Less education than you?
- ❑ How would your relatives treat your spouse if she or he is more educated than you? Less educated than you?
- ❑ How do you feel about women working outside the home?
- ❑ What are your expectations regarding the type of profession or career your spouse should have?
- ❑ What are the expectations and beliefs of each set of parents, and how will their expectations factor into or impact the couple?

5. Health

When it comes to health issues, there must be full disclosure by both parties so that each side can make an informed decision about how to proceed. There are many health issues that can affect the marital relationship, or the lifestyle of the person experiencing the health issue. People should have a test before marriage for sexually transmitted diseases. In cases where people hide information about their health, problems typically will arise later. Health issues can affect marriage in many ways. Some illnesses can cause changes in mood as well as physiological changes that can affect the sexual aspect of the relationship. For example, some people with diabetes may experience decreased libido; people with depression may have less energy and less interest in pursuing activities; people with fibromyalgia may need to have less active

lives. Obviously, fertility issues will significantly impact both partners if having children is desired. If a person knows for sure they cannot have children, the potential spouse must be informed. Once a health condition is identified, the couple must research it and understand what it will mean to live with a person who has this condition, and possibly, what it means to be a caretaker of someone with that illness.

The most ignored illnesses include mental illnesses like depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder. Sometimes people have a history of suicide attempts, substance abuse, depressive episodes, etc., which can potentially impact the relationship. Many people have a misconception that marriage is a treatment or cure for emotional problems. While marriage may certainly alleviate feelings of loneliness and provide comfort and security, it never should be used as a cure for any mental health problem. Marriage brings with it its own challenges and requires that each person enter the relationship with the ability to deal with these challenges. Although it is generally a positive event, marriage is also a major life stressor, which is why it rarely if ever serves as a remedy for emotional or mental health issues.

Illnesses, whether physical or mental, are to be considered a test from Allah (*swt*).[27] There should be no shame or stigma attached to any illness. All people, regardless of their individual limitations, have the right to pursue marriage. But the information about their limitations should be disclosed fully. Once people have married, they must be prepared to adjust to any health concerns as part of the commitment made at the time of marriage. Any person can become sick at any time. Some health issues are simply a natural part of the aging process which we must all be prepared to deal with. However, it is unfair to enter a marriage knowing you have a health issue and not share it up front.

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) married a woman and later came to know she had a contagious disease, manifested by something white on her stomach. Before consummation of the marriage, he divorced her and gave her a gift. He told her family that they had hidden this information from him but should have told him because it is the right of each person

27 "Be sure we shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere—who say, when afflicted with calamity, 'To Allah we belong and to Him is our return.'" (2:155)

to be informed of any illness or defect that could impact the marriage. He gave her a gift because she was hurt by the divorce, but as a prophet, he could not be married to someone with a contagious disease.[28]

Couples should also anticipate some of the natural changes that occur with pregnancy and childbirth. Some people have very unrealistic expectations and may become very disappointed when their wife does not lose the pregnancy weight right away, or if her mood is impacted by the natural hormonal changes in her body, or if she is not as interested in being intimate during or after the pregnancy. These are the times when spouses must remember their role as adjustable garments, being flexible, understanding, and cooperative. Being prepared by educating oneself about what to expect can often prevent many disappointments and conflicts.

We have noticed a trend in some men who are obsessed with the size or weight of their wife. This obsession can sometimes be a result of unrealistic expectations that have been shaped by pornography, magazine pictures, and other media. The reality is that models and actresses earn their living by maintaining their good looks either by starving themselves or having full-time trainers, but regular women with normal lives may not be able to maintain their shape as easily. While physical wellbeing and attractiveness are certainly important, weight should not be *the* priority. Contemporary culture has created an expectation that is based in fantasy. Unfortunately, we have heard complaints from many women that their husbands monitor their food intake, make insulting comments when they gain a couple of pounds, or threaten to divorce them if they do not lose weight. Not only will these behaviors make the weight even less likely to go down, they will contribute to a very negative and unhealthy dynamic which will impact all areas of the marital relationship.

The Qur'an encourages us to eat and drink in moderation (20:81), and the Prophet (pbuh) reiterated this in multiple hadith. Husbands and wives should encourage each other to live a healthy lifestyle and be supportive to one another in addressing health issues. At the same time, advice should be given in a loving and accepting way rather than in a

28 Al-Tabarani and al-Hakim.

critical or demeaning way. When each partner enters the relationship with the mindset of mutually supporting each other's journey to please Allah (*swt*), then it is easier to accept advice and suggestions that come out of love, as well as to give advice and suggestions in a loving manner.

Questions for Self-Reflection

- ❑ Have you had a physical exam lately? If not, make sure to have one if you are in the process of seeking a spouse.
- ❑ Do you have any health issues (physical and/or mental) that you are aware of? How might they impact you as a married person? How might they impact your spouse? Does this health concern impact fertility? Do you need any treatment?
- ❑ Do you have a family history of any genetic disorders?
- ❑ What expectations do you have about your spouse's health, including weight?

6. Physical Attraction

In the age of Photoshop, plastic surgery, beauty queens and genetic engineering, it is not surprising that people may be overly focused on physical details. One imam joked that young people come into his office acting as if they can point to a picture of a model or actor/actress and get a spouse who fits the description, but of course with Islamic behavior. This joke is actually a reflection of the sometimes unrealistic expectations that people have upon entering marriage.

What is deemed beautiful or handsome is very subjective, and is heavily influenced by culture and time. The well-known saying, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," explains why one person may see an individual as extremely attractive while another may see that

same person as ordinary or even unattractive. In contemporary society, the media contributes significantly to what society deems attractive; some of these standards are completely unattainable and unrealistic. Colonization has also had a major impact on the standards of beauty in many Muslim cultures, creating preferences for lighter complexions as part of the racist association with superiority.

Physical attraction is an important factor in the selection of a lifetime partner. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) acknowledged that beauty is one of the qualities for which to marry someone.[29] He also encouraged suitors to see the prospective bride to make sure there was some attraction,[30] and Umar ibn al-Khattab advised parents not to marry their daughters to someone they find unattractive. These teachings emphasize the important role that physical attraction plays, especially as part of a package with other important qualities in a spouse. If a spouse meets all the other criteria you have but you don't like to look at her or him, then the other criteria become irrelevant.

At the same time, looks can and do change over time. An eighteen-year-old does not look the same thirty years later. We cannot anticipate how a person will change over time, so while initial attraction is necessary, it cannot be the sole criteria upon which to base spousal selection. Many natural, as well as unnatural events, affect how we look. The aging process, pregnancy and breast-feeding, illnesses, hair loss, and accidents are just a few of the experiences that can significantly impact how we look over time. If the physical characteristics are the most important thing to any person, this priority should be made clear from the outset because in these cases, once the attractiveness fades, divorce or infidelity follows soon after. Physical appearance is not something in a person's control and can change. Once a person becomes unattractive in the spouse's eyes, it can be difficult to fix this problem.

---

29 A woman may be married for four reasons: for her property, her status, her beauty and her religion, so try to get one who is religious, may your hand be besmeared with dust. (Bukhari, Book 8, # 3457).

30 Muslim, Book 8, #3314.

Questions for Reflection

- ❑ How much of a value do you place on physical attractiveness?
- ❑ Do you have negative ideas or thoughts about people who are less attractive?
- ❑ Do you take care of yourself (health, grooming, hygiene, etc.)?

7. Personality

By now, you should be getting the idea that we don't believe any two good Muslims will automatically make a good couple. We have outlined several factors that need to be taken into consideration before you make your decision about the right person to marry. Believe it or not, personality is an important factor that is often overlooked in this whole process. We say this because when people rush into marriage without taking time to know each other, they are obviously not realizing the importance that personality plays in compatibility.

On the other hand, those people who do take the time to get to know each other may not be thinking about the ways each personality in the marriage may play out in the long term. Personalities rarely change over time, although behaviors, beliefs and attitudes certainly can and do change over time and with different life experiences. Think about your friends and family members. Some people are spontaneous, while others like their lives to be planned and structured. Some people can "go with the flow" and seem to be able to adjust easily to changes, while other people may be less flexible. Some people like to take charge, while others are more comfortable following.

There are two sides to most personality traits. For example, a trait that may be experienced as positive (such as spontaneity and flexibility) can also have a negative side (things may be decided or completed at the last minute). Similarly, a trait that may be experienced as negative (stubborn) can have a positive aspect (persistence in spite of obstacles). Typically, we may be attracted to people who are our opposites. A very

serious person may enjoy being with someone who is more carefree. While these two people may complement each other well, it is important to anticipate that down the road, the serious person may have less tolerance when the carefree spouse "refuses" to take anything seriously. This is the paradox of relationships and something to be aware of as you enter into a lifetime relationship.

Look at couples around you among your friends and family. Notice the differences in the personalities of each spouse and how these differences play out. Think about the types of people you tend to get along well with, as well as those with whom you tend to clash or feel uncomfortable around. Also notice what types of people seem to bring out the best in you, and what types seem to bring out the worst in you. You can use this information as you assess a person you may be considering for marriage to help you pay more attention to those personal attributes that are most important to you. At the same time, as you pay attention to yourself, you can share information about your personality with the other person.

It is particularly important to pay attention to the way you and your potential partner deal with anger and stress. Even the best couples cannot avoid getting mad at each other sometimes, and no one will escape significant stressors at some point in life. Think about the ways you cope when you are stressed, and what you do when you are angry. Do you have healthy coping skills? Do you shut down? Or do you lash out? Are you the kind of person that needs a lot of space, or do you need to talk it out right away if you're upset? You need to gather this information about yourself, as well as your potential spouse.

You may benefit from taking a personality assessment to help you understand yourself better. There are many of these available online, some for a fee and others are free. Some useful assessments include the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Keirsey Temperament Sorter. Both of these help people have a better understanding of their personality types, their strengths, and decision-making styles.

Another important aspect to know about yourself and your prospective partner is what makes you feel loved. Many couples enter counseling with each partner sharing the same complaint about feeling misunderstood, unappreciated, or unloved. It is usually the case that the other partner is doing their best to show love and appreciation and

is thoroughly confused about why their efforts are not making a difference. One typical scenario is a woman saying her husband never tells her he loves her, while the husband protests, saying, "Why else would I work so hard to provide for you if I didn't love you? Why do I have to say it?" Another scenario is a husband who feels unappreciated because his wife is always busy multitasking when he is talking to her. She becomes frustrated, exclaiming, "But I always make your favorite meals, iron your clothes, and prepare your suitcases for travel. That's my way of showing you how much I appreciate you."

There are so many of these scenarios that reflect a difference in what best-selling author Dr. Gary Chapman (a pastor and marriage counselor) has called "love languages," or the preferred way we communicate and receive love. While some people value quality time, others value acts of service (a meal, doing laundry, etc.), still others value words ("I love you," compliments, etc.), gifts, or touching. You can find out what your love language is by taking the assessment on the 5lovelanguages.com website. It's important to be able to communicate to each other what you need in order to feel loved, respected and appreciated. When partners have different love languages, they may need to learn how to "speak" the other's language to improve the feelings of mutual love and care.

Having a good understanding of both partners' personalities can go a long way in preventing unnecessary conflicts that may arise out of unrealistic expectations. People may assume that what is easy and natural for them is also easy and natural for the other person. However, some personal preferences can lead to a huge gap between the partners. For example, a person who is extremely shy and introverted may feel very stressed in the intense social life of an extreme extrovert. People who are closer on the introversion/extroversion continuum may have less of a problem finding a balance that works for each person. Similarly, a person who values organization and tidiness will be very stressed living with a person who is comfortable with a messy home and does not see the need to clean up all the time.

Another personality aspect to consider is jealousy. Like other traits, jealousy occurs on a continuum, with some degree of jealousy being valuable in making the other person feel special and protected. However,

too much jealousy can lead to controlling behavior which ultimately leads to the other person feeling smothered, controlled, or trapped.

As you reflect on your own personality and get to know yourself better, remember that the goal is not to find someone just like yourself. Rather, the goal is to understand yourself so you can communicate your needs and expectations and determine if you can meet the other person's needs and expectations. There is no "better" or "worse" personality; each personality has valuable traits that contribute to society and relationships. Within a couple, it's important to make sure the two personalities enhance each other rather than conflict with each other.

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said that Allah (*swt*) has divided personalities as He has divided up sustenance (*rizq*).[31] He meant that in the same way that we have to seek our provision, even though ultimately Allah (*swt*) is the One providing it, we have to seek qualities such as patience and forbearance, even though each personality has been designed by Allah (*swt*). We should be constantly trying to develop and improve ourselves. In addition, the Prophet (pbuh) taught us that each person has certain strengths according to the specific personality.[32] The message is that people should recognize the uniqueness of each personality, accepting the talents and strengths of each other, and not forcing people to be something they are not. For example, if one spouse is detail-oriented and the other one is not, the detail-oriented spouse should exercise patience and modify expectations rather than getting frustrated every single time the other spouse neglects a detail. Or the spouse who is naturally better at managing money should be the one to handle the family budget rather than getting mad every time the spouse who struggles with finances forgets to pay a bill. Spouses who have been together for many years notice the impact that each one has had on the other over time. Each person does grow and change naturally; but in the beginning, it is critical to understand your personality differences and to accept each other for who you are.

---

31 Ahmad.

32 Bukhari, Hadith #4947.

Questions for Self-Reflection

- ❑ Are you an introvert or extravert?
- ❑ How do you express your anger?
- ❑ When you are upset, do you want your space? Or do you want the person who upset you to discuss the issue with you?
- ❑ Do you tend to feel comfortable dealing with conflict, or do you tend to avoid conflict?
- ❑ How would you describe your personality?

8. Gender Roles

Ali had initiated couples counseling and was grateful to find a Muslim therapist who could help them finally resolve their conflicts. Salwah bristled as he told the therapist, "Please help my wife to become more obedient." She was visibly upset as she said, "He relies on my paycheck, but he refuses to include me in the decision-making. Then he expects me to just do what he says. I can't take this anymore!"

Ali and Salwah have a very common problem among couples in our post-modern world. They are caught up in the evolution of gender roles, cultural values, and their understanding of Islamic teachings regarding gender roles. Historically, gender roles were much more clearly defined. The man was the provider, protector and decision-maker. The wife was responsible for taking care of the home and the children. Today, gender roles are much less clearly defined. Both the husband and the wife may choose to, or need to, work outside the home.

Salwah and Ali had met at work and thought they had very similar views about marriage being a partnership. Unfortunately, they had never really explored what expectations each person had regarding the practical application of their views regarding what role they would each play. Like many couples we see, before marriage they thought they had

the same ideas about gender roles. Once they were married, Ali realized he wanted his wife to be more like his mother who depended on his father to make decisions for the family.

It is not unusual for couples to schedule a counseling appointment to figure out exactly what their roles "should" be once they've realized they have different ideas about their roles. Unfortunately, this sometimes takes place after a lot of bitterness and resentment has set in to their relationship. While both men and women may value women being independent and career-oriented, neither may realize that society has generated a myth about being a superwoman. While people may be able to find a balance between career, parenting, and taking care of the home, the reality is that something has to give. It really isn't possible to cook the traditional meals that require several hours in the kitchen, work eight hours outside the home, be actively involved in your children's lives, get a good night's sleep, and always have a smile on your face. It may be that both partners have to be involved in household chores, or meals may be quick fixes. What's important is that each person be honest about what they expect and what they are willing to do from the beginning of the "getting to know each other" process.

At the same time, people are often surprised to discover that there may be a part of them that is very traditional. The high-powered career woman may also really want to be taken care of, and the man who supports her career decisions may feel bad if he perceives that she doesn't really need him financially. Because the roles are rapidly shifting in society, both genders may feel very confused or ambivalent about their respective roles. Men may be pressured to "accept" a wife who has a higher degree or earns more money to show he is not closed-minded, when he may actually feel that in some way his manhood is compromised because he wants to be the provider. He may feel unable to express the discomfort he feels by her competitiveness. At the same time, he may really enjoy the fact that as a family, they can afford more because of the dual income. And he may really resent that since she is also at work, he may have to prepare dinner sometimes. When visited by his more traditional parents, they may chide him for doing "woman's work," adding to the layers of complex and sometimes contradictory feelings.

Women may also feel very conflicted about their roles. They may have grown up watching their mothers serve gladly or serve with resentment. Either way, a girl or young woman is also given many societal messages that suggest her value is measured by her career, similar to men, and that she should be strong and independent. She may resist being vulnerable emotionally and financially in the marriage. In some circles, women are very competitive about their academic degrees and their careers, and they may also feel the need to prove they can "do it all." Many mothers today feel that taking care of children is "not enough" since this role is often not valued as much as it was in the past. In some women's assertion of independence, their need to be taken care of may get masked. The end result is that both men and women may give mixed messages to their spouse as a result of internal conflict about what they want.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) provided a model in his marriage to Khadijah (*ra*). She was much wealthier than he was, yet he was not threatened by this fact. Reading between the lines, one can see that their relationship evolved over time. While his original role was to manage her money, they ultimately built their financial base together. They developed a relationship in which they were mutually dependent on each other emotionally, taking care of one another. Over time, she gave up her wealth for Islam, and he compensated her with love and care. Their relationship reflected a deep commitment to each other, where they were each willing to be vulnerable and interdependent in some way.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- ❑ How would you describe each spouse's role in the relationship?
- ❑ How do you feel about women working outside the home?
- ❑ Envision a day in your future marriage. As you go through the day, imagine what each spouse is doing. Who is cooking? Who is cleaning? Who is paying the bills? Who is earning income?

- ❑ Envision a day after you have children. Imagine what each parent is doing throughout the course of the day. Who is with the baby? Who is taking children to their activities? Who is at the parent-child conferences at school? Who is paying the bills? Who is cleaning? Who is earning?

Conclusion

If you are reading this book, it is likely that you are taking a serious approach to marriage and that you really want to do things right. After understanding what Allah (*swt*) expects from you in a marriage, the next step is to really get to know yourself before trying to find the person who is right for you. We've outlined several important factors to consider as you look for that person, and we encourage you to be open and honest throughout the whole process.

There are some additional resources that may be helpful to you as you go through this process. We've provided some questions throughout this chapter to help you get started. In addition to some of the personality assessments we mentioned above, there is a useful questionnaire in *Blissful Marriage* (Beshir 2003) beginning on page 45. You can also utilize the 100 Questions at the end of this book, even before you begin talking to someone for the purpose of marriage, simply as a way to begin identifying the areas for reflection.

Some people may feel this is a lot of work and get discouraged. Remember, you are in the process of choosing a life partner, someone you will raise a family with. While doing this work before getting married doesn't guarantee that everything will work out perfectly, you can certainly reduce the risks and at least know that you have done what you can to have the best marriage possible.

CHAPTER 4:

How do you find a potential spouse?



Actions are according to intentions, and everyone will get what was intended. Whoever migrates with an intention for Allah and His messenger, the migration will be for the sake of Allah and his Messenger. And whoever migrates for worldly gain or to marry a woman, then his migration will be for the sake of whatever he migrated for. (40 Hadith Nawawi, Hadith #1)

Mira is 29 years old and is completely frustrated with her situation. She has been raised in a conservative family and has never had a boyfriend. She is attractive, intelligent, and has a good job. She was shocked when her mother told her she needed to put herself out there more proactively so she could get married since she was getting so "old." Mira couldn't reconcile this with the stern warnings she had received all of her life to stay away from boys.

Now that you've decided you're ready to get married, how do you go about finding a spouse? This stage often raises many questions for Muslims raised in the US. Many observant young Muslims like Mira feel stuck because they have been taught to avoid relationships with the opposite gender. Now that they are seeking marriage, they don't know how or where to begin. Furthermore, their situation may be very different from parents who had some form of arranged marriage, or whose parents married someone from within the extended family. They may also be open to marrying someone outside of their cultural background and may be looking for a partner to fulfill more than the traditional roles of husband as the breadwinner and wife as the homemaker. While it is important to take the entire process of spouse selection very seriously, some people may worry excessively about choosing THE right person, for fear of being trapped in a bad relationship. Others may go to the opposite extreme, being completely passive and accepting the first person who shows up.

Once you've figured out what type of person you are looking for, you have to overcome the next hurdle of finding that person. There are many avenues to take to find a potential spouse. There are certainly many differences of opinions, as well as cultural preferences and traditions that exist in regards to this subject. In this section, we will discuss some of these avenues, giving our opinions on the usefulness of each one.

It may be helpful before reading further to take a moment to reflect on your intention as you move forward. The entire marriage process is something that can be considered *`ibaadah* (worship). Therefore, each step you take in this process that is completed with the intention of pleasing Allah (*swt*) can be rewarded.

Before we discuss the various avenues towards finding a spouse, we want to clarify that either party can initiate this search. Contrary to many cultural restrictions, it is Islamically permissible for a woman to approach a man for marriage without having an intermediary or a *wali*. Also, a *wali* can initiate searching for a spouse for his daughter, even though culturally, it is generally more accepted for the man to take the lead in initiating the search for a wife. While it is important to acknowledge cultural norms, as Muslims it is important not to judge those who make choices that are well within the limits of Islam even

though they may not be culturally accepted. It is important to remember that Khadijah (*ra*), the most beloved wife of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), initiated the marriage proposal. If this behavior was in any way unacceptable, then he would not have accepted the proposal.

People often say they are looking for a spouse but don't know where to look or how to find one. Many people ask others to help them find a wife. They may ask relatives, friends, their imam, or other community leaders. Other people may use one or more of the matrimonial services that have been developed to help people find a spouse. In addition, people seeking marriage may turn to the growing number of Muslim matrimonial websites as well as well-known dating websites. And there are many people who prefer to meet someone more naturally, whether at school, work or a social function. Still, we hear from many people that it can be a struggle to meet the right person.

Some people might object to the question of choice to begin with, saying that it isn't really a choice because their parents will choose, or that one's spouse is predestined (*naseeb* or *qismat*). Other people may feel that there really aren't that many options out there, that there are slim pickings, or that all the "good ones" have been taken. Still others may be confused about what to look for in a person due to conflicting messages from parents, society, or friends about the important qualities in a spouse. Should you choose someone of a particular ethnic group? Or is it their professional background that is more important? Does it really matter if she wears hijab or if he prays all of his prayers in the masjid?

While it is true that Allah (*swt*) knows whom we will end up with or choose to be with, marriage, like everything else, involves a freedom of choice. In fact, one of the conditions of the marriage contract is the agreement of both parties (husband and wife). Although nothing happens without the leave of Allah (*swt*), He *does* want us to do our part. Relying on Allah (*swt*) does not mean we should be passive; rather, we have to be proactive and take responsibility for our decisions. Without getting into a theological discussion, it is important for people to have a correct concept of the will of Allah (*swt*) and personal choice. Allah (*swt*) created all the possible options of potential spouses, leaving the choice of which one we pursue up to us.

Sometimes people misunderstand the concept of divine will, believing that the first person who comes to propose (especially after making a prayer for His help) is the one that Allah (*swt*) has designated. In some cases, a *wali* (guardian) may actually pressure a young woman to marry someone she does not like, saying that Allah (*swt*) has sent this person to you, so you can't refuse. This approach is not Islamic, since both the man and the woman should willingly choose a spouse, and actively seek out a compatible life partner. As the verse that is quoted at the beginning of the previous chapter suggests, believers should ask Allah (*swt*) to grant them spouses that will be a comfort to their eyes. In other words, you should ask for, and look for, a spouse that will make you happy in this life and help you to attain a good place in the Hereafter. Therefore, you should choose someone who brings out the best in you and who will share your values and your goals.

It is really helpful of course to have the parents' blessing and approval as well. Parental participation from the beginning of the process can have a positive impact in most cases. The role of parents will be elaborated on more fully in Chapter 5. We do encourage parents to discuss with their adult children all of the various factors outlined in this chapter that should be considered when choosing a spouse.

Internet

There are multiple Muslim matrimonial internet sites that have become very popular in recent years. Due to the increasing difficulty young people are facing as they try to meet suitable partners, they are turning to these sites for help. While there have been success stories, there have also been disasters. In one instance a woman got to know a man online and then approached the imam when she decided to marry him. The imam knew the brother and advised her not to marry him with a warning that he would divorce her. She couldn't believe it because he was so nice online. In front of this man, the imam told her, "He has been divorcing women left and right." Other imams had performed these previous marriages. Despite the warning, the couple got married.

He divorced her within three weeks. She realized the importance of having more references from a third party rather than relying on the image being portrayed through the internet.

Recently, a young man decided to marry a woman he met online even though she was living in Nigeria. He was advised to talk to people who had known her family when they lived in the US previously. Upon further investigation, the young man found inconsistencies in her story. The family began asking for money to be sent to them in Nigeria. The situation turned out to be a complete scam. Taking the time to do a little background checking paid off. In another case, a man thought he wanted to marry a girl based on a year of online conversations. At the end of the year, he discovered he had actually been talking to a man who was using a female model's picture on his profile. In still another case, a man showed up on a family's doorstep after the young woman provided her address online. When he came to the family, they discovered he was not only a much older man, but also suffered from a severe mental disturbance.

Another problem with using the internet to find a spouse is that people sometimes become too intimate, sharing too much information, then it doesn't work out. The fact that people aren't face to face while emailing or chatting sometimes makes it easier for people to let their guard down and reveal information they would otherwise wait to share until the relationship was more solid. During this time, many people forget that in the event the relationship doesn't work out, the online chat remains a permanent record that can be used against a person or shared with others in the future.

Of course, there are also many positive online experiences that result in successful marriages. The internet allows people to meet who would otherwise be very unlikely to meet due to being in another part of the country or another part of the world. At the same time, we've met couples who got to know each other through a matrimonial site, then discovered they actually lived in the same part of town although they had never met.

Hawa was ready to give up on the possibility of ever getting married. She had received many proposals over the years, and had seriously considered several of them. At

one point, she was almost engaged then discovered that her prospective fiancé had an addiction to painkillers. Her friends urged her to set up an online profile, which she did with great reluctance. She was even more frustrated when she started getting a lot of interest from men who wanted to marry her simply because she was a US citizen. Just as she thought that perhaps she was not meant to get married, she met a wonderful man who was working in the Emirates. After checking references, she agreed to meet him. Yunus came to New York and met Hawa's entire family, answering all their questions and openly discussing their areas of concern. Today, Hawa and Yunus have two beautiful children and are very grateful for the matrimonial site that enabled them to meet.

Most people who do ultimately have a good marriage as a result of meeting someone online also say that they had to do a lot of filtering, and that they were sometimes approached inappropriately. We have a few guidelines that may help reduce the risk of getting hurt if you are seeking marriage through the internet.

Guidelines for the Internet

1. Don't rely on what is presented online without a second reference. Find out as much as you can from other sources. Don't feel shy to ask for references.
2. Do plan to meet in person as soon as possible. The longer you communicate online without meeting, the more likely you are to develop expectations or ideas about the other person that may or may not be real.
3. Don't have long conversations without doing your homework, because emotions will overshadow your thinking. If you become emotionally involved, you will tend to compromise more of your values.

4. Do a criminal background check for prior arrests, history of domestic violence, child abuse, etc. It's more important to be safe as you proceed than to worry about offending the person you are getting to know.
5. Involve another person in all your online communications. Copy a relative or imam on the conversation. Having a third party included in the conversation may deter anyone who is playing games or trying to scam you.
6. Never marry someone via the internet. Some people may say we must get married Islamically because we are in love and crossing boundaries, afraid that the first meeting will be so passionate that they will fall into haram behavior. This is very dangerous. It makes more sense to move cautiously, meet the person with a third party present, get to know the person face to face, then decide whether or not to get married.
7. Utilize a website where there is filtering, monitoring, and no one can post anything without references.

Internet experiences do not have to be negative. It is important to use common sense and good judgment and to remain aware that anyone can say anything online. Following the guidelines above, getting consultation from someone you trust and respect, and moving cautiously can prevent a disaster from occurring and hopefully allow you to have a good experience should you choose this route.

Family

Meeting a potential spouse through family members is the most traditional and historically common method. There is a broad range of ways in which family plays a role in spouse selection. At one end of the continuum, there are arranged marriages in which the spouses do not meet until the day of the wedding. Although these marriages can and have been successful in many cases, we do not advocate for this type of marriage in an American context. At the other end of the continuum, the family may not get involved until after the couple has decided to get married, and they

approach their families for their blessings. In between these two extremes, there are many variations of the roles that families play.

When considering arranged marriages, the most acceptable format is when parents or relatives introduce the young man and woman to each other based on a belief that they will be compatible. Each person then has the opportunity to get to know the other and to voice whether or not they want to proceed. An advantage of this type of arrangement is that the parents know their children and may be able to find a good match through their network of social contacts that the adult children may otherwise not have access to. Other advantages include:

- ❑ Parents are already on board and have a vested interest in the success of the marriage.

- ❑ If the families are already on good terms, they may be more likely to get along once the couple gets married.

- ❑ Both families may work harder to avoid divorce so as not to disgrace the families. (In the case of abuse, this may be a disadvantage.)

- ❑ When both the parents and the adult children are actively involved in the process, there is more likely to be a successful outcome.

On the other hand, a disadvantage we've seen is that the young adults may feel pressured to marry the person the parents have selected out of obedience despite not really wanting to marry that person. We have seen some cases where the relationship seems to move forward until the last minute, then the prospective spouse is abandoned due to unhappiness because one or both of the potential partners did not feel comfortable speaking up to the parents from the beginning.

We do have some suggestions for making the best out of arranged marriages:

- ❑ You must be able to have enough time to meet the person, get to know each other, talk to the other family, ask the 100 Questions (see Appendix), etc.

- ❑ There must be clear consent from both parties, especially the woman. You must make sure she has given informed consent and is not consenting due to family pressure. This is especially important in the case of transnational marriages.

- ❑ Be aware of family politics. For example, a relative may believe the couple owes them for facilitating their introduction, or an elder may hold the threat of shame over the couple's heads, or one family may feel indebted to the other.

School, Work & Friends

Meeting each other naturally by virtue of having classes together or working together may make the process easier for some people if they have this opportunity. In these settings, care should be taken to get to know each other within the boundaries set by Islam. In these situations, people may allow the relationship to progress too far before informing or involving the parents. For women in particular, they can be more vulnerable if parents are not involved. It is important to involve parents or a trusted third party as soon as there is any indication of interest in or by the other person. The same is true when people meet socially.

Friends can often be a good way to meet a potential spouse since they are likely to know both parties and to have a sense if they are compatible. When friends make these introductions, they should also remember to stay within the boundaries of Islam and to keep their intentions pure. In marriage situations, it is appropriate to mention both positive and negative traits that may impact the marriage. It is important not to get emotionally attached to the desired outcome (that they get married), but to remain a facilitator and as neutral as possible. In this way, if the relationship does not work out, no friends are lost.

Sometimes we see situations in which people continue in a relationship even after knowing it's not a good idea because they feel bad "hurting" the other person or they feel sorry for the other person. It is critical to be honest with yourself and with the other person, even if that means hurting them by ending a relationship that will not lead to a healthy marriage.

It is better to end something before marriage than to get married and not be able to sustain treating the other person in the way he or she deserves, and then to break up the marriage and impact even more lives if there are children.

Du`a (Supplication)

Your relationship with Allah (*swt*) is very critical as you begin looking for a spouse. Making your intention, asking Him for guidance, and trusting that He will bring you what is best, are all important parts of this process. Once you are considering someone, it is also good practice to make *istikhaarah*, which is a special prayer for seeking guidance from Allah (*swt*) when making a decision. The steps for making *istikhaarah* can be found in Appendix 2.

It is important to understand how to respond once you've made *du`a*. Some people feel that the first person to show up once *du`a* has been made is the answer to their prayer. It is important to be open while also using all of the information we have provided so far in determining whether this person is actually right for you. Marrying the first person who comes along is the same as making *du`a* for wealth, then taking a lottery ticket from someone who offers it to you. You would probably think of the lottery ticket as a test rather than an answer to your prayer. In the same way, each person who shows up in your life as a potential marriage partner should be assessed to determine if that person would really lead you to a relationship that is pleasing to Allah (*swt*) and fulfilling for you.

The Qur'an teaches us to be critical thinkers, to reflect, and to ponder about the most important aspect of our life: our relationship with Allah (*swt*). It is a mistake to jump into any relationship, or to accept a person who seems to be right at a quick glance, without doing your homework to make sure the person is really right for you for the long term. As you make your assessment, continue to make *du`a* for guidance from Allah (*swt*) so that you feel sure and at peace when you make your final decision.

Getting to Know Each Other

Once you've identified a potential spouse, the next step is taking the time to get to know that person. There is a lot of flexibility in terms of how long you should take for this step, and the process you will employ. Until you are married, Islamic teachings prohibit being completely alone together (*khalwah*). This guideline includes avoiding any setting or situation where the two individuals feel completely secure to engage in intimate behavior without anyone seeing them or interrupting them. These settings include being in a car alone or sitting in the dark at a movie theater even though it is a public place. We recommend that any time the two individuals will be meeting together, someone else should be aware of the meeting time and place, and should be able to walk in on them at any time.

Some people feel that this restriction prevents them from truly knowing one another. However, it is possible to spend plenty of time together in multiple contexts as long as it is in a public space, or as long as someone else is in the vicinity. It is possible to sit separately at a restaurant, park or even in the family's home so that you have enough privacy to talk about the important issues but not enough privacy to engage in intimate behavior.

Individuals and families often come to this stage with misconceptions about what is Islamic. Sometimes undue restrictions and limitations are put in place by parents whose intention is to protect their children. However, too many restrictions can make it difficult for the individuals to get a good sense of each other's personalities. Among American Muslims, there is a wide range of what is considered acceptable at this stage. Some parents limit the number of times the two can meet to three meetings. Other times, there is no limit at all. Some families insist on a chaperone, others do not. While flexibility and accommodation of each family's comfort level is important, individuals and families should be mindful not to compromise Islamic guidelines in the process.

Islam emphasizes modest attire for both men and women, and modesty in the manner of speech and behavior. This modesty provides a framework for interacting in a mutually respectful manner. Individuals

should avoid dressing provocatively and flirting at this stage. Having other people in the vicinity can help curb any temptations to act inappropriately. In addition, individuals at this stage should avoid touching each other and talking intimately. Within these guidelines, Islam allows for men and women to talk, work together, and interact with each other.

The truth is that many Muslim men and women are meeting and interacting with each other all the time at school and at work. On a daily basis, these men and women must be conscious of Islamic behavior and etiquette and make choices whether or not to cross the line into un-Islamic behavior. There is no reason to impose stricter guidelines during the marriage process than those that should already be in place all the time when there is interaction between genders.

Many single Muslim men and women report challenges with this stage of the process. They often mention not knowing how to talk to Muslims of the opposite gender due to strong messages from parents and/or the community about not talking or engaging at all with the other gender. In addition, family and community norms may restrict the duration of this stage. Despite often feeling comfortable with the opposite gender outside the Muslim community, many Muslims struggle with how to approach Muslims of the opposite gender. Muslim men who want a practicing Muslim wife may feel hesitant to approach a Muslim woman, especially if she wears hijab. Some of these men are afraid to offend her if they come across as too friendly, other men may feel they may be perceived as not good enough, and still others have assumptions that a woman who wears hijab may be extremely strict or conservative across the board. On the other hand, Muslim women often feel trapped by cultural norms which make it feel unacceptable to take the first step in being very open as they get to know someone for marriage. They may also worry about how they will be perceived if they interact with a Muslim man, even if the interaction is fully within Islamic boundaries of appropriate behavior.

It is important to remember that the discomfort and uncertainty about what is most appropriate during this phase is probably occurring on both sides. It is also important to identify any barriers to communication and getting to know each other, then to explore possible solutions. From the time there is any serious interest in pursuing someone, it is critical to talk

through feelings of discomfort for the sake of openness and transparency and to keep all interactions and communication within Islamic boundaries.

For people who are shy or who have limited experience talking to the opposite gender, this stage might be very awkward. If this is the case, ask yourself what would make you feel more comfortable. Would having a friend present be helpful? Or would meeting in a particular environment be easier? It's critical that during this time each person is able to be open and honest in order for both people to get to know each other's personalities. Some people may prefer getting to know each other in a group setting, like a social or volunteer event, or even an outdoor activity. Other people may prefer getting to know each other in a more private space, perhaps within the family home.

Due to geographical distances, many people begin getting to know each other by email or phone. Adding a video component can also be helpful but people have to adhere to Islamic etiquette (being dressed properly, making sure someone is in the vicinity, not recording, sharing, or posting any recorded video or image). Some guidelines for Islamic etiquette include:

- ❑ Remain conscious of Allah (*swt*).
- ❑ Make sure there is someone in the vicinity who is aware of your conversation.
- ❑ Make sure to act in a dignified manner.
  - Make sure to dress modestly.
  - Avoid lying down.
- ❑ Do not record any exchange without the other person's permission.
- ❑ Do not post any recorded images or video on social networking sites or share with others without the person's permission.

Remember that the process one engages in should allow for getting to know the other person. Email alone is not enough, since the

words on the screen don't necessarily convey much about the personality. Email, texts, and chats do not provide voice and nonverbal cues that provide richer communication and information about the person you are talking to. Sometimes people fall in love with each other by email, then when they hear the person's voice, or meet in person, they are completely turned off. Other times email gives a negative impression, and once they meet in person, there is a more positive impression.

It is important to be mindful that online conversations can fall into the category of *khalwah* if there is no other person in the vicinity of at least one of the parties. Each person should be mindful of keeping the conversation appropriate and focused on exploring relevant issues to assessing compatibility. It can be very easy to prematurely slip into intimate conversations online. We recommend that as soon as there is any interest in each other, an in-person meeting should take place with at least one other person present.

It can be helpful if both parties, and possibly their parents, discuss at the outset what the process of getting to know each other will look like. Each side should outline their expectations, as well as provide suggestions for making the process effective and safe for both parties. It is always a good idea, regardless of the age of the parties, to identify someone from each side who will always be aware of what's happening at various stages of the "getting to know each other" process.

> *Soraya and Ibrahim live in different states. They were introduced by a mutual friend. They each talked to their parents who agreed that they could do a preliminary "screening" of each other by email just to see if they were interested in each other. Once they decided there was enough interest for them to get to know each other further, the parents agreed for them to have several phone and Skype conversations. They recommended that these calls be made when there was someone else at home, and that after each call, the parents would be debriefed.*

After Soraya and Ibrahim talked a few times, and the parents also talked by phone to begin getting to know each other, the families planned to get together for a weekend. They planned a combination of activities that would allow for everyone to get acquainted. In addition to family meals, there were times when Soraya and Ibrahim were given space to sit and talk in another room or at the park where the family sat at a distance. Other activities involved the siblings going hiking as a group, as well as Ibrahim playing basketball with Soraya's brothers while Soraya spent some time with the mothers. This gave the parents and siblings time to become acquainted, and for Soraya and Ibrahim to see how they each interacted with their family members. After the weekend meeting, Soraya and Ibrahim took time to think and pray about whether they wanted to proceed. Due to the geographical distance between them, once they made their decision, the families had a video conference to discuss next steps.

The example provided above is just one way that a couple might get to know each other. Every situation may be different, so there is no outline or format that must be followed. Individuals and their families can be as creative as they want to be to engage in a process that will allow for people to get to know each other in a variety of contexts. It's helpful to see each other in both serious and fun settings, as well as with a variety of people so that different aspects of personalities can be seen and experienced.

Jamilah and Hasan had a class together and ended up working together on a group project. By the end of the semester, they realized they had a lot in common and were interested in getting to know each other better for marriage. Both of them agreed they should involve their parents, now that their relationship was shifting from

classmate to potential spouse. Each of them consulted with their respective parents as to the best way to proceed. Jamilah's father suggested that Hasan come to the house so the family could get to know him. Later, Hasan's mother reached out to Jamilah's mother, and a time for both families to meet was arranged. The families discussed their expectations of how Jamilah and Hasan should proceed in getting to know each other better, identifying what they were comfortable with and what they were not comfortable with. Although there were some differences of opinion, the families were able to come to an agreement that everyone was willing to stick to. They also decided to have several family gatherings to build relationships and learn more about each family's respective culture.

Screening for Potential Abuse

Given the high prevalence rates of domestic violence in the general society, as well as in Muslim families, it is important to do as much homework as possible to try to avoid getting into an abusive marriage (see Chapter 10 for more information about domestic violence). Although women are more often the victims of all forms of abuse, both men and women can be victims of abuse. There is no way to fully guarantee that the person you are marrying won't be abusive, but there are some basics that can at least reduce the risk that you may be marrying someone with a history of being abusive. While anyone can be at risk of getting into an abusive relationship, newcomers to Islam are particularly vulnerable because they may assume that they can trust anyone who is Muslim. It is the role of the *wali*, as well as the person getting married, to do as much background checking as possible to learn of any red flags and to take those red flags seriously.

1. If a person has been married before, ask what caused the failure of the previous marriage. Ask how this person contributed to the problems. Ask about how conflicts were resolved and what fights looked like. Pay attention to the way the other spouse is being described too. Is their character being maligned, or are the problems being defined? Some people will offer to have the prospective spouse speak to the ex-spouse, showing they have nothing to hide. Other people will take no responsibility at all for the deterioration of their first marriage, suggesting they may not be giving the full picture of what happened. While every situation is different, remember that unless the person has gone through some form of counseling or deep self-reflection after the divorce, they are likely to repeat the same mistakes they made the first time around.
2. We recommend doing a background check to determine if there have been any charges of assault or domestic violence. While many people may feel this is offensive, it is often the only way to know about this aspect of a person's history, especially if they have moved from one state to another. If there is any red flag at all, it is important to raise these concerns in premarital counseling and to take sufficient time to explore them.
3. Thoroughly explore the topic of gender roles. The risk of being abusive is greater (not guaranteed) when a person is very rigid about roles. You can deduce whether there are control issues from the responses. For example, if a man is adamant that under no condition should the wife leave the house without getting his permission, it is important to explore further. A rigid person might say that even if she needs to see the doctor, and the husband is not accessible because he is in meetings or traveling, she must wait to reach him before taking care of her medical needs. While this may seem to be an extreme example, we have witnessed cases like this, and this is definitely a signal for potential abuse. See our discussion about

seeking permission under fulfilling obligations in Chapter 7 for more details.

4. Observe how the person treats his or her parents and siblings. If a person is abusive towards other family members, or even towards friends, there is a high probability the spouse would ultimately be a victim too.
5. Ask and observe how the person reacts when angry and what triggers anger. Feeling angry is normal and healthy. What is important is how the anger is expressed and how the conflict is resolved. Does the person become enraged? Are threats or insults part of the process? Does the person become violent towards others, throw things or break things? Do people report being afraid to make this person mad? Is this person known to give the "silent treatment?" Answers to these questions can help identify the potential for abuse.
6. Was there any abuse in either party's family of origin? The fact that a person comes from an abusive family does not mean this person will be abusive; however, growing up in an abusive environment can have a tremendous impact on how people act in relationships. We strongly encourage counseling to help identify the impact of the abuse, to heal from the abuse, and to prevent repeating learned patterns in the new relationship.

Conclusion

The process of finding a spouse varies from person to person, and it may be easier for some people than for others. There is no one right way to find a spouse, as long as the process fits within the boundaries of Islamic guidelines. Regardless of whether you are asking friends or family to help, relying on a matrimonial website or event, or hoping to meet someone at school or work, it is important to be mindful of the issues we have raised so far. Take the time to think about what an Islamic marriage means to you, what your expectations are, and which of the factors outlined in the previous chapter are important to you.

Communicate what you've identified to your parents and have open discussions with them in order to make sure you are all on the same page as much as possible. It can also be helpful to renew your intention periodically and to use this process as a means to strengthening your relationship with Allah (*swt*). Ask for His guidance, consult with those you trust, and do your best to seek out the person that shares a common vision of marriage.

CHAPTER 5:

The Role of the Family



It is He Who created man from water: then has
He established relationships of lineage and marriage:
for your Lord has power (over all things). (25:54)

The Selection Process

It is very important to include parents as much as possible, and as early as possible, in the selection process. It can be very helpful to have a discussion with parents and other family members before approaching someone for marriage. Sharing expectations about the new spouse who will be joining the family, considering what type of person would be a good fit for the family, and discussing what the person getting married values most in his or her life are all topics that can help to create a common understanding of what type of partner would be a good match for the individual, as well as the family.

People vary widely regarding how much they value or rely on family input and approval in the process of spouse selection. Some people rely one hundred percent on family input and suggestions, limiting themselves to those people recommended by family. Others completely

exclude their families until they have set a wedding date. Most people fall somewhere in between these two extremes. No matter where people fall on this continuum, almost everyone wants their families' acceptance of their new partner. It is wise to consider the opinions of key people in the family because they will continue to play a significant role in the lives of the couple, and especially when there are children later. Even in those cases where the extended family is not involved or is distant, their absence in and of itself has an impact on the couple and on their future children.

Often we find the conversation between the potential couple goes too far before the parents are brought in. At that point, if parents disagree about their child's choice, a difficult situation is created. In many cases that we've seen repeatedly, the parents' disagreement often leads to the breakup of the relationship. If the couple has already become attached to each other, then the result is unnecessary heartache for all parties involved. In cases where people decide to move forward with their choice despite parents' disapproval, the resulting tension and conflict can create real challenges for the couple as they start their new life with parents who are already alienated and not providing the critical support that most new couples need. By entering a relationship that parents don't approve of, the new couple make themselves vulnerable. They will not have a safety net to fall back on when things go wrong because parents may then say, "I told you so," and be less willing to help.

Some of these scenarios are easily preventable by including the parents' input from the beginning of the process. If you meet someone that your parents do not immediately approve of, take the time to have your parents get to know the person you're interested in. Try to get your parents to see what you see in your potential spouse. Sometimes, with cultural differences or other qualities that are not in line with what parents have in mind for their child's future spouse, it takes time to bridge the gap in expectations and to overcome some of the obstacles. At the end of the day, most parents want their children to be happy. However, parents' ideas of what their child needs to be happy can be different from what would actually make the person happy. These different perspectives can often be bridged by open communication and dialogue.

Do parents have the final say?

In some of the most complicated cases, parents may try to assert their authority in choosing the spouse, and when they are not satisfied, they may order their adult child to divorce the spouse that has fallen out of favor for one reason or another. In these situations, parents might refer to the story of Prophet Ibrahim (pbuh), when he asked his son Ismail to divorce his wife, which he did without any question.[33] In the story, Prophet Ibrahim was visiting his son's home and asked Ismail's wife, "How is your life?" When she said, "It's miserable," he advised Ismail to "change his doorstep," in other words, to divorce his wife. When Prophet Ismail remarried, Ibrahim again visited the house and asked the new wife, "How is your life?" When she said, "It is good," he told Ismail to keep her. In this unique situation, the father offering the advice was not a normal father; he was a prophet. In addition, he had come to know from the wife's answer that she was exaggerating the difficulty of the living conditions, and that she was ungrateful.

The only reason we are mentioning this story is because many people use it to justify asking their children to divorce. We do not want people to use this story as a frame of reference for many reasons. Ibrahim was a prophet and had more knowledge, insight, and divine guidance than the average parent. We don't have the details or background information in this story that would help us understand the dynamics and the underlying issues that led Prophet Ibrahim to give the advice he gave. It is not acceptable in the vast majority of cases for parents to ask their son or daughter to divorce the spouse. A parent's role is to help their adult child make a good decision based on all the factors we have been discussing in this book.

Another story that is often cited by parents who are trying to get their child to divorce a spouse is the one where Umar ibn al-Khattab (*ra*) asked his son to divorce his wife. He refused, but Prophet Muhammad said, "Divorce her because your father asked you to do so." People have used both of these examples to argue that parents have the final say in their children's marriage. However, Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal told a man

33 Bukhari, Book #55, Hadith #585.

not to divorce his wife even though his father had ordered the divorce. The man said, "Didn't the Prophet order Umar ibn al-Khattab's son to divorce his wife because Umar ordered it?" Imam Ahmad replied, "Is your father like Umar?"[34] In other words, the story is not applicable to all situations. The scholars have said that a man cannot divorce his wife simply because his parents ask him to, especially when there may be no legitimate grounds. Instead, he should recognize that the real problem is the type of relationship he has in which parents would ask him to break up his family. The energy should be directed into repairing the relationship with his parents, rather than fulfilling the request that would involve harming the wife and possibly children.

It seems clear in both instances that we don't really have enough information to determine why the divorce was ordered. Divorcing someone on the spot just because your parents say so does not fit with Islamic teachings that call for reconciliation. In the case of Umar's son, there must have been more than just a father asking for divorce. There must have been more background: it can never be that a parent has the right to require a child's divorce or to force marriage to someone. Parents should not take this story to mean they have the right to ask their son or daughter to get divorced.

There are many hadith emphasizing that women must give their consent in marriage, and cannot be forced to marry someone they don't want to marry. In the case where a woman was forced by her father to marry someone of whom she disapproved, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) allowed her to choose whether she wanted to stay in the marriage.[35] While the parents' input is very important, ultimately the two people getting married have the final say.

Islam teaches us that the parents have a highly respected position in the family structure, but that doesn't mean the parents can dictate how to run their children's marriage. "I'm the mother; my child has to listen" is a common reason some parents give for what is actually interference in the couple's life. Adult children in these situations experience a tension between obeying their parents and making their own choices. Parents

34 In *Al Fatawa al-Jaami'ah lil Mar'ah al-Muslimah*, Vol 2, Fatwa #671.

35 Abu Dawood, *Book of Marriage*, Hadith #2096. *HadithPro App.*

should not disapprove of every single person, finding fault even if the daughter and other family members approve of the potential spouse.

A common area of conflict is when parents insist on marrying from a particular culture, race or social status when their child is not attached to those same criteria. The person getting married may feel attracted to someone of their own ethnicity and race, or to someone of a different ethnicity and/or race. Parents may be focused on marrying within the culture because it's easier and feels more comfortable due to shared values and language, which is certainly something to take into consideration. At the same time, if parents are excluding potential spouses who are otherwise compatible and attractive to the person getting married, it is not right to discriminate based on race, ethnicity or social status.

In fact, the adult children may have already decided to marry someone outside their culture, or to marry someone who was raised in the US like them so that they would have similar ways of thinking. Many second- or third-generation Muslims are ready to marry across cultures and races. This preference may be hard for many immigrant parents to accept when they may have been looking forward to the day their children grow up and marry someone from their own culture, who speaks their own language, and who is familiar with all the cultural traditions that are part of their heritage. It is important to talk through these expectations in a manner that conveys respect and understanding of the parents' position, as well as a conviction that parents ultimately do want their children to be happy. Balancing the needs of the two generations takes patience, time, and sincere effort.

Occasionally, it may be helpful to bring in a third party who can facilitate the communication process. The third party should be neutral, and should not feel obliged to please either side. Rather, the third party's objective should be to focus on narrowing the gap between the parents and their adult child by helping them understand each other's perspectives.

Ideally, parents should never have to use the "obedience" card as part of the marriage process. This card is most often used when parents feel they are losing ground and need to rely on their authority to control their child's behavior. When dealing with adult children, this approach will only lead to resentment, if not hostility. It is much healthier for everyone in the long run to make decisions that emerge out of a

consultation model (*shura*) in which opinions are shared and exchanged, brainstorming occurs, and options are evaluated with the couple's best interests in mind. Framing issues as a matter of obedience creates a spiritual dilemma and sometimes a crisis for the adult child who knows that obedience to parents comes directly after obedience to Allah (*swt*).

In cases where parents are insisting on a particular spouse who is not appealing, attractive or compatible to the adult child, obeying the parents can lead to a failed or miserable marriage. At the same time, when people get married against their parents' will, they may also end up with a failed marriage because they can't withstand the pressure from the parents. It is unacceptable for a parent to create so many problems for the unwanted daughter- or son-in-law that this person feels pushed out of the marriage.

Parents need to realize it is their son or daughter who will be living with the spouse. It is the son or daughter who needs to make their own choice. The parents' role is to be a support system by highlighting the pros and cons of a particular person: if they know of character flaws, abuse, etc., this information needs to be shared. At the end of the day, the adult children must make their choice and live with the positive and negative consequences of this choice.

Advice to the Person Getting Married

There is a difference between obeying parents and making a choice of whom to marry. You are the one who will be impacted by the choice you make. If you are not happy with your parents' choice, you should not accept their choice. If you marry someone you are neither attracted to nor compatible with, you will not be able to make your spouse happy: this would be unjust to your spouse. Marrying someone and then mistreating them or denying them the love and care they are entitled to because you don't have emotions for them is a form of injustice, which is prohibited by Allah (*swt*). You cannot obey your parents if there is any disobedience to Allah (*swt*).

Remember: you will live with this person, not your parents. You will be disobeying Allah (*swt*) if you marry someone you don't like

and end up being unfair to them. You must strike a balance between the rights of your parents and the rights of your spouse. Obedience to parents must always be within the reasonable boundaries of what is asked. If parents ask you to hurt yourself or someone else, this violates the principles of Islam. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said that obedience is only required in what is good, never for anything that would be displeasing to Allah (*swt*).[36]

At the same time, if you decide that you want to get married to someone against your parents' wishes, it is important to consider how you will manage in the long term without their support. It may be easy for you to say you don't really need them, but also keep in mind that your children may then be deprived of grandparents. You also need to consider how your siblings and other relatives may be caught in the middle of this conflict and the impact on your relationship with them.

Parents generally want what they think is best for their child and are usually not intending any injustice. Sometimes the young couple feels that if they obey their parents, the marriage will work out because they will have blessings from Allah (*swt*) for being obedient. The couple might ignore their own feelings which indicate that the selected partner is not a good match. It is important to consider not only your feelings and your desire to be obedient, but also to consider the other person involved. It is wrong to convey a false feeling that you like them or are attracted to them. It's a type of dishonesty. We want you to be honest with your feelings because the other person is putting their trust in you and investing in you. Although the intention of pleasing parents is good and noble, parents may be unaware of the long-term implications of marrying someone you don't really want to be with.

The *Wali*

The topic of the *wali* is an important one because there are many misconceptions and misunderstandings about the need for a *wali*, who should be a *wali*, and what this person's role is. Unfortunately, this issue

36 Bukhari, Book #89, Hadith #258 & #259.

is sometimes a source of significant stress for the person getting married. We have also seen cases where the *wali* has abused the role, even to the point where an appointed *wali* ends up marrying the woman he is supposed to be advocating for. In this section, we will define the concept and role of *wali* because it is very important to have the proper understanding in order to achieve the intended benefit from having a *wali.*

The word *wali* can be translated as a protector or guardian. Allah (*swt*) describes Himself as *Waliyy* of those who believe (2:257), meaning the Protector and Sustainer. A *wali* is a person who looks out for someone else's interests. The Qur'an describes believing men and women as *awliaa',* or friends and protectors, of one another.[37] Even an employer looking out for the employees' best interest can be considered a *wali.*

In the marriage process, the *wali* is a person whose role is to safeguard the woman's interests. The *wali* is a person who acts as her representative and advocates on her behalf. Traditionally, the *wali* is the father or other close male relative, but does not have to be. The *wali* must play an active role and should not be relegated to being a symbolic figure. This role includes screening suitors for compatibility, protecting the woman from being taken advantage of, and letting suitors know if the woman is already talking to someone else for the purpose of marriage. Screening includes verifying the legitimacy of the person who is proposing, knowing his background, and knowing if there is any history that could be harmful to the woman.

A young woman seeking marriage should seek someone to help her with the background check. Unfortunately, sometimes the *wali* misuses the role and imposes his or her will on the bride-to-be. The objective of the *wali* is to protect and not to control or dictate.

If a woman is approaching a man for marriage, it is not a must to have a *wali* before she takes the first step, but she must know something about the potential spouse before approaching him. In the example of Khadijah (*ra*), she had a lot of information about Prophet Muhammad

37 "The Believers, men and women, are protectors one of another: they enjoin what is just and forbid what is evil: they observe regular prayers, practice regular charity, and obey Allah and His messenger. On them will Allah pour His mercy; for Allah is Exalted in power, Wise." (9:71)

(pbuh) before she sent her friend to inquire if he would be interested in marrying her.

Who Can Be a *Wali*?

Scholars have debated the issue of the *wali* and who can be a *wali*. There are differences of opinion, and a complete analysis is beyond the scope of this book. A *wali* must meet the following conditions: sanity, puberty, just, fair, reasonable, and no mental illness.

There is a misconception that the *wali* must be a male. However, the *wali* can be a woman's father, brother, grandfather, mother, grandmother or any other relative.[38] Kinship is important because the *wali* should know the woman being represented. According to Abu Hanifah, the function of the *wali* is more important than the gender. In the event that a male *wali* is not able to perform the functions properly, or that there is any reason that would prevent him from due diligence, then a woman can take his place. In some cases, the female has a right over the male in terms of serving as a *wali*.

A male may be able to perform certain functions that a female cannot do as easily, such as talking to or confronting the male potential spouse. In some cultures, men and women do not interact much; therefore a male is needed to do due diligence, ask the right questions, and do a background check. A female could not do that in certain societies, where she may not have access to necessary information or have ease of access to the potential candidate. Having a *wali* can be especially useful in screening for potentially abusive relationships. A male *wali*, in particular, will be able to observe the person much more closely and should be alert to behaviors that are controlling or rigid.

Although most schools of thought say that a woman needs to have a *wali* in order to get married, Imam Abu Hanifah said that the marriage is valid even without a *wali*. The reason we are raising this issue is that in some cases the *wali* does impact the process of marriage, sometimes negatively. The *wali*'s influence may force people into the

38 Zedan, Abdulkareem. *Ahkam al-Mar'ah*. Risalah Publishing House, Beirut, 1993. p.352 (v. 6 of 12).

marriage via parents or siblings. At, the same time, an undesirable outcome may occur due to the absence of a *wali* who can screen or investigate the prospective spouse.

The *Wali's* Role

The *wali* should seek to know the prospective spouse's character and his level or practice of Islam. The *wali* should make sure that the woman likes the suitor and is physically attracted to him (otherwise she should not be pushed to marry him). Being forced to marry someone where there is no attraction often leads to underlying resentment. In the future, if the relationship is not good, the truth generally comes out and causes much pain to both parties.

In today's world of technology and easy access to information, many people can do their own background research, including criminal background checks, before getting married. What might be harder to access is information about how the person interacts with his family, how he conducts himself in the workplace, and how he treats his friends. The *wali*'s job is to get this added insight into the suitor's personal life. Sometimes the *wali* may not have access to technology, and the adult children may need to help parents do background checks through the local police, check Facebook profiles, and google the prospective spouse. It is important for the adult child to work cooperatively with the parents who are trying to investigate the suitor; otherwise, it is not fair to blame the parents for not doing their job later if things don't work out.

In some cases, the *wali* is a person outside the family. For example, some women may not have any family members with them in the United States, or in the area where they are living. In addition, if the family member who is acting as the *wali* is using criteria that are not appropriate, like insisting on marrying a secular, "modern" spouse when the woman is religious and wants a religious husband, then the woman might appoint someone other than her father to be her *wali*. A woman in the situation where parents may be racist or rigid about the criteria for selecting a spouse may choose a *wali*, either another relative or someone

outside the family. If a father rejects all suitors without good reason, his daughter may get frustrated with the process and may decide to marry someone irrationally just to get married.

If the *wali* is a just person, he or she will do a great job on behalf of the woman to protect her from manipulation by other men. Women may trust easily, and may believe a man without having the opportunity to get enough information about him. There is *hikmah* (wisdom) in having a *wali*. However, if the *wali* is not a reasonable person or is not doing a good job of checking people's background, you must do your own homework. It defeats the purpose of having a *wali* if he or she is not fulfilling the proper role or acting in your best interest.

Immigrant parents often choose to be proactive and search for a spouse for their children. One example of how this process might look is for the *wali* to take the initiative by asking his daughter what she is looking for, then going out and searching for the right man by asking community leaders or family friends if they know anyone who meets the criteria. When suggestions are made, or a potential candidate is found, he then takes the idea back to his daughter. Many daughters are pleased to have their fathers looking for them, especially if they are comfortable sharing their thoughts and feedback with their fathers. This is a positive process.

It is also a positive process when the wali functions as a sounding-board. Sometimes a woman may meet someone through a youth camp, spiritual retreat, school, work or MSA. She can do some background research by asking imams and community leaders about the person she is considering, doing her homework first and then taking the information to her parents.

Another scenario is the man and woman getting to know each other on their own and continuing a relationship to the point of being attached to each other, then informing the parents of their decision to get married. In this case, the parents may be disappointed that they were not included in the process. They may also be dissatisfied with the choice, leading to a potential rift. The first two scenarios are ideal in terms of the *wali*'s role being constructive and beneficial. The absence of including a *wali* in the third scenario leads to the possibility of family conflict.

Tips for Choosing a *Wali*

In situations where a woman doesn't have a family that can represent her interests, she may choose an imam or a close friend to represent her if she chooses to have a *wali.* According to Abu Hanifah, she can marry herself without a *wali.* We recommend that you consider the following points when selecting a *wali.* Your *wali* should be:

- ❑ A person who is fair and can represent you.
- ❑ A person that you trust and whose advice you are open to considering.
- ❑ A person who includes you in the discussion and decision making. A *wali* cannot make decisions on your behalf but should act as a consultant and investigator on your behalf.
- ❑ A person who is willing to take a stand if there is a belief the marriage may be harmful, like marrying a person who is abusive, alcoholic, etc.

Tips for the *Wali*

- ❑ Be objective.
  - Try to be neutral in the process, avoiding prejudice against the person's race, status, type of job, etc.
  - Examine the characteristics of the person in light of whether he is compatible with the woman being represented, not whether you actually like him. As the *wali*, you are not going to marry the man in question, so you yourself do not have to be compatible with him. He doesn't have to have your same interests or same political affiliation. The only thing that matters is that the man must be compatible with the woman you are representing.

- ❑ Make and follow a checklist.
    - Can this person communicate with her?
    - Can he provide for her?
    - Can he care for her?
    - Is he compatible with her?
    - Does he respect her?
    - Does he share common values and goals with her?
    - Does he have any history of domestic violence?
    - How does he treat his siblings, especially his sisters?
    - Does he exhibit controlling behavior?
    - Does he have an anger problem?
    - Does he have any chronic health issues, including mental health?
    - What is his relationship with his parents like?
    - How would he respond if there is potential conflict between his mother and his wife?

The *Wali* in the US

It is very common for new Muslims to be told they have to have a *wali*. Frequently, they approach the imam to be their *wali*. People should not assume that every imam will make a good *wali*. Even an imam should be checked out before relying on him for this very important function.

A woman may go to her local imam and ask him to be the *wali*, but the imam may not have enough information about the woman herself. In these cases, the imam may not be able to fulfill all the obligations of the *wali*. If the woman has non-Muslim family members and has maintained good relations with them, they can still perform some aspects of the background checking; while the imam could research the Islamic matters.

In some cases the so-called *wali* turns out to be a disaster. In some communities, imams themselves have taken advantage of women. There have been many cases where the imam is asked to be the *wali* but proposes to the woman himself. As he gets to know her and works closely

with her, the relationship may become personal, and he may take her for his second or third wife. It is important to maintain proper boundaries to prevent any inappropriate relationship from developing. In other cases, he does not do his homework, and she ends up in a bad marriage. These scenarios occur with leaders of all ethnicities. We encourage women to empower themselves by knowing who is being "hired" and to be very clear about the role of the *wali*.

Sometimes, it may be preferable for the imam to act as a resource person rather than a *wali*. In this case, the imam would simply answer specific questions about the person being considered for marriage. These questions might include: Does the person go to the masjid? Does the person pray? Is this person known to be difficult to deal with? Is there any known history of abuse? It is imperative that these questions be answered honestly. It is not backbiting to answer these questions because the information is necessary in order for a good decision to be made. We have seen many cases where women discover too late that people in the community actually were aware of the man's history of abusing a previous wife, or of his addictions, and did not share the information thinking they were doing him a favor by "covering his flaws." In fact, withholding this type of information is unethical and immoral because a person's future could be significantly impacted.

The difference between a *wali* in the US and a *wali* in other cultures is that in Muslim countries, the *wali* can have a legal say in the marriage itself but in the US he or she cannot unless the person is a minor. A person in a Muslim country who gets married without a *wali* would have an invalid marriage. However, in the US any person eighteen and over[39] can have a legal marriage without a *wali*, even though the validity of the Islamic marriage may be questioned. It is always preferable to have the marriage meet both civil as well as Islamic criteria. However, in places where there are a limited number of Muslims, there may not be an option of having a *wali*. In these cases, a civil marriage with two witnesses, even if they are not Muslim, would fulfill the criteria for an Islamic marriage, as long as the offer and acceptance are done before a judge or court clerk.

39 The actual age may vary from state to state.

Some people will not recognize a civil marriage between two Muslims if it was not done Islamically, believing that the people are engaging in *zina* (adultery and fornication). The situation can be complicated if the legal requirements conflict with the religious requirements. According to the Fiqh Council of North America, civil marriages and divorces in the US are considered Islamically valid.

The Overseas *Wali*

In situations where the woman getting married lives in the US and her parents live overseas, they may still want to (and should) be actively involved in the process as much as they can. If the suitor is able to travel overseas to meet the parents in person, that is the ideal situation. If not, and the parents are only able to have a phone conversation with him, then other people in the US may need to be involved to help with the screening process. Even if the in-person visit is possible, it's still important to speak to local community members who can share more information about his character, his involvement in the community, and any other relevant details based on their direct observation and interaction. There is sometimes an assumption that the person officiating the marriage will also have done some background checking before the ceremony. No assumptions should be made. Ultimately, the family or the designated *wali* is responsible for doing the background checking and not the person officiating the marriage.

Conclusion

The role of the *wali* is to look out for a woman's best interests and to help ensure that the suitor is really a good match for her. Historically, women have not had as much access to the public domain, nor did they interact as freely with men, as in contemporary society. So they did need to rely on a *wali*, typically a male, for this assistance. Since we are focusing on the role of the *wali* in this section, we have not discussed the ways in which men should investigate any woman they intend to propose to.

The screening and investigation goes both ways, and men should also make inquiries about any woman they intend to pursue, to learn about her character and her personality, before making any decision to marry.

The following is an example that highlights the positive role that each person can play in doing the groundwork before a decision can be made to proceed for marriage.

> *A convert's father interviewed the prospective husband who happened to be an imam. The father asked about the imam/suitor's immigration status, his family background, and the reasons for marrying his daughter. The father then traveled from another state to meet with the suitor/imam face to face. The imam also investigated her family, and upon discovering the good character and righteousness of her father, although a non-Muslim, the marriage vows were exchanged between the father and the imam. The imam himself got to know her, had another imam do premarital counseling with them, and consulted his peers. The prospective bride took a marriage class. In order to make sure she could tolerate the demands of being the imam's wife, he presented her with worst-case scenarios, being completely open, not concealing any potential risks.*

The Role of the In-Laws

In-laws act as a social safety net for the new couple. The support they provide should be for both spouses as a new family, not just as individuals. Maintaining healthy relationships with the in-laws is part of maintaining a healthy marriage. It seems that in many cultures, in-laws are perceived and portrayed as a negative force. The term mother-in-law has a very negative connotation for most people. This negativity can start people off on the wrong foot with assumptions that they will face challenges from their in-laws. It is helpful to enter these new relationships with an open mind, giving the in-laws a chance and expecting the

best, rather than building a relationship based on preconceived ideas shaped by popular culture or other people's experiences.

One of the leading causes of divorce in the US among immigrant Muslims stems from a failure of maintaining healthy relationships with in-laws. This section will consider some of the factors that create troubled relationships.

Generation Gap

Parents and adult children may disagree due to conflicting expectations resulting from being raised in different cultures and different times. It is important for each side to remember that what may have mattered or worked in the parents' time may not be relevant anymore. For example, in previous generations, the expectation was that a woman would be financially taken care of, that her status as a married woman would offer her protection in society, and that a husband would provide security for her. In contemporary society, women marry with the expectation that their husbands will be their friends and partners more than their protection in society. Many women are financially secure. So from the outset, the goals and expectations may be quite different between the generations.

Sometimes a mother-in-law might create a checklist based on her own expectations, values and beliefs to assess how her daughter-in-law treats her son. This is not fair because the daughter-in-law is living in a different time and in a different circumstance than when the mother-in-law was a bride. The daughter-in-law may be working outside the home and not in a position to fulfill the traditional expectations that she will serve her husband's parents, cook traditional food every night, or be available to cater to all the domestic demands. It is natural for each generation to have a different perspective, different expectations, and a different approach to marriage. This issue does not seem to be as large a problem in indigenous communities at it is in immigrant communities.

In this regard, it is helpful to remember the words of Imam Ali (*a*) who said not to force your children to follow your own customs because

they were created for a time other than your time.[40] And like everything else we have discussed, having open and loving conversations can go a long way to help to develop mutual understanding, maintain good relationships, and keep all parties feeling included. These conversations take time and energy and can often be emotionally exhausting, but they can really be worth it in the long run when family members are able to have good relationships with each other.

Cultural Gap

Children raised in the US have different views and perspectives of life from their parents who were raised overseas. The expectation that children will live with their parents in the same house may conflict with the adult children wanting to have their own space. Young adults may want to be independent but feel that they cannot be if they live with their parents or in-laws who may naturally treat them as children without even realizing it.

As immigrant parents age, they may develop more affinity for their culture of origin than they demonstrated in their younger years. Adult children are often surprised when this happens, sometimes feeling like "aliens" have taken over their parents. In the cultural arena, first-generation immigrants may have worked hard to become Americans but in their later years may feel very homesick. Their expectations that their children treat them the way they saw elders being treated back home may be unrealistic if their children grew up without seeing an extended family. Children raised in the US actually may not have any role models when it comes to engaging with the elderly, since in many cases, the second and third generation may not even really know their extended family back home.

Bridging this cultural gap requires patience, flexibility, and understanding. It becomes even more challenging in a bicultural couple dealing with aging parents. In some cases, there have been language barriers all along but when parents were independent, these barriers were more

40 Cited in Hadi Nasser Saeed al-Baqir, *Hewar al-Mutamaddineen.*

manageable. When the parents come to depend emotionally, physically and financially on their children, the language barriers can feel insurmountable. Anticipating these challenges and preparing for them is really important. Taking the time to learn the other language and culture from the beginning can prevent a lot of heartache down the road.

Needs of the Elderly

The emotional and psychological state of elderly parents may create a stressor for a young couple. In old age, parents may have diseases or emotional issues that affect their personalities and make them difficult to deal with. The adult child may be treating them as if they are normal. A father may be demanding too much and may expect his daughter-in-law to take care of him while being mean to her. This daughter-in-law does not have the attachment to him that his own children may have, so she may have trouble accepting what his own daughter might accept. Coping effectively with these types of situations can become an issue, and the level of stress will necessarily be increased. Not only has she become a wife but also a caretaker for a mother-in-law or father-in-law. At the same time, her own parents may also be aging and have their own demands on her. These scenarios are not easy, especially if the wife is married primarily to become a caretaker for the husband's parents.

Economic Gap

Sometimes there is an expectation that the son-in-law should live up to the standards of the wife's family, which puts a lot of pressure on the young people and may make them feel there is competition. In one case where a father believed his daughter in her mid-30s had passed the age of marriage, he married her to someone with limited wealth compared to the millionaire father. This young man could not compete with his in-laws. He was always on the receiving end, so he had to confront his father-in-law and ask him to stop giving gifts because he was not able to reciprocate and began to feel very awkward. Whenever he

purchased something, the father-in-law would upgrade it, making him feel inadequate and undermined. There was also tension in social settings where he was invited to certain parties where he felt out of place because he could not live up to the same economic standards. In addition, his parents were less educated than his in-laws, adding to the gap between the families and the level of discomfort.

People should assess these differences honestly and anticipate how they might feel if they were to live with these differences. We recommend that the daughter should live within her husband's means. Of course, a father can give his daughter money and gifts, but should be sensitive not to make the husband feel inferior.

Boundaries

Boundaries encompass all areas of life, such as finances, social expectations, living arrangements, and roles. Clarifying and setting boundaries before marriage is important. This is where premarital counseling can help. Both sets of parents must be aware of where their authority ends. As people transition from their parents' home to their own home, they need space to build their new relationship. Parental overinvolvement, even in its most benign and well-intentioned forms, can have a detrimental effect on the marriage. For example, one husband complained that his wife was always on the phone taking advice from her mother, to the extent that it impacted their personal life. He wished his wife would discuss her opinions with him and consult him, rather than always talk about her mother's opinions. Women also complain when their husbands' are overly influenced by their parents. It is important for new couples to have some independence as they create a family of their own.

So when should one talk to the parents? It is appropriate to discuss personal issues and to seek advice, but when it comes to marital life, all discussions about the marriage should remain between husband and wife in order to prevent a negative image from developing about the spouse. One exception is when there is any type of abuse occurring. A woman must seek family support if she feels abused at any time.

Another exception might be when the couple has tried to resolve major issues like addiction, mental illness, major medical issues, or debt but is not able to deal with the issues on their own. The spouses should come to an agreement, whenever possible, about whom to involve from the extended family. Individually, a person can seek emotional support to cope with life in general and talk about issues, but issues of conflict should be handled by a neutral third party outside the family.

Parents are usually well-intended but in their focus to make their own child happy, they may give advice that is not in the best interest of the relationship. Sometimes, the spouse becomes "under probation" and is watched to make sure he or she is doing things right. Sometimes these parents engage in the same type of controlling and monitoring with their own children; in other cases, it is as if they are looking for a fault in the spouse who must demonstrate worthiness of being admitted into the family.

Verse 4:35[41] establishes a process to follow when the relationship seems to be coming to an end. This verse outlines a process of arbitration, and both families are involved, not just one side. Typically when there is a problem, the husband or wife talks to his or her parents without having a representative from the other side, leading the in-laws to question if the spouse is the right person for them. This type of talk is more like a complaint session and may lead to a situation worsening; whereas, the arbitration process has a goal of reconciliation and is balanced between the parties. Each spouse's representative should try to remain focused on the wellbeing of the marital relationship and try not to let their personal feelings get in the way of the arbitration process. Every couple experiences difficult times. If the arbiters can help the couple get through the rough spot, it is in everyone's best interest. Unfortunately, we sometimes see the extended families clash with each other, escalating the couple's problem into a huge drama that encompasses everyone.

In some cultures, there is an expectation that the daughter-in-law's role is to serve the in-laws. If the family lives together, she should be integrated in the family while also allowing her the space to have her

41 "If you fear a breach between the two of them, appoint (two) arbiters, one from his family and one from hers; if they wish for peace, Allah will cause their reconciliation: For Allah has full knowledge, and is acquainted with all things." (4:35)

own family. She is not a maid or servant but should participate in the household as everyone else does. She must have her own personality and her own time. The authority does not shift from her parents to his parents, nor does it shift to her husband. If the husband's parents need to be taken care of, it is primarily his job and she can play a supporting role.

The couple must also have their own relationship and space to do their own things. Parents should not expect their adult married children to continue the same level of interaction as before marriage, nor should they expect to have the same degree of authority over their own child or their new son or daughter-in-law.

Parents do not have the right to interfere in their children's lives once they become adults, unless there is imminent harm or danger. As a parent, you may have preferences, in which case you can give advice; however, you should not insist on obedience. One should try to fulfill the "reasonable" needs of the parents; this does not include the parents dictating a way of life for their children or just doing things "my way." If parents have to live with you, give them a role to play, or a task to fulfill, in order to make them feel needed.

Another problem we see is when husbands try to limit the amount of time the wife can visit her family but expect her to spend a great deal of time with his family. What makes a husband have the right to deny his wife from visiting her parents when she cannot say the same to him? Kinship is kinship. He has no right to deny her from her family. It is a responsibility to encourage good relations with respective parents. It is necessary to work towards finding a balance to meet the needs of both sets of families.

Suggestions for Living in an Extended Family

There are many reasons why a couple may live with one set of parents, whether the couple is moving in with the parents, or vice versa. In some families, there is an expectation that the couple will live with the parents, especially if the husband is the eldest son. In other families, the mother prefers to live with the youngest son. In still other cases, one or both parents may live with the daughter. If you know that

you want to live with your parents or intend for your parents to live with you after marriage, make sure you communicate this clearly to your potential spouse.

Although each situation may present different challenges, there are some suggestions that may help to prevent or ease problems that often arise. A prerequisite for having good relationships with your spouse's family is starting with a positive attitude, along with a willingness to get to know your in-laws and to have a relationship with them that is independent of your spouse. In addition, it can be helpful for the spouse to provide some background about each family member's personality and preferences. At the same time, sharing information about the new spouse's personality and preferences with each family of origin is also helpful in easing the transition for both sides. For example, a very shy older sister may be perceived as unwelcoming or cold unless the new spouse is informed that it takes her time to warm up, and that it's not personal.

1. The biological adult child should be proactive in establishing communication, helping to build relationships, and setting boundaries. Parents and their children share a strong bond and a long history that provides a secure base and can withstand the adjustments required as new family members are integrated. Both the parents and the new spouse may feel insecure about what place they will have as new relationships develop. If the parents had their own challenges with their in-laws, they may project their fears onto the new spouse. It is the biological adult child that can pave the way, building bridges and offering reassurance as needed.

2. Don't allow your parents to give direct orders to your wife. If they start to exercise some authority over your spouse, it creates resentment. No matter how hard they try, parents cannot usually treat the daughter-in-law as their own daughter because she is not. They must take the time to build trust and to build a relationship. Consider the example in which your mother comes to your home and she says, "Everyone has to go to bed at 11:00."

In this case, politely ask your mother if that is something she wants for herself or something she want everyone to do. If it's about everyone, politely tell her that as a couple, you will decide for yourselves the best time to sleep but she is welcome to sleep at the time that is best for her.

Although it can be quite difficult and awkward at first, parents will eventually realize that by setting boundaries, you are not trying to get them out of your life but you are trying to create an environment that will support healthy relationships for the long term. Parents struggle sometimes to adjust to the changes that occur in their roles when their children grow up, move out, or get married. Patience is a key factor, as are understanding, compassion, and consistently firm, but gentle reminders. These reminders are much easier to hear from the biological adult child than from the in-law.

3. Give parents a task or a role to play in the family. For many mothers who dedicated their lives to taking care of their children and who did not have any work outside the home, the only role they know is that of caretaking. When there is no one to take care of, they may feel useless and lost, not knowing what purpose they serve in life. Many parents, especially mothers, may get depressed, especially if they have to move in with their children. Finding a way that these parents can fulfill their need to feel needed can go a long way in keeping the relationships healthy.

   Think about what your parent is good at, and what hobbies or interests may be encouraged to develop. It might be helping out with housework or reading stories to your children. Or it might be a creative talent that can be shared with others through volunteering in the community. Allow your parents or in-laws to have a particular job(s) that will make them feel they have a place in your home and in your family.

4. Strike a balance between your parents' needs and your spouse's needs. When it comes to money issues, for example, people send money to their parents. However, the money that is sent should not impact the wellbeing of your wife and children. A husband may believe that his money belongs to his parents, but from an Islamic perspective, he must assess who needs it most. If parents are making demands that lead to an injustice towards your spouse, you must tell your parents they are wrong because Allah (*swt*) will hold them accountable. Parents do not have a blank check to do whatever they want, nor do spouses have the right to ignore the needs of their parents or their in-laws.

   Some parents may blame the daughter-in-law for taking the son away from them because he spends less time with them after the marriage. They may feel that he prefers his wife over them. The wise man is the one who strikes a balance between the rights of his wife and the rights of his parents. A wife may ask her husband to cut off from his parents for fear that they will impact the marital relationship negatively. She also has no right to do this. A wise woman will not create a situation in which her husband feels stuck between her and his parents.

5. Be sensitive and understanding. When a mother-in-law feels it is not her home, she may be waiting for her daughter-in-law to include her; meanwhile, the daughter-in-law may assume the mother-in-law feels right at home. On the other hand, sometimes the new wife is brought into the home where the mother-in-law is the woman of the house and everyone submits to her rules, such as using the kitchen and deciding which guests to invite, and there is limited privacy. In both cases, there is a power struggle and tension because issues can't be communicated clearly. The daughter-in-law may feel she is under a microscope, having to answer to many people. What is required here is compassion and empathy, really trying to understand from each other's perspective and recognizing that both sides are probably hurting. When

there is compassion and a willingness to consider both perspectives, it is generally easier to begin exploring possible solutions.

6. Engage in ongoing communication and consultation. As new couples seek to establish appropriate and healthy boundaries, they must check in with each other frequently to make sure they are acting in ways that feel mutually respectful. Spouses should try to get on the same page, then move forward by communicating consistent messages to extended family members.

   What often happens is that spouses may be communicating and consulting with their respective parents more than with their spouse. In this case, the spouse will feel that the in-laws have too much say or influence in the marital relationship. It is not uncommon to hear husbands complaining that their wives are sharing everything with their mothers to the extent that the husband feels he has no say at all in household affairs. The reverse is also common, where women complain that their husbands are operating by their mother's wishes, with the wife feeling marginalized and excluded. When adult children have a close relationship with their parents, it is natural to have open and ongoing communication. However, after marriage, a gradual transition must occur in which the new spouse becomes the first priority. Time and energy must be put into developing and strengthening this relationship through communication and consultation. The relationship with parents naturally has to shift to a supportive role that is inclusive of the couple's needs and preferences, not just their own child's.

   In order to determine the best way to transition these relationships, spouses can consult each other as well as others in the family who may have more life experience and wisdom to share as they navigate family relationships. It can also be helpful to identify older couples in the community who can serve as mentors. For complicated situations, it can be beneficial to seek professional assistance from a marriage and family therapist.

Mediation

Parents may sometimes be able to play a helpful role in mediating conflict but should only get involved if they are invited to do so. Sometimes the emotional attachments make it difficult, if not impossible, to be objective and to see things clearly. If your son or daughter asks you to get involved, listen to both sides and consider that your child might be wrong. Don't take sides if you want to be a positive force. Since we rarely see parents able to remain neutral, it is usually better for them not to mediate. A neutral third party can often be more helpful, and the spouses will not have to deal with loyalty issues towards their parents on top of the conflict they are already having with each other.

Communication

The way that young people relate to elders who are not their parents may be very different from the expectations of the in-laws. It is important for these expectations to be communicated clearly and directly, rather than to have assumptions that everyone is on the same page. In one case, the new wife felt it was her responsibility to give respect, ask about her in-laws' day, then go to her room. They became very frustrated because they wanted her to sit with them and interact with them more. Even though their own daughter did the same as the daughter-in-law, they expected more courtesy from the daughter-in-law. Parents should treat their daughter-in-law with the same considerations as their own daughter, giving her space and time to relax after work, for example.

Language barriers can also affect relationships with in-laws. The younger generation may not speak the language as well, even if they are of the same ethnic background. In these cases, the in-laws may feel constrained in their communication. Expectations are not communicated well, either due to language barrier or shyness, which leads to frustration and resentment on both sides. Sometimes the elders feel they are being disrespected when the younger generation's needs are communicated. They may tolerate the same from their own children, but not from the in-law.

When your spouse has complaints about your parents, it is important to listen and try to understand your spouse's perspective. Before defending your parents, try letting your spouse know what makes sense to you about the situation by putting yourself in the other's shoes. Remember that your spouse does not know your parents or have the same long history that you do. Once you are able to empathize, you will notice that your spouse may be able to hear your perspective or interpretation of your parents' behavior. If you skip this step and start defending your parents first, your spouse will feel alienated, invalidated, and will eventually develop resentment towards you and your parents.

If there are recurring issues, try facilitating a conversation between the two parties so that you are not caught in the middle. A marriage can be drained very quickly if one spouse is constantly hearing complaints from both sides. If you are the spouse with the complaints, think carefully about what you really need to share or complain about. Remember that your spouse cannot control his or her parent's behaviors, and that no matter what, parents are parents and must be treated with respect and compassion. Try not to overburden your spouse with complaints; whenever possible, try to resolve issues as they come up directly with the party involved. What can be helpful is getting tips from your spouse about the most effective way to communicate with the parents.

At the same time, remember that if you complain about your spouse all the time to your parents, they will form a negative impression. They may carry this negative impression even after you and your spouse have made up and are in a better place. Make sure you convey the good things about your spouse in order to facilitate a positive and healthy relationship between your spouse and your parents.

CHAPTER 6:

The Wedding



*Live with them (women) on a footing of kindness and equity (*ma`ruf*). (4:19)*

It's finally here. The big day! In one moment, your status in life changes from single to married. There are many cultural and societal expectations that surround this day. For most people, it is exciting and a time when family and loved ones come together to celebrate. For many young women in particular, this is a day they have dreamed about since they were little. For others, it is just another ritual on the checklist. For parents it is a day to feel proud of an accomplishment, having raised a child and helped him or her to transition to the next stage in life. In some cultures, there are days of festivities. In others, the celebration may be limited to the marriage ceremony itself. Regardless of the degree of importance the wedding has in people's lives, it can either be a wonderful launch pad for the couple's new life together or a time of stress for all involved if there is difficulty resolving conflicts and making decisions.

All of the elements we have discussed so far about keeping a focus on Islamic principles, communication, mutuality and *shura* apply to the process of planning a wedding. In many cultures, more time goes

into planning the wedding day and the associated parties than into considering the marriage to come. An online search for wedding planning timelines and checklists yielded suggestions to begin the complicated process about sixteen months before the wedding: hiring a wedding planner, coordinating the venue, florist, photographer, and many other details. One checklist suggested hiring the wedding planner twelve to eighteen months before the wedding and arranging for premarital counseling eight to ten months before the wedding. In our opinion, the premarital counseling should come first, and the bulk of energy should be spent on preparing for the rest of your life *after* the wedding day, rather than the day itself.

Planning the wedding often takes a toll on the entire family due to the expenses, conflicts in expectations between the two families or between the bride and groom, logistics, and even setting a date that works for all the relatives. Some of the marital problems we hear about in our counseling actually began on the wedding day. We hear about a spouse or relative who refused to compromise on how the wedding would look in terms of the location, the set-up, or the decorations. There can be major disagreements on how the bride will dress, including details like how form-fitting her dress will be, whether she will cover her hair, or how much makeup to wear. Another common conflict is whether the men and women will be separate or in the same room. When both sides are inflexible and unable to recognize that the wedding is only one day in the entire life of a person, these issues and others can be blown out of proportion with some people becoming overly attached to the details. For many people, the way the wedding plays out has an impact for the duration of the marriage, not only on the couple, but also on the extended family members. Some people get caught up in the moment and hold on to those emotions/grudges for the rest of their lives.

It is very important to take the time to explore and understand all of the expectations associated with the wedding. There can be internal or hidden expectations that each person has but may not communicate in order to avoid rocking the boat. In these cases, resentment often follows when the person feels that sacrifices have been made, and there is an expectation that these will be recognized and reciprocated. There are

also external expectations from others, like parents or in-laws, or even the broader community. Negotiating these expectations, which may be conflicting, takes time, patience, and a focus on the purpose of marriage, and the purpose of the wedding itself.

The Wedding Expenses

A wedding can be quite expensive, depending on the how elaborate the families want to make it. There are cultural expectations that often create pressure for families to make the wedding meet a certain standard. Competition and comparison to other weddings in the community can create too much stress on a family with limited means or for families who value simplicity. Some families go into debt just to cover the wedding expenses. If the marriage does not end up working out, it can be very painful to consider all the money that was invested in the wedding day.

It is wise to spend modestly rather than to be extravagant when it comes to the wedding. Starting life off in debt can set the stage for financial conflicts and added stress that are really unnecessary. Rather than putting all the time, effort and money into a one-day event after which everyone goes home, we recommend putting those same resources into what will happen after the wedding.

From the perspective of Shari`ah, the wedding (*waleemah*) expense is the responsibility of the husband. But Islam also considers *`urf* or cultural traditions and customs, and allows for traditional practices to be observed as long as they do not conflict with Islamic teachings. In many cultures, there are multiple events and parties, such has the henna (*mehndi)* and the contract ceremony (*kitaab/nikaah)*, etc., that occur in addition to the wedding (*waleemah*). The rituals and customs for each event, including which family covers the expenses, vary considerably across cultures. One thing to bear in mind is that if the bride's family contributes to the wedding expenses, and the marriage doesn't work out, this money cannot be demanded to be returned. The minute the money is spent for the wedding, it cannot be reclaimed in the case of divorce later.

Intercultural and Interfaith Marriages

Many times the tensions around wedding planning have to do with intercultural issues. Even between people from two South Asian countries, two Arab countries, or even two different regions in the same country, there can be significant differences in the cultural rituals that are part of the engagement and wedding process. Expectations of who pays for what often originate from the respective cultures. Each side must be willing to negotiate and compromise. Expectations must be stated explicitly from the very beginning without assuming that the other culture has the same rules. Some cultural differences include expectations about when to give gifts, what types of gifts are appropriate, when the rings are exchanged, when and what is the *shabkah* (engagement gift to the bride), the amount of the *mahr* (dowry), etc. Other differences in expectations may relate to whether there is music or dancing at the wedding, what type of food will be served, and how extravagant or simple the ceremony will be. Sometimes when these expectations are not met, people get offended and take it personally, leading to bad feelings and strained relationships.

It is important to refer back to Islamic guidelines when celebrating weddings. Although people may believe they are making Islamic decisions, their decisions in fact may be more related to customs and cultural traditions. It is not uncommon, for example, to have belly dancers at Egyptian weddings, even among practicing Muslims. But this practice is not Islamically acceptable, especially if the wedding is mixed gender. Referring back to a mutually accepted Islamic reference can help clarify the Islamic boundaries so that the wedding is planned in a manner that will be accepted by Allah (*swt*).

In cases where there are differences of opinion, the need to compromise and be flexible cannot be overstated. There has to be give and take on both sides. Sometimes the differences are between the bride and groom, such as when one may be more liberal or conservative than the other. Differences may occur when extended family members have different degrees of religiosity or if the extended family is not Muslim. People may disagree about the guest list. The parents' wishes for their children's weddings may be in direct conflict with the couple's values. It is not unusual in these cases for conflicts to occur if one of the parties

wants to serve alcohol or have dancing while the other party cannot accept these elements. When there is poor communication, lack of respect for each other's values, and an inability to compromise, we see situations in which a parent may boycott the wedding. These situations are extremely painful for all involved, and may be avoided when these issues are considered and dealt with at the beginning of the "getting to know each other" process.

Second- or third-generation Muslim couples may be unfamiliar with the traditional customs, and/or may not want to observe them in their weddings. Given the increase in cross-cultural marriages, it is important for the parents on both sides to be flexible and remember that it is the young couple's wedding and it may differ from their own. American Muslims may create new traditions that are either a mixture of multiple cultures, or completely innovative.

All of these issues should be discussed in premarital counseling and during the time the couple is getting to know each other. Sometimes the wedding might not happen because these differences cannot be resolved, especially in intercultural or interfaith marriages. It is important to discuss early on what type of religious ceremony the couple will have and how children will be raised. It is an unrealistic expectation to raise the children as Muslims when one of the parents doesn't know Islam.

> *Nora met David at work. He had been learning about Islam since his college days. Nora encouraged him to attend the classes at the masjid. Within a few months, he took* shahadah. *As they got to know each other better, they decided to get married. The parents agreed, although David's family expressed concern about the "strictness" of Islam. While his family agreed to participate in an Islamic ceremony, they also wanted a reception for their friends who had known David all of his life. They insisted that champagne would be served and expected Nora's family to attend, just as they were willing to attend the wedding at the masjid. Nora's father refused to go to the reception, feeling he would be compromising Islam; her mother insisted on going in order*

to maintain a spirit of good will between the families and believing it was her Islamic duty to do so. The parents could not resolve their differences and ended up fighting on the wedding day. Needless to say, both Nora and David were greatly affected and struggled to manage their relationships with each set of parents.

David and Nora's problems on their wedding day are actually not the problem at all; their problems simply manifested on that day. The underlying issue is the different value systems in their respective families. These differences will continue to play out throughout the lifetime of their marriage, at every developmental stage, during holidays and at every joint function. It will impact not only the couple and their parents, but will also impact the children. If we fast-forward ten years, David's parents are very hurt that his children are not joining the other grandchildren at their grandparents' home for Christmas. David is really suffering as he sees the pain in his mother's eyes, but he feels very strongly that his children should not be in a home where adults are drinking wine as part of their celebration. David's parents have avoided drinking in front of them out of respect, but the other relatives have expressed some frustration with David's preferences. Neither David, Nora, nor their parents had really thought through all of these future scenarios.

The wedding planning, and the wedding itself, can often be a good source of information about the values, character and personality of each family member. The choices people make, the stance they take (flexible versus rigid), the responses they have to things they don't like, and how they deal with differences are all a reflection, and prediction, of how people live their lives. It is really amazing and inspiring how people are able to bridge their cultural and religious differences and arrive at creative solutions that work for everyone when intentions are pure, conversations are honest and open, and there is a genuine spirit of mutual respect.

Agnes was a devout Catholic. When her Muslim colleague Adam expressed interest in marrying her, she politely said she was not marrying anyone outside of her faith. At the same time, she was very attracted to him,

particularly the way he treated others and the way his religious teachings guided his life. She also felt comfortable with many of the aspects she had learned about Islam. When he approached her again a few months later saying he felt a great deal of affinity towards her, she was willing to reconsider with the condition that he would not expect her to convert to Islam, and that he would allow her to get married according to her beliefs. As they explored what was essential for each of them, they decided to have both his imam and her priest perform the marriage ceremony.

Agnes and Adam respected each other's values and beliefs, and they were able to work out an arrangement that was mutually acceptable. They probably also had to take into consideration the opinions, advice, and even criticism from friends and family members. It can take a lot of wisdom and diplomacy to negotiate what others want, balance the importance of those relationships with the couple's preferences, and find a solution that is acceptable. While it is usually impossible to make everyone happy, conflict can be minimized when all parties try to remain focused on the ultimate objective of getting married as a means to please Allah (*swt*) and helping the couple get off to a good start.

Writing the Contract: "A Solemn Covenant"[42]

The Islamic marriage contract can be divided into two documents: one is the prenuptial agreement, and the other includes the Islamic or moral terms and conditions. The terms of the marriage contract can be written as a prenuptial agreement in order for the contract to be upheld in a US court of law. It must be called a prenuptial agreement so that it reflects an agreement prior to marriage, rather than after the marriage. It can be written as a separate document for US legal purposes. In the marriage contract itself, the language can include a reference to

42 Qur'an 4:21.

the conditions outlined in the prenuptial agreement. An example of the wording could be, "I marry you according to the Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad, and the *mahr* agreed between us as specified in the prenuptial agreement, and with the conditions specified in the document we have called a prenuptial agreement." This way, if anything happens later, this document can be used to uphold the accepted terms.

The prenuptial agreement can include any of the legal issues that could come up in a court of law or may need to be resolved legally. This document would cover issues related to finances (assets, *mahr*), education, how you will resolve disputes, etc. In the second document, a wide range of conditions can be included according to the Shari`ah, including the right to a monogamous relationship, the right for a woman to initiate *talaaq,*[43] her right to work outside the home, her right to have a home separate from in-laws, or even not to relocate. Men can also put conditions in the contract, as long as there is no injustice to either party. These terms then become binding according to Shari`ah, and if violated, become grounds for Islamic divorce. However, the same terms may or may not be legally binding in a court of law if any of the terms are not consistent with US law. For example, although a spouse may enter the right not to relocate in the marriage contract, a court of law might not uphold this condition because a spouse cannot legally be forced to stay in one location. We recommend having the prenuptial agreement reviewed by an attorney to ensure its compliance with state and federal laws.

When it comes to interfaith marriages, the contract might also include terms that may be relevant due to having different beliefs and rituals. For example, a Jewish or Christian spouse might stipulate that their burial rituals be adhered to, while the Muslim spouse might stipulate an Islamic burial. Agreements related to raising children in a multifaith household might also be included. For example, an agreement might specify that the children will be raised Muslim, or that there will be no alcohol or pork in the home.

Another issue that can be addressed in the contract is polygyny. Although it is allowed in Islam, it is illegal in the US. To address this issue, I (Imam Magid) put a standard clause in each contract that if a

43 This condition is allowed in Hanbali *fiqh.* Abu Shaqqah, A. *Tahrir al-Mar'ah fi `Asr al-Risaalah.* Vol 5.

man takes a second wife, the first wife has the right to divorce. Any imam must uphold this contract; thus, a woman will not face difficulty when she needs to get a divorce. She then has the choice to exercise this right or not.

Unfortunately, we have observed that many people take their marriage contract very lightly. They may agree to terms without really thinking them through. Some people never even look at their contract until their marriage is falling apart and they need the marriage contract in order to get a divorce. It is imperative that both parties participate in writing the contract and are very comfortable and familiar with all the terms. The process of communicating what matters most, negotiating any differences, and coming up with a document acceptable to both parties is also an opportunity to see how well you can work together as a couple. And remember, no matter where you are in the process, until the contract is actually signed, you can always back out if you discover that you are not right for each other.

It is a good idea to look at different samples of marriage contracts and to learn more about this document that frames one of the most significant relationships in your life.

The Mahr

One of the key components in the Islamic marriage contract is the *mahr* or dowry. Because cultural elements have become mixed with the Islamic aspects of the *mahr,* many people are quite confused about this element of the marriage contract. Since it is one of the conditions for a valid Islamic marriage, it is crucial to have a good understanding of what it is, what it isn't, and how it's determined.

What is the Mahr?

The *mahr* is a required element of the marriage contract. It is usually translated as "dowry." It is a gift that is given from the groom to the bride and is stipulated in the marriage contract. The Qur'an says, "And

give the women (on marriage) their dower as a free gift; but if they, of their own good pleasure, remit any part of it to you, take it and enjoy it with pleasure and good cheer" (4:4).

The *mahr* is given to the woman as a means of showing respect to her and commitment to the responsibility of taking care of her. From a historical context, the divine prescription of giving a *mahr* to the bride was part of the social revolution initiated by Islam. In pre-Islamic Arabia, women were considered to be the property of men. Many Arab men believed they were doing a favor to a family when they married the daughter. In addition to many of the rights given to women by Islam, the *mahr* establishes her right to own her own wealth and is an acknowledgment of her right to have a say in the financial wellbeing of the family.

Some people divide the *mahr* into two portions, giving some of it at the beginning of the marriage and deferring the remainder (often the larger portion). In some contracts, this deferred portion is payable upon death or divorce. However, Islamically, once the terms of the *mahr* are accepted, it is payable upon demand. If the *mahr* has been divided into two portions, the woman can ask for the remainder at any point in time. She can also choose to have the entire *mahr* up front.

Making the deferred portion payable upon death or divorce reflects a common misunderstanding among Muslims. Upon death, the wife would receive her inheritance, something that is entirely separate from her *mahr*. Upon divorce, separate and in addition to any unpaid amount of the *mahr*, the husband may be responsible for paying maintenance or financial support. Once the *mahr* is paid, no portion can be taken back, neither during the marriage nor in the event of divorce.[44] The Qur'an stipulates that in the event that the marriage is not consummated and the couple decides to divorce, the wife would retain half of the *mahr*.[45]

---

44 "But if you desire to give up a wife and to take another in her stead, do not take away anything of what you have given the first one, even if you had given her a whole treasure for a dower. Would you take it away by slandering her and thus committing a manifest sin? And how could you take it when you have gone in unto each other, and they have taken from you a solemn covenant?" (4:20-21)

45 "And if you divorce them before consummation, but after the fixation of a dower for them, then the half of the dower (is due to them), unless they remit it or (the man's half) is remitted by him in whose hands is the marriage tie; and the remission (of the man's half) is the nearest to righteousness. And do not forget liberality between yourselves. For Allah sees well all that you do." (2:237)

The *mahr* is a right that has been given to women by Allah (*swt*) to address issues related to financial control. Its purpose is to ensure that the woman has some financial security in the marriage by having money of her own. She can choose to use it, invest it or set it aside for emergencies. It is hers to use as she pleases.

What the *Mahr* Is Not

Contrary to common misconceptions, the *mahr* is not:

- A means for the bride's family to gain income or to cover wedding expenses.

- A token of appreciation or a symbolic gesture. It is a gift that should be given freely with a spirit of generosity and acknowledgement of the wife as an independent being, worthy of receiving such a gift.

- A price paid by the husband to gain sexual access to his wife. Marriage is a vehicle through which both spouses can and should have their intimate needs gratified. It is a mutual right and responsibility, and is a relationship that is grounded in mutual compassion. If the relationship becomes defined by payment for the physical relationship, then it becomes akin to a *mut'ah* relationship.[46]

- Compensation for services rendered. While there is much work involved in maintaining a household and raising a family, this work is a mutual responsibility. The marriage should be entered into with a spirit of teamwork, partnership, and mutual care rather than a relationship in which one spouse serves the other. There is actually nothing in the Qur'an or Sunnah that stipulates household work as the "woman's job." Even when it comes to

46 The *mut'ah* marriage is a temporary "pleasure marriage" that is allowed by the Shi'a

breastfeeding, a mother has the option to have the father pay for a wet nurse.

- A pot that a wife should dip into to cover household expenses. Hind, the wife of Abu Sufyan, complained to the Prophet (pbuh) about her husband's stinginess and asked if she could take from his money without him knowing. The Prophet (pbuh) advised her, "Take for your needs what is just and reasonable."[47] This hadith clarifies that it is the husband's responsibility to provide for his family, even if he does not fulfill it willingly.

Determining the *Mahr*

Both parties should concur about the amount of *mahr*, taking into consideration both sides' financial circumstances. What we mean by both parties is the husband and the wife. From the perspective of Shari`ah, the woman herself should either approve or reject the mahr. The *mahr* has to be specific and clearly understood, without any ambiguity. For example, if the *mahr* is a ring, the couple needs to specify up front what kind of ring it will be, the value of the ring, or the size of the ring. Sometimes, people just agree on a ring, without the details, but they each may have different expectations in mind about what kind of ring it will be. It's better to be very clear in order to avoid confusion and any possible disappointments later.

A woman is entitled to ask for whatever the man can afford at that time. The *mahr* should be commensurate with his social status; however, there is no maximum limit on what the *mahr* can be. For example, a man who earns $200,000 per year cannot give $2 as a *mahr*. I (Imam Magid) recommend ten percent of the annual income to be the *mahr*.

In selecting a spouse, it is important to give thought to the social compatibility (*kafaa'ah*) of the two partners. Although it is not mandatory to marry someone from the same social status, as mentioned in earlier chapters, there are issues that need to be considered when people

47 Bukhari, Book 64, Hadith #272.

marry outside of their social bracket. Certainly, expectations concerning *mahr* may be influenced by each person's socioeconomic background. While a woman has the right to be maintained after marriage at the same level she was used to prior to marriage, if she agrees to marry a man from a lower socioeconomic bracket, she must have realistic expectations of what he can afford in terms of the *mahr* as well as her future standard of living. If both partners are coming from a lower socioeconomic background, their expectations will probably be more aligned. In most cases, it is not appropriate for a man to lower his wife's standard of living, or to live off of her, unless she agrees and wants to marry him and support him.

Even in the case of poverty, the husband must provide a *mahr*. It cannot be waived just because he has no financial means. He has to offer something within his means, even something small or symbolic. The Prophet (pbuh) encouraged men to give whatever they could. In advising a poor man, the Prophet (pbuh) told him, "Give her a garment." The man said, "I cannot afford it." The Prophet said, "Give her anything, even if it were an iron ring." The man apologized again. The Prophet then asked him, "What do you know by heart of the Qur'an?" He replied, "I know such-and-such portion of the Qur'an (by heart)." The Prophet said, "Then I marry her to you for that much of the Qur'an which you know by heart."[48]

In some immigrant cultures, particularly among fathers who have social prominence, it is becoming common for the fathers to waive the *mahr*. Their intention may be to emphasize that the family is not interested in materialism, or it may be to avoid creating obstacles for the groom. However, this decision should not be made by the parents. A woman should consider carefully before waiving this marital gift, given the fact that Allah (*swt*) has prescribed it for a reason and is looking out for the wellbeing of His servants.

No one gets married with the intention of getting divorced. When things are going well, it may be hard to imagine that circumstances might change and that she may be in need of this financial cushion. The *mahr* is for the bride, and for the bride alone. It is neither the parents'

48 Bukhari, Book 61, Hadith #547.

right to waive the right of *mahr* for their daughter, nor is it acceptable to ask for exorbitant amounts just to show off. It is also not acceptable for men to promise an amount that they cannot pay simply to impress her, thinking that they may not have to pay the deferred amount if they don't get divorced.

This common misconception is illustrated in the example of a man who offered his wife a deferred dowry of $1 million. When the imam asked him if he actually had that much money available, the man said he had no intention of divorcing his wife, believing that the amount of money specified was irrelevant unless there was a divorce. Another example that is not uncommon is a man who refuses to divorce his wife because he does not want to pay the deferred amount. To reiterate, the *mahr* is not related in any way to divorce. Once it is promised, it is binding on the husband to pay it.

Therefore, the husband must limit the *mahr* to an amount that he would be able to pay at any time the wife asked for it. He could add a clause to the contract, that in the event of divorce, he would pay her a specified amount. This amount would be additional to the *mahr* she is entitled to upon marriage.

Legal Implications

As Muslims, we should always be aware that Allah (*swt*) is watching over us. Many of the Qur'anic verses related to human interactions and relationships include a reminder of this fact. The reminder is needed because it can be very easy to commit an injustice like backing out on an agreement related to the *mahr*. In some cultures, the agreement is verbal, leaving even more room for agreements to be broken. We strongly encourage couples to have written contracts so that there is no room for someone "forgetting" what was agreed. Again, these contracts can be written as prenuptial agreements so that they can be upheld in US courts.

It is disturbing that many women, especially those who get married overseas, have no idea what their *mahr* is. They are often not consulted or even informed. In some cases, the marriage contract itself has the section for the *mahr* crossed out. We discover this unfortunate situation

when we ask women to bring their marriage contract in if they are dealing with an abusive husband and are exploring the possibility of divorce. At that point, there is often not much to be done if no terms regarding the *mahr* have been written in the contract.

As American judges become more exposed to Muslim divorce cases, they are learning about the *mahr*. There are several cases in which the *mahr* has been upheld, and other cases where a judge ruled according to state law.[49] In 2003, a Pakistani man divorced his wife through the Pakistani embassy, giving her the $2500 written in their marriage contract. The Maryland court of Appeals overturned the divorce and noted the injustice of the husband trying to get away with paying his wife $2,500, despite having a $2 million estate and being married for twenty years.[50]

Marital Implications

Given that women are entitled to their own wealth, and that the *mahr* is owned exclusively by the wife, it makes sense that every wife should have her own bank account. A joint account can be established for household expenses, and the husband can also have a separate account as long as he has provided sufficiently for his family. Some men bristle at the idea of women having their own account, and even some women feel uncomfortable; both may believe that all finances are to be jointly shared or that a woman who maintains her assets separately is selfish, materialistic or stingy. These beliefs are a reflection of a lack of proper understanding of Islam.

The Islamic model of marriage is a preventive one that is designed to protect the health of the marital relationship. The Qur'an assigns

49 See Alkhateeb, Maha. (2012). *Islamic Marriage Contracts: A Resource Guide for Legal Professionals, Advocates, Imams, and Communities.* Peaceful Families Project, Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence, and Battered Women's Justice Project. http://www.peacefulfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Islamic.Marriage.Contracts.Resource.Guide_Produced.By_.PFP-API.Institute-BWJP_2012.pdf. Retrieved 12/29/12.

50 http://www.totaldivorce.com/news/articles/legislation/islamic-divorce-denied.aspx. Retrieved 12/29/12. Also, see http://karamah.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Marriage-in-Pakistan-Divorce-in-Maryland-A-Sequel1.pdf. Retrieved 12/29/12.

men the responsibility of financially providing for the family,[51] and it allows women to have independent wealth because they are *not* responsible for providing financially. Unfortunately, there are many men who abuse their role and exercise forms of financial abuse. Some examples include denying the wife access to any money, humiliating or insulting her because she is financially dependent on him, and forcing her to sign over her paychecks to him.

When a woman has her own bank account, or her own assets, she is less likely to feel subjugated if a husband is financially controlling. In cases where husbands may not be providing due to stinginess, she is not expected to use her *mahr* for household expenses, as demonstrated in the hadith of Hind above (see "What the *Mahr* Is Not"). Furthermore, the fact that she is the one negotiating her *mahr* suggests that she should have financial input regarding the family's financial affairs. Again, we meet many men who prefer their wives to simply and silently accept all of their financial decisions, forgetting that their decisions will impact the wife one way or another. Islam has recognized women as autonomous, independent, dignified human beings; it is important for men to be conscious of this in their financial decision-making.

As you have read in previous chapters, we advocate for a marriage hat reflects a collaborative and cooperative partnership. When each spouse remembers that the wellbeing of the family is more important than the desires and whims of each individual, and that ultimately the marriage is a means towards pleasing Allah (*swt*), many of the challenges people struggle with regarding control and finances will be easily resolved.

Principles of the Marriage Contract: Married According to the Qur'an & Sunnah

Regardless of whether the contract is written or verbal, there are certain factors that are automatically built in to a contract that is based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah. For example, inherent in a contract that is based

51 "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means." (4:34)

on Qur'anic concepts like *mawaddah* (love) and *rahmah* is a promise not to abuse or mistreat each other. Understanding the Qur'anic model of marriage (see Chapter 1) is necessary in order to be fully aware of the commitment one is making by virtue of signing an Islamic marriage contract.

When Umar ibn al-Khattab (*ra*) used to officiate a marriage, he explained that it is a strong covenant (*meethaq ghaleeth*) in which each spouse is committing to treating the other well (*imsaak bi ma`ruf*) or letting each other go with kindness (*tasreeh bi ihsaan*). Traditionally the *wali* represented the bride during the marriage ceremony. During the time of Umar (*ra*) the *wali* would exact a pledge from the son-in-law to treat the wife with kindness.

Nowadays the ceremony is often just a ritual. The imam or mullah may be speaking or making the couple repeat the vows in a language they don't understand. The imam should explain what the contract means, but doing so for the first time on the day of the wedding is too late. The contract terms and implications must be explained not only the day of the wedding but also before the wedding so that people have time to realize their commitment. People may listen to the sermon at the wedding and take it as advice, but many do not realize that this advice is actually integral to the contract, and therefore binding on the couple.

Do you know what you are signing? Know what your contract includes.

In committing to marrying someone according to the Qur'an and Sunnah, you are promising the following:

- Kindness (*ihsaan*): You promise to treat your spouse with kindness. You promise there will be no physical, emotional, sexual, financial or verbal abuse. Abuse is any form of maltreatment, including neglect (withdrawal of affection, ignoring, not providing, etc.). Part of treating each other well includes showing appreciation for each other, going out of your way for each other, being thoughtful and considerate, and doing all that you can to make your spouse feel loved and respected.

- ❑ Protection of the integrity of the marriage: You promise to contribute to the integrity of the marital relationship which is supposed to be a protection for each spouse. This protection includes your reputation, refraining from thinking about others in an intimate manner, and fulfilling each other's emotional and sexual needs. While there is never a justification for cheating, affairs often do begin when the integrity of the marriage has been compromised. For example, when a person feels that the spouse is emotionally distant, too occupied with work or children, unappreciative or uncaring, it is natural to become vulnerable to attention from others. We are not justifying crossing the line, but we are saying that each spouse has a responsibility to create an environment in which the other spouse feels nurtured and loved, and their needs are being met. If you find yourself thinking about someone else, this is a cue or warning for you to reflect on what is missing in your relationship and how you can get what you need from your spouse.
    - Being truly kind to your spouse inherently leads to protecting the integrity of the relationship, and there is no way to truly keep your relationship secure without treating each other well.

- ❑ Mutual Protection (*haqq al-ri`aayah*): You promise to protect the honor and wellbeing of your spouse to your maximum ability. The husband is responsible for being the primary financial provider. Spouses should take care of **each other** in all circumstances: in health, wealth, poverty, and sickness. Many people don't realize health includes emotional wellness/illnesses as well, like depression. Each of you is a caretaker for the other; each one must fulfill their obligations before asking for their rights.

- ❑ Loyalty (*haqq al-wafaa'*): You promise not to violate the marriage by cheating or getting involved with someone else. Loyalty also includes protecting private information and details about each other, avoiding situations with the opposite gender that

might lead to inappropriate relationships (in person or online), and speaking well of your spouse to others.

- Intimacy (*haqq al-istimtaa'*): You promise to provide an environment that is conducive to intimacy and the enjoyment of each other, and to do your best to fulfill each other's needs. One objective of marriage is to provide both spouses with protection through the mutual enjoyment of each other. How this right is exercised is as important as the right itself. The abuse we see in some relationships, like marital rape, reflects a misunderstanding of this right. It is not true that this right can be demanded anytime, regardless of circumstances, with no respect to the emotional state of the other person. Husbands cannot expect their wives to be intimate if they aren't treating their wives well or keeping them safe (emotionally and physically). Intimacy cannot be withheld nor can it be forced. The Qur'anic description of husbands and wives being garments for one another (see Chapter 1) is actually part of a verse that addresses intimacy during Ramadan. [52]

- Letting each other go with kindness (*haqq al-tasreeh bi ihsaan*).[53] If the husband and wife feel that the marriage is not working, and they are not able to fulfill each other's rights, then they have to fulfill the right of letting each other go with kindness. One of the things we see in divorces among young people is that if the divorce is initiated by the male (in 7 out of 10 cases), he initiates because he feels bored, uninterested, etc. When a female initiates, it is often because she has been putting up with so much over many years, such as a lack of appreciation or mistreatment.

---

52 "Permitted to you, on the night of the fasts, is the approach to your wives. They are your garments and you are their garments. Allah knows what you used to do secretly among yourselves: but He turned to you and forgave you; so now associate with them, and seek what Allah has ordained for you, and eat and drink, until the white thread of dawn appears to you distinct from its black thread; then complete your fast until the night appears; but do not associate with your wives while you are in retreat in the mosques. Those are limits (set by) Allah: Approach them not. Thus does Allah make clear His Signs to people: that they may learn self-restraint." (2:187)

53 "A divorce is only permissible twice. After that, the parties should either hold together on equitable terms or separate with kindness." (2:229)

Terms You Can Add to the Contract

- ❑ The right to have a monogamous relationship (according to the Hanbali school of thought only). This means that the contract can stipulate that the husband cannot take a second wife. The term may be worded as each one of you committing to follow the law of the land by not engaging in polygyny or any other illegal practice.

- ❑ The right of the wife to initiate *talaaq*. This right means that the wife can initiate the divorce and retain her financial rights. Whether specified in the contract or not, the wife always has the right to divorce by *khul`*, which means that she waives her financial rights for a no-grounds divorce.

- ❑ Anything that does not contradict the mutual rights listed above. It is not acceptable to say, "I will marry you but not fulfill one of the above rights." No term that violates any part of the Shari`ah can be added to the contract.

- ❑ Terms related to financial issues, ownership, property, etc., can be added by either party. For example, either party can stipulate that premarital assets do not become shared assets.

- ❑ The terms must be written in a manner that is enforceable in a US court of law. Otherwise, the contract will not be upheld. If the contract is not written in language that can be executed legally, then when it comes to a divorce, people may exhaust themselves and their resources trying to resolve these issues. A well-written prenuptial agreement (marriage contract) can prevent problems from being dragged out.

Some people may feel uncomfortable spelling out these details in their contract, believing that if they are marrying a "good" Muslim, then they do not have to worry about anything. While it is true that a practicing Muslim should not have to be told to treat a spouse properly,

it is also true that people have different expectations and different understandings. For that reason, anything that is important to you and is concrete should be spelled out in the contract. Moral obligations, which are pledges to Allah (*swt*), will be enforced by the laws of the Hereafter (*aakhirah)*; other obligations can be enforced by the laws of this world (*dunyaa).*

Engagement versus Marriage Contract (*Kitaab* or *Nikaah*)

Because of the limitations that Islam places on men and women being alone together before marriage, many people choose to have a marriage contract to formalize their engagement period. They sign the contract to legitimize spending time alone and to have more freedom in their relationship. A wedding is then planned at some future date. This custom is acceptable within Islam. However, it is important that both spouses and their families are clear about the expectations all around.

Once the contract is signed, the couple is considered married. However, families that use the contract as an engagement often expect that the couple will refrain from consummating the marriage until after the wedding. These people are using the *kitaab /nikaah* (which is technically the marriage contract) as a dating period with the expectation that there will be no sexual relationship. In essence, the use of the marriage contract in this manner creates a stage that is culturally considered an engagement and Islamically considered a marriage. When the contract is used in this manner, the couple does not live together until after the wedding or *waleemah.*

Of course, many couples may not wait until the wedding to consummate the marriage, even if they are not living together. When this happens, parents who feel strongly that consummation should occur only after the wedding get angry, and the couple often feels unnecessary guilt.

Young people should understand their parents' expectations of the *kitaab/nikaah.* Parents must also understand that by giving their children

the freedom to spend time alone, while they are legitimately husband and wife, that if anything happens between them it is not *haram*. Parents need to accept that the delay of the *waleemah* (wedding party) should be for logistical purposes only (wedding planning, saving the money needed, etc.), but they should not have the expectation that no intimacy will occur. It is completely understandable that the young couple want to have the freedom to get to know each other in a private setting. But there needs to be an understanding that there is a difference between being engaged and being married. Using the marriage contract as an engagement is a contemporary usage of *kitaab*. In the *fiqh*, the *kitaab* is the marriage contract. The minute the contract is written, all the rights and responsibilities are in place.

Once the marriage contract is in place, if the couple wants to end their relationship, then they must get a divorce. Unfortunately, people may not realize that the ending of the relationship constitutes a divorce because culturally, people use the *kitaab* as a trial period. As long as there are no children involved, ending the *kitaab* if needed can still be positive since it allows the couple the opportunity to withdraw from the marriage with minimal consequences or damage. From an Islamic standpoint, there is no stigma attached to divorce; however, culturally, there often is a lot of stigma. So couples and their families should really think through how they want to use the *kitaab*.

Because of the cultural value placed on virginity, women sometimes feel pressured to lie about consummating the marriage if the relationship doesn't work out. We mention this because we want people to be aware of how cultural pressures may lead people to sin (lying) even though they have not engaged in any prohibited behavior by consummating the marriage. We have also seen cases where women have abortions because they have gotten pregnant before the *waleemah* and feel too much shame because of their parents' expectations that there would be no intimacy before the *waleemah*. Parents really need to be mindful of the differences between culture and Islam, and to accept that when an Islamic practice like the marriage contract is utilized, the couple cannot be penalized for exercising their marital right.

Even if the marriage has not been consummated, if the relationship ends after the *kitaab*, each person is considered divorced Islamically.

The term that is used in *fiqh* for consummating the marriage is *dukhul.* While this term is normally understood as intercourse, a couple might engage in many forms of sexual activity that stop just short of intercourse. For this reason, some scholars have said that consummation is not restricted to intercourse but is broader to the extent that the individuals feel comfortable with each other, as a husband and wife, seeing each other in a way that only husband and wife should see each other. Other scholars say that it includes any time spent alone during which the possibility of a sexual relationship could occur (they are together privately with no other person around).[54] The rationale for broadening the meaning of the term *dukhul* is to protect women from those men who may be using the *kitaab* as a means of trying out different women without truly being committed. Women typically stand to lose more than men in the event of a divorce, so it is important to be cautious in proceeding with sexual behavior during this type of "engagement" until both parties are truly committed.

We have often seen this *kitaab* period extended for unnecessarily long periods of time. When the wedding is delayed unnecessarily, we've seen these relationships end due to lack of commitment and misusing the "engagement." At the other extreme are the "drive through" or quick marriages where people don't know each other, don't ask the right questions, and don't interact with each other at all before marriage.

We advocate for a balance. We do encourage potential spouses to take time to get to know each other within the boundaries of Islam. There is a great deal that people can learn about each other by spending time with each other around family and friends. The next stage can be the *kitaab* as engagement, but this stage should not be extended too long without finalizing the marriage with the wedding celebration. The right

54 The majority (Imam Ibn Hanbal, Imam Abu Hanifah, and Imam Malik) define *dukhul* according to the broader concept in which the couple engages in *khalwah* (complete privacy with the secure feeling that no one will interrupt or disturb them). Imam Shafi'i defines *dukhul* as intercourse. Although Imam Shafi'i's opinion is stronger based on the strength of the legal evidence he uses, many scholars recommend following the majority opinion for two reasons: protecting the woman's rights and preventing abuse by men who may be taking advantage of the opportunity to "try" different women, while avoiding the responsibility of marriage. See *al-Fiqh al Islami wa Adillatuhu* by Wahbah Al-Zuhayli.

amount of time for engagement cannot be prescribed as it will vary from couple to couple, based on their circumstances.

The Honeymoon

Having a honeymoon has become customary, and many couples plan for it as they plan their wedding. While it can often become another major expenditure, and therefore a potential stressor, it is a wonderful opportunity for the new couple to spend some time alone together away from life's stresses. It's a chance to deepen the couple's bond and get to know each other while being relaxed and on vacation. This vacation can be simple or elaborate, but it should always be within the couple's means.

In order to make the most of this opportunity, couples should focus on using the honeymoon to set the stage for the rest of the relationship. This is the time during which couples can have fun together while learning about each other at a deeper level. Take the time to be observant, listening in order to learn about what makes your spouse happy. Communicate openly and honestly to help your spouse get to know you better.

Maintaining the spiritual perspective we have outlined from the beginning can help ensure that the honeymoon is also part of the couple's spiritual journey and growth together. Remaining conscious of the core values while having fun can facilitate a balanced approach that can protect couples from some of the common pitfalls we have heard couples experiencing. For example, some people "forget" that during the honeymoon, they are still bound by Islamic teachings. One or both spouses may want to engage in activities that are *haram*, making an excuse that it's OK during the honeymoon as part of having fun. Not only is this not acceptable from an Islamic point of view, it can often harm the relationship and the way spouses view each other if the expectation was to have a spouse who is observant of Islam.

In some cases, people may spend extravagantly during the honeymoon, potentially creating an expectation that the same level of spending will be maintained during the marriage. The same advice we

have given regarding the wedding planning applies to the honeymoon planning, too.

In our counseling, we often meet couples who report that their problems began during the honeymoon. Sometimes issues emerge that were not apparent during the "getting to know each other" process. If this happens, the best thing to do is to seek help as soon as possible so that these issues can be addressed before they escalate and become entrenched after many years of marriage. Most issues do not just disappear with time; however, they can often be solved when addressed early enough.

Some of the issues that arise are related to expectations. Some spouses have unrealistic expectation of what will happen during the honeymoon. Other spouses may expect that the same level of relaxation and stress-free interaction will continue when normal, daily life resumes. After being together 24/7 during the honeymoon, some spouses are disappointed when their spouses may not have time to chat during the work day or may be too exhausted after work to be playful. These are all situations in which open communication, understanding, and realistic expectations can go a long way.

The Wedding Night[55]

The months of wedding planning, the weeks of last-minute preparations, and the demands of family and guests up until the last minute can leave a new couple exhausted as they begin their lives together on their wedding night. All of their energy may be depleted by the time they are finally alone. As a new couple prepares to spend their lives together, some energy must be reserved to attend to each other and understand each other's needs in that moment. In some cases, the misunderstandings that begin on the wedding night have a lasting impact on the marriage.

From this first night, and every night going forward, each spouse must utilize good listening skills, good communication skills, and

55 It is recommended that the couple learns about Islamic etiquette and rulings related to sex. See *Islamic Guide to Sexual Relations* by Muhammad ibn Adam Al-Kawthari and *The Muslim Marriage Guide* by Ruqaiyyah Waris Maqsood.

possibly good compromising skills. Each person may be approaching this night with very different emotional states. One may be tense, nervous, or simply exhausted; the other may be ready for romance. Each one may have expectations and assumptions about how the night will proceed. Taking the time to understand each other's perspective and to show compassion to one another is especially important during this time when each person may be feeling very vulnerable.

In order to be oriented properly, the wedding night should begin with prayer. The couple should make two *rak`ahs* to Allah (*swt*) to ask Him to bless the marriage and make them a comfort to each other as they begin a life of mutual commitment. After prayer, they should sit together and make *du`a* in order to be spiritually connected in that moment. It can be helpful for intentions to be restated in this private setting. Beginning the marriage in this manner sets the tone and the framework as the couple moves forward, creating an everlasting impact on the marriage.

Some women may experience a dilemma when it comes to prayer on their wedding day because they have put a lot of time and energy into beautifying themselves and may not want to mess up their makeup by making *wudu*. In fact, they may have already missed several prayers during the day as they were preparing for the wedding itself. While beautifying oneself is definitely important, one's relationship to Allah (*swt*) must take precedence. Planning ahead can help to avoid this issue altogether. During winter when the days are short, the wedding itself can be planned after *`isha*, or a shorter wedding can be planned in between two prayers.

Prayer produces two outcomes. It relieves the mind from the stress of the wedding planning, allowing for relaxation. It also can contribute to a calm and peaceful environment which can help ease nervousness or anxiety if it is present. Spiritual intimacy is the highest level of intimacy that can occur between a husband and wife. And it is a reminder of the framework in which your marriage is taking place, situating your relationship with each other (a horizontal relationship) under the more encompassing relationship you each have with Allah (*swt*), (a vertical relationship).

Uncomfortable or awkward as it may feel, it is important to share expectations about how you imagine the night will unfold. Otherwise,

disappointments resulting from unspoken expectations can impact the rest of the marriage. The first impression leaves a lasting impression. Men who do not convey interest in their wives on their wedding night can make her feel unattractive, undesirable, and even unworthy. Brides have gone to a lot of trouble to look their best for their husbands. We have heard many stories of men who simply fall asleep from the exhaustion of wedding-related events once they are in the hotel room, leaving their new bride to wonder if something is wrong with her.

Intimacy Issues

Men may be more forgiving of women who are not ready for intimacy, attributing it to anxiety or shyness. At the same time, men may also feel rejected if a woman is not responsive and does not communicate what is going on with her. Women may have a harder time forgiving a lack of interest if they feel rejected and unattractive. There tends to be an assumption that men may be more interested or excited about the wedding night, which is generally true. Women are often encouraged to be prepared emotionally but may not be prepared for the possibility that he may not be interested, or that he may also be suffering from anxiety.

Sometimes people do not have enough information about intimacy to begin with. It is important to be aware that intimacy refers to a continuum of behaviors and expressions, all of which are important to building the attachment between the couple. Words of affection, loving gazes, and both sexual and nonsexual touch are all important components of intimacy, which may or may not culminate with intercourse. If this is your first relationship or marriage, then not only will you be learning about your spouse, you will also be learning about yourself.

Although it is hard to live in the US without being exposed to information about sex and sexuality, sources like Hollywood movie scenes, primetime television and pornography can create false notions of what an intimate relationship between a husband and wife will look like. Movies or songs may provide glamorized versions of sexual relationships without providing the context of a healthy environment that is the

key to the health of the sexual relationship. Lack of knowledge, inaccurate ideas, and unrealistic expectations may all contribute to the experience of the first night being disappointing or even devastating.

In addition to having unrealistic expectations, some people may be comparing their experience to stories they have heard from friends. We want to make clear that learning about sex and sexuality from biological and psychological perspectives is permissible and even necessary. Viewing pornography or any sexually graphic material is completely prohibited. In addition, sharing personal experiences about your sex life with friends is completely prohibited. If there is a problem in this area of your relationship, it is best to seek professional advice from a physician or marriage therapist.

Typically, people consummate the marriage on the first night. But we have also met many couples whose marriage is not consummated months or even years after the wedding. In some cases, the issue is hardly even discussed because of the shame and embarrassment each person may feel about sexual matters. In other cases, the issue may not be raised by men who do not want to pressure their wives. Sometimes women may feel that the subject should only be broached by the man. For many reasons, each person may be waiting for the other person to open the subject, with the result that much time can be wasted during which all kinds of insecurities, assumptions, and misunderstandings can build up.

When women are the ones who have difficulty with intimacy, men may assume the difficulty is a result of her shyness or anxiety. This may or may not be the case, since there may also be physiological issues or psychological issues related to some type of sexual trauma. Avoiding a frank, but compassionate, discussion of the issue is not the solution, and this avoidance can cause harm to both parties.

Sometimes the husband is the one who has difficulty with intimacy. Again, this difficulty may be a result of a physiological problem or a psychological one related to performance anxiety or previous sexual trauma. Regardless of who is experiencing discomfort, both spouses need to talk openly about it and find out the underlying cause. We cannot overemphasize the importance of talking openly and honestly about this issue, and any other issue, that is causing distress in the relationship.

We have seen people coming to counseling years into the marriage due to feelings of rejection that began that first night. Some men feel

disappointed when they see their wife for the first time without clothes. Men may have unrealistic expectations based on actresses, models and/or pornography. In many cases, men who are accustomed to pornography may expect their wives to watch with them. This expectation is not acceptable. Reading educational books to resolve intimacy issues is acceptable; however, watching pornography is not.

Ideally, couples will have addressed the topic of intimacy during their premarital counseling. Although it may be difficult to go into much detail before marriage, if there are any psychological or physical issues that are discovered, individual treatment can be completed before marriage. After marriage, couples can engage in marital or sex therapy to treat intimacy issues. At any stage, sexual problems should be dealt with in a sensitive and nonjudging manner. Spouses should refrain from using accusatory or interrogative language when there is an intimacy issue since the problem could be traced to a variety of underlying causes.

One major problem is that many men may already have dating experience and an understanding of what it means to be physically attracted beyond the face. Men and women who have engaged in sexual relationships prior to marriage may find themselves comparing these experiences to their wedding night. This is an especially unfair comparison if the bride has kept herself chaste and is completely inexperienced, or vice versa. One woman called for advice during her honeymoon because her husband was making sexual requests of her that she could not fulfill. He had expectations that his marital sex life would replicate what he had seen in pornographic movies.

People can lose their marriage from the "click of a mouse," since pornography has become so easily accessible. The image of women gets distorted if people are watching pornography, creating long-term damage. Men who have engaged in premarital sex or pornography can develop some distorted thinking, sometimes viewing their Muslim wife as someone who is too "pure," thereby not wanting to have sex with her, or expecting her to fulfill all of his sexual fantasies, some of which may be abhorrent to her.

Although historically the pornography industry has catered to men, more recently the industry is also catering to women. An increasing number of women are viewing and becoming addicted to pornography.

A person who is accustomed to pornography will struggle to feel satisfied with the marital relationship, and should recognize that watching pornography is a form of cheating on one's spouse. People who find difficulty avoiding pornography may have an addiction problem and should seek professional addiction counseling in order to save themselves and their marriage.

Some intimacy issues arise due to a lack of attraction. We meet people who admit they were never attracted to their spouse from the first day but were pressured into the marriage for one reason or another. In the case of one woman, she tried to suppress these feelings but, ten years later, found herself talking to another man. Similarly, many men have reported that they do not approach their wives because they never found her attractive. When asked why they married her, they often say they assumed if they married her for her religion, then the physical attraction aspect is not important.

A very easy way to prevent this type of issue is for people to be honest with themselves and with their parents. As discussed in Chapter 3, physical attraction *is* a necessary, but not sufficient, ingredient in the total package of a potential spouse. Parents can make it easier for their children to openly express any lack of attraction by either directly asking if the person they are suggesting is attractive, or by openly discussing physical attraction as an important element in spouse selection.

It is really sad to meet couples who get married for many reasons, either to please their parents or because they feel the clock is ticking, only to realize several months into the marriage that they were not able to overcome the initial lack of physical attraction. For many of these couples, they believed there were enough other positive factors that would eventually outweigh the lack of attraction. While it is possible that physical attraction may develop, couples are taking an unnecessary risk by proceeding with a marriage without this factor in place.

Advice to the Husband

It is important to consider that your wife may need a gentle approach as you begin your intimate life together. She may need to hear words of

affection and reassurance if she is shy, nervous, or in any way uncomfortable with the new degree of physical closeness you are about to experience. The Prophet (pbuh) warned men not to approach their wives like animals, and encouraged foreplay as part of a healthy and mutually satisfying intimate relationship.[56] On the other hand, sometimes men are more self-conscious about performance issues and may not be aware that the wife is just as self-conscious and unsure.

Take the time to reflect on your expectations. Some men who have worked very hard to avoid succumbing to temptation prior to marriage may have developed extremely high expectations as they waited for the chance to experience sex in a legitimate context. Their perceptions of women and sexuality may be distorted due to fantasies that have no basis in real experience. These men are at risk for major disappointment if they have not taken the time to learn about female sexuality from Islamic and/or scientific references and what they can realistically expect from a Muslim woman who is likely to be completely inexperienced herself. Most Muslim women will expect you to initiate intimacy, although this is not always the case.

There are many hadith that encourage men to approach their wives with love and affection in order to have a healthy intimate relationship. Men and women differ physically in arousal rates, responsiveness, and preferences during intimacy. It is best to remember that intimacy occurs on a continuum which includes actions as simple as a look or word that expresses tenderness or affection. Women may need more hugs, kisses, and verbal expressions of affection than men. Although books can be very helpful in getting general information, the best source of information about your partner is your partner. Each person is different, so it is important to share openly and honestly with each other.

Remember that the sexual part of your marriage is only one part; however, it is integrally connected to all other areas of your marriage. When a couple is emotionally attuned to each other and happy with each other,

---

56 "Not one of you should fall upon his wife like an animal: but let there first be a messenger between you." "And what is that messenger?" they asked, and he replied: "Kisses and words." (Daylami) Some scholars of hadith have questioned the chain of transmission of this hadith, but most scholars have allowed the use of a hadith that is weak in transmission when it comes to moral values, as long as there is no contradiction to the Qur'an.

they are more likely to have a satisfying sexual relationship. The same components that improve the likelihood of having a healthy marriage apply to having a healthy sexual relationship. For some men, it is hard to understand when a woman does not respond to sexual advances after a fight or argument. Most women need to feel OK emotionally in order to relax enough to enjoy being physically close to their husbands. The Prophet (pbuh) expressed his disapproval for men who beat their wives during the day, then wanted to be intimate with them at night.[57] Not only is this behavior reprehensible, it will cause irreparable damage to the marriage. The same is true for any harsh treatment, including neglect.

While many Muslim women (not all) may be very shy and reluctant to express their sexual needs, the Qur'an and the hadith are very clear in establishing that the sexual relationship is a mutual one. Each person in the marriage has the right to feel sexually fulfilled. At the same time, each person has the right to be treated with compassion and understanding if there is an inability to provide for the spouse's sexual needs for any legitimate reason.

Advice for the Wife

It is important to have some knowledge about what to expect on your wedding night. You may or may not have been given advice by relatives or friends. Some of the advice you received may be based on the person's own experience and may not be applicable to you. Many young women are confused about what to expect and feel too shy to ask questions or to express themselves to their future husbands.

Remember that if you are marrying a practicing Muslim man who was not previously married, he is just as inexperienced as you are. Women are just as prone as men to fantasies about what the first night will be like, often feeling disappointed that it was not what they had imagined. There is probably more than enough anxiety in the room for both of you. Anxiety can really have a negative impact on men's ability to perform, as well as women's ability to respond. Encourage your

57 Bukhari. Book #73. Hadith #68.

husband to proceed as slowly as you need him to so that you can enjoy the experience as well. Many women are afraid that their first sexual experience will be painful. This fear leads to tensed muscles that will actually increase the probability of pain. It is important to be as relaxed and comfortable as possible. If you have any particular concerns, it is important to discuss these with your doctor prior to getting married.

Many Muslim women, especially if their families are from immigrant backgrounds, will have been taught that it is shameful to talk about sex, express any sexual needs or preferences, or take any initiative in the sexual relationship. Many Muslim men share this expectation of their wives. At the same time, there are many Muslim men who get frustrated that their wives don't communicate openly to them about what they need or want in this area of the marital relationship. They may want to approach you in the ways you prefer, but can't if you don't give them enough clear information. Of course, there is a lot you may not know about yourself until after you are married. The communication process should be an ongoing one.

Advice for the Couple

Make sure you have not waited until your wedding night to discuss important issues like contraceptives and when you want to have children. Although talking about contraceptives may be very awkward when you are getting to know each other, it is imperative to have the conversation and come to some agreement about which method, if any, will be used. Some people are completely against using any type of contraceptive; others will only consider one or two types. It can be very helpful to have a joint visit with a physician who can help you determine the best contraceptive for you if you decide to use one. In some couples, this issue is considered the woman's problem; in other couples, the man makes the decisions and imposes them on his wife. However, each means of contraception can have a different effect on the person using the contraception, on the intimate relationship, and on the other partner. It is important for the couple to discuss these issues together and come to an agreement that is good for both of them.

From the first night, and going forward, spouses should pay attention to some basic elements that can go a long way in contributing to a healthy intimate relationship. Both spouses should take care of themselves physically (appearance, hygiene, personal grooming, and overall health). They should also be mindful that Allah (*swt*) is present, even during intimacy, and that pleasing one's spouse is also pleasing to Allah (*swt*). Ruqiyyah Waris Maqsood has written a helpful chapter called "How to Turn Sex into Sadaqa."[58] It is also important to learn what is lawful and what is prohibited. For example, some couples do not realize that it is prohibited to engage in sexual relations during menstruation, and it is prohibited to engage in anal sex.[59]

Remember that if the first night does not go as you had expected, gently share with your partner what disappointed you and what you would prefer in the future. Do not make the mistake of telling yourself, "It's not a big deal." Little concerns that are not addressed tend to grow into major concerns that may not be as easily fixed after years of experiencing the problem. Although it may be painful in the short term to bring up these issues, the pain is much less in intensity and duration than that pain of dealing with the issue after it has grown and has been fed by resentment, disappointment, and frustration. If you are not able to resolve the issues easily by yourself, seek help. Some problems may be medical in nature; others may be psychological; and still others may simply result from lack of education. Most problems can be resolved if they are not allowed to become too large.

While we encourage you to address any problems you may encounter, we also encourage you to focus on what is going right. Remember to appreciate the positives in each other and to let each other know when you feel your needs have been met well. Compliment and praise each other often because these positive words make it much easier to hear about problems or complaints.

Remember that the Qur'an and the hadith address intimacy quite openly. This aspect of your relationship can be part of your *`ibaadah* (worship) of Allah (*swt*) if you approach each other with the intention of

58 *The Muslim Marriage Guide.*

59 Qur'an 2:222; Tirmidhi, Hadith #1165.

pleasing Him by fulfilling your sexual needs in a halal manner. Begin with the *du`a*, "*Bismillah. Allahumma jannibna al-shaitana wa jannibna al-shaitana maa razaqtanaa.*" The translation for this *du`a* is "In the name of Allah. O Allah! Protect us from Satan and also protect what you bestow upon us (i.e., the coming offspring) from Satan."[60]

Be open to learning about each other. If you have previous experience with marriage or other relationships, remember to view your current spouse as unique. Get to know this person's needs. Just as it takes time to get to know each other's preferences in other areas of your life, it will also take time to become familiar with each other in the intimate arena of your marriage.

Exercises & Questions for Reflection

- ❑ What expectations do you have regarding a wedding? A honeymoon?
- ❑ Define what intimacy means to you, differentiating between general intimacy and physical intimacy.
- ❑ Do you consider yourself a romantic person? Define romance.
- ❑ How do you feel about being affectionate in public?
- ❑ What do you know about fulfilling the other person's physical needs from the Islamic perspective?
- ❑ Would you be able to express what you need openly in a marital relationship regarding intimacy? Think about how you will do that. What is your preferred mode of communication (talking in person, email, phone)? What will help you to share honestly and openly?

60 Bukhari, Book #4, Hadith #143.

CHAPTER 7:

Elements of a Successful Marriage



And of everything We have created pairs, that you may receive instruction.
So flee to Allah. I am a clear and open warner from Him. (51:49-50)

Although the actual honeymoon may be over, your relationship can remain fulfilling and satisfying over the years if certain key elements are present. Enjoying each other for the duration of your relationship requires remaining both conscious of what healthy relationships require and active in contributing positive and nurturing ingredients to this relationship.

The verse above identifies the purpose of parity as fleeing to Allah (*swt*), emphasizing the spiritual journey that couples should embark on in their efforts to please Allah (*swt*). Embracing a spiritual framework allows space to tolerate more negatives and incentive to work on improving oneself as part of the process of freeing oneself from anything that may hinder fleeing towards Allah (*swt*). This perspective allows couples

to interpret and respond to everything in their lives, both bad and good, as part of their journey to Him.

In this chapter, we will address some of the most important ingredients for a successful marriage. These ingredients include spirituality, fulfilling Islamic obligations, intimacy, and social life. Each spouse should be proactive in contributing to each of these ingredients.

Living a Spiritual Life

As we have discussed in earlier chapters, Islam provides a model that can prevent many problems in marriage and can help to ensure the marriage is healthy and satisfying. Adhering to the teachings of Islam allows each spouse to be the best person possible and keeps each person focused on the bigger picture. In addition to fulfilling all religious obligations, spirituality brings deeper feelings of connection with Allah (*swt*) and with each other.

Think of your relationship with your spouse as part of a triangle where Allah (*swt*) is the top point of the triangle and each of you forms one of the other two points. Allah (*swt*) is the source of love, and He bestows love on the couple if the husband and wife are receptive. The spousal relationship is fed by Allah (*swt*), and in turn, their relationship with each other can bring each one closer to Allah (*swt*) and closer to the other. The way Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) related to his followers provides a good example. Because of the mercy of Allah (*swt*), the Prophet (pbuh) was gentle and merciful to his followers. As a result, they drew nearer to him.[61]

Your relationship with your spouse also impacts your relationship with Allah (*swt*). For example, if you feel envy in your heart towards your spouse, then at some level, you are objecting to what Allah (*swt*) has given him or her. And if you are good to your spouse, then Allah (*swt*) will be good to you. As He says in the Qur'an, "Is there any reward

61 "It is part of the Mercy of Allah that you deal gently with them. Were you severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from you. So pass over (their faults), and ask for (Allah's) forgiveness for them, and consult them in affairs (of moment)." (3:159)

for good other than Good?"[62] When people love each other for the sake of Allah (*swt*), then Allah (*swt*) will love them with His infinite love. Seeing the ultimate reward and pleasure of Allah (*swt*) can motivate you to work harder in your marriage to please your spouse. In this way, marriage becomes part of your spiritual journey towards Allah (*swt*).

Our spiritual journey is the journey of the relative to the Absolute. The husband and wife seek their love and energy from the Absolute; recognizing this fact prevents people from becoming self-centered. During times of difficulty, it is useful to put things in perspective by remembering that *everything* is relative, including our knowledge and our power, compared to that of Allah (*swt*). The Qur'an provides many examples of people who forgot this perspective, becoming arrogant and ultimately being destroyed. Take the people of 'Ad as one example. They become arrogant, forgetting that the source of their knowledge and ability to advance their civilization came from Allah (*swt*). They forgot that Allah (*swt*) had more power than them, so in one instant, their entire civilization was destroyed as a punishment and reminder to all of us.[63]

Increasing Spirituality

People may be religious but still experience a kind of emptiness or void that is related to spirituality. A person who prays five times a day but is harsh may be lacking some of this spirituality. The lack of spirituality is the lack of internalizing the daily prayers. When prayer is just a ritual, people are more concerned with the format rather than with its essence. A person who has internalized the prayer will be kind, thoughtful, and gentle.

The Prophet (pbuh) gave the example of a man of Paradise who did not pray extra prayers or fast extra days, but he never slept a single night with a grudge or hatred towards another Muslim.[64] He was identified as a dweller of Paradise because his five daily prayers were meaningful.

---

62 Qur'an 55:60.

63 See Qur'an 26:123-140.

64 *Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, narrated by Anas ibn Malik.

He lived them in terms of achieving a state of calmness and peace, keeping his heart free of grudges.

Assessing our spiritual state is important because our spiritual state has a significant impact on our lives. The core of spiritual life revolves around being conscious of Allah (*swt*). He is always there and always watching, taking care of each person as they are in the relationship. This consciousness leads to a spiritual intimacy that creates an anchor point, becoming a spiritual frame of reference. The most difficult aspects of implementing Islam have to do with the inward practices, such as managing anger, forgiving, being kind to others, etc.

Allah (*swt*) commands us to follow the Prophet (pbuh) as a way to demonstrate our love for Him and in order to gain His love and forgiveness.[65] We know from Aisha (*ra*) that the Prophet (pbuh) embodied the teachings of the Qur'an.[66] It is our duty to emulate him and his character, constantly striving to improve ourselves. He was just and fair, gentle and kind, forgiving and patient.[67] He spent portions of his nights in prayer, expressing his gratitude to Allah (*swt*).[68] He also taught us to show appreciation to people. He said that whoever does not thank people is not thankful to Allah (*swt*).[69] If that gratitude towards others determines our gratitude to Allah (*swt*), then we can check this status by seeing how grateful we are to our spouse, our parents, our children, etc.

In Chapter 6, we discussed the concept of *ihsaan* as part of the marital commitment to one another. This concept, which we translated as "being kind," really suggests going above and beyond the bare minimum, leading the other person to also give more than the minimum. Living spiritually includes being affectionate, gentle and kind. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "Kindness is not to be found in anything but that it adds to its beauty, and it is not withdrawn from anything but it

---

65 "Say (O Prophet), 'If you love Allah, then follow me; Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. Verily Allah is forgiving and compassionate.'" (3:31)

66 Zino, M. (1995). *Al-Shama'il al-Muhammadiyyah. Selections from the Attributes of Prophet Muhammad, His Virtuous Character and Islamic Manners*. IIASA.

67 *Ibid*

68 *Ibid*

69 Tirmidhi. Hadith #1961. Retrieved from: http://www.scribd.com/doc/16768046/Jami-a-Tirmidhi-Sunan-al-Tirmidhi.

makes it defective."[70] Showing care is a sign of the mercy Allah (*swt*) put in our hearts, and gentleness is one of the characteristics of a believer. A lack of spiritual intimacy is indicated in a lack of affection and care for your spouse at the time of need.

Ihsaan also encompasses the concept of forgiveness and overlooking the other person's shortcomings. The person who seeks forgiveness must acknowledge his or her mistakes and the pain he or she has caused the other person. In return, the person who has been violated should be open to that remorse. Rather than focusing on each other's shortcomings,[71] spouses should focus on what the other person is doing right. Focusing on the positive makes it easier to be grateful and appreciative, leading to a more positive environment at home.

When there are issues that need to be resolved, addressing them in a constructive manner is critical. Chapter 8 focuses on communication and problem-solving skills. In the event that there is abuse or any form of oppression, this is not something to be overlooked because oppression is forbidden by Allah (*swt*). Muslims are instructed to help both the oppressed and the oppressor by doing whatever is possible to stop the injustice.[72] Part of the spiritual journey is also freeing oneself from others' oppression in order to be able to worship Allah (*swt*) without being afraid of others.

In human relationships, everything related to negative interactions with others can be traced to the root of arrogance. For example, in abusive relationships the issues of control come from people thinking too much of themselves and looking down on the other person (degrading or demeaning them). When a husband or wife is not fulfilling obligations, it is often due to being self-centered. It's an arrogant stance that conveys, "It's all about me. I don't care about the other person's needs." When we hurt others, our ego has become the center of the universe at that moment, and we've lost sight of our relationship to the Absolute.

---

70 Muslim, Book #32, Hadith #6274.

71 The Prophet said, "Beware of suspicion, for suspicion is the worst of false tales; and do not look for the others' faults and do not spy, and do not be jealous of one another, and do not desert (cut your relation with) one another, and do not hate one another; and O Allah's worshipers! Be brothers (as Allah has ordered you!)." (Bukhari, Book #73, Hadith #90).

72 Bukhari, Book #43, Hadith #623.

One's spiritual life is a very personal and intimate relationship with Allah (*swt*). It is not something that can be imposed on a spouse. For example, although it is better to pray as a family, a husband should not force his wife to pray with him if she does not want to. If she doesn't want to, then there is probably an issue that needs to be addressed that is getting in the way of her wanting to pray with her husband. The issue may be a lack of knowledge, a lack of spiritual commitment, or being angry with the husband for some mistreatment or due to an argument.

> *The environment at home had been tense since the morning. Samir had criticized Shireen, telling her he couldn't believe the way her parents had raised her. He said he wished he had never married her, and if it weren't for the children, he would send her packing. Then he called her some really awful names. Although he hadn't apologized, he expected her to join him for* maghrib *prayer. When she said she would pray separately, he accused her of not being a good Muslim since she was not interested in maximizing her reward by praying in congregation with him. She tried to explain that she was still hurt and would have a hard time following him after the way he acted. He couldn't understand why she wouldn't take the opportunity to pray together, hoping that would clear the air between them.*

A person with a very high level of spirituality would probably be able to prevent negative emotions towards the imam from affecting his or her prayer. However, for most people, this may be hard to do. Husbands must realize they are not in charge of their wife's spiritual life. She may need to be given space to grow on her own, to heal if there has been abuse or maltreatment, or simply to calm her emotions if she is upset. In general, an imam should not impose himself on people. If he does, then his prayer will not be accepted.

A marital relationship grounded in spirituality develops through mutual spiritual caretaking in a loving and gentle manner. Spirituality

is something that must be nurtured and never forced. For example, a husband who wants to wake his wife up for *fajr* should inquire about how she prefers to be awakened, and vice versa. If spouses have agreed to use water to wake each other, they should lightly sprinkle a few drops rather than pouring a bucket of ice cold water.

Strengthening your relationship with Allah (*swt*) will help you have a better marriage. At the same time, a strong marriage can bring both spouses closer to Allah (*swt*). Spouses can deepen their spiritual connection by engaging in spiritual activities together such as reading Qur'an and praying. Many couples enjoy learning about Islam together by reading and discussing books or attending workshops. Other couples might enjoy competing with each other in memorizing Qur'an, or encouraging each other to find worthy projects for *sadaqah* (charity). When spouses are truly connected to Allah (*swt*) spiritually, it is unlikely that they will mistreat each other.

Spiritual Healing

All of us may be in need of spiritual healing at one time or another. Spiritual healing is needed when we are struggling with negative emotions. The first step is self-reflection to determine the source or reason for these feelings. Since many spiritual issues may be traced back to arrogance, al-Ghazali suggests the solution begins with adjusting one's perspective with a reminder that each of us is in need of others, that we have limited power, and that we are vulnerable like everyone else to sickness, worries and sadness. We can strive to achieve goodness in ourselves by giving love and being kind to others.

Remembering that all relationships with others are based on our relationship with Allah (*swt*) is another way to regain perspective. Understanding the nature of our relationship with Allah leads to self-understanding, which then leads to understanding relationships with our fellow human beings. We must remember that treating people well is a way of pleasing Allah (*swt*), and wronging people is equivalent to

wronging Allah. Mending relationships is what Allah (*swt*) labels as being the best kind of talking.[73]

As human beings, we will inevitably hurt each other, and because of that we also need to be able to forgive each other. Some people find it very difficult to forgive. In his *Ihyaa' `Ulum Ad-Din* (Revival of Religion's Sciences). al-Ghazali suggests that sometimes the inability to forgive may be a result of the offending person not being genuine when asking for forgiveness. The person may be focused more on moving on, needing forgiveness as a way to alleviate guilt rather than really recognizing and appreciating the gravity of hurt that has been caused. At the same time, he suggests that sometimes forgiveness is difficult because pride is getting in the way. For both the person who offends, and the one who is offended, spirituality can greatly facilitate the forgiveness process.

Another area where spirituality can be helpful is managing envy (*hasad*). Some marriages don't work because the in-laws envy the son's wife. A mother-in-law may be jealous when he buys his wife gold or takes her to *`umrah*. This *hasad* stems from arrogance because of the belief that the other person doesn't deserve what they have and that you should have it instead. When you begrudge the good that happens to someone or feel happy over someone's misfortune, that's an example of *hasad*. Borderline *hasad* is not feeling happy for others' good fortune or not feeling sad for others' bad fortune.

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) provided a summary of what will keep us on the path to living spiritually: "Have *taqwa* (fear and consciousness of Allah) wherever you may be, and follow up a bad deed with a good deed which will wipe it out, and behave well towards the people."[74] Part of spiritual healing is to engage in honest soul-searching to determine the degree of mindfulness of Allah (*swt*) and to treat people in the best manner. Whoever claims to be spiritual needs to examine how they treat others. Are they humble or arrogant? Do they admit their mistakes? Do they recognize how they may have hurt others?

---

73 "In most of their secret talks there is no good. But if one exhorts to a deed of charity or justice or conciliation between people, (secrecy is permissible). To the person who does this seeking the good pleasure of Allah, We shall soon give a reward of the highest (value)." (4:114)

74 Tirmidhi, http://www.40hadithnawawi.com/index.php/the-hadiths/hadith-18.

Omamah bint al-Harith gave her daughter advice upon marriage which included telling her that Allah (*swt*) created women for men and men for women, and telling her that she is leaving the environment she is used to and going to a partner she is not used to and a home she is not used to.[75] In people's spiritual lives, they must recognize they are moving into a new relationship that may therefore be out of their comfort zone. You enter a contract in which each person has promised to be good to each other and fulfill their obligations with Allah (*swt*) as the Witness, the Ultimate Supervisor of the contract who will know if you fulfill the contract. Because of this contract Allah (*swt*) is watching you. Allah (*swt*) knows even what is happening behind closed doors.

Fulfilling Islamic Obligations

The Prophet (pbuh) said, "Each one of you is a shepherd and everyone is answerable regarding his or her flock. . . . A man is a guardian over the members of his family and shall be questioned about them (as to how he looked after their physical and moral wellbeing). A woman is a guardian over the household of her husband and his children and shall be questioned about them (as to how she managed the household and brought up the children)....Beware, every one of you is a guardian and every one of you shall be questioned with regard to his or her trust."[76]

The Islamic model of a healthy marriage is one in which there are mutual rights and obligations. Each person has a responsibility to work towards the family's success and wellbeing. Spouses should view their respective roles as complementary, neither one being more or less important than the other. As half of a pair (*zawj*), neither can be successful without the cooperation and support of the other. Each person has his or her domain of primary responsibility, yet should maintain flexibility to adjust to the demands of specific circumstances.

---

75 Sobh, Ali. *Tasweer al-Qur'ani lil Qiyam al-Khuluqiyyah*, vol 1 p. 210, cited by Hussein Rawashdah, unpublished master's thesis, al-Manhaj *al-Islami fi Hall Khilafaat al-Zawjiyyah*, 2006.

76 Muslim, Book #20, Hadith # 4496. http://www.guidedways.com/book_display-book-20-translator-2-start-20-number-4492.htm (Retrieved 12/31/12).

What do we mean by Islamic obligations? And who defines them? In discussing spousal roles, some people expect to find a handbook with a list of obligations for each spouse. The fact is that most of what would fall under the category of "Islamic" obligations are actually just universal values, such as fulfilling mutual obligations by providing an environment in which the spouse feels their needs have been met (physical, social, spiritual), as well as the protection of self and spouse from all kinds of abuse. As we discussed in Chapter 1, Allah (*swt*) defines the ultimate goal of marriage in Surat al-Rum (30:21) as *sakeenah* (tranquility), and identifies the core components of this goal as *mawaddah* (love) and *rahmah* (mercy or compassion). These broad values encompass the totality of Islamic marital obligations. Every behavior or interaction in the relationship should be designed to work towards creating and maintaining a tranquil and peaceful environment in which each family member can fulfill his or her utmost potential as a Muslim.

Roles & Finances

Allah (*swt*) has assigned a conditional leadership role (*qiwaamah*) in the family to men, giving them an additional degree (*darajah*) of responsibility over women.[77] This degree is related to men's obligation to provide financially for their families. It should not be misinterpreted as a privilege or as an opportunity to take advantage of women or to oppress them in any way. In order for the marriage to be healthy and successful, and for each family member to feel *sakeenah* (tranquility), this leadership role must be fulfilled with the utmost *taqwa* or consciousness of Allah (*swt*).

The model of leadership in marriage from an Islamic perspective is a collaborative one. The hadith at the beginning of this section clearly delineates the responsibility of both the husband and wife as shepherds, with the husband being responsible for the general wellbeing of his family, and the wife being responsible for the environment in the home and upbringing of her children. Reflecting on the metaphor in this hadith,

77 Qur'an 4:34.

a shepherd attends to the interest of the flock, making sure they have food, are protected, and that he is behind them instead of in front of them. No one walks in front of the sheep and says "Follow me." He has to be kind and patient, waiting for those who went astray to return to the flock and responding to any kind of external attack.

With regards to the wife as a shepherd, her job is to make sure that she takes care of the home, especially in her husband's absence. In this complementary role, he can feel secure knowing he can depend on her to make sure that the home environment is a peaceful one, and that the children are taken care of. She can feel secure knowing that he is providing for her and the family, and that he is looking out for the family's best interests. Depending on whether the couple has children, the age of their children and the family's financial situation, the wife may or may not also work outside the home. Spouses must recognize the interdependent nature of their roles; as a team, each person should want the other to be successful in his or her respective position.

The family is an *amana* (trust) given by Allah (*swt*) who is taking care of everyone. Just as the shepherd is hired to take care of his flock, spouses are tasked with taking care of their family as part of their obligation to Allah (*swt*). Having this mentality can prevent people from becoming competitive, undermining each other's role. It will also help people avoid having rigid roles, since the only way for each person to really be successful in fulfilling their responsibility is to have the support and assistance of the other spouse. In practice, this may look like fathers helping out with housework and homework, or it may look like mothers giving fathers time to unwind after a hard day's work before listing all the tasks that need doing. In other words, there should be mutual appreciation and recognition of how each person has contributed to the family's wellbeing, as well as a team spirit and willingness to help each other out.

One way to think about the partnership is that each spouse has their full-time job of eight hours during the day, whether that job is in the office or at home. If there are children in the family, then both parents have to share the "after hours" shift. Since parenting is a 24/7 job, it is not reasonable to expect women to be the sole parents simply because the husband is the provider. In many cases that we see, the husband still

wants the traditional obligations fulfilled by his wife while also relying on her income. He asks her to contribute to the household income 50/50, but he also expects her to do more than 50% of the household chores and parenting obligations. This expectation is unrealistic and will eventually contribute to resentment on the part of the wife, who is then forced to be a superwoman. If she works outside the home, then his expectations must be lowered as far as household chores are concerned. He must realize he has to share in what has traditionally been considered the wife's obligations.

In American society, it has become customary (*'urf*) for women to contribute financially. This custom impacts each partner's expectations coming into the marriage. We recommend that a man seeking marriage should plan to be able to support his wife on his income, in order to comply with his Islamic responsibility. Although many men and women assume that each employed person will be contributing towards household expenses, we see many cases where resentment and frustration set in after some time. Typically, this is due to implicit expectations that have not been communicated clearly.

> *Tahirah and Tariq both had good jobs and were living alone, supporting themselves, when they met and later decided to marry. They casually agreed to create an account for household expenses, each person putting in half the expenses. After Tahirah got a promotion and huge raise, Tariq began to feel resentful when she refused to contribute towards a larger portion of the expenses. Tahirah's objection was based on her perspective that she was already going beyond her Islamic responsibility by making any financial contribution at all. Tariq felt she was violating their initial agreement and that she was being selfish. During counseling, it became clear that they had never really laid out their respective expectations or discussed their understanding of their respective responsibilities.*

The default assumption in a paradigm where men have the financial responsibility in the family is that women are staying at home. Women certainly have the right to work outside the home if they choose to, and in many cases women may need to work outside the home in order for the family to manage financially. Women are entitled to their own wealth and income and are not obligated to provide for the family. However, there may be cases where the husband needs her assistance, and if she is able she should provide that assistance in the spirit of cooperation and collaboration. In these cases, it is imperative that the couple have a clear agreement on the details of the finances.

> *Mira volunteered to contribute her entire paycheck to the joint bank account. She felt comfortable knowing that Malik was working very hard but could not afford to provide for them on his income alone. Over the years, Malik's situation improved but the couple's financial arrangement remained the same. When Mira discovered he was sending all of his extra earnings back home instead of contributing to the household repairs that had been on hold, she was furious. She decided to stop contributing her paycheck, telling him that since he could afford to support other people, he should take care of his wife and children first. He told her she no longer had his permission to work and would have to give notice at her job. Counseling with both an imam and a professional counselor helped them realize their need to communicate better, re-evaluate their agreements as their circumstances change, and to avoid using religion as a control tactic in order to get their way.*

In situations where the husband is able to provide financially, and the wife wants to work for her personal fulfillment or development, she should recognize that expenses incurred as a result of her working should be shared by her. We sometimes meet women whose attitude is

"My money is my money, and your money is my money." It is not fair to expect him to pay daycare expenses, her parking expenses, and gas expenses related to commuting unless she is going to share her income to contribute to household expenses. It is important for a spirit of sharing and goodwill to exist in the relationship rather than an emphasis on separateness or individual accumulation of wealth.

Another scenario is when the woman wants to work, but the husband won't allow her to even though she may already be fulfilling her responsibilities as a mother and a wife. He should consider that she may actually be a better wife if she is feeling fulfilled by her work outside the home. If balancing the demands of home and work life is too difficult, the partners should explore creative ways to meet each family member's emotional needs. Part-time jobs, volunteer work, or working from home are all options that can be considered.

Seeking Permission

One area of obligation that often comes up in counseling situations is the obligation placed on women to get permission from their husbands before going anywhere. There are many different opinions on this matter, ranging from completely restrictive to permissive. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "If your women ask permission to go to the mosque at night, allow them."[78] This instruction to men seems to have been given in order to prevent the type of psychological abuse that can occur if a husband restricts his wife's outings, especially for worship. Ibn Teen said that, by analogy, this hadith can be generalized to a woman going other places, not only the masjid. On the other hand, some scholars have said a woman cannot leave the house without her husband's permission;[79] otherwise, she is considered guilty of *nushuz*[80] and should be punished. Sheikh Bin

78 Bukhari. Book 12. #824.

79 See Ibn Taymiyyyah. *Majmu` al-Fatawa*. Volume 32.

80 This word comes from the Arabic root word meaning "to rise up" and is used in the Qur'an to refer to both men's and women's behaviors that undermine the integrity of the marriage. It has been translated in many ways, including "rebellion," "turning away," "sexual impropriety," and "disobedience."

Baz of Saudi Arabia was of the opinion that a woman should not even go to the market without her husband's permission.

We advocate for a common sense approach in this matter. We live in a time and a society in which it is customary for women to go out alone, to drive, to go to school or work, to be involved in their children's academic and extracurricular activities, and to be engaged in public life in many other ways. It makes sense for each partner to inform the other of their whereabouts and their activities. This transparency will create a relationship built on trust and will prevent suspicion from creeping in. It should not be necessary for a wife to obtain permission for everyday routine errands, such as going to the store or picking the children up from school, if the spouses are already in agreement that these errands are under her jurisdiction. If she is going to do something out of the ordinary, she should consult her husband. By the same token, he should also consult her before making major decisions or going somewhere unusual. Ongoing and consistent communication and consultation go a long way in building a relationship in which each partner feels respected and valued.

One thing to remember is that the husband is ultimately responsible for his wife's safety, so he may ask her not to go somewhere that he feels is not safe. In order for him to fulfill this responsibility, she must keep him informed of what she is doing. Couples can create their own ways of keeping each other informed. For some couples, this may mean a daily overview each morning or the night before. Other couples may prefer to text or call each other throughout the day. Either way, staying informed and sharing plans with each other are ways to build and strengthen the relationship through the increased connection and intimacy that comes with sharing.

Obligation Myths

Some people create "obligations" that are not Islamic but are culturally rooted. When women come to America and live in this new context, they soon recognize that many of their so-called obligations are not really Islamic obligations at all. In most Muslim cultures, women are

taught that their "duties" include cooking, cleaning, providing intimacy upon demand, and putting everyone else's needs before her own. The concept of marriage as a partnership based on the mutual fulfillment of each other's emotional and physical needs may not be part of most Muslims' upbringing.

For many immigrant Muslims, it is often after coming to the US that they begin to learn the difference between Islamic and cultural values/norms. As this learning occurs, often at different rates for each partner, expectations change. Women are often quicker to adjust to these changes since Islam frees them from many of the cultural burdens that have been placed on them. Although this learning process and the resultant changes are normal, the relationship can be adversely affected if both partners are not flexible and willing to adapt and adjust their expectations.

In intercultural marriages, these expectations can often backfire. Sometimes American Muslim men may choose to marry a woman from overseas, hoping for a subservient or submissive wife who will take care of their needs and have little demands of her own. This fantasy may last for a few years until she realizes that this is neither the Islamic nor the American way, so she either protests or refuses to continue being an inferior partner in the relationship. The reverse situation, in which an immigrant man from an Eastern culture marries an American woman, can also be problematic if he is not aware that American women are not socialized to "take orders" from their husbands, remain silent during decision-making, or to plan their entire lives around their husbands.

As a reminder, the cases we see are those in which there is some kind of problem related to expectations or misapplication of Islamic teachings. In no way are we suggesting that all immigrant Muslims have erroneous understanding about the respective roles, or that only immigrant Muslims have these problems. We are simply sharing some of the problems we see in our work as a way to alert people of the potential pitfalls, especially when there has not been adequate and appropriate communication up front.

Absolute Obedience

Given that the husband has the responsibility of taking care of his family, he may make requests from his wife that are for the wellbeing of the family. As team members, they should work together to have a harmonious and peaceful family life. In order for that to happen, men should engage women in a manner that will make them want to cooperate. It is wise to look at the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as an example in this regard. His way was to make his wives feel loved and valued by helping them around the house, consulting them in affairs of the home as well as affairs of state, being affectionate and attending to their needs. When a man treats his wife well, she is more likely to naturally want to please him and comply with his requests.

Husbands should remember that while they do have a leadership position in the family, they are not an "absolute" authority. In other words, he should know the limits of his authority and should not try to control every detail of a woman's life. Not only is this beyond the scope of his role Islamically, but also it will guarantee a very unhealthy, and potentially abusive, marriage. It is a natural human response to resist or rebel if one feels forced or compelled to do something. A wise man will utilize more effective means, such as making respectful requests instead of issuing commands, being generous with appreciations which soften the heart, and including his wife in decision-making which makes her more likely to feel like a team player.

A wise woman will be aware that challenging everything and anything her husband says simply to assert her right to disagree will only lead to a relationship full of tension. As long as what the husband requests is reasonable and will not cause harm to anyone, and his requests take into account the wellbeing of the family and are inclusive of her needs and preferences, then she should not object.

It is important to recognize that many couples get caught up in a power struggle. Each person wants to assert his or her way, and neither may want to budge. Sometimes in these situations, a man may use the "religion card" and assert his "right" as a husband to have her obedience. While this tactic may

get her obedience, it will not get a loving attitude. In these situations, each person needs to remember what matters most: the health of the relationship rather than who gets his or her way. These situations require each person to engage in communication to achieve understanding, problem-solving, and compromise (see Chapter 8). In many Muslim-majority cultures, some people believe that women must obey their husbands unconditionally. This belief can lead to abusive situations in which the husband effectively controls his wife, silencing her because he does not tolerate or accept her opinions and input. In situations where she may not speak English or know how to drive, she can become completed isolated and dependent on him. This scenario is not only unhealthy, it is completely un-Islamic.

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) had a relationship with his wives in which he solicited their advice and confided in them. Furthermore, they questioned him and even argued with him.[81] He did not consider this behavior something requiring any type of discipline, especially not physical discipline. We are not trying to encourage talking back; what we are trying to convey is that the relationships we have as our Islamic models did not establish the man as the master with a woman having to submit. This misunderstanding can lead to abuse of the wife, or domestic violence. It is not acceptable for a man to demand anything, from physical intimacy to housecleaning, simply as a means to exercise his control or to dominate his wife. It is not the woman's obligation to comply with everything he says, regardless of how she feels or what her situation is. She has the right to reason, question, and even to object to some things.

She also has a responsibility to speak out in the event he is asking her to do something *haram* (prohibited). She is responsible for her own emotional wellbeing. Although he is responsible for protecting her and taking care of her, she must also take charge of herself. If a woman is married to an abusive man, she should try to seek out whatever resources are available in order to ensure her safety and wellbeing. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was never known to use his rank as a prophet or as a husband to force his wives to obey him. There were many instances when one wife or another had grievances, and even when several wives ganged up together. At one point when they were complaining about the

81 Bukhari. Book #62. Hadith #119.

financial situation, he gave them the option of staying and accepting what he could afford, or he would "let them go in a beautiful manner" (i.e., divorce them).[82] Imagine that the person we hold up as the model of a Muslim husband did not put his wives down when they were complaining, nor did he lord his status over them. He offered them the choice of what they wanted to do. And given the choice, they chose to stay with him. There is a lot of wisdom for all of us to learn from in this example.

Zero Tolerance for Abuse

> *Zeena couldn't believe how lucky she was during her engagement period. Zahid really loved her. He cared so much that he wanted to know every detail of her day. He asked about all her friends. And he wanted her to check in with him several times each day to tell him what she was up to. Once they got married, she started to feel uncomfortable. Instead of feeling loved, she wondered if Zahid even trusted her. He started to express strong negative opinions about her friends and questioned whether she really should be spending so much time with them. When she tried to defend herself, he showed another side that was scary. He began to threaten to divorce her if she wouldn't listen to him, not only about her friends but it seemed he was critical of everything. Even though he apologized after slapping her and throwing her on the bed during the last argument, she realized she had become afraid of him and was on edge all the time.*

Muslims should have no tolerance for any kind of abuse or violence in the home (see Chapter 10 for more discussion of domestic violence). What do we mean by zero tolerance? We believe that a person should never think it is acceptable under any circumstances to be abusive. There is no excuse for abuse. We should treat this issue as one of the

82 Qur'an 33:28-29.

most threatening issues to the stability of the marriage. The Prophet (pbuh) said, "A Muslim is the one who avoids harming Muslims with his or her tongue and hands."[83]

When we talk about abuse or domestic violence, we are referring to any type of behavior that causes emotional or physical harm, used in the context of trying to control another person. Most people are aware that hitting, pulling hair, shoving, and biting are examples of physical abuse. Many people do not realize that name-calling, put-downs and threats constitute verbal and psychological abuse. And even more people are unaware that Muslim marriages are often challenged by various forms of abuse. While there are a wide range of behaviors that can be defined as abusive, once a person becomes fearful of the other spouse, it is highly likely that the relationship has become abusive.[84] Abuse causes irreparable damage to relationships and all parties who are impacted by it.

Both men and women can be abusive, and both can be victims of abuse. Women should pay attention to the ways they speak to their husbands that can be belittling or controlling. It is not acceptable for women to hit their husbands, threaten them, stalk them, or insult them. While women are more often the victims of severe abuse and usually resort to violence as a form of self-defense, men are increasingly reporting being abused as well.

Zeena's situation is not unique. For women who have not been in a relationship before, it can be hard to distinguish between someone who is being very attentive out of love versus someone who is seemingly attentive in an effort to gain control over her. It is natural and desirable for each potential spouse to try to learn as much as possible about each other and each other's friends and lifestyles. Mutual sharing generally brings people closer to each other. But when one person is doing all the information-gathering, tracking, and managing of the other's behaviors and friends, then a boundary has been crossed and that person is being controlling.

---

83 Bukhari. Book #2, Hadith #9.

84 To learn more about what constitutes abuse or to get help for abuse, visit www.peacefulfamilies.org or see *What Islam Says about Domestic Violence* by Zainab Alwani & Salma Abugideiri.

One thing that is very interesting is the way people rely on different cultural interpretations to justify or normalize abuse. An Arab man might say that his behavior is not abusive because he saw all the men in his family treat women harshly, or that a man must be tough in order to maintain the upper hand in the marriage. A South Asian woman might say that since she was mistreated by her mother-in-law, it is now "her turn" to dominate her daughter-in-law. A woman in many cultures may dismiss maltreatment because "That's just the way women are treated." Culture does have a lot to do with how we interpret and label behavior as abusive. What is considered abusive in one culture may not be viewed as abusive in another.

The Islamic paradigm can cut through the confusing picture that may result from using culture to determine whether certain behaviors are acceptable. For example, in many Middle Eastern and South Asian cultures, it may be "normal" for some parents to call their children names or for some husbands to throw their wives out of the house upon divorce. However, the Qur'an clearly prohibits any name-calling[85] and instructs men to maintain their wives financially while they remain in their homes during the waiting period (*`iddah*).[86]

Physical Relationship & Intimacy

Keeping Romance Alive

There is a misunderstanding among some couples who believe romance is strictly physical intimacy, but romance and intimacy are really much broader than that. Intimacy refers to a continuum of many forms of connection, from a look that conveys a very deep message of care to a hug or shoulder rubs, to sex. Expectations and expressions related to romance and intimacy vary from person to person and culture to culture.

---

85 "Nor defame nor be sarcastic to each other, nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames: ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness." (49:11)

86 "For divorced women, maintenance (should be provided) on a reasonable (scale). This is a duty on the righteous." (2:241)

Romance in the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was exemplified in many ways. He would take a nap with his head in Aisha's lap, or take a drink from the same spot on the cup where she put her mouth, or put a morsel of food in her mouth. Each person must communicate what he or she finds to be romantic. It might be a foot rub, a hug, or just talking and listening to each other. It could be taking a walk together, watching a movie, or watching the sun set. It might be receiving gifts or flowers, going out to a nice restaurant, or planning a weekend getaway. All or any of these could be romantic behaviors.

Or it might be none of the above. For example, one woman said that for her, the most romantic experience was for her husband to engage her in dialogue about a book she had read. She felt very connected to him emotionally when they were intellectually engaged. While many women ask for more expressions of affection, other women have explained that when kisses are only given as a prelude to sex, they don't feel romantic anymore. Prophet Muhammad kissed his wife to express affection, kissing her even while fasting.[87] His behavior clearly indicates that he kissed his wives simply to express affection, which is very important, and not simply as a prelude to sex.

In the early phases of a relationship, romance seems to occur naturally for most couples. As people get busy with life and get used to being together, they may gradually stop appreciating each other and begin taking each other for granted. In the beginning, people may go out of their way to plan when and how to be together; later, they may stop being as intentional about spending quality time since they see each other every day. In order to sustain a romantic and intimate relationship, this area of marital life needs to be given attention and nurturing. It is important to continue finding creative ways to make your spouse feel special and loved.

While sex is an important aspect of intimacy, couples can experience a much richer relationship if they can enjoy the whole range of intimacy and closeness. It is important to be aware of gender differences related to intimacy. For example, many women need to feel emotionally connected to their husband before they are interested in having sex. On

87 Bukhari. Book #31. Hadith #149 & 150.

the other hand, many men feel more emotionally connected by having sex. Learning about gender differences can be helpful in having a better understanding of your partner. Ultimately, what is most important is that each person communicates openly and honestly about what is important, what feels good, and what doesn't. The best way to learn about each other is to share information with each other.

For some couples, intimacy problems revolve around sex, sometimes because they are approaching it the wrong way. For example, scheduling a date night can be a great way to make sure couples put themselves in a romantic frame of mind and have some dedicated time to reconnect. However, if the purpose of the scheduled dates is only for sex and not to enjoy each other's company, then it can easily start to feel like one more item on the to-do list. Another example is when people use sex as a bargaining tool, which can fall under the category of sexual abuse. Some men complain that their wives won't sleep with them unless they get what they want, like a new car or piece of jewelry. Some women also complain that unless they have sex the way and with the frequency the husband demands, he mistreats her or ignores her. Others complain that he only spends time with her when he expects to have sex. Both withholding sex and forcing sex are forms of sexual abuse and are prohibited by Islam. In these cases, the relationship is probably in need of professional help.

An important factor in keeping romance and intimacy alive is grooming and hygiene. Both men and women complain when their spouses begin to neglect themselves. Sometimes men view hygiene and grooming as important for women to keep up, but they may not take time to take care of themselves. Many women do not appreciate their husbands coming home from the gym and approaching them while sweaty. Many men complain that their wives really neglect themselves after having children. While men should be understanding as their wives adjust to taking care of young children and not having as much time for themselves, women should do their best to take care of themselves, too.

We recommend that couples give attention to their romantic lives by making sure to set aside couple-time. We encourage people to change their routines, take vacations, and take care of their physical and emotional health. We also encourage couples to talk openly and honestly

about what they need from each other and what they find to be romantic. These things may change over time, so it's important to have ongoing communication. When couples feel the spark has begun to die, it's important not to panic. Instead, take the opportunity to remember the behaviors that were present during a more romantic time and to bring those back into the relationship.

For couples that live in extended families, it's even more crucial to make sure there is enough time alone as a couple. Privacy and feeling relaxed are essential to having a healthy intimate relationship. Many couples have reported that when they lived with in-laws, or when they had a relative stay for an extended period of time, their sex life became almost non-existent because they felt very self-conscious with someone else in the next bedroom. In these situations, the couple may need to plan some weekend getaways or more date nights to keep their intimate relationship healthy. Extended family members must be made to understand that not all vacations can be family vacations if they value the couple's relationship.

It's natural for the business and stressors of life to have a negative impact on intimacy. For that reason, it's especially important to constantly utilize good coping and stress management skills. It's also important to resolve conflicts and to avoid letting issues pile up, which leads to resentment. And romance can rarely flourish in the midst of resentment.

Resolving Intimacy Issues

One of the major factors contributing to dissatisfaction in marriage is lack of intimacy. Among Muslim couples, especially the immigrant community, the topic of intimacy and sexuality is generally taboo. Unfortunately, this means that when there is a problem, neither party may talk about it until it becomes a breaking-point, at which time, it's often too late. Both men and women may feel that since sexuality can be a very sensitive issue, they might hurt the other person if they raise concerns or talk about expectations. In many cases, people avoid the topic, thinking that they are doing their spouses a favor by avoiding potential

conflict or discomfort. However, if the topic is never raised, then the opportunity to make changes and improvements does not exist.

As difficult as it may be, it is really important for people to address problems as soon as they arise, rather than allowing them to intensify or to reach a crisis level. Sometimes, as people feel less connected with their spouses or less satisfied on an intimate level, they begin seeking attention and intimacy outside the marriage. They may also consume themselves with work or excessive socializing as a way to avoid the pain caused by the intimacy issues. When this happens, the energy that should be focused on the marital relationship starts to dissipate, weakening the relationship even more. Most of the time, there is no intention to have an affair. However, when the intimate relationship at home is not healthy, people are vulnerable and it is very easy for an affair to happen. We have seen affairs occurring at an alarming rate among both women and men in the Muslim community.

When we have explored why people cheat on their spouses, we have received a range of responses. Some people say that they got married very young, and their concept of what is attractive changed as they got older. Others who married very young admit that they got married because they needed to legitimize a love relationship but they did not marry someone who was compatible. Others say they got bored with the marriage and were looking for excitement. Still others acknowledge they were not mature enough when they got married to cope properly when there were problems in the marriage.

Sometimes problems occur in the intimate relationship as a result of unrealistic expectations or lack of knowledge about what is normal developmentally. In general, in maintaining a marriage, people must realize the first year is not like the second or third. When a child comes along, in addition to hormonal changes in the mother, it is natural for a lot of energy and attention to go to the child. During pregnancy, women may be less interested in sex and men may find their wives less attractive. Women who work outside the home may feel more stressed and have less energy. Sometimes, the relationship struggles when a spouse is going through a midlife crisis. And of course as people age or have health issues, both needs and abilities can be impacted. What is important at each step along the way is to have continued open and honest dialogue about what each

person is experiencing, how their needs and energy levels may be changing, and what each spouse can do to continue nurturing the relationship. At some points, one spouse may have to take more initiative or work harder than the other to nurture the relationship, knowing that at another point in the future, the other spouse may play this role. It is important to keep a long-term vision of the relationship in order to keep things in perspective.

When we look at the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), we see that he was a great husband to both his older and younger wives. He gave Khadijah, the older wife, all the love she deserved. He stayed married to her for twenty-three years, during which time he had no other wife. They raised a family together and worked together to build the early Muslim community. Later, when he married a much younger wife, Aisha, he also gave her the type of love she needed and deserved. He played with her, was romantic with her, and gave her the kind of attention she needed. His model exemplifies the need to be flexible and provide the type of love and care that fits your spouse's needs, and which may need to be adjusted over time depending on the particular circumstances.

Pornography

Just like other populations in the US, Muslims are also suffering from the pornography epidemic which has become a multi-billion dollar industry. Pornography comes up regularly in our counseling sessions as a cause of marital distress. We also work with individuals who are struggling because they realize they have become addicted and they really want to quit. The pornography industry has historically catered to men, but it is now also catering to women. Regardless of which spouse is watching it, the negative consequences impact both.

People have many misconceptions about the effects of pornography. While all Muslims may acknowledge it as *haram*, some people may believe that it can enhance their sexual relationships. Others may believe that it is something they can enjoy that will not impact their spouse in any negative way. Many people are really taken aback when their spouses discover their porn habits and accuse them of having an affair. These people don't understand why their spouses feel so betrayed. After

all, they didn't have a relationship with a real person. However, they are not aware that their relationship with pornography can have the same impact on their spouse as an affair. In most cases, a person who discovers that the spouse is watching pornography ends up feeling betrayed, unattractive, sexually inadequate, and sometimes dirty.

At the same time, people who watch pornography may act similarly to people having an affair. They may sneak around trying to view it when no one is home, or go to work early to use the work computer, or start putting more passwords on their phones and online accounts to prevent being caught, and they look forward to those moments when they will be free to seek pleasure using pornography. There can even be a thrill of being able to get away with watching porn in the same way that there can be a certain thrill in having an affair. The hiding and sneaking behaviors contribute to the other spouse feeling betrayed.

We want to emphasize some of the negative consequences of watching pornography. The images that are viewed lead to a very distorted perception of women, sex and sexuality. Furthermore, viewing pornography leads to desensitization regarding aggressive sexual behavior. And ultimately, pornography can be addictive. Because normal sexual relations do not occur the way sex is portrayed in pornographic material, viewers often become less satisfied with their spouses. They become more and more reliant on porn for pleasure. As spouses sense their partner's decreased interest in them, they may become frustrated and hurt. When the pornography is discovered, the level of betrayal is the same as if a real relationship had occurred outside the marriage. Pornography damages not only the individual viewing it, but also the entire family. Imagine the devastation of a young person discovering a parent's addiction, or a young person following in the parent's footsteps. This epidemic is also damaging to the entire society, as the pornography industry has become one of the largest industries in the US.

Shaykh Hamza Yusuf has addressed the topic of pornography in several lectures which can be found on YouTube. There are lectures by other scholars, as well as some short videos produced by purifyyourgaze.com. In addition to seeking help by turning towards Islam, it may be necessary to seek professional treatment. Many people who are addicted to pornography before marriage believe that once they are married, they

won't have a problem anymore. The truth is that pornography is a hard habit to break, just like any other addiction. While some people may be able to quit without any help, most people will need support and guidance to truly break free of this addiction.

Seeking Treatment and Counseling for Intimacy Issues

Many people are not educated on the topic of intimacy and may not know how to identify when something is a problem, and when something is just a normal part of relationships. People may let things go without seeking help because they are embarrassed or because they don't know where to turn. Just like any other type of problem, when intimacy issues are addressed early, they are usually easier to resolve. It's better to seek professional help and be told that something is normal than to wait until the issue has become a crisis and is much more difficult to resolve.

It is important for each person in the relationship to be aware that it takes time to really know and understand each other. Many people feel shy talking about their preferences and needs in the intimate arena of the relationship. It takes time to build trust and to feel safe enough to be open and honest. Making time to talk when you are both relaxed, listening with the intention of understanding, avoiding any form of judging or mocking, and trying to fulfill each other's requests are all ways to build a feeling of trust and safety and to encourage deeper communication.

We've talked repeatedly about the importance of communicating expectations and having realistic expectations. When one spouse has been in a previous relationship, or has had multiple relationships, and the other spouse is experiencing an intimate relationship for the first time, it is important to remember that the playing field is not level. A common problem we see is when men have not kept themselves chaste then when it comes time for marriage, they want to marry a chaste woman. In these cases, we see either he is dissatisfied because his wife is not comfortable engaging in behaviors he became used to in other relationships, or that he finds it difficult to engage his wife sexually because he has learned to associate sex with promiscuous women.

Another common issue we see is the disappointment men have about the physical appearance of their wives after marriage, particularly if the woman is wearing hijab. We have addressed the importance of physical attraction in Chapter 2. As a reminder, it is important to make sure that spouses feel attracted to each other physically; otherwise, it is likely that issues may develop around intimacy. Men often have unrealistic expectations about women's bodies and physical appearance if they are comparing her to models, movie stars or pornography characters. While we encourage both men and women to be healthy and take care of themselves, it's important to remember that models and actresses are paid to look good and often deprive themselves of food to maintain their size. They may also have plastic surgery to "fix" their flaws.

We also see some couples where sexual satisfaction becomes the centerpiece of the relationship, leading to overfocusing on this aspect of the marriage. While sex is an important part of the marriage, it is not the only important part and is not the only way to connect with each other. Having a balanced approach and taking care of all aspects of the marriage may actually enhance the sexual relationship because each person feels valued and respected as their emotional needs are also met.

There are many other reasons for intimacy issues. These include medical problems, communication barriers, and psychological issues. Sometimes discovering that a person has not been forthcoming about past experiences destroys the trust and kills intimacy. In some cases, a spouse becomes infected with a sexually transmitted disease and as a result learns that the other spouse has had previous relationships. This type of discovery is absolutely devastating. While Allah (*swt*) can forgive anything, in order to be just, people need to disclose this type of information before marriage. We recommend that before marriage, each person have a complete physical, including testing for sexually transmitted diseases. If a person has any kind of medical condition, it is important to discuss any possible impact that the condition may have on libido or sexual performance. There are many medications that can interfere with a person's interest in sex.

We know that for many people, it is really embarrassing to talk openly about these issues before marriage, and even after marriage for some people. It is important to remember that it is the right of each

person to know what to expect, and what limitations might exist. It is also important to remember that the Prophet (pbuh) advised people on sexual matters and spoke openly about the topic. For example, a woman complained to the Prophet (pbuh) that her husband was impotent,[88] and another woman asked him about wet dreams.[89] We also know that Umar (*ra*) discussed his marital relationship with the Prophet (pbuh).[90] The Qur'an also discusses certain aspects of the sexual relationship, so there is no shame or prohibition on seeking help to improve the sexual relationship. What is prohibited is to discuss this private relationship during casual chatting with friends or family. It is definitely permissible to seek help from a professional, an imam, or anyone else qualified to help.

Since intimacy is one of the rights of each spouse, lack of intimacy is a legitimate reason for divorce. It is important to seek help and try to remedy any problem in this arena before it becomes an irresolvable crisis, thereby preventing unnecessary divorce.

A Note about Therapy

In general, therapy is still often not part of a Muslim couple's help-seeking behavior. We want to encourage people to consider therapy as a means to address problems as soon as they arise. It is heartbreaking when couples seek therapy after suffering for many years, sometimes disclosing that they have not even been able to consummate the marriage for a year or even longer. These couples live with so much avoidable pain, feeling they are unable to speak to anyone about this private aspect of their lives.

We encourage couples to think of therapy the same way they would think of medical treatment. Therapists are trained to help people work through their problems in a professional way, and they are bound by confidentiality. It is important to seek a therapist who is trained in marriage and family therapy and who is sensitive to the specific needs and values of Muslim couples. When intimacy issues are more serious, or

88 Bukhari, Book #48, Hadith #807 & Book #72, Hadith #715.

89 Bukhari, Book #5, Hadith #280.

90 Tirmidhi, #2980, *Mawsu'at al-Hadith*.

when there are addictions[91] involved, it may be necessary to seek the help of a sex therapist or an addictions specialist. While many couples may prefer seeking the help of a Muslim therapist, in communities where this is not an option, it is possible to get very good treatment from people of other faiths a well as from secular therapists. It may be necessary to communicate clearly about Islamic values and to feel free to express if any suggestion or recommendation is not fitting with Islamic values. At the same time, other couples may prefer working with a therapist who is not Muslim if they feel uncomfortable with the idea of possibly running into their Muslim therapist at community functions. What matters most is that the therapist is qualified and competent, both culturally and professionally.

As a consumer, it is important to do some research to ensure that the therapist will be a good match. Most therapists are willing to spend some time on the phone to respond to questions about their training and their philosophical approach. In seeking a therapist, the following points may be helpful:

- ❑ Ask if the therapist has specific training in marriage and family therapy. While any licensed mental health therapist may be qualified to provide couples counseling, many have not had the specialized training in this field.

- ❑ Ask if the therapist has had experience working with Muslim couples. The more experience they have had, the more likely they are to be familiar with commonly held beliefs and values that may impact the therapy. At the same time, therapists who have not worked with Muslims but have traveled extensively or who have worked with other cultures are likely to be open and sensitive to values that many Muslim couples hold.

- ❑ Ask about training in sex therapy. This specialization may or may not be necessary, depending on what the issue is or how chronic it is.

91 Al-Ghazali has also addressed some of these issues in *On Disciplining the Soul and Breaking the Two Desires.*

- ❑ If unfamiliar with Islam or Muslims, ask if the therapist would be open to learning more about working with Muslims. Ask if the therapist obtains consultation for issues with which they are unfamiliar (this is a part of every therapist's ethical practice).

- ❑ If the spiritual aspect of your relationship is an important element that you want included in the therapy, look for a therapist who practices or was trained in pastoral counseling. These therapists value the role of religion and spirituality and may be a good match if comfortable working with Muslims. In addition, marriage and family therapy training should have been completed to properly address marital issues.

- ❑ Pay attention to your comfort level as you interview the therapist or have your first session. Research indicates that one of the most important factors in successful treatment is the relationship between the client and the therapist. It is important that you feel comfortable and that you can trust the therapist. You can gauge a lot from an initial conversation; however, at any point in time during the therapy, feel free to express any discomfort.

Social Life

A healthy social life can enhance the marital relationship and can be a great source of support, as well as an emotional outlet for each spouse. It is important to live a balanced life that includes time for having fun and relaxing. A good circle of friends can serve as a safety net for the marriage in the sense that each spouse will not need to be totally emotionally dependent on the spouse, but will also have friends with whom to vent, confide in and consult with. Obviously, it is important for each spouse to be relatively comfortable with the other spouse's friends, and for each spouse to select friends who are trustworthy and share common values. Couples may have friends with whom they socialize with as couples, and each spouse may also have their respective friends. It's a good idea for spouses to have a girls' or guys' night out periodically.

The key to a healthy social life is balance. Too much socializing means there will not be enough couple time, which is necessary for nurturing the marriage. For example, while entertaining guests can be a great way to socialize, hosting continuous *iftars* in Ramadan or other events can lead to situations where women are stuck in the kitchen and men are enjoying their guests. Another example is when one of the spouses does a lot of socializing outside the home, while the other spouse may be stuck at home with the children. There are many examples in which improper or excessive socializing can cause marital problems.

Culture plays a big role in determining what people consider to be appropriate when it comes to socializing. For example, in some Gulf countries where gender segregation is the norm, it would be considered shameful for a man to introduce his wife to his business colleagues. In American culture, on the other hand, it would be very offensive to a woman if her husband did not introduce her to his colleagues.

When we look at the model of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), we can see that he was proud to be with his wives and to be seen with them in public. They even accompanied him to the battlefield. Khadijah (*ra*) knew all of the Prophet's business contacts, especially since she wa his employer. She also knew all of his friends, and he knew hers. Afte her death, he used to visit her friends as a way to honor her. As far as socializing, on one occasion, a man invited him to dinner. The Prophet asked, "And my wife?" The man said, "Only you." Then the Prophet said, "Either she comes or I won't come." So the man invited her too.[92]

Most people are familiar with the story of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) taking Aisha to watch the Abyssinians' performance on *Eid*. He knew she enjoyed this activity, and he watched with her until she was ready to leave.[93] This example is a good reminder to those people who may feel that it is a waste of time to "have fun." Sometimes spouses have completely different ideas of what constitutes entertainment or fun. In these cases, it's a good idea to share these activities with your spouse at least occasionally, simply to communicate that you care. For example, if he is a football or basketball fan and she isn't, she can still watch a game

92 Ramadan, T. (2009). *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad.* Oxford UniversityPress.

93 Bukhari, Book #15, Hadith #70.

with him occasionally if that is important to him. Or if she really likes taking long walks while he prefers staying indoors, he can occasionally join her. It's important to have a positive attitude when joining your spouse in the chosen recreational activity, and not to act so miserable that the spouse would have preferred to be alone.

Sometimes spouses use the issue of *halal* and *haram* as an obstacle to having fun together. There are plenty of recreational and entertainment options that are within the boundaries of what is *halal*. The Prophet (pbuh) did not allow his position as a prophet and head of state to prevent him from playing with his wives, racing them, and laughing with them.[94] He also watched while his wives played with each other, throwing dough at each other just for fun. It is really a mistake to believe that good Muslims must be serious all the time, and that the only "fun" option is going to a class in the *masjid*.

Playfulness, laughter and having fun strengthen the marital bond. It is important to take time away from work and education to relax. Couples should play games, spend time in nature, and try different activities like skating, bowling or going to amusement parks. As we mentioned earlier though, balance is the key. Nightly movies, eating out every night, and having guests over every day take a toll on the marriage rather than enhancing it. Ideally, each person's interests would have been discussed during the premarital phase as part of assessing compatibility.

Of course there are certain kinds of entertainment that are clearly prohibited in Islam. These include going to bars and night clubs, watching indecent movies, watching porn, etc. Even if one spouse really enjoys these activities, the other spouse should not share in them.

Social interaction with the opposite gender can occur as long as it is within the boundaries of respectful behavior and does not occur privately with the opposite gender. Socializing should not violate moral standards. Islamic principles include making sure friendships with someone of the opposite gender develop within the circle of the husband and wife, having complete transparency (not feeling worried if spouse happens to see your emails or learns with whom you are corresponding), and avoiding alcohol.

---

94 Abu Dawood. Book #14. Hadith #2572.

One of the things that kills marriages is a boring routine. Re-energize the relationship by doing something different, taking a weekend away, or seeing a new place. It is also important to take vacations. During vacations, spouses should not make things difficult by being too restrictive of fun activities. The couple, and later the family, should agree on some fun activities. Alone time can also be built in to vacations if that is also needed. Plan vacations within your means so that the vacation itself does not become a burden. It is possible to have low-budget vacations as well as weekly fun activities that may not cost anything at all.

In addition to having friends and engaging in recreational activities, it is also important to be part of a community. This connection leads to a sense of belonging and identity, which is also very critical to a positive sense of wellbeing. Engage in community events and participate in community functions as part of your social life. Sometimes people only turn to the community when a death occurs in the family, but if there has been no connection developed prior to this event, it is really hard to feel supported. Being connected to the community also contributes to a sense of productivity when people contribute and serve. Again, balance is critical. Sometimes people serve the community at the expense c their families. Community is particularly important when couples hav children who can be raised feeling that sense of belonging and identity that is critical to their healthy development.

Red Flags

Sometimes couples fall into certain behavior patterns in their social life that can indicate an underlying problem in the marital relationship. It is best to catch these patterns early on and explore the underlying issue so that it can be addressed. Some common red flags include:

- ❑ Spending all the time at home on the phone or computer while neglecting the spouse and/or children

- ❑ Using "business networking" as an excuse to socialize after work hours or on weekends, which can eat into family time

- ❑ Wanting to spend all free time away from home, either because the marriage is boring or unfulfilling or as away to avoid problems

- ❑ Having a "friendship" with the opposite gender that you are anxious your spouse will discover

- ❑ Feeling ashamed or embarrassed to introduce your spouse to colleagues and friends

- ❑ Leading a double life, such as wanting a religious wife but living a life that is far from Islam at work or socially

- ❑ Having no shared social circles

If you notice any of these red flags in your relationship, sit down with your spouse and discuss what is going on. Refer to the communication tips in Chapter 8 to help you address the problems before they escalate or cause too much damage. It is normal for every relationship to experience bumps in the road. Take the time to pause and repair any small bumps so you can quickly get back on track and resume enjoying your spouse and your marriage.

Conclusion

Using Islam as a frame of reference and a guide will go a long way in helping each spouse identify and maintain a balanced approach not only in marriage, but in life in general. When you remember the triangular relationship mentioned above that exists between you, your spouse, and Allah (*swt*), focusing on the vertical relationship between you and Allah (*swt*) will allow you to determine priorities more easily when it comes to the horizontal relationship with your spouse. Thinking and reflecting on what is most pleasing to Allah (*swt*) will provide you with clarity, particularly when you and your spouse disagree. Yes, it will happen, even in the best of marriages. Living in an intimate relationship often

requires patience, flexibility, and sacrifice; therefore, it provides constant opportunities to practice purifying the *nafs* (soul).

When times are challenging, turning to Allah (*swt*) for guidance and patience can bring great comfort and help to keep things in perspective. Reading stories about Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his wives can be a good reminder of the fact that every marriage will experience bumps in the road and can suggest the best ways to maneuver over or around these bumps. Remembering that every act of kindness to your spouse is *sadaqah* (charity) can help you be nice to each other, even when you may be upset with one another.

When Islam is a mutually accepted reference, then couples can turn to the Qur'an and Sunnah to help them make decisions and resolve differences in various situations. There are usually several adequate approaches for any given situation. Remembering that the ultimate goal is to please Allah (*swt*) can make it much easier to let go of things when both people are digging in their heels and refusing to budge from their personal opinion of what is best.

CHAPTER 8:

Essential Skills for a Successful Marriage



Have you not seen how Allah sets forth a parable of a good word (being) like a good tree whose root is firmly fixed and whose branches are in heaven, yielding its fruit in all seasons by the permission of its Lord." (14:24-25)

Understanding the Islamic model of the husband-wife relationship, and having a proactive, collaborative attitude are prerequisites for achieving a healthy and successful relationship. In addition, there are several critical skills that are necessary for sustaining this relationship. This chapter will cover communication skills, including conflict resolution, as well as stress management and anger management.

Communication

Throughout this book, we have made many suggestions about *what* prospective couples should talk about. Now we will share some

suggestions about *how* to talk to ensure that both sides really understand each other. Having good communication skills allows each person to convey expectations, clarify roles, set priorities and goals, establish boundaries, make decisions and resolve conflicts. Healthy communication is a two-way process in which both people can express their thoughts and emotions openly and honestly, and in which both people (the speaker and the listener) feel heard and understood. Effective communication includes paying attention to the emotional state of both the listener and the speaker, being aware of nonverbal messages, taking the context into consideration, and choosing the best time for the message to be relayed and received. For example, giving your spouse "constructive criticism" about the way a parenting situation was handled, while in front of the children and while the situation is still tense, is likely to have a negative outcome. The same message will probably be received much better during a conversation with just the parents and in which both parents are in the frame of mind to discuss being effective parents.

Unfortunately, many couples struggle with communication from the beginning of their marriage. It is not uncommon for one or both partners to feel misunderstood, unheard or invalidated. When this communication gap occurs, the natural consequence is for the spouses to feel disconnected and ultimately lonely. It is wise to take the time to learn good communication skills. We will provide some of the basics here, but we also encourage couples to participate in workshops or to read books about communication in order to improve these skills and deepen their knowledge of this core ingredient for successful relationships.

The Prophetic Model of Communication[95]

Simply by looking at the way Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) communicated with others, we can learn a lot about the etiquette of good communication. His model conveyed respect and consideration,

95 Zino, M. J. (1995). *Al-Shama'il al-Muhammadiyyah: Selections from The Attributes of Prophet Muhammad, His Virtuous Character and Islamic Manners.* (Trans. Abdisalam A. Adam). Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences in America (IIASA). Also, Khan, Z. (Trans.) (1974). *Gardens of the Righteous: Riyadh as-Salihin of Imam Nawawi.* Curzon Press.

regardless of who he was talking to. He was known to face the person talking to him, never turning his back or cutting a person off. He waited to hear the person out before responding. When someone called his name to address him, he would turn his whole body to face that person, not just his head. He would also repeat himself to make sure his message was clear, and he would confirm what he heard the other person say. He also used his hands to express himself and sometimes drew something in the dirt to illustrate what he was saying.

The Prophet (pbuh) emphasized that a good word is charity. He was very generous in praising his companions and his wives, which is why people opened up like flowers to him. Kind and loving words never die; they continue to bear fruit[96] and have a lasting impact on the receiver. With each kind word you say, you are planting a seed of goodness in the other's heart, leading that person to have good feelings towards you.

The Prophet (pbuh) was also very interactive in his manner of speech. He engaged the listener by asking questions as if he were teaching a concept or an idea. He took time to ensure that his message was getting across by asking questions like, "Do you know what I mean?" He used to pause, giving people the chance to answer. Another example is whe he was redefining poverty as someone who is bankrupt on the Day (Judgment due to mistreating others. He began by asking his companions, "Do you know who is *muflis* (poor or penniless)?"[97] Using this manner of communication ensures that people are really listening and engaged.

The tone of voice is an important aspect of effective communication. The Prophet (pbuh) made people feel respected and loved by his tone. He was also known to have a very gentle manner in his speech, even in situations that were grave or when his followers had disobeyed him, such as in the Battle of Uhud.[98]

One of his most notable qualities in terms of communication was that he was known to be a good listener. The Qur'an describes him as someone who used his listening skills to do good in response to his

96 "Do you not see how Allah sets forth a parable? A good word is like a good tree....it brings forth its fruit at all times." (14:24-25)

97 Muslim Book 32, Hadith #6251.

98 "It is part of the mercy of Allah that you deal gently with them. Were you severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from you." (3:159)

attackers criticizing him for being "all ear."[99] The Qur'an also highlighted the importance of nonverbal communication, admonishing the Prophet (pbuh) when he frowned at a blind man who interrupted his conversation with some of the influential leaders of Makkah. [100] Imagine how important it is to attend to our own nonverbal expressions if, in the Qur'an, Allah (*swt*) advocated for a blind man who couldn't see the Prophet's frown. These verses emphasize the critical role that listening and nonverbal expression play in effective communication.

Elements of Effective Communication

Communication consists of both verbal and nonverbal expression. It is important to be conscious of the nonverbal signals that you convey when your partner is talking to you. People often complain of feeling unheard or misunderstood because they see the other person rolling their eyes, avoiding eye contact,[101] turning their body away, scowling or frowning. It is also important to pay attention to your tone of voice and the words you choose to convey your message, and to avoid name-calling, character assassination[102] or insults.

Every communication involves someone sending the message and someone receiving it. Each person has a role to play in ensuring that the communication process is effective. If one person is talking, and the other person is not listening, then effective communication has not occurred. If one person is willing to listen, but the other person won't share what she or he is feeling, then again there is no communication.

There are a few basic guidelines that can help increase the effectiveness of communication:[103]

---

99 Qur'an 9:61.

100 Ibid. 80:1.

101 In an intercultural marriage, it is important to be aware that eye contact and other types of nonverbal communication may differ. In some cultures, husbands and wives avert their gaze when speaking to each other as a sign of respect.

102 For example, labeling someone as a slob, liar or a jerk, instead of focusing on the specific behavior (such as leaving the dish on the table, or not fulfilling a promise).

103 Some of the guidelines have been adapted from the PREP and Imago models. For more details, see *Fighting for Your Marriage* by Howard J. Markman, Scott M. Stanley and Susan L. Blumberg; and *Getting the Love You Want* by Harville Hendrix.

- ❑ If you are in an intercultural relationship, take some time to familiarize yourself with the other culture's style of communication. Is it more polite to be direct or indirect? Is it respectful to maintain eye contact or avert one's gaze? Observe how people communicate and reflect on how that may be the same or different from you and your family's style of communication.
- ❑ Before talking about a sensitive or important topic, make sure your partner is able and willing to hear you. The person needing to open the conversation should ask the other person for a good time to talk. Taking this step allows the listener to be in the right frame of mind and to be emotionally ready to listen and understand. Insisting on talking when the other person isn't ready may create a frustrating experience with the potential for an argument.
- ❑ When your spouse approaches you to set up a good time to talk about a topic that is important to him or her, you should provide a time at your earliest convenience. Some people prefer to avoid these talks in order to protect themselves from what they anticipate may be a negative experience, giving the message that there is never a good time. This avoidance ultimately convey disrespect and builds resentment and frustration, in addition t creating a pile-up of issues and the potential for an emotional outburst.
- ❑ Once both people are ready for a good communication experience, the person sending the message should use I-statements and should avoid blaming or attacking. For example, "I get really worried about you when you are late coming home from work and haven't called to tell me you will be late." Avoid statements like, "You're so irresponsible. You should call me if you're going to be late."
- ❑ Avoid using words like "always" and "never" because they are not really true. Even a chronically late person will sometimes show up on time, even if it's a fluke. Using such words like "always" and "never" eliminates the possibility for change and progress. These words are like sentencing a person to failure; once we've decided a person is "always" doing something wrong, we are

"never" likely to see when their behavior has actually changed or improved.

- ❑ If the purpose of the communication is to share a complaint, stick to ONE complaint per conversation rather than bringing up a whole laundry list of complaints. Make sure to begin with an appreciation of something positive and to end with an appreciation of something positive, rather than making the entire conversation about negative issues.
- ❑ The person listening should practice active or reflective listening, especially during very important discussions. By letting the person know what you are hearing, you can prevent the potential for misunderstanding. Summarize important points you've heard by saying, "What I'm hearing you say. . ." or "What I understand from you is. . ."
- ❑ Avoid interrupting each other, talking over each other, walking way in the middle of a conversation, or other behaviors that convey disrespect. If you need to pause the conversation because it is too difficult or uncomfortable at the moment, or because you feel unable to regulate your own anger, ask for a break. The person who asks for a break is responsible for letting the other person know when it's OK to continue or resume the conversation, preferably within twenty-four hours or less.
- ❑ Avoid mind-reading. Try to listen to what your spouse is actually saying in order to understand the message being sent. Some spouses believe they know what their partner is "really" thinking, feeling or believing and make a point to share this analysis. Rarely do people appreciate being told what they think and feel. In other words, telling your partner that you know he or she doesn't really mean what they say, or that you know his or her intention was different than what was stated conveys disrespect and disregard. It also takes away the value of communication if you already "know" what the other person is thinking. Try to listen with an open and curious mind. The speaker is the expert on him or herself.
- ❑ Try to preface any gripe with an appreciation. If your partner knows you see the good things and positive contributions he

or she is making, it is much easier to hear about a complaint. Consistent appreciations provide a cushion for those times when complaints have to be aired out.

- ❑ Remember that communication should not be limited only to complaining or "giving advice;" rather it is for sharing a full range of ideas, feelings and appreciations, in addition to complaints when necessary. Unfortunately, some people subscribe to a belief that nothing needs to be said unless there is a problem to be corrected. This narrow focus will create a negative environment and feelings of being unappreciated.
- ❑ Make sure to take turns. Healthy relationships involve both people sharing their thoughts and emotions. One person should not do all the talking.
- ❑ Discuss things as they come up rather than brushing them aside in the effort to avoid a conflict. Conflicts are part of every relationship and, if handled properly, can actually deepen the relationship. When issues are brushed under the rug, over time mountain will accumulate and make subsequent issues eve harder to resolve.
- ❑ Try to anticipate potential problems and discuss them ahead of time, rather than waiting for a crisis to occur. For example, if you know that relations between your spouse and your parents are somewhat strained, make sure to talk about what will make your parents' upcoming visit more comfortable for your spouse **before** your parents arrive. Some people believe that waiting until the last minute to give potentially upsetting information will prevent a fight; in fact, this practice is likely to **ensure** a fight, because there has been no opportunity to prepare oneself for the perceived difficult situation.
- ❑ Pay attention to the use of language and pronouns referring to a sense of ownership and belonging, like "don't do that with **my** kids" instead of "**our** kids." Using pronouns to express ownership that does not include both partners can lead the excluded party to feel unvalued, hurt, and eventually resentful. It is improper for men to refer to the family home as "his" house; and for women to refer to the children as "her" children.

The Art of Listening

When Allah (*swt*) refers to the various faculties He has created, He mentions hearing before sight. In terms of human development, the ability to hear develops in utero, with sight developing after birth. The fact that hearing precedes sight suggests that it is the initial way we begin to take in information. Perhaps that is why people may respond to the tone of the person speaking before beginning to process the actual words being said. The early Arabs had a saying that the ear sometimes falls in love before the eye, meaning that the sound of a person's voice can be the initial source of attraction. In fact, we have heard stories from people who have said they were attracted to someone based on their picture and profile but were turned off after hearing the voice. While we cannot change the sound of our voice, we can certainly be mindful of the tone and volume, taking care to avoid sounding harsh. Communicating in a gentle tone and manner will make it easier for the other person to listen and really hear what is being said.

Listening is perhaps the harder part of communication. It requires discipline, patience and a genuine desire to understand the other person's point of view. The Qur'an emphasizes the importance of proper listening which includes paying attention[104] and advises us to avoid being "like those who say, 'We hear,' but listen not."[105] Allah (*swt*) condemns those who don't use the ears they were blessed with to listen to His message,[106] as well as those who would sit with the Prophet (pbuh), then indicate their lack of listening afterwards by asking, "What is it he just said?"[107] While these verses are specifically referring to the recitation of the Qur'an and the message of Allah (*swt*), they identify the key components of proper listening, regardless of who is speaking. The Qur'an trains us to be good listeners, and identifies the Prophet (pbuh) as the model for us to follow by labeling him as a "good ear."[108]

104 Qur'an 7:204.
105 Ibid. 8:21.
106 Ibid. 7:179.
107 Ibid 47:16.
108 Ibid. 9:61.

Many people think that listening means sitting there and being quiet or giving advice. Listening actually means putting oneself in an emotional space to hear what the other person is saying with a willingness to accept that person's right to a perspective, opinion, or emotion that may be different from one's own. Listening requires paying attention, which usually requires an interruption of multitasking. It is best to face the person who is talking to you, rather than sitting side by side or "listening" while watching television, reading, or sending emails. Eye contact, when culturally appropriate, and facing each other increase effective communication because of the improved ability to catch nonverbal signals.

Good listening also includes validating the person who is speaking. Validation creates a stronger feeling of being heard and understood, which in turn increases the feeling of connection and trust. Khadijah (*ra*) validated the Prophet (pbuh) when he came back from the cave of Hiraa, asking if he was scared when she saw him, then seeking consultation as she understood the powerful spiritual experience he had just been through. Examples of validation include statements like, "I ca understand why you might be so tired after waking up with the ba every hour," or "I know what you mean. If your boss criticized you in meeting, that would really be embarrassing." Examples of invalidation, which ultimately leads to the other person feeling unheard and unvalued, include "That's really dumb. Why would that make you upset?" or "That's no reason to be sad," or "You don't have the right to be angry."

Although it's generally not a good idea for a spouse to "judge" whether the other person's emotions are valid, people often do make assessments about the validity of another person's emotions. However, it is impossible to form any judgment without listening carefully to the story. There is an anecdote that illustrates this point. There was a judge training another judge. They saw a woman crying, and a man was walking next to her. The trainer asked, "What do you think about those people?" The trainee replied, "He has done something to hurt her, so she's crying." The trainer dismissed the trainee, saying he was not qualified to be a judge. He added, "Yusuf's brothers cried to their father after they threw him in the well. Crying does not indicate the wronged party."

The Prophet (pbuh) was very good at validating people. In one example that occurred during the Battle of Hunayn, he gave everyone

except the Ansar (People of Madina) money from the spoils of war. They got upset, and rumors were spread that the Prophet (pbuh) had found his own people and no longer needed them. The leader of the Ansar, Sa`d ibn `Ubadah (*ra*), came and told him the people of Ansar were not happy. The Prophet (pbuh) told him to gather all the Ansar and no one else, and told them, "O Ansar. I heard you're not happy with me because I gave money to people to soften their hearts, and I relied on your faith. If I had given you a chance to say something, you would have said, you came to us with nowhere to go, and we gave you shelter; you were wronged and we supported you.....and if you had said that, it is the truth. But if I had wanted, I could have said, I came to you when you were separated and I united you....." Then he acknowledged their feelings and said, "Wouldn't you accept that people go back with camels and things and you go back having me? They have the money and you have me." After that, they said they were content with the Prophet of Allah. He validated them, responded to their emotions, explained why he did what he did, and tried to compensate them by reminding them how much he loved them and wanted to be one of them.[109]

In his marital life, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was attuned to his wives' emotions. He told Aisha (*ra*) that he always knew when she was upset with him because she would refer to the Lord of Ibrahim, and when she was pleased with him, she would refer to the Lord of Muhammad.[110] This acknowledgement is another form of validation. Of course, he did not stop there. He would make a point to try to understand why she was upset, and to try to address the problem.

Sometimes good listening requires a great deal of patience and self-regulation. It can be easy to get defensive if your partner is telling you how you caused him or her to feel hurt, angry, or upset in any way. Try to hear your partner out. If you are hearing words that are insulting or disrespectful, ask your partner to revise the message using I-statements. Try telling your partner what you are hearing. For example, "So I'm hearing you say that you start to worry when I'm late from work if I haven't called you to tell you I'll be late." This type of reflective

109 Ibn Hisham. *Seerat Ibn Hisham*

110 Muslim. Hadith #2439. *Mawsu'at al-Hadith. Sharh al-Nawawi.*

listening helps to keep you focused on the message and tells your partner you are on track. It also provides your partner with the opportunity to correct the message if needed.

Remembering that listening to your partner will contribute to the overall health of the marriage, which includes each person's happiness. Listening may help you to be patient until it's your turn to talk. As long as your partner is talking in a respectful manner, listening with the intention of understanding is the best thing to do. When couples are able to communicate effectively, they can prevent the buildup of frustration, resentment, anger, and pain that can destroy a relationship over time.

Reading the Situation

In addition to listening to what your partner is expressing and trying to understand what she or he is feeling, it is helpful to develop a habit of paying attention to the nonverbal cues and the context or situation. Although it is important for each person to take responsibility for communicating their needs, it is also important to take responsibility for being attuned proactively to the other's needs. This attunement becomes easier when we practice putting ourselves in the other person's shoes. For example, a stay-at-home wife can try to imagine what it's like for her husband to be in a stressful work environment all day after a long commute, being in meetings, having projects due, or dealing with a demanding boss. As she thinks about his experience, she may realize that after work he may need some time to unwind before she begins sharing the challenges of her day or asking him to do things around the house.

At the same time, he could imagine what it's like for her to be at home with two small children who have plenty of energy and need constant supervision and entertainment, sometimes not even giving her a break to use the restroom in peace because they may be banging on the bathroom door. He may realize that she could use a break and offer to give her a couple of nights off. In both cases, each person may be expecting the other one to know what they need without asking, which often leads to disappointment and frustration when expectations are not met.

By the time couples come for counseling, one or both partners are often full of resentment and hurt, complaining that the other person doesn't appreciate them, acknowledge how hard they are working, or proactively offer help and support. These couples are suffering due to both a lack of communicating expectations clearly, as well as a lack of attunement to each other. While a woman can certainly ask her husband to help carry in the grocery bags as she juggles carrying the groceries, the baby and the diaper bag, he can also recognize that she needs another pair of hands. Similarly, a man may explain that he needs some time to spend with the guys once in awhile, and his wife could also realize that as much as he loves his family, he could use some time to "play" when he doesn't have to think about how to provide for his family.

When people's needs go unattended, resentment and frustration can manifest initially as arguments. Over time, people can get tired of fighting and the relationship can be very silent. These relationships can end in divorce that is a result of an accumulation of unmet needs. This problem is preventable when both people do their best to communicate clearly what they need, give positive feedback when their needs are being met, and pay attention to nonverbal and contextual cues to recognize unvoiced needs. Effective communication requires both partners to be fully engaged and proactive.

Cross-Cultural Communication Issues

We created you nations and tribes that you may know one another. (49:13)

Cultural differences can play out in the area of communication and can cause significant distress to the marriage if not attended to from the beginning. Misunderstandings due to differences in communication styles, language differences, and preferred ways of resolving conflict can build up over time. These differences should be identified as early as possible in order to reduce the incidences of miscommunication

which can lead to frustration and resentment over time. The most common areas in which cross-cultural differences can manifest include intimacy, social behaviors and etiquettes, parenting, and privacy issues. Communication is critical before and during the marriage to understand the differences in expectations and values in these and other areas.

The early Muslim community experienced some of these cross-cultural issues, too.[111] In Makkan society, women were not given the space to argue if they disagreed with their husbands. When the Muhajirun (immigrants from Makkah) arrived in Madina, the women learned to communicate more openly than their culture in Makkah had permitted. Although the men began to protest as their wives began talking back, it soon became apparent that the Prophet (pbuh) himself did not object to his wives expressing themselves freely. The men from Makkah had to adjust to the expectations they had based on their culture of origin and adapt to their new culture.

Cultural differences are generally expected when spouses cor from two different countries. Sometimes, when the two people g ting married have both grown up in the US, they may not anticipate t impact of the cultural differences of their families of origins, or even be aware of how cultural heritage has affected their values and expectations. Cross-cultural issues also occur between people of different racial backgrounds, such as a marriage between an African-American and a White American. Within the same ethnic background, cultural differences also occur as a result of living in urban versus rural areas, having different levels of education, and coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds. To some extent, every single family has its own culture too. Many people experience culture shock when the new family operates very differently than the family of origin, even if they are of the same ethnic background. It is important to recognize that culture runs deep and that expectations around communication and conflict resolution are often not stated explicitly until after someone has been offended. For this reason, the Hanafi school of thought emphasizes *kafaa'ah* (compatibility) or matching socioeconomic levels and other factors.

111 Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet.*

Expectations, attitudes and values around communication are impacted by many factors in a person's heritage. Certain cultures tend to value speaking directly and getting to the point, while other cultures value speaking in a more circular and indirect manner. For example, an American woman married to an Arab man may discover that her directness is perceived by his parents as rude or inappropriate; at the same time, she may wish that his parents would just say what they mean or get to the point. Neither culture is right or wrong, or better or worse than the other. Each culture simply has a different style. It is important to take the time to learn about these differences and be willing to adapt to each other's cultures if needed.

Another example regarding communication styles has to do with the degree of expressiveness that is accepted in each culture. In some cultures, people may be very passionate and even loud when they talk about something that matters to them. In other cultures, voices remain soft regardless of how passionate a person may feel about a topic. A person from a "quieter" culture may perceive the partner to be yelling and take offense, when in fact the partner may simply be feeling passionate or excited. It is important to share how your partner's behavior makes you feel. Each of you must be willing to take this feedback into consideration and be willing to adjust by modifying your behavior to some degree in order to make your spouse more comfortable **and** by increasing your ability to tolerate different styles of communication (remind yourself that your partner is simply expressing deep emotions and is not intending to offend you). The changes must be made by both partners, along with a willingness to accept that each culture has its own merits and that neither culture is superior.

An obvious, but sometimes overlooked cross-cultural issue in communication is language barriers. These barriers can occur when one person is less fluent than the other in the spoken language, when spouses speak different dialects of the same language or when extended family members speak a different language than one of the spouses. In any of these situations, it is important to give the person the benefit of the doubt and take time to clear up any misunderstandings that may arise due to language differences. When a spouse does not share the in-laws' language, it is crucial to make accommodations by translating as

much as possible and by trying to learn each other's language. It is too easy for language differences to contribute to significant marital issues because a spouse feels alienated, excluded or marginalized by virtue of being unable to participate in conversations that the rest of the family is having.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict, or disagreement, is an inevitable part of every relationship.[112] Each person brings his or her opinions, attitudes, and beliefs into the relationship, in addition to his or her perceptions of events. The goal of healthy relationships is not how to avoid conflict altogether, but how to resolve it successfully. Sometimes the first step is to acknowledge that conflict is normal and healthy, and that conflict resolution creates an opportunity for the relationship to grow and be stronger than before. Many people are afraid of conflict because it is uncomfortable and because they believe that conflict means an end to the relationship. In fact, avoiding conflict is more likely to impair the relationship than making genuine efforts to resolve it.

Practicing the communication skills outlined above is a good start to healthy conflict resolution. Remembering that each of you brings a different perspective, and that each perspective is worthy of being included, will also help in ensuring a respectful approach to addressing the disagreement. Couples should also recognize that resolving an issue simply means coming to an understanding of each person's perspective, conveying respect for it, and trying to find a solution that feels acceptable to both parties. A successful resolution does not always include both parties agreeing with each other. In some cases, after talking things out, there will be an agreement. In other cases, couples may have to agree to disagree. In these cases, a compromise or sacrifice may have to be made in order to move forward. When couples come to the table with the intention of working as a team and prioritizing the health of

112 By conflict, we are referring to differences of opinion or disagreements about decisions. We do NOT mean fights in which each person is out to get or hurt the other, or in which there is abusive language or behavior.

the marital relationship, each partner will be more willing to make the compromises and sacrifices that are part and parcel of any relationship. These compromises should occur in a balanced fashion so that one person is not making all the sacrifices.

In cross-cultural situations, it is important to understand how conflict is viewed in the other culture and what means are typically used to resolve it. Cultural practices that are not contradictory to Islam can be integrated into the couple's repertoire of conflict resolution tactics. Culture should ever be used as an excuse for any abusive behavior. For example, in some family cultures it may be acceptable to use insults, screaming or even hitting as a way to deal with conflict or to discipline children. These practices are in violation of the Qur'an and Sunnah and cannot be used. In other family cultures, conflict is "dealt with" by withdrawing emotionally, communicating indirectly, or simply avoiding sensitive topics. Again, these practices are not very effective in solving conflict; rather, they only prolong the conflict and delay the inevitable explosion or fracturing of the relationship that must occur when conflicts are not resolved.

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) introduced teachings that changed many existing cultural norms, including those around anger and conflict. He emphasized that Muslims should control themselves when angry, and defined strength as self-control instead of acting out one's anger. He himself was often the center of conflict, being attacked for his beliefs and his religious practices. As a leader, he demonstrated a wide range of conflict resolution skills. These included listening with the intention of understanding the other's point of view, expressing his opinion in a respectful manner regardless of how the other person was addressing him, compromising when possible,[113] and at other times, standing his ground while agreeing to disagree.[114]

So how do you know when to compromise and when not to compromise? The answer is much easier once you have identified your priorities and what in your life is negotiable. There are certain issues that may be nonnegotiable, such as having alcohol in your home or

113 Ramadan. *In the Footsteps of the Prophet.*

114 Qur'an 109:1-6.

having a spouse who does not pray. Each person must identify his or her nonnegotiable issues. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) never compromised his belief in Allah (*swt*), regardless of how much he was tempted or tortured. It is important to have certain boundaries in terms of religious matters, not accepting abuse, ways of disciplining children, etc. Once the priorities have been established, it is easier to know the less important issues that can be ignored. It is important to pick your battles and know what is worth fighting about.

Sometimes couples are unable to resolve conflict successfully on their own. In these cases, it may be helpful to involve a third party who can bring some objectivity and wisdom to the table. It is important to choose this third party together, someone who is accepted and respected by each spouse. In selecting this third party, consider why he or she is being chosen and what this person will bring to the table. Sometimes, well-intentioned third parties can bring more conflict because they are not skilled at conflict resolution themselves. In some cases, it may be necessary to involve a professional mediator or counselor if family members are unable to be helpful for whatever reason.

A story about resolving conflict from the marital life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) provides a good example of how to bring in a third party. After a conflict which he and Aisha (*ra*) were not able to resolve on their own, he asked her to pick a mediator to help them. She told him to choose someone, so he chose Umar (*ra*). She disagreed, so he asked if she would agree to have her father Abu Bakr (*ra*) intervene. She agreed. When Abu Bakr arrived, he asked which one of them wanted to tell their side of the story first. Prophet Muhammad did not try to take his father-in-law aside to tell him his version first or to try to influence him. Instead, Aisha said her husband should speak first but he should speak the truth. At this, Abu Bakr was angry and moved towards his daughter as if to hit her. She hid behind her husband, who said, "We didn't bring you here for that." Then they proceeded to share their problem and take his input. Aisha was satisfied with the outcome.[115]

From this example, we can see that even the Prophet (pbuh) had some marital conflicts that he needed help to resolve. He did not feel ashamed

115 Al-Ghazali, *Ihyaa `Ulum ad-Din*, Volume 2, p. 39.

to ask for help, and he recognized the importance of having the third party be someone who was acceptable to both. Even though he was the Prophet (pbuh), he did not try to impose his opinion on his wife. We can also see the latitude he gave his wife to express herself freely, to the point that he didn't get upset when she insinuated that he may have presented a biased version of the story. And even in the midst of their conflict, Aisha still felt safe with her husband. Imagine that she hid behind him from her father, even when she was very upset with him. The instruction for the mediator is also clear in this story. The mediator should listen to both sides objectively and not give preference to either side.

In another example, the Prophet (pbuh) played the role of mediator between his daughter Fatima (*ra*) and his nephew Ali (*ra*). After some conflict with his wife, Ali went to sleep in the masjid. When the Prophet, who was also his father-in-law, heard about the situation, he brought Ali back home. He had the couple lie in their bed, and he lay down between them. In an effort to reconnect them, he took each of their hands and joined them on his chest and made *du`a* for them. Then he left. Ali said this intervention impacted him for the duration of his marriage, and he never got angry enough to leave his wife again.[116] In this case, the intervention was both spiritual and physical and shows that couples should be open to creative efforts at reconciliation.

Sometimes the issues underlying conflict can be very severe, such as the example of Aisha (*ra*) when she was rumored to have behaved immorally after being seen returning from a camp with one of the Companions.[117] This example shows the humanness of both the Prophet, who was greatly affected by the rumors, and Aisha. Aisha was not only deeply hurt by the rumors, but even more distressed by the fact that her husband needed to wait for divine revelation before being certain of her innocence, despite several people testifying about her good character. He did not know what to do in the face of these accusations against his wife, and he consulted with several companions. Although he did not mistreat her in any way during the month of uncertainty, she was aware that he was not as kind as he normally was, especially since she was sick

116 Al-Ghazali, *Ihyaa' `Ulum ad-Din*; also Tabarani, *al-Mu`jam al-Awsat*.

117 See Quran 24:11-20 and Bukhari Book #47, Hadith #829 for details.

during this time. This external stressor placed a strain on their relationship, yet they were able to recover, each one by putting complete trust in Allah (*swt*) that there would be a good resolution. This story shows that no one is immune to stressors that can adversely affect marriage, and that each spouse needs to practice tremendous patience and kindness even during the most difficult of times.

Tips for Conflict Resolution

- ❑ Make an appointment with each other to discuss the issue when there are no other distractions and each person can focus fully on the issue at hand.

- ❑ Make the intention to approach and resolve the issue in a manner that is productive, remembering that the person with whom you are in conflict is also your partner and teammate.

- ❑ Review and apply the guidelines outlined above under Element of Effective Communication.

- ❑ Remember the Qur'anic advice to "argue in the best manner,"[118] suggesting that even in times of disagreement, we must be polite and respectful.

- ❑ Try to deal with issues as they arise, rather than letting them pile up or fester.

- ❑ Remember that working through conflict is an opportunity for each person to grow and for the relationship to become stronger.

- ❑ Remember that the objective is not "winning" since you are both on the same team. Rather, the objective is to understand each other's perspective and to work towards a solution that is good

118 Qur'an 16:125.

for the wellbeing of the family unit. Focusing on the wellbeing of the family as a shared goal can help people step out of the power struggle and yield, knowing that yielding leads to a "win" for the family.

- ❑ Plan to do something fun or make each other laugh afterwards as a way to diffuse the situation and reconnect.

Decision-Making

The process for making decisions in a healthy marriage must include *shura* or consultation. While the husband has the leadership role in the family, he should utilize effective leadership skills that include assessing the needs of everyone involved, hearing the opinion of each person who will be affected by the decision. A good leader should strive for consensus (*ijmaa'*). The leader must make a point to hear from every one, as the Prophet (pbuh) did in the Battle of Badr, making sure all the parties were behind him. The people who will be most impacted by the decision must speak the most. In the example of the Battle of Badr, the Prophet made sure to seek the opinion of the Ansar (Muslims of Medina) because they had less reason and more to risk by fighting the Quraish then the Muhajirun. The Ansar were simply helping the Muhajirun to get their rights back. There are many examples in the *seerah* that illustrate the Prophet consulting with his companions and with his wives in a wide range of issues, from governance to daily living.[119]

When the Prophet was married to Khadijah (*ra*) and worked for her running her business, there were times when she relied on him to make decisions and other times when he was not involved at all. As his employer, she gave him time off to go to Hira, during which time he could not have been part of the decision-making process. Their marriage reflects a mutual trust and a partnership in which they both participated in decision-making.

In family matters, it makes sense for men to have a final say in matters where they have the most expertise, and for women to have the final say in matters where their expertise is greater. In my household (Imam Magid),

119 Ramadan. *In the Footsteps of the Prophet.*

we have a co-leadership model. We have divided the areas of leadership, and in her areas, my wife makes decisions without consulting me.

It is completely unwarranted for men to exclude their wives from the decision-making process simply because men are financial providers. We often hear men respond to their wives' complaints of being excluded by statements like, "It's my money. I'm paying for it, so why should I consult her?" This attitude will not bring any happiness to the marriage and can only result in resentment and disconnection on the part of the wife. Excluding her because of her financial dependence suggests that the husband is superior or doing her a favor. The fact is that the husband is mandated to provide for her financially, and to take care of her emotionally. Excluding or ignoring her is emotionally harmful. While the husband may be paying for things, the choices he makes will have an emotional impact on everyone involved. For example, a wife should have input into the home the husband is purchasing even if she is not contributing to the cost of the home because she will be living in it, taking care of it, and raising her children in it. She must feel comfortable in the home and express her needs, as long as they are within the family budget.

A Decision-Making Process

Consult them in affairs (of moment). Then, when you have taken a decision put your trust in Allah. For Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him). (3:159)

1. *Istishaara* (consultation):

Before making any decision, the couple should consider the pros and cons of the decision, with a focus on achieving benefit (*maslaha*) for the family. *Shura* (consultation) in the family must consider the wellbeing of the whole family. Preventing harm (*dar' al-mafaasid*) takes priority over attaining benefits (*jalb al-masaalih*).[120] Spouses should realize that

120 This is a maxim in Islamic jurisprudence.

if the harm of any choice will outweigh the benefits, then that choice should be abandoned.

For example. Anas has a job offer that will bring him a better salary, but he has to relocate. His current job pays the bills, but he believes it is better for him to move because he will make more money at the new job. On the other hand, his wife Sumayyah prefers to stay where they are because she believes the children are settled and doing well in school, the family has a good support system in the community, and the family is able to manage on Anas' current income. They do not know anyone in the city where Anas has received a job offer. Anas needs to consider that the marriage may suffer if they move because his wife and children may become frustrated and feel isolated even though they would have more money.

In consulting with each other, Anas and Sumayyah should explain their perspectives, evaluating the pros and cons of moving. Although they each may feel strongly about their respective position, it is important to take the time to listen carefully and consider the other person's perspective. During this process, one spouse should not be selfish by excluding the partner's needs. In addition, it is not healthy in the long run to remain passive, and simply go along with what the other partner wants, especially if a decision is being made that will negatively impact the family. Depending on the situation, spouses may need to negotiate compromise to meet each person's needs as best as possible, while also keeping the wellbeing of the family as a whole in mind.

An example of selfishness taking over the decision-making process occurred in the case where a man wanted to go to law school. Pursuing a law degree was something he really wanted, and his parents were going to pay for the expenses. Meanwhile, his wife wanted to complete her master's degree. She was accepted into a program that was only offered in a local university, while he was accepted in multiple programs. He decided to pursue a program in a university that did not offer his wife's degree. Since he had other options that would have taken care of both of their needs, he should have selected the program where his wife was also accepted rather than focus on his preferences to the exclusion of her needs. When these kinds of unilateral decisions are made repeatedly, there will ultimately be negative consequences for both people, often with the result of the marriage being destroyed.

In making decisions, it is important to distinguish between needs, necessities and luxuries in order to prioritize what is most important. A need (*haajah*) is something you identify that will improve the quality of your life, but you could technically survive without it. The needs to be loved and respected fall into this category. On the other hand, a necessity (*darurah*) is something you cannot live without, like food. Then there are those things in life that simply complete your needs (*takmiliyyaat*). For example, a person may need a car in order to get to work, but having an SUV specifically is not really necessary. It is an example of *takmiliyyaat*. Sometimes people confuse what they need with what would simply enhance their life. Sorting what we want into each of these categories can sometimes ease the decision-making process.

2. *Istikhaarah* (prayer seeking guidance from Allah):[121]

This prayer can be prayed anytime except times when prayer is n permissible. It is basically a *du`a* that is made after praying two *rak`a* of *nafl* (optional or voluntary prayer). The *du`a* should be made when a person is uncertain of a decision after doing research and engaging in consultation. It should be made with full conviction that the prayer will be answered. The answer is typically in the form of a person feeling more confident or at peace with the decision. While some people may have dreams that inform them of the answer to their prayer, having a dream is not necessary as a response to this prayer. The process of *istikhaarah* in and of itself can bring comfort to people and help them accept when the outcome is not what they might have wanted.

3. *Iraadah* (strong will in decision-making):

Executing the decision is just as important as making the decision. Once a decision has been made, it is important to follow through. Sometimes couples take the time to come to an agreement after many

121 The details of how to perform *istikhaarah* can be found in Appendix 2.

lengthy conversations, then one or both partners do not follow through. The lack of will sometimes reflects a lack of conviction in the decision; other times it may reflect some anxiety or fear about the consequences. For example, the couple may have decided to take a certain action in disciplining a child but may have some anxiety about the repercussions interfering with following through. Every decision has a consequence. Part of the decision-making process is to anticipate these consequences and be prepared to deal with them. Not following through on decisions can lead to missed opportunities and wasted resources. Furthermore, if there has been an agreement and one person does not follow through, the outcome will be mistrust in future decision-making.

4. *Tawakkul* (reliance on Allah, swt):

Referring to the verse at the beginning of this section, it is clear that relying on Allah (*swt*) is the final step in the decision-making process after completing the consultation process. Many people skip the first two steps, just wanting to make a decision. For example, the husband might say, "We are going to leave the US and move to the UAE." When his wife objects because he may not have a job in hand or he may not have looked into the children's school situation, or the housing situation, he might say, "We'll depend on Allah (*tawakkul*)." This scenario is not only an example of poor decision-making, but an example of a good way to alienate one's spouse and foster resentment in the relationship.

Exceptions

There are of course situations when the decision-making process outlined above may need to be modified. For example, in any situation where there is imminent danger, it may not be appropriate to take time to consult multiple parties about what to do. The most appropriate thing to do might be to act according to your best judgment. In cases of domestic violence, which will be discussed in Chapter 10, it is not appropriate for the victim

to discuss safety options with the person being violent. The person being abused can and should consult with others (trusted family and/or friends, professionals, etc.), and can still follow the rest of the decision-making process outlined above. However, in the case of imminent danger, the person in danger should just call 911. Similarly, if your child is not breathing, you wouldn't wait to consult your spouse before calling 911. Safety must be restored in order for joint decision-making to be possible.

Stress Management

Stress is a part of life, and it is important that people develop effective stress management skills in order to prevent stress from taking a toll on one's health, relationships, and/or work. Any stressor that impacts either one of the spouses can potentially impact the marriage if not handled properly. There are many self-help resources to help people manage stress better. This section will simply provide an overview to help yo become more aware of the role stress can play and how to begin mana ing it more effectively.

One thing to be aware of in a relationship is that different people get stressed by different things, and each person responds to stress differently. So you may find it stressful to have limited financial resources, while your spouse may find it more stressful to manage a great deal of money. One person may find it relaxing to spend the whole weekend with extended family, while the other person may feel suffocated and trapped and just want to spend some time alone. As part of getting to know each other prior to marriage, share with each other the kinds of things you experience as stressful, what you do to cope with stress, and the ways in which you take care of yourself to prevent stress from wearing you down.

Couples often come in for counseling when the stress levels are too high for them to manage on their own. They may be stressed due to a job change, demands from in-laws, inability to balance multiple responsibilities, communication problems, and internal stressors like anxiety or other health issues. How we react to stress is a function of our personality, our faith, and our perception of the stressor itself. For example, many people are stressed because they compare what they have to others, or

they worry about lost opportunities, or they struggle to adjust to life's transitions. While much of this is very natural, the Qur'an addresses this type of stress by reminding us that any misfortune that befalls us is part of the will of Allah (*swt*), and that we should not dwell on things we feel we have missed.[122]

Other people worry about the future and about things beyond their control. They end up not being able to enjoy the present because they are so focused on the future. While it is our responsibility to do our best to prepare and work for the future, we should also remember that ultimately, Allah (*swt*) is going to take care of us. We can only manage what is in our control.

Since Allah (*swt*) promises that He will test everyone with some sort of trial,[123] we should prepare ourselves with the best tools to deal with these tests in the best possible manner. Just as a person engages in preventive care to have a healthy immune system ready to fight diseases, we can strengthen our emotional wellbeing so that we can have a healthy response to stressors. Some of the components of a healthy emotional lifestyle include getting proper sleep and exercise, having a nutritional diet, enhancing spirituality, having a good support network, living a balanced life (time for work, play, worship), and knowing and communicating what you need.

When people do not have a healthy lifestyle and are unable to communicate what they are experiencing and what they need, relationships tend to suffer. Some people may internalize their stress and become very irritable and edgy. Other people may shut down and withdraw. In both cases, if the spouse is unaware of what is going on, he or she may come to some erroneous conclusions such as assuming the person is no longer interested in the marriage. Clear communication is especially critical during stressful times, which is usually when people tend to have more difficulty communicating clearly due to being stressed. It requires extra effort to be mindful and intentional about communicating clearly and constructively. This extra effort will pay off when you get the support and understanding you need from your spouse, once he or she has been brought into the loop and understands what's going on.

---

122 Qur'an 57:22-23.

123 Ibid. 2:155.

Sometimes spouses see their partners being stressed and have no idea what to do to help. The best thing to do is simply ask, "What can I do?" or "What do you need right now?" or "How can I help?" These questions may seem obvious, but often people do not ask them. Instead, they end up feeling helpless as they try things they **assume** are helpful; later when they get negative feedback, the couple may end up fighting. Sometimes the person who needs support may not know exactly what form of support they really need. Instead of identifying how their partner can help, they express frustration that the other person doesn't know how to help. This is an unfair expectation since we can't expect others to know something about us that we don't know about ourselves.

Some suggestions for dealing with stress more effectively include:

- ❑ Identify the stressors in your life. It may be something concrete like a new job or a conflictual relationship, or it may be something less tangible like uncertainty about the future.

- ❑ Identify what helps you to feel calm and relaxed. This list cou include a range of activities like exercise, prayer, sitting in natur reading, having a cup of tea, playing with children, talking to a friend, going for a drive, etc.

- ❑ Reflect on experiences you've had being encouraged to identify what others could do for you when you are stressed.
    - Do you prefer to have someone listen to you or do you prefer to have alone-time?
    - Do you like to be given advice, hear reminders from the Qur'an, or simply be given assurance that things will be OK?

- ❑ Practice communicating what stresses you, what helps you, and what others can do to support you when you feel stressed.

- ❑ Practice letting people know when they have been helpful, so they know what to do in the future.

Anger Management

Anger is a natural and necessary human emotion. It is useful in that it provides information that something is wrong, and cues us to evaluate a situation to determine what action we need to take. Anger becomes problematic when it is expressed destructively, when it is not managed, and when it is used to control others through intimidation. Anger can be a primary emotion when it is in response to oppression or injustice, and it can be a secondary emotion when it masks underlying hurt, sadness or fear. A more extreme form of anger is rage, which can occur when people have accumulated anger and a complete loss of control.

Most Muslims are familiar with the oft-quoted hadith in which Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) advised a man not to get angry.[124] Sometimes this hadith is taken literally to mean that a Muslim should not experience anger at all. However, this hadith is an example of the Prophet (pbuh) knowing that the person seeking advice in this case was quick to anger. His advice was in response to this man's specific needs.

In fact, the Prophet (pbuh) himself was known to get angry, and the Companions relayed that his face used to get red when he was angry.[125] What we learn from his example, however, is **how** he acted when he was angry. In the case of an injustice, he was known to take action. For example, when he saw Abu Masud al-Badri (*ra*) whipping his slave from a distance, the Prophet (pbuh) yelled at him to stop and told him to remember the power Allah (*swt*) has over him, rather than the power Abu Masud had over the boy.[126] In other cases, such as when he was approached by Wahshy (*ra*), the man who killed Hamza (*ra*), the Prophet told Wahshy he did not want to see his face.[127]

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) is not known to have ever reacted with hurting someone verbally or physically. Even when he heard rumors about his wife Aisha (*ra*) being unchaste, she reported that he was simply a little less kind than usual, but not that he was harsh in any way.

---

124 Bukhari. Book #73. Hadith #137.

125 Multiple hadith, including Bukhari. Book #2. Hadith #19; Book #2. Hadith #91 & 92.

126 Khan. M. Z. (1975) (Trans.). *Gardens of the Righteous: Riyadh as-Salihin of Imam Nawawi*. Chapter 280. Hadith #1609.

127 Bukhari. Book #59. Hadith #399.

Through these examples of his behavior, we see the embodiment of the Qur'anic description of believers as those who "restrain their anger."[128]

Individuals can be angered by different things, and they may react in many different ways when angry. Although your partner may be the one whose behavior angers, you, it is your responsibility to choose how to express that anger. In counseling, we often hear people blaming their spouses for "making them" yell, scream insults, throw or break things, and even causing physical harm. While your spouse may certainly know how to push your buttons, only you can determine if the pushed button will lead you to raise your voice or excuse yourself until you feel calm enough to talk about it.

It is inevitable that sooner or later, your spouse will do or say something, intentionally or unintentionally, to make you angry. If anger is viewed as simply a means of providing information that something is wrong, then it can actually facilitate needed growth and change by being the catalyst for addressing issues that may be creating problems. In order to use anger in a beneficial way, people must understand it an know how to avoid being controlled by it.

Sometimes people get angry when their expectations aren't m These expectations might be related to mundane things like the laundry not being done on time, or the clothes not being folded properly. Or expectations may be tied to values and beliefs such that a person gets angry when his or her spouse isn't "religious enough," or does not practice Islam in the expected way. Some expectations are reasonable (expecting your spouse to talk to you with respect and treat you with care), while others are not (expecting your spouse to read your mind). Talking through these expectations can be helpful in identifying what is reasonable, what your spouse can accommodate, and what you may need to release.

When anger is related to "fixing" the other person, it is usually helpful to recognize that we can only "fix" ourselves. Whether it is trying to get your partner to see things the way you do, or to behave the way you think a good Muslim should behave, it is counterproductive to put energy into changing anyone other than yourself. The best you can do

128 Qur'an 3:134.

is to follow the example of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) who changed people simply by being a good model. He accepted that each person had their own struggles and journey to become the best person they could be. In addition to being a good model, he employed several other strategies that inspired people to change: patience, tolerance, respectful manner of speaking, kindness, fairness, open-mindedness and prayer. When he needed to correct someone's behavior, he was gentle and avoided criticizing and scolding.[129] He was reminded by Allah (*swt*) that he only had the power to be a reminder to others, but only Allah (*swt*) has the power to change others.[130]

Even in a situation where his followers' disobedience created a threat to national security during the battle of Uhud, Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) remained gentle in his manner. Allah (*swt*) advised him, and by extension us, to deal with those who disobeyed him by forgiving them, asking Allah (*swt*) to forgive them, then consulting them.[131] There is no advice to be punitive or to take out his anger and disappointment in any harsh manner. If this is the model for us to follow in grave matters, then there is obviously no legitimate reason for us to lash out or be aggressive in the minor matters that tend to cause marital friction.

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) offered advice to help people manage anger. Some of these suggestions include:

- Saying "*A`udhu billahi min asshaitan al-rajeem*,"[132] which means, "I seek refuge in Allah from Satan."

- Changing your position. If you are standing, sit down, if you are sitting, lie down.[133]

- Making *wudu* because anger is like fire and can be calmed with water.[134]

---

129 *Gardens of the Righteous*. Chapter 91. Hadith #704.

130 Qur`an 88:21.

131 Ibid. 3:159.

132 Bukhari. Book #54. Hadith #502.

133 Abu Dawood. Book # 41. Hadith #4764.

134 Ibid.. Hadith #4766.

According to Imam Ghazali in *Ihyaa' 'Ulum Ad-Din*, there are several causes of anger: selfishness, feeling a loss of control, arrogance, being irrational, or running out of ammunition to make the other person submit when there is no logical or rational way to get them to follow you. He recommended managing anger by:

- ❑ Asking yourself why you are angry.
- ❑ Remembering the reward Allah (*swt*) gives to those who control their anger (7:199).
- ❑ Remembering the justice of Allah (*swt*) and His power over people, instead of your power over others.
- ❑ Cleaning your heart of hatred and grudges and not allowing anger to overtake your heart.
- ❑ Imagining how you look when you are angry. Most people wou not be pleased with how they look in this state.
- ❑ Not letting S*haitan* tell you that you've been belittled or disrespected if you don't show anger or violence. In other words, don't be misguided into thinking that violence is a sign of strength or manhood.
- ❑ Remembering that not everything in this world goes your way. Allah (*swt*) has power over the universe.

Responding to another person's anger is also part of anger management. If a person is expressing their anger constructively by taking the time to calmly explain what upset him or her, the other person should listen and try to understand. This response sends a message that you value the other person enough to hear what makes him or her angry. On the other hand, if a person is expressing anger by yelling insults, throwing or breaking things, it is important to draw a line and calmly let the person know that this behavior is not acceptable. If you give in

to a person just to calm him or her down, this response sends a message that being violent is an effective way to get what is desired, and there is no incentive to express anger any differently. If a person is out of control and being violent, the other person should do whatever is necessary to keep herself or himself safe. Sometimes, it is best to excuse yourself from the room or the house until the other person calms down. It is best to have an agreement ahead of time that either person can call a time out until things are calm. By having an agreement, the other person will not feel abandoned or ignored but will know that for the sake of the wellbeing of the relationship, a time out is needed. Anything that is said or done when people are out of control typically causes damage that is irreparable, so it is best to prevent and avoid this level of escalation.

Ideally, when couples are able to follow the suggestions outlined above under Communication, they can avoid situations where conflicts escalate to the level where someone is out of control. Having clear and consistent communication prevents issues from building up and accumulating, and also contributes to a relationship in which both people feel valued and respected. In these healthy relationships, partners are more likely to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. So even if one person does something upsetting, that behavior will be interpreted through the lens of a belief that he or she probably didn't mean it. This belief minimizes the intensity of anger.

We've seen many couples where one or both spouses have difficulty letting go of anger, sometimes believing that the person who lets go is weaker or has lost the fight. This kind of thinking can take a couple to a place where no one wins. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, "The strong is not the one who overcomes the people by his strength, but the strong is the one who controls himself while in anger."[135] When it comes to marriage, remembering that you are both on the same team can help eliminate the loser-winner mentality. Instead, focus on what you both value in terms of your relationship and try to find some middle ground where you can both agree. If that isn't possible, then sometimes you have to take one for the team.

---

135 Bukhari, Book #73, Hadith #135.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- ❑ What is your preferred mode of communication: face to face, written, phone?
- ❑ How did your parents communicate?
- ❑ Do you prefer to discuss problems, or do you tend to avoid raising issues that may cause conflict?
- ❑ How did your parents make decisions?
- ❑ What is your personal process for decision-making?
- ❑ What method do you think couples should practice for decision making?
- ❑ What kinds of things make you angry?
- ❑ How do you deal with anger?
- ❑ What do you imagine is a good process to have in your marriage when one or both of you are angry?
- ❑ What do you expect from the person who has angered you? If you expect an apology, what are the ingredients of a "good" apology?

CHAPTER 9:

Finances[136]



And let not your hand be tied (like a miser) to your neck, nor stretch it forth to its utmost (like a spend-thrift) so that you become blameworthy and in severe poverty. Truly your Lord enlarges the provision for whom He wills and reduces it for whom He wills. Verily, He is Ever All-Knowing, All-Seeing of His servants. (17:29-30)

The topic of finances is typically a hot-button issue in most marriages. People can have very strong beliefs about money, and there are also often cultural taboos that make it difficult to speak openly about expectations related to money. People have different financial philosophies and different relationships to money. Some people are savers, others are spenders; some people get offended if they are given money as a gift while other people get offended if money is not offered. Many people are reluctant to discuss money issues because of beliefs that it is shameful or disrespectful, while others avoid the topic because of how emotional it can become. Because it is such an important issue, it is one

136 Written with Yusuf Abugideiri, CFP®, financial planner at Yeske Buie.

that people must become comfortable addressing if they intend to share a life together. If potential spouses have not addressed their beliefs and expectations regarding money, they are likely to find themselves in a situation where one or both of them experience a great deal of disappointment and frustration.

Before marriage, take some time to discuss what each of you values as a priority and where money fits in. Be honest with yourself and your potential spouse about what kind of lifestyle you want to have. It's easy for someone who is in love to say, "All I need is you," but when the infatuation stage is over, the minimalist home may no longer be satisfactory for some people. It's also easy to misjudge someone by looking at their current lifestyle, which may reflect specific circumstances more than a particular value or goal for the future. While making assumptions regarding any issue can get you into trouble, the area of finances is definitely one in which you don't want to leave any room for misunderstandings or unclear expectations. In extended family situations, these conversations may need to include other key players in addition to the couple getting married.

What Is Your Priority?

Take a moment to ask yourself what matters most to you as you prepare yourself for marriage. Is it the relationship itself, or is it financial gain or financial security? If your focus or your potential spouse's focus is on material gain, then there may be many pitfalls ahead. Culturally, financial status and security are often priorities. For this reason, matrimonial ads may focus on seeking a physician or a person with another career that yields a good income. We are not suggesting that financial stability is insignificant. However, a focus on finances can lead people to overlook more important issues that are relevant to the success of a marriage. Sometimes, fathers marry their daughters to older men because they believe their daughters will be better provided for by a man whose career is well established. When parents' only focus is on financial stability, they may disregard the fact that their daughter is not compatible with the prospective son-in-law. When a woman reported to the Prophet

Muhammad (pbuh) that her father married her to his nephew to elevate her social status, the Prophet informed her of the option to divorce if she was not happy. She opted to stay married, saying she had only wanted to know if women have a say in the marriage.[137]

On the other hand, some people's focus on getting married is solely to avoid engaging in premarital sexual relations. In their effort to have a lawful relationship, they may overlook some of the other necessary factors in having a successful marriage, namely how they will support a new family. It is necessary to consider how such an important relationship will be sustained from a practical point of view. Some people believe it is unnecessary to talk about money because they do not understand the concept of *rizq* (sustenance or provision from Allah). While people of all financial backgrounds can get married, it is important to know how to live within one's means.

Islamic Perspective

The issue of finances was also part of the marriage of the Prophet, (pbuh). His marriage to Khadijah (*ra*) and their financial relationship differed from that of his other wives later in his life. Looking at his marriages, we can see a variety of financial arrangements, indicating the flexibility that is part of the Islamic perspective. Khadijah was his employer and significantly more wealthy than he was, supporting him and his mission. His later marriages were to women from different backgrounds, some of whom earned money and some of whom did not. As a prophet, he lived a very simple lifestyle. At one point, his wives complained about the financial situation and asked for more money. When he said he couldn't afford to give them more money, they suggested he take some of the income that was going into the treasury. At that point, he reminded them of the choice they had made when they married him to have a spiritual, rather than material, focus in life. Allah (*swt*) advised him to give his wives a choice: to either accept living within his means and getting a reward in the Hereafter, or to be released from the marriage

137 Nisai, Hadith #3271.

to pursue a worldly life.[138] So even the most noble couples are not above talking about finances and even having different financial aspirations. What is most important is that each spouse has to be clear about his or her priorities, and as a couple, the spouses should be aligned.

Men are mandated in the Qur'an to be financially responsible for women.[139] As part of that responsibility, men must do their best to earn enough to support their families. There is nothing wrong with having limited financial means as long as a person is doing his best. In these cases, a wife who does not have her own income or assets must simply be willing to live within her husband's limited means. However, it is completely irresponsible for a man to approach a woman for marriage when he is making no effort to earn a living, relying on his belief that Allah (*swt*) will provide.

Sometimes women agree to marry a man even if he cannot support her, waiving her financial rights because she is eager to be in a relationship. While this situation may feel acceptable at the beginning, most women will eventually expect the husband to provide. And ultimately, is his Islamic duty to provide. Therefore, even if a woman waives her inancial rights, the husband is not absolved of the responsibility, and his wife can demand her right at any time.

Some men consider the financial support they are providing to be a favor to the wife, and they may use the fact they are supporting her as a way to control her or put her down. Instead, he should consider his financial support as part of the fulfillment of his obligation to Allah (*swt*). Other men view finances as a strictly male domain; they do not share any information about their financial situation, nor do they include their wives in financial decision-making. This situation often brings couples into conflict.

At the same time, there are women who take advantage of the husband's financial situation and demand much more than they need. They may equate money and gifts with love. Unfortunately, women who seem to care only about how much money their husband earns or how many extravagant gifts he buys make it harder for other women to have the

138 Qur'an 33: 28-29.

139 Qur'an 4:34.

trust of their husbands, who may be afraid of being taken advantage of. Other women subscribe to the notion that it is not their place to ask about finances or to contribute to decision-making. They may witness their husband making unwise decisions or getting himself (and thereby his family) into debt. Or what we often see is that something happens to the husband, and she is completely in the dark about a financial catastrophe that she has now inherited.

> *Omar was clear from the beginning of the marriage that Sarah's job was to take care of the home and had no need to know about his financial situation as long as he was providing shelter and food for her. She saw no problem with this arrangement; in fact, it was similar to her own parents' arrangement. After several years, the couple decided to divorce for reasons unrelated to finances. Omar moved back to Sudan, and Sarah remained in the US near her extended family. A year later, the IRS informed Sarah that there were errors in several tax returns, and that since the couple had filed jointly, she was responsible for paying the delinquent taxes. Sarah had signed the tax returns each year, but she had no clue what she was signing.*

This unfortunate situation with the IRS could easily have been prevented had Sarah been more aware of her husband's financial situation. While retaining his role as the sole provider and primary decision-maker regarding finances, Omar should have shared the financial situation with Sarah because she was financially liable as his wife when signing any joint financial document. Sarah realized too late that she should have asked questions and reviewed the tax return before signing it, or the couple could have opted for filing separate tax returns if Omar was unwilling to be financially transparent. In this case, Omar wanted the benefits of filing jointly without being willing to treat his wife as a partner and include her in the financial picture.

Marriage that is established as a partnership includes transparency and consultation. Both partners should always be focused on the

wellbeing of the relationship when making financial decisions and transactions. Neither spouse should take advantage of the other, hide information from the other, or make major decisions without involving the other person. And ultimately, all financial decisions should bear in mind the higher focus of pleasing Allah (*swt*). This perspective can remind people to be balanced in their spending and can guide people about where and how to spend their money. From a spiritual point of view, it is better to prioritize spending money on charity because that is a way to bring blessings for your family. We encourage new couples to make their first "bill" some form of *sadaqah* (charity) as a way to bring blessing into their money.

When it comes to an Islamic philosophy of money, there are three golden rules:

1. Remember that Allah (*swt*) is *al-Razzaaq* (the Provider). He is the One who bestows material blessings. At the same time, people have to do their best to earn. The Prophet (pbuh) said, "If you were to rely upon Allah with the required reliance, then He would provide for you just as the bird is provided for; it goes out in the morning hungry and returns full."[140] This hadith teaches us that we have to put forth effort to earn our living, just as birds fly in search of their food; but ultimately, it is Allah (*swt*) who will provide.

   There is also the issue of being balanced in terms of how hard we work. Working multiple jobs in order to buy luxury items that you don't have time to enjoy can lead to a life that is unbalanced, unfulfilling and ultimately exhausting. While there is nothing wrong with working hard to increase your wealth, work must always be balanced with family life, health, and spirituality in order to promote a healthy family environment.

2. Remember that any money spent on your family as a means towards fulfilling your obligation is rewarded by Allah (*swt*),

140 Tirmidhi. Hadith #2344.

"even if it is a morsel which you put in your wife's mouth."[141] In no way should a man ever make his wife feel bad or indebted to him for providing because it is his obligation to do so; nevertheless, he will be rewarded for doing so sincerely. The Prophet (pbuh) gave examples of recommended ways to spend money, including for the sake of Allah (*swt*) and to free a captive. He emphasized that the greatest reward is for money spent on one's family.[142] Therefore, a husband should provide for his wife with love and generosity.

Women who are being supported by their husbands should remember to express appreciation and acknowledge that the husband works hard to provide for her. Hearing appreciation prevents men from feeling taken advantage of. Seeing that a wife is careful not to waste and avoids being extravagant also conveys appreciation for his efforts. Many men tell us they don't feel appreciated for their efforts to support the family. One newly married man shared that it meant a great deal to him when his wife, who was also contributing financially, said to him, "Thank you so much for working hard to provide for us." He explained that he felt valued and respected. He also recognized that it was new for her to have to stick to a budget, so he made a point to let her know how much it meant to him that she was conscientious about adjusting her spending habits. This mutual appreciation is a great example of how couples can reinforce positive behaviors in each other and foster a feeling of partnership.

There are situations where men are unable to provide for their wives, for one reason or another. It may be that he had some unusual circumstances or that he lost his job or had to support many family members. Whatever the reason, sometimes it is appropriate for a woman to support her husband, too. The Prophet (pbuh) was supported by his wife Khadijah (*ra*), who was

141 Bukhari, Book #2, Hadith #53.

142 Muslim, Book #005, Hadith #2183.

a woman of means and who supported the cause of Islam during very difficult times. Men in these situations should also make sure to express appreciation, to contribute by working around the house and by giving support in other ways. By helping around the house, and contributing financially when he is able to, the family will still feel supported. Each partner can do whatever they are able to improve the situation for the whole family.

3. Avoid excessive spending (*israaf*) and unlawful spending (*tabdheer*). The Qur'an describes those who spend money in prohibited ways as being the "brothers of *Shaitan*."[143] Examples of unlawful spending include gambling, womanizing, and buying alcohol.

   Excessive spending refers to money that is spent on something permissible, like a television, but is in excess of what is needed. The issue of need is relative and is determined by what a person can afford, as well as the situation. For example, if two practicing medical doctors are married, they may need (and can afford) both a housekeeper and a nanny since neither spouse is at home. In comparison, a stay-at-home mother whose husband earns just enough to survive would not be justified in insisting on a housekeeper. Each situation is different, and each couple needs to assess what they can afford and what they need. People generally know when they are spending excessively, even if they choose to ignore the part of themselves that is aware.

   Due to being driven by commercialism, it is common for many families to spend more than they earn and to accumulate more than what they actually use. It is easy to get caught up in consumerism, buying the newest version of everything whether you need it or not, and worrying about what other people will think or say about the house you live in or the car your drive. It is

143 "Verily, spendthrifts (*mubadhireen*) are brothers of the devils, and the Devil is ever ungrateful to his Lord." (17:27)

important to be mindful of your purchases, assessing why you are making the purchase and how it relates to your priorities.

Umar ibn al-Khattab (*ra*) stopped a man he saw carrying meat. He asked him, "What is this?" The man said, "I desired it, so I bought it." Umar replied, "Do you buy everything you desire? Aren't you afraid you will be among the people in the Qur'an described as exhausting their enjoyment in this worldly life?"[144] Umar's story is a reminder to think about our purchases carefully and to avoid getting overly focused on this world instead of the Hereafter.

To summarize the Islamic perspective, the key in all matters is always moderation. Allah (*swt*) says, "And they who when they spend, are neither extravagant nor stingy, and (keep) between these the just mean" (25:67). Allah (*swt*) also emphasizes spending within one's means: "let him who has ample means spend in accordance with his amplitude, and let him whose means of subsistence are scanty spend in accordance with what Allah has given him... (65:7).

Financial Planning

Financial planning is an ongoing process. It includes establishing realistic goals about what you can afford now, mid-term and long-term. It also includes having savings, identifying financial priorities, and planning for hard times. In addition, couples should spend plenty of time discussing what they consider to be wants versus needs, which may change depending on circumstances and are definitely very subjective. The example of Ahmad and Sonia shows how subjective these definitions are and how differences could lead to potential conflict if not resolved.

144 Al-'Aqqad. *'Abqariyyat Umar*. The verse referred to in this story is "And on the Day that the Unbelievers will be placed before the fire, (it will be said to them): "You received your good things in the life of the world, and you took your pleasure out of them, but today you shall be recompensed with a penalty of humiliation, for that you were arrogant on the earth without just cause and that you transgressed" (46:20).

Ahmad, the son of a hard-working immigrant who worked two to three jobs to provide for his large family, and Sonia, the daughter of a surgeon and a high powered attorney, differed significantly on what they considered "basic needs." Sonia "needed" a luxury car, whereas Ahmad believed it was excessive to spend money on a luxury, new car when he could get around perfectly fine with a used mid-range car. He also let Sonia know that her shopping habits would need to change radically. She thought he was being stingy; he thought she was spoiled. Each one was simply defining their needs according to what they knew and were used to. For Sonia and Ahmad to have a successful relationship, each one would have to make changes that would be outside their comfort zone. Unless they are both willing to be very flexible and adjust their values related to money, they are likely to have ongoing, recurrent conflict.

Successfully managing finances requires responsible spending habits and the ability to determine what is necessary, what is just for fun, what is superfluous, and what is simply irresponsible. Again, people have different definitions of what is necessary and what is fun. These definitions are influenced by people's values and their contexts. Regardless of what people deem necessary versus extra, responsible spending requires people to make sure they are paying their bills and living within their means. Irresponsible spending is spending on luxuries before taking care of basic needs.

Before marriage, plans should be made based on one income because the husband is mandated to provide financially,[145] whether the husband is the sole provider or in the event one spouse loses a job. Many couples begin their life planning a lifestyle that is based on two incomes and may live on a large scale. If circumstances change down the road and income is decreased, they may have trouble adjusting to a lower standard of living. Other times, people live beyond their means,

145 See Chapter 3 on Gender Roles, and Qur'an 4:34.

stretching their finances to live on a grand scale but barely making ends meet. This type of lifestyle is stressful and ultimately lands many people in debt.

It is important to assess the financial situation of each person before marriage. Once there is a commitment to getting married, each person should be transparent about their financial situation. If a man is not earning enough to be the sole provider, the couple should discuss their options and whether the woman will be contributing to the family income. There are situations where the husband is not able to provide enough for a comfortable lifestyle, and at the same time he does not want his wife to work. In other situations, the husband may make it clear that he expects a certain contribution each month from his wife. In all cases, the couple should discuss their situation in detail and describe their expectations, in addition to what each one is willing to do financially. They should also discuss their preferences about having joint accounts or separate accounts, who will pay the bills, how aggressively they will save, and what they believe regarding the permissibility of loans, mortgages, and other financial agreements.

Since a person's financial history before marriage is part of the pac' age being brought into the new relationship, any issues that one pers has regarding the other's financial situation should be raised prior t marriage. When people have poor credit histories, have filed for bankruptcy or have accumulated a lot of debt, it is helpful to explore how these situations will impact the marriage and what plan of action will be taken to address these issues.

We recommend that couples enter into a prenuptial agreement for the protection of both parties. Assets and income should be declared, with clear understandings about what is joint and what is separate. If a woman has any assets, the husband has no right to them. Some men take advantage of a woman's financial status, relying on her even though this is not the right kind of relationship Islamically.

Many couples struggle around the issue of whether to have joint or separate accounts. We suggest that when people don't agree on merging their finances, she should have her personal account, and he should have his. Then they should have a joint expense account from which the home expenses are paid. This arrangement allows couples who disagree about

spending habits to have discretionary spending money without compromising the household budget. Regardless, it is a good idea for a woman to have her own account so that she can participate in the household expenses to the degree she feels comfortable, keeping her own money separate. It is a woman's Islamic right to maintain her own money and assets without any obligation to share in the household expenses.

When people get married young, like college students, parents may be the ones initially supporting the couple. It is a blessing when parents are able to help their young adult children start off their life with relative ease. This support can alleviate a lot of financial stress and can prevent people from delaying their marriage unnecessarily. At the same time, it is important for the whole family to plan how the couple will transition to financial independence. We encourage these young couples to play some role, even if very limited, in meeting their financial needs. In this way, there is a conditioning and preparation for the financial reality of supporting a family.

Even as parents help out with money, they should recognize the couples' need to establish themselves and become independent. Sometimes parents provide financial support with expectations or conditions attached to this support. In these situations, the young couple, particularly the in-law, may become very uncomfortable if they are being held accountable for all of their spending. The couple should be mindful of the ways in which being financially dependent may open the door to family members feeling the right to impose their views on how the couple should live. Having open and clear communication up front about expectations on both sides can prevent avoidable frustration or resentment down the road.

Other couples may not be as fortunate and may be starting their lives off with student and other loans, supporting elderly parents or other relatives, and dealing with the challenges of supporting a new family. These couples need to take extra time to ensure they have a budget agreeable to both and a commitment to stick to the budget. These couples should be prepared to be particularly patient and supportive with each other if their financial situation is stressful, and they should make a point to identify ways to help them cope with their stress so that they don't take out the stress on each other. Couples can be creative in identifying free

or low-cost ways to relax and have fun. Strengthening their spirituality can also be helpful.

Making a Budget

For many people, the idea of making a budget is overwhelming, and they don't know where to start. In its simplest form, a budget is simply a list of all sources and amounts of both income and expenses. In the beginning of the marriage, the expenses may need to be estimated based on each person's individual expenses and anticipated joint expenses. After a few months, it is possible to get a more accurate picture of what is being spent.

There are lots of resources available to help people make a budget. As part of an online banking account, some banks offer a service that tracks spending and puts expenses into categories. Some credit card companies also offer this feature, which helps people see where their mone is going and allows for spending patterns to be identified. There are al many software programs and apps that can help people create a budget

In order to develop a budget, each person needs to be willing t share information about their respective finances openly and honestly. It is helpful to look at bank statements, credit card statements, income tax returns and any other documents that contain information about your financial history. The budget should include input from both spouses. Even if one person takes the lead on identifying the categories and creating the skeleton, it is important for the other person to review it to make sure categories haven't been overlooked.

While it may be time-consuming up front, taking the time to gather this information and plug it into a spreadsheet or program can save a lot of headache and heartache down the road. Some people may be resistant to the idea of creating a budget because they are afraid they will be constricted in their spending. In reality, having a budget can be very empowering because you know exactly where you stand and can make financial decisions in a well-informed manner. Having a structure actually provides more freedom because you are not worried about whether or not you will be able to pay your bills at the end of the month.

The budget should be viewed as a roadmap to be revisited periodically to make sure it is still aligned with where you want to go as a couple. If you are not happy with the budget, at least you are now completely clear about your financial situation and can make changes intentionally and with a clear plan of action. As your circumstances change (new job, new child, new home, etc.), the budget should be updated. When income decreases for any reason, the budget must be updated to make sure that needs are met before any unnecessary spending.

When income is gained, it can be helpful to develop some policies or rules that are mutually acceptable. For example, if a couple has already allocated income to bills, some discretionary spending and savings, they should plan ahead for what will be done with extra income from a bonus, a gift, a raise or inheritance. One policy might be that every extra dollar that comes in will be put into a travel fund until enough money has been saved for a vacation. The cap on the fund should be determined up front. There might be an additional plan that once the cap has been reached, any additional money will go into a niece's education fund, for example. Couples should determine these policies based on their goals. Some couples may prefer to have a policy of taking the first ten percent of any extra income and splurging or having fun, then allocating the remainder to a savings category. When there is already a policy or plan in place, people are less likely to quickly spend the money in the moment and potentially miss the opportunity to move closer to a financial goal. They are also less likely to have fights about how to spend the extra income since they've already thought through it and have come to an agreement.

It is a good idea to review the budget regularly, whether quarterly or semiannually; some couples do this annually around their anniversary. For those families where there is frequent change of jobs or living situations, the budget needs to be revisited more frequently.

Avoiding Debt

> *O Allah I seek refuge in You from worry and grief, I seek refuge in You from hopelessness and laziness, I seek refuge in You from miserliness and cowardice and I seek refuge in You from overwhelming debt and from the force of men.*[146]

Avoiding debt can be difficult if couples are not mindful and intentional about their finances, but it is something we want to emphasize as a priority. People who have fallen into debt know how difficult it is to get out of it. It is an easy trap to fall into in a consumer society and with the ready option of plastic money. In order to resist the temptations we are bombarded with to continuously have newer, bigger and better things, we have to constantly ask ourselves if we really need the upgrade or new addition, and if we can afford it.

When people have established a budget and are clear about their spending priorities, credit cards can be a very helpful tool in keeping track of spending. A goal to pay off the card each month in order to avoid paying interest and getting into debt is a key to using credit cards successfully.

It is important that potential couples discuss how they use credit cards and share any information about current debt prior to getting married. Honesty is crucial, and people should not feel shy to ask about the other's financial situation. The problems we see are often a result of one person having debt or ruined credit prior to marriage and the other person discovering this after marriage. Another issue we see is when one person starts off with bad credit and uses the spouse's good credit history for major purchases, sometimes bringing that person into debt, too.

The Qur'an reminds us that Allah (*swt*) is watching over us and emphasizes honest and fair dealings in all financial transactions. These guidelines apply in marriage too. It is completely unacceptable for any spouse to take advantage of the other spouse financially, or in any other

146 Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) taught this *du'a* to a man who was concerned about his debts. In Abu Dawood, Book #8, Hadith #1550.

way. It is also completely unacceptable to make irresponsible financial decisions that can jeopardize the entire family for many years down the road. Sometimes people justify over-spending when it's on the parents or extended family. However, it is important to remember that debt is debt. Although there may be a lot of pressure to provide a certain lifestyle or level of support, if you can't afford it, you have to be able to say so. It's possible to find another non-monetary way (calling, visiting, taking to appointments) of supporting parents or extended family so that you still feel you are contributing.

There are circumstances, of course, when taking a loan may be justifiable and even necessary. It is impossible for many people to complete their education, for example, without taking a student loan or borrowing money from relatives or friends. Other common examples include mortgages and car payments. What is important to remember is to be mindful of not accumulating unnecessary debt or debt that is unlikely to be resolved. While it may be justifiable to have a mortgage on the home you live in, it is not necessary or justifiable to take out a loan on another property in order to have as a vacation home. Of course there are differences of opinion in these matters, and researching different schools of thought is critical to making an informed decision.

Debt Resolution

While it is preferable to avoid getting into debt if possible, there are many circumstances that may arise where it makes sense to borrow money to address a temporary situation. People may also come into the marriage with preexisting debt. Dealing with debt as a couple can be a learning opportunity, as well as a chance to show each other how adverse situations are handled.

One way to begin to address debt is when the budget is being made. A policy for taking a certain percentage of income to apply to any debt ensures that the amount of debt will be reduced. All, or a certain percentage of unanticipated or additional income can also be planned to be applied to lowering or paying off debt. People with multiple loans or overwhelming debt may not know where to start or how to choose

which loan to get rid of first. It makes the most sense to look at your loans and to get rid of what has the highest cost, whether that is in terms of the interest rate or in terms of a deadline or consequences of not paying off the loan on time. It may be worth consulting a professional if it is difficult to put together a good plan for resolving the debt. There are free debt counseling services offered by nonprofit organizations such as the National Foundation for Credit Counseling to help people figure out how to manage and eliminate their debt.

Professional Financial Planning

Financial planners are professionals who assist people to optimize their financial health. They may be consulted for one-time help developing a budget, or for long-term wealth management. While many people may have the inclination and ability to develop a budget, determine the best ways to save and invest their money, and address changing financial needs, other people may become quickly overwhelmed when it comes to dealing with finances. The Financi Planning Association (www.fpanet.org) is one organization that pr vides a directory of professionals who can assist people with deve oping a good financial plan. They suggest that one of the times that people might most benefit from consulting with a financial planner is before getting married.

Financial planners use their technical expertise to help people gather the necessary information and sort through it to get a good picture of their financial situation. Then they help people develop a plan that is in line with their financial goals and priorities. Seeing a financial planner can be compared to seeing a doctor. Some people are proactive and see the doctor for wellness visits and routine exams. Other people only see the doctor when they are very sick. It can be a good idea to meet with a financial planner before getting married to help you set up a good plan for your joint financial future together. If either or both people are bringing financial challenges into the marriage, meeting with a financial planner or a debt counselor makes even more sense.

Some couples may wonder how they can even afford a financial planner. Financial services are offered at different levels and with different types of fees. Some services may be completely free, as is the case with most credit counseling offered through nonprofit organizations. Other services may have a one-time fee, or may be commission based. Take some time to look into the various services that are available to find the service that fits your needs and your circumstances.

Dual-Income Families

Whether both spouses work out of necessity, or because the wife is seeking personal fulfillment by working outside the home, the couple needs to have realistic expectations of what it means to have both people employed. The type of employment should also be factored into these expectations. For example, a person who works twelve-hour days in the hot sun may have less energy to contribute around the house than a person who works flexible hours in a comfortable work environment with lots of perks. Higher-paying jobs allow people to pay for services like housecleaning that alleviate a certain amount of stress. These factors need to be taken into consideration when potential spouses are envisioning their future life together.

Couples should discuss how they envision raising children in a home where both parents are working. Raising children is one of the issues that adds stress (and joy) to marriage, but it can be more stressful when both parents are juggling jobs and the responsibilities related to child-rearing. Children can also become stressed and struggle if parents have not been thoughtful about who will be home with the children and who will be following up with their needs. At least one parent needs to be helping with homework, attending school functions, and driving children to their activities. It is ideal if both parents are actively engaged in their children's lives: playing with them, reading to them, attending their activities, taking them to the masjid, etc.

Parents who have to work two low-income jobs will have worked hard all day, earned little, and may have no time or patience to deal with a child's need for evening quality time. In these cases, it is important to

find community support. Even if parents are exhausted, it is important to find a way to bring children to the masjid and to enroll them in extra-curricular activities. If possible, parents should rotate schedules so that both parents are not absent at the same time. It is ideal to have family members spend time with the children and to reduce working hours. For some people, this is not a feasible option, because the only choices are providing shelter and food versus spending time at home. We recognize that these situations do raise stress levels. Couples who have the means to take vacations can take a break and reenergize. Those who cannot will encounter more stress, hardship and other issues like sickness. In these cases, it becomes a community responsibility to reach out and provide needed support and to explore ways to alleviate these families' stress. Although addressing this issue is beyond the scope of this book, we wanted to raise it because it is an important issue.

When women choose to work for their own personal fulfillment, sometimes husbands are less willing to help at home and to be involved with raising the children. In some cases, husbands may be "punishing" her for her choice. Before marriage, take the time to explore what ea person believes about a woman's right to work both before and af having children. Make sure to discuss expectations around childca expenses, childcare providers, children's appointments, etc. It is critica to be in agreement; otherwise, it is very likely the couple will end up with major conflict. We've seen many cases where couples are miserable or end up divorcing because they are not able to resolve their differences around this issue.

Many women prefer to stay home after having children if they can afford it. Other women prefer to continue working, even if it is part-time. If a woman chooses to work even though the husband can afford for her to stay home and is able to take good care of her and the children, then she should consider that she may have to pay for the babysitting or childcare expenses.

Another scenario is when couples have a joint business venture. Again, it is really important that spouses who make this choice have clear understandings and expectations about the business itself, as well as how it may or may not impact their relationship. It is important to follow the guidelines of establishing a professional business in order

to protect both the business and the marriage. Some men may view the partner-wife as an employee, not a full partner. In these cases, he may make financial decisions without consulting her, taking what he wants from the account. When the business goes down, he expects her to sell her assets to clean up the mess. Thus when they are making a profit she is not really a full partner, but when there is a loss he needs her as a partner. Sometimes physician-spouses who have a joint practice begin on the same terms, but if one spouse ends up being more successful or well known than the other, jealousy might crop up. It may be better for a marriage for the spouses to have separate practices. In the event that couples have a joint business venture and end up getting divorced, the situation can be very messy. These issues are all important to think through and discuss, reflecting on how the marriage may be impacted.

Conclusion

The topic of finances is an important issue to think through and iscuss thoroughly before marriage. Identifying your personal values related to money, sharing your personal financial history and experiences with money in your family of origin, and developing a vision about your financial future are critical elements to being able to develop a shared, healthy financial future. Ongoing communication about these issues is necessary to minimize conflict and to ensure working together towards common goals. Sometimes couples have done their homework and have a good agreement before marriage, then circumstances change. Life often does not go as we plan it, so couples should make their agreements in good faith, with the understanding that all agreements will be revisited when there is a change in circumstance. Once that happens, couples need to sit down and reassess the situation, exploring best options for the family given the new situation. Couples can also benefit from consulting with financial professionals and utilizing online and other resources and tools.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- ❑ When you think about money, what emotions do you notice?
- ❑ What are some beliefs you have about money?
- ❑ What role does money play in your life?
- ❑ How important is money to you?
- ❑ How did your parents manage money? What conflicts, if any, did they have related to money?
- ❑ What type of lifestyle do you prefer to have?
- ❑ What do you consider to be necessary spending? Excessive? Irresponsible? Give examples.
- ❑ What ideas do you have about how you and your spouse should manage money?
- ❑ What are your views regarding debt?
- ❑ Are different kinds of debt acceptable or unacceptable? Consider student loans, mortgage, credit card debt, car payments, etc., in your reflection and discussion.
- ❑ What would your plan be to get out of debt? How would you work together to get out of debt?

CHAPTER 10:

Special Issues



You shall certainly be tried and tested in your possessions and in your personal selves.[147]

This chapter will cover several issues that are important to be aware of, but they may not apply to everyone. We encourage everyone to read this chapter as a way to become aware of possible issues that you may not have thought of or that you felt unsure how to address. Some of these issues may be taboo culturally, while others are simply issues that some people don't realize can significantly impact a marriage. We begin by discussing premarital counseling, explaining its benefits and what you can expect if you choose to pursue it. We also address the issues of mental health, domestic violence and issues that may lead to divorce. From our experience, these issues impact many people in one form or another at some point in their lives.

147 Qur'an 3:186.

Premarital Counseling

Now that you've read this book, you may be wondering if you still need premarital counseling. While we do hope that each couple would seek premarital counseling, we realize that many couples will not, either because it is not available to them or because they really don't see the need. In addition to reading this book to prepare for marriage, we encourage you to seek out other resources to increase your level of preparedness. These resources may include couples workshops, counseling, reading materials, and consulting with married couples to learn from their experiences.

There are many benefits to premarital counseling. Having an objective third party can help identify any red flags that you may have missed, or can help you feel more confident about your decision to get married by highlighting strengths and compatibility in the relationship. Premarital counseling can also provide a safe space for couples to explore sensitive issues and to learn skills that can be applied for the duration of the marital relationship. Counseling provides an opportunity to work through any fears related to getting married, commitment issues, or anxiety about being vulnerable. In addition, potential couples can explore the important conditions that each person may want to include in the marriage contract, which naturally includes a thorough exploration of their respective expectations. People who have been in previous long-term relationships, including previous marriages, should consider counseling as a way to make sure old issues are not being brought into the new relationship. It is worthwhile to note that in a recent study of divorce trends among American Muslims, almost all of the divorced people interviewed said they wished they had had more premarital counseling.[148]

In actuality, premarital counseling is simply a tool to help couples prepare for the next major step in their lives. Most people do appreciate the counseling once they've participated in it because they realize the benefit of meeting with someone experienced who can see some of the issues they may not see themselves. In addition, premarital counseling

148 Julie McFarlane (2012). *Understanding Trends in American Muslim Divorce and Marriage: A Discussion Guide for Families and Communities.* http://www.ispu.org/pdfs/ISPU%20Report_Marriage%2011_Macfarlane_WEB.pdf (retrieved 9/9/13).

is an opportunity to obtain guidance about dealing with issues that are specific to your relationship. Make the most out of any premarital counseling sessions you have by taking notes and doing your best to engage in the process. Look at the sessions as a learning opportunity, and a way to begin your relationship in the best possible manner. Avoid thinking of the sessions as simply a task to cross off the to-do list.

In a growing number of Muslim communities, imams provide premarital counseling. Some people prefer to meet with the imam, but others may prefer to work with a professional marriage therapist. Either one is fine, as long as the person providing the counseling is trained and experienced. Good counseling will include getting a background history of each person (family dynamics, history of abuse, history of trauma, history of mental health issues). If there is anything significant in either person's history that is beyond the scope of the imam's training, he should refer to a professional. It may or may not be necessary to delay the marriage if professional treatment is needed. At the very least, it is strongly encouraged that the couple at least initiates any recommended treatment.

Counseling with an Imam

We encourage each couple to be proactive about seeking counseling from their imam if he provides it, rather than waiting until the imam suggests it. Begin the process of premarital counseling as soon as you feel certain that you want to commit yourself to a particular person. Since many imams may not be aware of the need for or benefit of premarital counseling, they may not offer it. Imams coming from overseas may assume that couples have the benefit of their extended families who will prepare them for marriage.

If premarital counseling is not required by your imam, set up an appointment with him to give him the opportunity to know you as a couple, and to advise you. Make sure to share how you met, and what you may have learned about yourself and each other as you've read this book. Share any areas of conflict that you are experiencing or that you anticipate. Don't feel shy to ask any questions you have about any aspect of marriage.

If the imam in your community is strict about couples receiving premarital counseling before he will perform the marriage, be grateful to have an imam who recognizes that marriage is the most important investment of a lifetime. Some people get annoyed because they view the counseling as an obstacle or something that is unnecessary. Other times, parents discourage the counseling because they have some misconceptions about what counseling means and what it entails. Some parents feel it is a negative reflection on them as parents if their children need or utilize counseling.

The role of the imam does not end with premarital counseling. As problems arise, it may be necessary to consult the imam again or seek counseling to address issues before they get to crisis levels. It may be easier to meet with the imam when issues arise later in the marriage if he's already worked with the couple before marriage, and before the problems began. He then has a baseline and can remind the couple of the positives they saw in each other. During major conflicts, many couples have a hard time remembering why they married each other in the first place.

Counseling with a Mental Health Professional

People who are unfamiliar with professional mental health services may have some misconceptions and concerns, including a fear that the community will come to know their private affairs, and that only people with mental illness seek these services. All mental health professionals are bound by confidentiality, which means that no information that is shared in the sessions can be shared with anyone without the client's written permission. The only exceptions to this confidentiality are when a client reports the intention to harm self or others, when there is a suspicion that a child is being abused, and when the court subpoenas records during legal proceedings. In addition, mental health professionals comprise many different specialty areas and available services cover a broad spectrum from preventive care to treatment for general mental health issues to inpatient treatment.

There are several types of mental health professionals that may offer premarital counseling. Some of these are marriage and family therapists, psychologists, professional counselors and clinical social workers. These professionals generally integrate their clinical expertise into the premarital counseling sessions. They may ask for a family history to learn about any abuse or trauma history, substance abuse history, and mental health history. Approaches to the premarital counseling itself may vary widely from professional to professional. It is always a good idea to ask the professional you are considering to explain the approach and process that will be used.

Mental and Psychological Wellbeing[149]

By now, if you've read this book from the beginning, we are sure you have gotten the message that we encourage potential spouses to communicate openly. This communication includes sharing information about any emotional or mental health issues that you may have as well as any treatment you may be receiving. Just like people are susceptible to getting sick physically, they can also get sick emotionally. There is no shame at all in having any kind of illness; on the contrary, illness is a form of a test from Allah (*swt*) as well as an opportunity to have your sins forgiven.[150] If you know that you have a mental health issue, it is your responsibility to disclose it before marriage and to seek appropriate treatment.

Mental health issues affect people of all ethnicities and faith traditions. Mental health issues can cover a wide spectrum which includes stress, mood disorders like depression and bipolar disorder, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, sleep disorders, substance abuse issues, and phobias. They are generally caused by a combination of biological and environmental factors, with some people being more susceptible than others. Just like physical illnesses, mental health illnesses may run in families, or may be triggered by being under a lot

149 For further reading, see the resources section.

150 Qur'an 2:155; Bukhari, Book #70; Hadith #545.

of stress. If several people in your family have been diagnosed with heart disease or diabetes, you may be at greater risk yourself. Similarly, if close relatives have symptoms of depression or anxiety, you may be predisposed to the same illness.

While it is normal for all people at times to experience feeling down, anxiety or occasional nightmares, people should seek consultation or treatment when these symptoms last daily for a period of several weeks and begin to interfere with daily functioning (going to work, studying, getting out of bed, etc.). There are many self-help books available, as well as online resources, that can help people have a better understanding of mental health disorders and when to seek treatment (see Resources section).

There are many misconceptions and negative attitudes about mental health that lead to people making decisions that could be harmful not only to themselves, but to others. For example, we've seen many cases where a young adult is struggling with depression or anxiety, and the parents' solution is to get their child married. We often tell parents that marriage does not solve those problems. In fact, we often see that the mental health issues may get worse, and the marriage may suffer from the beginning. We advise getting proper treatment prior to marriage for any kind of illness in order to enter marriage in optimum health.

Unfortunately, there is still a lot of stigma surrounding mental health issues. This stigma leads people to fear coming forward or seeking treatment. Some people hide their mental health issues due to fear that their spouse will tell the in-laws. They may fear that they will look bad in front of their in-laws or that people will look down on them. It is important for the spouse to be supportive, regardless of what the in-laws or other family members may think. Unfortunately, sometimes family members on both sides may actively interfere with treatment because of their own misconceptions about mental health.

Many people believe that seeking therapy or seeing a psychiatrist is an admission of being crazy. In fact, depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder are fairly common. People with these illnesses can often be very successful, highly functioning individuals. There is no reason for most people who suffer from these disorders to avoid getting married. However, it is important that people are getting the treatment that is

most appropriate for the disorder they have so that they are able to fulfill the role that will be expected of them once they are married.

Mental Health and Faith

One of the major misconceptions in the Muslim community regarding mental health is that mental illnesses are caused by a lack of faith, or weak faith. There is definitely a very important relationship between mental health and faith; however, it is not necessarily a causal one. We know from the Qur'an and the *seerah* that prophets and the companions of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) were tested and experienced a full range of emotions, with several stories documenting despair, depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic[151] symptoms. Prophet Yunus (pbuh) was so full of despair and anger[152] that he left his community. Prophet Yaqub (pbuh) became blind with the deep sorrow he experienced from losing his son Prophet Yusuf and he fell into melancholy.[153] And in many places, Allah (*swt*) comforts Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), telling him not to feel sad,[154] reminding him that he was not abandoned by Allah (*swt*) when there was a break in the revelation,[155] and acknowledging the pain he felt from the disbelievers' attacks.[156]

Obviously, these prophets were not suffering from a weakness of their faith. But they were human beings who were tested with various hardships, and they reacted with human responses. So feeling these emotions to varying degrees, even to the point of utter despair or going blind from grief, cannot be interpreted as a sin or as a reflection of one's level of faith. When we look further into these stories, we do see that these prophets ultimately benefited from their faith because it is what helped them to endure the trials and the resulting emotional responses. These prophets engaged in constant prayer to Allah (*swt*), asking for

151 Physical symptoms originating from emotional causes.

152 Qur'an 21:87; 37:140.

153 Ibid. 12:84.

154 Ibid. 3:176; 10:65; 31:23; 36:76.

155 Ibid. 93:3.

156 Ibid. 6:33.

forgiveness and mercy, and engaging in *sabr* (perseverance). Allah (*swt*) comforted them, and He offers comfort to all of His servants, reminding them He is near and is responsive to everyone who calls on Him.[157]

Furthermore, the Prophet (pbuh) taught us quite a bit about emotions. He normalized expressions not only of affection, but also expressions of grief and sadness. He himself cried on many occasions, including the deaths of his daughter[158] and son.[159] He frequently assisted and counseled members of his community who were struggling with emotional and mental health issues. He used to recite a *du'a* that specifically addresses anxiety and sadness: "O Allah, I seek your protection from anxiety and sadness, and I seek your protection from helplessness and laziness, and I seek your protection from stinginess and cowardice, and I seek your protection from heavy debt and the oppression of men."[160]

Faith can be an excellent resource and healthy way of coping with very difficult situations and trials. Maintaining and nurturing one's faith is critical during good times so that it can be used as a resource during hardship. At the same time, hardship frequently becomes a means to strengthening faith because people tend to turn to Allah (*swt*) for help when they are overwhelmed and stressed.

A full discussion of the relationship between spirituality and mental health is beyond the scope of this book. The impact that mental illness can have on one's faith is an important issue and one that is relevant to relationships. From our counseling experience, we've seen that people who are anxious or worried may tend to turn more towards Allah (*swt*), perhaps increasing the quantity or the quality of their prayers. At the same time, some people who experience depression, which includes symptoms of low energy and motivation, my struggle to keep up with their prayers. People who have been abused by a "religious" spouse may experience symptoms of depression and may turn away from Allah (*swt*) because of the association between the abuse and the "religious" perpetrator. We often see spouses become very critical of the person who seems to be practicing less, blaming their depression on the lack

157 Qur'an 2:186.

158 Bukhari, Book #23, Hadith #374.

159 Ibid., Hadith #390.

160 Bukhari, Book #52, Hadith #143.

of prayers when, in fact, it may be the depression interfering with the motivation to pray. Of course, blaming and shaming will only add to a person's state of depression and will rarely, if ever, result in someone feeling better or more motivated.

What can be more helpful is to remind someone of the mercy of Allah (*swt*) and His constant presence and understanding. He reminds His servants not to despair of His mercy.[161] Allah (*swt*) is certainly aware of each person's state and capacity to worship. When we remember that an emotional illness can be as impactful as a physical illness, we will respond to people suffering from mental health issues more compassionately. It is a common sight to see people running to get a chair for an elder person to sit on for prayer. This action comes from a desire to make it easier for this person to pray. In the same way, if your spouse is suffering from depression or any other mental health issue that is impacting their worship, explore what might make it easier for him or her to complete their prayers. This compassionate approach is not only more likely to have a better outcome regarding the person's emotional and spiritual welfare, but is also more likely to have a positive impact on your relationship.

Jinn,[162] *Evil Eye*[163]*, Black Magic & Hasad*[164]

Sometimes people blame metaphysical factors for emotional or mental health issues. While we do believe in and accept these supernatural elements, we also believe that people have overused and abused these concepts, leading them to abandon seeking professional help and proper treatment. In many cultures, when people witness or experience behaviors and emotions that they don't know how to explain, they may lean towards these supernatural forces as a way to make sense

161 Qur'an 39:53.

162 *Jinn* are one of Allah's creations that inhabit the world of the unseen (*'aalim al-ghayb*). See Qur'an 15:27; 51:56; 72:1-12.

163 Also referred to as *'ayn* or *nazar*, the evil eye is a concept in many cultures of attributing the power to harm someone to a malicious look as a result of envy.

164 Malicious envy.

of these experiences. For example, a person with no understanding of psychological illnesses who is experiencing auditory or visual hallucinations may believe he is possessed by *jinn*. Sometimes couples who are experiencing marital conflict attribute their distress to being given the evil eye or having been cursed. We have seen so many families suffering from such misinterpretations of behavior and explanations of events, often resulting in wasted time and resources seeking mystical healing when they would have benefited from professional mental health treatment.

It's always a good idea to consult with a mental health professional to rule out and address any psychological issues that are contributing to the problem. Professional treatment can occur in conjunction with Qur'anic healing (*ruqya*), which is the proper treatment for *jinn* possession and other supernatural issues. It is important to seek professional treatment to make sure there is an accurate diagnosis which can then be used as part of a holistic treatment approach. Sometimes the problem is a skill issue, such as a need to improve communication or conflict resolution skills. Other times, there may be a personality issue or underlying psychological issues.

We believe that all healing ultimately is from Allah (*swt*), whether it's in the form of medication, therapy or *ruqya* (spiritual healing with Qur'an recitation). In seeking spiritual healers, be aware of people who are simply looking to benefit financially by making people believe that they are victims of black magic.

Bodies, Minds & Relationships

Just as we can do a lot to prevent numerous physical ailments, we can take care of ourselves in many ways to prevent and to relieve mental health issues. Most of us are familiar with the elements that constitute a healthy lifestyle: proper sleep, nutrition and exercise. The same factors that contribute to our physical wellness also contribute to our emotional wellness. In addition, our physical health and our mental health are very closely intertwined.

Think about times when you've been very stressed. Maybe you had a deadline for a project and were way behind. Or perhaps you were

dealing with a loved one's death or severe illness. Or it might have been a time when you were experiencing conflict with someone very close to you. It is not unusual for people to get sick with a cold or the flu at what feels like the worst possible time, because they are already stressed. Other people get headaches or stomachaches when they are stressed. Stress lowers the immune system and makes people more vulnerable to viruses and bacteria. It can also interfere with the body's ability to repair itself and for organs to function at their optimal levels.

Similarly, when people are depressed or anxious for long periods of time, or they have experienced any kind of trauma, the body becomes stressed and immune responses can decrease. It is not uncommon for people with untreated mental health issues to also suffer from body aches, recurrent infections, migraines, fibromyalgia, gastric issues, hypertension, sexual and reproductive issues and many other physical ailments.

Now think about times when you've been sick. Think about how your mood was affected, especially if you had a serious illness or perhaps had an extended recovery from surgery. Of course, people react to being sick in different way, but many people worry a lot, become stressed-out or depressed. Even having a cold that lasts more than a few days can leave people irritable or feeling down.

At the same time, when people suffer from a serious disease lik cancer or a life-altering injury like losing a limb, it is not uncommon t get depressed. And there are some physical illnesses that can contribute to, or co-occur with, mental illness. Some of these are head injuries, thyroid problems, anemia, cancer, and chronic pain.

Conversely, think about times when you are in great shape, have stuck to a regular exercise routine, and are eating nutritious food. Chances are you felt pretty good and were better able to deal with stress and resist negativity. So we cannot really separate our physical wellbeing from our emotional wellbeing.

As you can imagine, mental health issues are also closely intertwined with relationship issues.[165] People who have happy marriages are generally healthier overall than people who have miserable marriages, since chronic misery is a major stressor. People who live, or have lived,

165 See *The Effects of Marriage on Health*. http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/07/marriageonhealth/rb.htm, retrieved 8/9/13.

in abusive relationships are at a higher risk for both mental health and physical ailments. Abuse can be a traumatic experience, and people who have been abused may have the same type of post-traumatic stress symptoms as war veterans or survivors of a horrific plane crash. Making sure you nurture your relationship can also be a way of taking care of your physical and emotional health.

When a person suffers from untreated depression, anxiety, trauma or other mental health issue, there may be a significant impact on that person's relationships. Think about a person who is depressed and has lost interest in the usual pleasurable activities: he or she no longer wants to go out or be around people, doesn't have the energy to be active, sleeps all the time or has no appetite, cries frequently or is very irritable, is consumed with guilt or wants to die. When you think about some of the elements of a successful relationship that we have been discussing throughout this book, you can imagine that it might be hard for someone suffering from these symptoms to have fun, keep romance alive or even communicate, because there is not enough energy or motivation. Living a few weeks with someone who is depressed takes a toll on the spouse as well, who may be struggling with his or her own unmet needs.

It is important for spouses to educate themselves about whatever illness may be impacting either spouse. Learning the symptoms, recommended treatment, and the possible ways the illness can affect the relationship can be very helpful in preventing unnecessary stress on the relationship. When both spouses are actively educating themselves, a feeling of mutual support and understanding is more likely to develop. If the spouse of a person suffering from depression doesn't understand that one of the symptoms of depression is to view and interpret most things negatively, it is more likely for the depressed person's attitude to be taken personally rather than being attributed to the illness.

It can be difficult to determine when someone has an emerging mental health issue. Sometimes the symptoms are attributed to a genuine stressor, and people expect that with time the symptoms will pass. It is normal, for example, for people to feel many of the symptoms of depression after the loss of a loved one. However, if the symptoms persist after several months, it is possible the person has developed a complicated form of grief or what is considered clinical depression. Other times the

symptoms may manifest as physical pain, like headaches or stomachaches. It may take multiple visits to the doctor with several tests before the doctor is able to safely say that the cause of the physical symptoms is a psychological issue. Meanwhile, the relationship may be suffering due not only to the actual illness, but also to the additional stress of medical appointments, missed work, and reduced functioning.

If you or your potential spouse has any kind of mental health issue, make sure to thoroughly discuss any limitations you may have, treatment needs, and impact of any treatment. Educate yourself about the illness itself so that you have a good understanding of its impact and how it manifests. If medication is part of the treatment, learn about any possible side effects. A big mistake many people make is to assume that medication is not necessary or that it's addictive. In these cases, people may pressure the person who has had medication prescribed to discontinue taking it. It is true that some people take medication unnecessarily. At the same time, it is important to recognize that some people will really suffer or deteriorate if they discontinue their medication. Just as most people would not recommend that a heart patient or a diabetic discontinue medication without consulting a physician, it is irresponsible and possibly dangerous to interfere with someone's mental health treatment protocol without the consultation of a professional.

Suggestions for Good Mental Health

While there are some general recommendations for overall wellbeing, each person may vary when it comes to the most effective ways to cope with stress or hardship. Everyone needs to have enough sleep, nutritious food, and regular exercise in order to be healthy. However, individuals vary in terms of how much sleep they need and what forms of exercise they enjoy. As you prepare for marriage, make sure you know what you need for your optimal wellbeing so that you can share this with your potential spouse. Think about the kinds of things that would go on your "care label" in order for you to be at your best. Identify important factors that keep you in good emotional shape. These factors might include making *dhikr*, reading Qur'an, going for walks, working

out, spending time with friends, having some time alone, or reflecting in nature, just to name a few.

In addition to individual wellbeing, couples should plan to take care of their relational wellbeing. One of the first things that is often neglected once the couple has moved out of the honeymoon phase is dedicated time with each other. It is very easy to get pulled into the busyness of life, and to take for granted that you will have enough time with your spouse at the end of the day. Make sure to discuss and plan the ways in which you will have quality time together. Some couples have certain times that are off limits for all electronics (that means no TV, no cell phone, no iPad, no laptop, etc.). Also plan to take regular mini-vacations, which might be a day trip or even a half day, with the intention of just relaxing and having some fun together. Other couples enjoy going to spiritual retreats together, or attending educational events. It's a good idea to plan a variety of activities that will keep your relationship alive and healthy. When each spouse attends to personal wellbeing, and both spouses attend to relational wellbeing, it is more likely that a couple will be able to handle the stressors that are part and parcel of everyone's life.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- ❑ When you are feeling unmotivated to pray, what might you need from your spouse?
- ❑ When you are feeling anxious or down, what can you do to boost your mood or calm yourself down?
- ❑ What helps you when you feel stressed?
- ❑ Are you living a healthy lifestyle with proper attention to diet, exercise and sleep? If not, what small changes can you make to begin living healthier?
- ❑ What might be helpful from your spouse as you plan a healthy lifestyle together?

- ❑ Do you have any concerns about your emotional wellbeing?
- ❑ Have you been honest with your potential spouse about any mental health issues and/or treatment you may have?

Domestic Violence

What is the topic of domestic violence doing in a book preparing Muslims for marriage? Some readers may be thinking that domestic violence is not even a relevant issue in the Muslim community. This issue is actually incredibly relevant, not only to Muslims, but to people from all faith traditions, ethnicities, and racial backgrounds. The Centers for Disease Control consider domestic violence a major public health issue. Their 2010 research found that one in four women, and one in seven men, have been the victims of physical violence by an intimate partner.[166] Although research in the Muslim community is still emerging, a 2011 online survey of 801 Muslims found that 40% of the respondents reported experiencing some form of domestic violence by a spouse,[167] and 53% reported experiencing some form of violence from a family member (parent, sibling, other relative, or spouse) at some point during their lifetime.[168] While more research needs to be done in order to have an accurate picture of the prevalence of domestic violence, it is definitely impacting a large number of Muslims.

People who have been exposed to domestic violence as children are at risk for getting into abusive relationships as adults (either as victims or perpetrators), simply because using violence in the family

166 Centers for Disease Control (2010). *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey.* http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/cdc_nisvs_overview_insert_final-a.pdf (retrieved September 12, 2013).

167 Peaceful Families Project & Project Sakinah (2012). *Assessment of Attitudes toward and Experiences of Domestic Violence.* Unpublished PowerPoint presentation.

168 Celik, A. & Sabri, B. (2012). *The Attitude of Muslim Men & Women toward Domestic Violence.* http://www.projectsakinah.org/ResourcesTools/Research/2011Survey/SurveyResults.aspx (retrieved September 12, 2013).

is a learned behavior. People tend to replicate what they've witnessed growing up unless they make some conscious decision to do otherwise. Any form of abuse or violence that is common in someone's household or family can become the model for what people expect or imagine is "normal." For that reason, many people who have grown up in abusive homes are not sure what a healthy relationship looks like, and they may not see the signs of a potentially abusive relationship as they are seeking a spouse.

What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence is also sometimes referred to as family violence or family abuse. It includes a wide range of behaviors that are used to intimidate and control another family member or members (parent, sibling, grandparent, aunt, etc.). The term intimate partner violence refers to a type of domestic violence that occurs between spouses or other intimate partners, such as people who are engaged, dating, or living together without being married. There are many forms of abuse or violence that can be used to control or intimidate others. These include:

- ❑ Verbal Abuse

  This form of abuse is probably the most common. It refers to name-calling, insults, put downs, yelling and constant criticism. In many cultures, these behaviors are not recognized as abusive and are quite common. However, Allah (*swt*) prohibits this behavior very clearly.[169] Verbal abuse is extremely hurtful and can cause long-term psychological damage. Many survivors of multiple forms of abuse say that the physical injuries eventually heal, but the impact of the words never goes away.

169 "Oh you who believe! Let not some men among you laugh at others....nor let some women laugh at others....nor defame nor be sarcastic to each other, nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames....and those who desist not are (indeed) doing wrong." (49:11)

- Physical Abuse

  This is the most easily detected form of abuse because it can leave bruises, broken bones, and other injuries. It includes hitting, shoving, pulling hair, choking, throwing objects, using a weapon, or any other kind of forceful physical behavior. Victims of physical abuse sometimes sustain very serious injuries. In the most severe cases, death is the result. Sometimes the result is the death of a fetus (miscarriage) due to beatings during pregnancy.

- Psychological Abuse

  All forms of abuse have a deep psychological impact on the person being abused. Some forms of abuse are very hard to pinpoint or observe, such as gradual isolation, intimidation, manipulation, and subtle threats that are understood only by the person being abused and not necessarily by others. For example, a person might be calmly informed in private that if she does not fully comply with everything being asked, then she can expect her family members back home to suffer. Other threats may include threats to divorce, to marry a second wife, to interrupt the application for citizenship, to ruin a reputation, etc. These threats are done with the express purpose of controlling the other person's behavior and instilling fear.

- Financial Abuse

  Financial abuse can take many forms and may include putting the wife down for being financially dependent, withholding access to money, forcing her to turn over her paychecks, forcing her to sign fraudulent tax returns or bad checks, or refusing to pay bills. It can also include refusing to let someone work with the intention of exercising power and control.

- Sexual Abuse

  Perhaps one of the most difficult forms of abuse for people to disclose, sexual abuse refers to any unwanted or forced sexual activity. It can include any forced sexual activity, forced sexual behaviors that are prohibited in Islam (anal sex, sex during menstrual cycle, or sex while fasting in Ramadan), forced viewing of pornography, and withholding sex as a means to control the other person. It can also include forcing someone to dress in a sexually provocative way, calling the person sexually insulting names, threatening to reveal sexual secrets, and hurting a person during sex.

- Spiritual /Religious Abuse

  This form of abuse is particularly devastating to people of faith because it interferes with the victim's relationship with Allah (*swt*). It includes a wide range of behaviors such as labeling a person as a bad Muslim, preventing the person from worshipping or studying about Islam, forcing a person to practice in a manner they are not comfortable with, and using hadith or verses from the Qur'an out of context in order to manipulate behavior. Sometimes an abusive husband will misuse his authority as the leader of the family to command particular behavior, claiming that his wife will go to hell if she doesn't obey him, even if he is asking for something that is unacceptable or prohibited. This type of abuse creates a conflict for women who may not realize that the husband's leadership role does not entitle him to control her.

As you read about the various forms of abuse, bear in mind that domestic violence refers to a pattern of behavior and not an isolated incident. For example, some people have trouble regulating their emotions and may be horrified during an argument when they realize they have lost control and pushed their spouse or thrown the remote control. Although the behavior itself is completely unacceptable and is

destructive, if it is the only incident and is not part of a pattern of other abusive behaviors used to exert control over the other person, then this incident is not labeled as domestic violence. However, it **is** behavior that needs to be addressed because it is harmful and destructive. If a person experiences difficulty in self-control, it may be necessary to seek professional and/or spiritual counseling.

Many of the examples listed above are obviously unacceptable behaviors. Some behaviors may appear to be abusive on the surface, but it is important to consider the context of, and the intention behind, the behavior. For example, in a relationship where the couple has decided to take control of their financial situation, it may be that the wife has a hard time managing her spending. The couple may have agreed that until they are out of debt, only the husband will have access to the credit and debit cards and will give her an agreed monthly allowance. As long as they are both in agreement, this situation is not abusive. In contrast is a situation where a husband does not give his wife access to credit cards or online accounts because he does not want her to know how much money he earns, and wants to keep her on a tight leash even though he may have plenty of money and is very generous with himself. This second scenario is abusive because the intent is to control the wife. Some defining features of abusive behavior are that the person on the receiving end has no choice or say about the behavior or decision and usually feels afraid of or intimidated by the other person.

In addition to the context and intention related to the behaviors, it can be helpful to have some understanding about the type of person committing the behavior in order to assess the likelihood of change. People who have certain characteristics are less likely to change. These characteristics include rigid beliefs about gender, a belief that men are superior to women, a belief that violence is acceptable or justifiable, a tendency to blame others for their own behavior, minimizing or dismissing the abusive behavior, and a need to control others. People who are more likely to change are those who recognize and admit that the abusive behavior is unacceptable and who are willing to seek help to learn how to change their behavior.

Muslims who have worked hard to live within the guidelines of Islam may realize that they don't know much about intimate relationships

when they are in the process of seeking a marriage partner. Due to having limited relationship experience, they may not recognize the signs or red flags of a potentially abusive relationship. For example, many young women interpret their fiancé's constant checking of their whereabouts, requests to have access to email accounts, "suggestions" about which friends to lose, and "recommendations" about how to dress as an indication of how much he loves her. In the beginning, the constant attention may make her feel very special. However, these behaviors can be an indication of a person who is jealous, suspicious, and controlling. If these behaviors are protested, the young man generally will become very angry and may even resort to more severe forms of abuse.

Controlling or jealous behavior can also be instigated by the woman. There are women who are manipulative and who use threats and intimidation to control the man in the relationship. There are also some women who are physically and sexually abusive. While no abuse is acceptable from either men or women, the reality is that most of the severe forms of abuse that lead to injury and/or death are sustained by women and perpetrated by men. This should not be surprising since in most cases, men are more powerful than women. This greater power is not only physical but societal: men generally have a higher status in society in general and in many Eastern cultures in particular. Furthermore, many Muslims have a cultural interpretation of Islamic teachings regarding gender that may in some ways condone or contribute to men being abusive towards women.

Islamic Perspective on Domestic Violence[170]

Throughout this book, we have emphasized the values and behaviors that contribute to a healthy marriage that is consistent with the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah. It should be very clear by now that any behavior that is harmful or hurtful to your spouse or family member is completely inconsistent with Islamic teachings. In fact, domestic violence is a form of oppression (*zulm*). In Chapter 1, we addressed the core values of *mawaddah* (love and compassion, *rahmah* (mercy) and

170 For a more in-depth discussion, see Alwani, Z. & Abugideiri, S. (2003). *What Islam Says About Domestic Violence*. Herndon, VA: FAITH.

sakeenah (tranquility) which create the foundation of a healthy marriage. As you can imagine, any of the behaviors listed under the forms of abuse would shatter an environment of *sakeenah* (tranquility).

Unfortunately, many people underestimate the negative consequences of abuse and may dismiss it as "no big deal," because after all, "I was treated this way as a child, and I turned out OK." Regardless of how abuse impacts different people, it is something that is incompatible with Islamic behavior and categorically prohibited. In general, a good Muslim avoids harming anyone with his or her tongue or hand.[171] When we speak specifically about the behavior Muslim spouses should have towards one another, their interactions should be grounded in compassion and mercy. They should treat each other kindly. Whenever there is abuse, there is an absence of kindness. A person who is abusive has a disease of the heart (a spiritual malady).

Often we hear people who are abusive say that if the other person behaved better, or didn't provoke them, they wouldn't resort to the abusive behavior. It's critical for each person to take responsibility for their own behavior. The person being unkind is the person with the deficiency. Other people think that by being kind, they are doing their spouse a favor. In reality, being kind is something a person does f self-betterment and personal growth. Being kind leads to being a bett person.

Other people who are abusive give the excuse of being stressed-out. If you are stressed-out, you must learn to manage your stress and never use it as an excuse. For example, if you work two jobs and are feeling overwhelmed, you may need to evaluate how you can modify your life so that you either need to work less or find ways to relieve your stress. Taking stress out on a spouse or a child is not acceptable. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) experienced many hardships and was often stressed by the mistreatment and abuse he experienced at the hands of Abu Lahab and others. We have no record of him ever taking out this stress on his wives or on anyone else. Since stress is a natural part of everyone's life, it is important to develop healthy ways of coping with it (see Chapter 8 for stress management skills).

171 Bukhari, Book #2, Hadith #9 & 10.

Money & Abuse

All forms of abuse are prohibited in Islam. Unfortunately, many of the commonly seen behaviors in Muslim marriages are abusive; however, most people may be completely unaware that they are engaging in abusive behavior. Rather than assessing the relationship according to cultural norms, Muslim should assess their relationship according to Islamic standards. In this way, they may be able to separate those behaviors that may seem normal, but are not consistent with Islamic teachings.

Because men are in a position of leadership in the family, they are the ones who may have more power. This is especially true in families where women are financially dependent on their husbands. While men are responsible for financially maintaining their families, they should remember that this is a responsibility that has been assigned by Allah (*swt*). The fact that they are providing should never be used to make her feel inferior. This responsibility does not give him any rights to dominate over his wife.

A good leader, whether in the family, in a corporation, or even in government, should not lord his position over others. As we know from the example of the Prophet (pbuh), he consulted with and confided in his wives, engaged in household chores, and did not use his role of prophethood to pressure his wives to do anything they did not want to. They were free to express their own opinions, to argue with him, to work or volunteer outside the home, and to have their independent identities.[172]

Unfortunately, we see many cases where women are humiliated for being financially dependent. Some women are practically forced to beg for basic needs from their husbands. Other women are constantly reminded of the "favor" he is doing for her. Still others are prevented from continuing their education or learning any skills as a way to ensure her constant dependence, thus preventing her from thinking about leaving an abusive marriage.

Another form of financial abuse arises when a man has enough money but is stingy. We have seen many cases where the husband enjoys eating at nice restaurants, buying expensive clothes, and driving a nice

172 Ramadan. *In the Footsteps of the Prophet.*

car but deprives his wife of the same standard of living, or even of basic needs. Many women in this situation do not know what to do. When Hind complained to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) that her husband Abu Sufyan was miserly and was not taking care of the family's needs, he allowed her to take from her husband's property without his permission to get what she and her sons needed.[173] We are not trying to encourage women to sneak money from their husbands, but there are situations where she may need to do that. Seeking consultation from a third party may be helpful in assessing the situation and perhaps intervening in a way to correct the situation and help the couple develop healthy dynamics around money.

Family, Marriage & Abuse

The vast majority of parents wants what's best for their children and does their absolute best when it comes to raising their children.[174] There are cases, however, where parents play an abusive role when it comes to marriage. It is not uncommon for parents with very good intention to decide who their daughter or son is going to marry. When this decision is imposed, or when the potential bride or groom is not consulted, a situation of a forced marriage occurs. Forced marriage is a form of abuse. In many of these situations, the adult children may feel afraid to voice their dissent because cultural and family pressure may be very great. In other cases, their dissent may be dismissed. In still other cases, the parents force the marriage as a way to get their child out of an existing relationship that they disapprove of.

One of the primary conditions for a valid Islamic marriage is the consent of both the bride and the groom. The consent must be given freely and without any pressure. We strongly encourage both parents and their children to have open and honest communication about their feelings regarding a marriage prospect. We ask parents to remember that while

173 Bukhari, Book #34, Hadith #413.

174 The issue of child abuse is beyond the scope of this book. To learn more about child abuse and neglect, visit Helpguide.org and search abuse. Also see http://mentalhealth4muslims.com/2010/06/27/child-abuse-the-muslim-community/#&panel1-6 (retrieved 9/14/13).

we firmly believe parents are generally acting in what they believe is the best interest of their child, they cannot skip the mandatory step of getting their child's honest input about whom they want to marry. We have seen too many cases where people are forced to marry someone they do not want to marry, resulting in disastrous consequences that include running away, attempted or completed suicide, self-injury, and affairs.

Another way that parents might play an abusive role is by putting too much pressure on the married couple. Sometimes the man's parents will expect him to spend all of his free time with them, take the parents on all the couple's vacations, or give them so much financial help that the couple may be suffering. In other cases, either set of parents may be interfering too much in the new couple's lives, dictating how they should live and creating problems because of their desire to control the couple or their difficulty in letting go of their adult children. And in more severe cases, we are aware of parents who explicitly tell their son to withhold money from his wife, prevent her from continuing her education, or even to beat her. These scenarios are destructive and damaging to each spouse's wellbeing and to the overall wellbeing of the marriage. We urge parents to be mindful of their goal to see their son or daughter happy. In order for any new couple to experience happiness, they need to have some time and space to build and nurture their new relationship. It is important to remember that while parents certainly have rights to be respected and taken care of, they do not have the right to impose their will or to ask for anything that will cause harm to either newly married spouse.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- ❑ As you read this section, what emotions or thoughts were triggered?

- ❑ Do you know anyone who has been abused? If so, how is that person connected to you? Did that person's abuse have any effect on you?

- ❑ Do you know anyone who is abusive? How do you feel about that person? How do you interact with that person?

- ❑ Have you ever been abused or witnessed abuse between your parents? If so, how do you think this experience has affected you?
- ❑ What do you believe a person should do if they are in an abusive relationship?

Possible Threats to the Marriage

There are several issues that we want to discuss that may threaten the marriage, potentially leading to divorce. You may be wondering why we would talk about divorce when you are not even married yet. Some people think that mentioning divorce is somehow bad luck or may curse the relationship. In many cultures today, as in pre-Islamic Arabia, divorce is viewed as an awful fate for women. A woman and her family may fear she is doomed if she gets a divorce, that she will never marry again, or that her female relatives may struggle to get married Divorce is sometimes viewed as a contagious disease, to the extent th a divorced woman may not be invited to relatives' weddings or may l kept away from the unmarried women in the family. When women i miserable or abusive marriages consider how they might be perceived and treated if they pursue a divorce, they may choose to stay in a marriage that is far from being what Allah (*swt*) describes as a vehicle for mutual tranquility (*sakeenah*).

Islamically, there is no stigma or shame attached to divorce. It is presented as a legitimate option when couples are unable to live together on a footing of kindness and equity (*ma`ruf*). The Qur'an discusses the important values and processes of divorce in Chapter 2 (*al-Baqarah*)[175] and chapter 65 (*al-Talaaq*). From these verses, it is clear that even when people get to a stage where they are unable to reconcile their differences, they should continue to treat each other with the guiding principle of

175 See Qur'an 2:226 – 233.

justice, they should continue to make decisions with mutual consultation (*shura*), and they should exercise compassion by remembering that they began with a shared intimacy.

Islam places limits and provides guidelines that protect the interests of both men and women, both during the marriage and in the event of divorce. By introducing divorce as an acceptable option, spouses are aware from the beginning that they cannot mistreat each other and take for granted that the mistreated spouse will always be there. Each spouse has the right to exit the marriage if needed. People who exercise this option should not be viewed or treated in any negative manner. They should not be judged or labeled as less pious or defective in any manner. When a divorced person seeks remarriage, that person should be given the same chance and opportunity as a person seeking marriage for the first time.

The Prophet (pbuh) married a divorced woman, Zaynab bint Jahsh (*ra*), who had been previously married to his adopted son Zaid (*ra*). Although there were many lessons in this marriage, the most relevant one is that if a divorced woman is good enough for Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), then there is obviously no shame or stigma in being divorced.[176]

Successful divorce is a topic in and of itself, which we cannot fully delve into in this book. However, we do want readers to have some ideas about some of the common reasons for divorce in order to proactively work to prevent these in their marriage.

Common Reasons for Divorce

There is some emerging research on divorce in the Muslim community, which is beginning to give us a more solid picture of major contributing factors to divorce among Muslims in the US,[177] but more research is needed before we can definitively identify the most common

176 Ramadan, *In the Footsteps of the Prophet.*

177 See Julie McFarlane (2012). *Understanding Trends in American Muslim Divorce and Marriage: A Discussion Guide for Families and Communities.* http://www.ispu.org/pdfs/ISPU%20Report_Marriage%2011_Macfarlane_WEB.pdf (retrieved 9/9/13) and Samana Siddiqui (2009). *Divorce among American Muslims: Statistics, Challenges & Solutions.* http://www.soundvision.com/info/marriage/conflict/muslimdivorcestats.asp. (retrieved 9/9/13).

causes for divorce. The following list is not meant to be a comprehensive one, and it is one that is based on our experiences working with many couples over the years. As you read each of the issues listed, it may be helpful to go back to the section in this book where we've discussed these issues and how to explore them before marriage.

- ❑ Communication Issues

  In our experience, failure to communicate effectively before and during the marriage is the leading cause of divorce. Many issues that couples face may be resolvable, but if the ability to communicate is missing, then the opportunity to resolve these issues is absent. While we have addressed communication throughout this book, we've provided concrete tips for better communication in Chapter 8.

- ❑ Religious Incompatibility

  In Chapter 3, we discussed the importance of exploring your religious values and priorities and of discussing these values and priorities with your prospective spouse. While people's degree of religiosity can chang over time and depending on life experiences, there ar certain types and degrees of differences that can contribute significantly to stress and conflict during the marriage. While people do sometimes grow apart over the years, we offered some suggestions in Chapter 3 for ways to grow together spiritually. Of course, no two people will be identical in how they interpret and practice religion. Often, it is a lack of accommodation and flexibility to deal with differences that can break the marriage. In addition, behaviors that are outside the boundaries of Islam (drinking alcohol, using drugs, watching pornography, adultery and fornication, abuse) constitute grounds for divorce.

- ❑ Culture Clashes

  As we discussed in Chapter 3, there are many factors that contribute to cultural differences. We also addressed intercultural wedding planning in Chapter 6. The failure of cross-cultural marriages is often the result of a lack of respect towards one or both cultures, an unwillingness to adjust to the other person's culture, and rigid expectations of each other that are grounded in culture. In many cases, the cultural issues may be imposed by extended family members.

- ❑ Gender Roles

  Who's the boss in the house? We see a lot of competition, instead of cooperation, between spouses who experience conflict around gender roles. Sometimes women enter the marriage overly sensitive to the issue of control, while other times men exhibit chauvinistic attitudes. Expectations around gender roles are shaped by cultural norms, which are rapidly changing in today's society. Conflict around gender roles was cited as the most common cause for conflict between spouses in research conducted by Julie McFarlane on marriage and divorce trends among Muslim in North America.[178] We have addressed gender roles in depth in Chapter 3.

- ❑ In-Laws & Extended Family

  We have focused on the role of the family and provided some suggestions to having healthy relationships with in-laws and extended family members in chapter 5. The importance of developing these healthy relationships and having the skills to navigate the often contradictory expectations between spouses cannot be overemphasized. In fact, conflict related to this issue was the second

178 Ibid.

most common cause of conflict cited by participants in McFarlane's research.[179]

- Finances

  We've seen many couples end their marriages, or struggle with a great deal of conflict, due to mismatched expectations related to finances. Sometimes, marriages end because the husband is not living up to his responsibility of providing for the family, or because one or both spouses engage in irresponsible spending habits. We've dedicated Chapter 9 to the issue of finances.

- Mental or Physical Illness

  We've addressed mental illness earlier in this chapter. In Chapter 3 we discussed the importance of communication about, and accommodation of, changes in a spouse's health. Sometimes divorce occurs when people discover that their spouse had contracted a chronic illness prior to marriage, but did not disclose it or did not reveal the severity of the illness. Other times, even with full knowledge of an illness, the type of illness, its treatment or lack thereof creates too much stress for the marriage to withstand.

- Infidelity

  A casual search on the internet regarding the causes of divorce yields multiple sites that rank infidelity as the number one cause for divorce. Although we don't know how often infidelity leads to divorce among Muslims, we have witnessed it becoming a growing phenomenon. The best protection against infidelity is to abide by the strict Islamic guidelines of avoiding any opportunity to be alone with a person of the opposite gender outside of immediate family. Other protective factors include

179 Ibid.

nurturing and prioritizing the marital relationship, maintaining open lines of communication, addressing conflicts appropriately, and responding to each other's needs for intimacy. See Chapter 7 for some helpful suggestions.

- ❑ Abuse

  As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the impact of abuse can be permanently damaging to a relationship and generally has long-term effects on those who are abused and those who witness abuse. One third of the participants in Julie McFarlane's research[180] identified domestic violence as a cause for divorce. Many times the abuse has been ongoing for years before divorce is sought.

- ❑ Parenting

  The topic of parenting is beyond the scope of this book, but we have encouraged readers to think about their philosophies regarding child-rearing as part of marriage preparation. Many relationships encounter trouble when raising the first child. This conflict may be a result of not being emotionally prepared for being a parent, having different expectations of each other, having rigid beliefs about best parenting styles, undermining each other as parents, and not understanding the impact that having a child will have on a marriage. Just as you have taken the time to prepare yourself for marriage, it is important to take the time to prepare yourself for becoming a parent. There are many online and print resources that you can explore. We've listed a few in the resources section.

180 Ibid.

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

- ❑ Which of the common reasons listed for divorce do you think you would put more energy into to make sure it doesn't break up your marriage? Identify potential areas of vulnerability.

- ❑ If your parents are divorced, how has their divorce affected you?

- ❑ Would you consider marrying someone who has been divorced? Why or why not?

- ❑ If you have been previously divorced, how is your previous experience helping you to build your new relationship? What have you learned about yourself and about marriage that will help you have a successful marriage?

Appendix 1

Premarital Questionnaire[181]

This questionnaire was developed by Imam Magid over the years as he worked with couples preparing for marriage. The questions are available online at www.adamscenter.org under Marriage Services. Many, but not all, of these questions are found throughout the book. They may be worded slightly differently.

Basic Information

1. How old are you?
2. Where were you born?
3. What did you study in college?
4. What is you occupation?
5. Why have you chosen me as your potential spouse?

Core Values

6. What is the role of a husband?
7. What is the role of a wife?
8. What are your expectations of marriage?
9. What are your goals in life? Long term and short term plans.
10. Identify three things that you want to accomplish in the new future.
11. Identify three things that you want to accomplish, long-term.

Previous Marriages

12. Have you ever been married before?
13. Are you married now?
14. Do you want practice polygamy?

181 Prepared by Mohamed Hagmagid, updated August 2012.

15. Have you ever been engaged? If so, how long ago?
16. Have you ever been divorced? If so, how long ago?
17. Have you ever gone to counseling for marriage or divorce?

Health

18. Define mental, verbal, emotional, and physical abuse.
19. What would you do if you felt that you had been abused?
20. Who would you call for assistance if you were being abused?
21. Do you suffer from any chronic disease or condition?
22. Are you willing to take a physical exam by a physician, before marriage?
23. What is your understanding of proper health and nutrition?
24. How do you support your own health and nutrition?

Raising Children

25. Do you support the idea of utilizing baby-sitters and maids?
26. Do you want to have children? If not, why?
27. To the best of your understanding, are you able to have children?
28. Do you want to have children in the first two years of marriage? If not, then when?
29. Do you believe in abortion in your family?
30. What is the best method of raising children?
31. What is the best method of disciplining children?
32. How were you raised?
33. How were you disciplined?
34. Do you believe in spanking children? Under what circumstances?
35. Do you believe in public schools for your children?
36. Do you believe in Islamic schools for your children?
37. Do you believe in home-schooling your children? If so, by whom?
38. What type of relationship should your children have with non-Muslim classmates and friends?
39. Would you send your children to visit their extended family if they lived in another state or country?
40. Do you have children now?
41. What is your relationship with your children, now?

42. What is your relationship with their parent, now?
43. What relationship do you expect your spouse to have with your children and their parent?
44. What type of relationship do you want your children to have with all of their grandparents?
45. If there are members of my family that are not Muslim, that are of a different culture or race, what type of relationship do you want to have with them?

Role of Religion

46. What is the role of religion in your life – now?
47. Are you a spiritual person?
48. What is your understanding of an Islamic marriage?
49. What are you expecting of your spouse, religiously?
50. What is your relationship between yourself and the Muslim community in your area?
51. Are you volunteering in any Islamic activities?
52. What can you offer your mate, spiritually?

Finances

53. What is your definition of wealth?
54. How do you spend your money?
55. How do you save your money?
56. How do you think that your use of money will change after marriage?
57. Do you have any debts now? If so, how are you making progress to eliminate the debt?
58. Do you use credit cards?
59. Do you support the idea of taking loans to buy a home?
60. What are you expecting from your spouse financially?
61. What is your financial responsibility in a marriage?
62. Do you support the idea of a working wife?
63. If so, how do you think a dual-income family should manage funds?
64. Do you currently use a budget to manage your finances?
65. Who are the people to whom you are financially responsible?

Social Relationships

66. What are the things that you do in your free time?
67. Do you like to have guests in your home for entertainment?
68. What are you expecting from your spouse when your friends come to the house?
69. What is your opinion of speaking other languages in the home that I do not understand? With friends? With family?
70. Do you travel?
71. How do you spend your vacations?
72. How do you think your spouse should spend vacations?
73. Do you read?
74. What do you read?

In-laws

75. What is your relationship with your family?
76. What do you expect your relationship to be like with the family of your spouse?
77. What do you expect the relationship between your spouse and your family to be like?
78. Is there anyone in your family that lives with you now?
79. Are you planning to have anyone in your family live with you in the future?
80. If for any reason my relationship with your family turns sour, what should be done?

Friendships

81. Who are your friends? Identify at least three.
82. How did you get to know them?
83. Why are they your friends?
84. What do you like most about them?
85. What will your relationship with them be like after marriage?
86. Do you have friends from the opposite sex?
87. What is the level of your relationship with them – now?
88. What will be the level of your relationship with them after marriage?
89. What type of relationship do you want your spouse to have with your friends?

Emotions

90. After marriage, do you think that you are one to express romantic feelings verbally?
91. After marriage, do you think that you want to express affection in public?
92. How do you express your admiration for someone that you know - now?
93. How do you express your feelings to someone who has done a favor for you?
94. Do you like to write your feelings?
95. If you wrong someone, how do you apologize?
96. If someone has wronged you, how do you want them to apologize to you?
97. How much time passes before you choose to forgive someone?
98. How do you make important and less important decisions in your life?
99. Do you use foul language at home? In public? With your family?
100. Do your friends use foul language?
101. Does your family use foul language?
102. How do you express anger?
103. How do you expect your spouse to express anger?
104. What do you do when you are angry?
105. When do you think it is appropriate to initiate mediation in a marriage?
106. When there is a dispute in your marriage, religious or not, how should the conflict be resolved?

Appendix 2

Istikhaarah Prayer

Jabir bin 'Abdullah (*ra*) said, "The Prophet (pbuh) used to teach us the way of doing *istikhaarah* (asking Allah to guide one to the right sort of action concerning any job or a deed) in all matters as he taught us the chapters of the Qur'an. He said, 'If anyone of you thinks of doing any job he should offer two-*rak`ahs* of prayer other than the compulsory ones and say (after the prayer):

*Allahumma inni astakhiruka bi`ilmika, Wa astaqdiruka bi-qudratika, Wa as'alaka min fadlika al-`azim Fa-innaka taqdiru Walaa aqdiru, Wa ta`lamu Walaa a`lamu, Wa anta `allaamu l-ghuyub. Allahumma, in kunta ta`lam anna hadha-l-amra Khairun li fi dini wa ma`aashi wa `aqibati amri (*or *`ajili amri wa'ajilihi) Faqdirhu wa yas-sirhu li thumma barik li Fihi, Wa in kunta ta`lamu anna hadha-lamra shar-run li fi dini wa ma`aashi wa`aaqibati amri (*or *fi`ajili amri wa ajilihi) Fasrifhu `anni was-rifni `anhu. Waqdir li al-khaira haithu kana thumma ardini bihi.'*

[Translation:] 'O Allah! I ask guidance from Your knowledge, And power from Your Might and I ask for Your great blessings. You are capable and I am not. You know and I do not and You know the unseen. O Allah! If You know that this matter is good for my religion and my subsistence and in my Hereafter--(or said: If it is better for my present and later needs)--Then You ordain it for me and make it easy for me to get, And then bless me in it, and if You know that this matter is harmful to me in my religion and subsistence and in the Hereafter--(or said: If it is worse for my present and later needs)--Then keep it away from me and let me be away from it. And ordain for me whatever is good for me, And make me satisfied with it).'

"The Prophet added that then the person should name (mention) his specific need."

(Bukhari, Book #21, Hadith #263)

Glossary

`abaya	Loose, robe-like dress often used as over garment
akhirah	Hereafter
Allah	Arabic word for *God*, literally the *One God*
`ayn	Evil eye; belief in many cultures that this malicious look can cause harm out of envy
dar' al-mafaasid	A term from Islamic jurisprudence meaning to prevent harm; part of a legal maxim prioritizing the prevention of harm over the attainment of benefit
darurah	A necessity
dhikr	Literally, remembrance; used to refer to recitation of the Names of Allah, supplications from the hadith or Qur'an, or simply remembering Allah
du`a	Prayer, supplication
dukhul	Intercourse; consummation of the marriage
fajr	Morning prayer before sunrise
fiqh	Jurisprudence
hadith	Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and narrations about his behavior

haajah	A need
halaqah	Study circle
haram	Prohibited
hasad	Malicious envy, wishing that the other person loses what they have
hijab	Manner of dress in which Muslim women cover their hair & bodies in public
`ibaadah	Any act of worship, including ritual prayers, doing good deeds, and any act done with the intention of pleasing Allah
`iddah	Waiting period for wife after pronouncement of divorce or after husband's death, before which she can remarry
ihsaan	Behaving with excellence, in the context of marriage it refers to treating your spouse with the utmost care and kindness
imam	Muslim clergy, also refers to person leading congregational prayer
iraadah	Motivation or will
`isha	The evening prayer
istikhaarah	Prayer made to seek guidance from Allah before making a decision
israaf	Excessive spending

jalb al-masaalih	A term from Islamic jurisprudence meaning the attainment of benefit, part of a legal maxim prioritizing the prevention of harm over the attainment of benefit
khuluq	Character, including one's conduct
kitaab	Islamic marriage contract
khutbah	Sermon
libaas	Garment
maghrib	Sunset, also the prayer offered after sunset
mahr	Dowry, gift given from husband to his wife
maqasid al-Shari`ah	The objectives or underlying purpose of Islamic law
masjid	Mosque, Muslim place of worship
mawaddah	Love and compassion
nafl	Optional worship, such as prayers in addition to the five mandatory daily prayers
naseeb	Destiny; one's share in life
nikaah	Islamic marriage contract
qismat	Fate or destiny; also spelled *kismet*
qiwaamah	Concept referring to the leadership role that men have in the family, in which they are

	entrusted to provide care and maintenance for women (4:34)
Qur'an	Holy book for Muslims, considered to be Word of God, translated into many languages
rak`ah	A unit of ritual prayer including the prescribed movements beginning with standing, and ending with prostration
al-Razzaq	The Sustainer or Provider, one of the ninety-nine Names of Allah
rizq	Provision or sustenance from Allah
ruqya	A form of spiritual healing using Qur'anic recitation
sabr	Patience and perseverance
sakeenah	Tranquility
sadaqah	Charity
seerah	History of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)
shahadah	Bearing witness that there is no god but One God and that Muhammad is His Messenger; it is the first pillar of Islam
Shaitan	Arabic for *Satan*
shalwar kameez	Traditional dress of South and Central Asia, worn by men and women
Shari`ah	Islamic way of life, Islamic law/code of ethics

shirk	Worshipping other gods besides Allah
Sunnah	The way of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) captured in his sayings & recorded deeds
ta`aruf	Getting to know one another
tabdheer	Unlawful spending
takmiliyyat	Things that enhance one's life but are not necessary
taqwa	Being ever-conscious of Allah
taraweeh	Optional prayers in Ramadan after the obligatory evening prayer (*`ishaa*)
`urf	Custom
`umrah	The lesser pilgrimage
waleemah	Celebration of marriage with a banquet
wudu	Ablution, ritual washing before prayer
zabiha	Meat that has been slaughtered according to Islamic guidelines
zawj	Pair
zawjiyyah	Parity
zina	Adultery or fornication

Resources

Domestic Violence

General

Asian & Pacific-Islander Institute on Domestic Violence: www.apiidv.org.
Helpguide.org.
National Domestic Violence Hotline: http://nnedv.org/resources/stats.html. 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).
National Network to End Violence. *About Domestic Violence*: http://nnedv.org/resources/stats.html.
Tahirih Justice Center. www.tahirih.org.
US Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families (2003). *The Basics of Domestic* Violence. https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/domesticviolence/domesticviolencec.cfm (retrieved 9/14/13).

Muslim-Specific

Karamah, Muslim women Lawyers for Human Rights: www.karamah.org.
Peaceful Families Project: www.peacefulfamilies.org.
Project Sakinah: www.projectsakinah.org.

Marriage

General

Chapman, G.D. (1992). *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love That Lasts*. Northfield Publishing.
Chapman, G. D. (2010). *Things I Wish I'd Known Before We Got Married*. Northfield Publishing.

Gottman, J. & Silver, N. (1999). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert.* Three Rivers Press.

Gray, J. (1992). *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus.* HarperCollins Publishers.

Hendrix, H. (2012). *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples. 20th Anniversary Edition.* Holt Paperbacks.

Markman, H.J., Stanley, S.M., & Blumberg, S.L. (2001). *Fighting for Your Marriage: Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love.* Jossey-Bass Publications.

Couples Workshops

Gottman Relationship Institute: www.gottman.com.

Emotionally Focused Therapy & Hold Me Tight Workshops: http://www.iceeft.com/index.php/externships?id=101.

Imago Relationship Therapy: www.gettingtheloveyouwant.com.

PREP (Prevention & Relationship Enhancement Program): www.prepinc.com/main/Instruc.aspx?ctry=USA.

Interfaith

Riley, N. S. (2013). *'Til Faith do us Part.* Oxford University Press.

Muslim-Specific

General

Badawi, J. (1995). *Gender Equity in Islam: Basic Principles.* American Trust Publications.

Beshir, E. & M.R. Beshir (2003). *Blissful Marriage: A Practical Islamic Guide.* Amana Publications.

Beshir, M.R. (2009). *Family Leadership, Qawamah: An Obligation to Fulfill, Not an Excuse to Abuse.* Amana Publications.

Birjas, Y. *Fiqh of Love, Marriage in Islam, 15 CD's.* Al-Maghrib Institute.

Ezzeldine, M. (2003). *Before the Wedding: 150 Questions for Muslims to Ask Before Getting Married.* Izza Publishing.

Ismail, S. (2012). *Modern Muslim Marriage.* Amana Publications.

Maqsood, R. W. (2000). *The Muslim Marriage Guide.* Amana Publications.

Marriage Success Website (videos, suggested readings): http://www.marriagesuccess.ca/.

McFarlane, J. (2012). *Understanding Trends in American Muslim Divorce and Marriage: A Discussion Guide for Families and Communities,* ISPU. http://www.ispu.org/pdfs/ISPU%20Report_Marriage%20II_Macfarlane_WEB.pdf.

Family Dawn Website: http://familydawn.com/category/marriage/.

Muslim Matters Website: http://muslimmatters.org/category/social/marriage/.

Qadhi, Y. *Like a Garment.* Youtube.com, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jf6B4xk3kcI.

Shaarawy, K. (2011). *Dwell in Tranquility: an Islamic Roadmap to the Vibrant Marriage.* SalaamHearts, Inc.

Soundvision Website: http://www.soundvision.com/info/marriage/.

Yusuf, H. (2009). *The Rights and Responsibilities of Marriage, 14 CD's* Alhambra Productions.

Intimacy

Al-Kawthari, Muhammad ibn Adam. (2008). *Islamic Guide to Sexual Relations.* Huma Press.

Al-Ghazali. A. M. (1997). Trans. T. J. Winter. *On Disciplining the Soul and Breaking the Two Desires.* Islamic Texts Society.

Marriage Contract

Alkhateeb, Maha. (2012). *Islamic Marriage Contracts: A Resource Guide for Legal Professionals, Advocates, Imams, and Communities.* Peaceful Families Project, Asian & Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence, and Battered Women's Justice Project. http://www.peacefulfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Islamic.Marriage.Contracts.Resource.Guide_Produced.By_.PFP-API.Institute-BWJP_2012.pdf.

Kahf.net:
http://monzer.kahf.com/marriage/MARRIAGE_CERTIFICATE_FORM_DEC_2003.pdf

Karamah, Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights: http://karamah.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/The-Nature-of-the-Islamic-Marriage.pdf.

Online Premarital Class

Before You Say, "I Do." http://www.classroad.com/elearning/?welcome=icsc.

Finances

Financial Planning Association: www.fpanet.org (directory of financial planners, online guides for budgeting and financial planning).

National Foundation for Credit Counseling: www.nfcc.org (provides financial counseling and online resources).

Health & Marriage

US Department of Health & Human Services (2007). The Effects of Marriage on Health.
http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/07/marriageonhealth/rb.htm

Mental Health

General

American Psychological Association, www.apa.org.
Helpguide.org.
National Alliance on Mental Illness, www.nami.org.
National Institute of Mental Health, http://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml.
PsychCentral, www.psychcentral.com.
WebMD.com.

Muslim-Specific

MentalHealth4Muslims.com.
Muslim Mental Health: www.muslimmentalhealth.com.

Online Assessments & Screening Tools

These online tools are designed to help people get a better understanding of the symptoms they may be experiencing but are not a substitute for assessment by a qualified mental health professional or physician.

PsychCentral: http://psychcentral.com/quizzes/.
WebMD: http://www.webmd.com/depression/depression-health-check/default.htm.

Therapy

GoodTherapy.org: http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/how-to-find-a-therapist/.

Parenting

Beshir, E. & M.R. Beshir (1998). *Meeting the Challenge of Parenting in the West: An Islamic Perspective.* Amana Publications.

Beshir, E. & M.R. Beshir (2004). *Parenting Skills Based on the Qur'an and Sunnah.* Amana Publications.

Family Dawn Website: http://familydawn.com/category/parenting/.

Muslim Matters Website: http://muslimmatters.org/category/life-2/parenting-life-2/.

Quadri, H. & Quadri, S. (2011). *Parenting...Who Said it was Easy?, 2nd Edition* Cedar Graphics, Inc.

Quadri, H. & Quadri, S. (2009). *The War Within Our Hearts, 2nd Edition.* Kube Publishing, Ltd.

Prophet Muhammad

Bewley, A. (Trans.) (2006). Muhammad, Messenger of Allah. *Ash shifa of Qadi Iyad.* Madina Press.

Emerick, Y. (2002). *Critical Lives: The Life and Work of Muhammad.* ALPHA, A Pearson Education Company.

Ramadan, T. (2007). *In the Footsteps of the Prophet: Lessons from the Life of Muhammad.* Oxford University Press.

Salahi, A. (2010). *Muhammad, Man & Prophet.* The Islamic Foundation.

Index

Abortion 35, 156, 298
Abuse 6, 11, 41, 45, 47, 72, 91, 92, 112, 118, 124, 150, 151, 153, 157, 175, 176, 180, 184, 188, 189-191, 193, 225, 232, 233, 239, 265, 267, 268, 269, 272, 273, 276, 279-289, 291, 294, 298, 311
  Screening for, 91, 100-102, 112, 117
Adoption 27
Addiction 72, 90, 118, 125, 164, 197, 198, 201, 269
Affair (see Infidelity)
Age 37, 66-69
Anger 77, 80, 102, 117, 214, 219, 224, 232, 271, 301
  Management 174, 209, 236-241
Attraction 22, 34, 42, 50, 60, 68, 74-76, 114, 164, 199, 216
Chastity 21, 38
Child-rearing (see Parenting)
Companionship 20, 23-25, 47
Conflict viii, xx, 9, 13, 31, 42, 50, 52, 54, 55, 59, 61, 66, 73, 78, 79, 80, 82, 101, 106, 109, 111, 115, 117, 125, 136, 137, 138, 141, 195, 215, 235, 240, 241, 246, 251, 252, 261, 262, 263, 267, 268, 274, 275, 282, 291, 292, 293, 294, 301
  Resolution xx, 102, 131, 135, 194, 209, 210, 220, 221, 223-228, 274
Consultation 10, 91, 110, 130, 135, 185, 202, 217, 228, 229-231, 232, 247, 270, 277, 287, 290
Contraceptives 167
Contract (see Marriage)
Converts 52, 53, 60, 120, 141
Counseling (Therapy) xvii-xxi, 3, 36, 40, 41, 45, 77, 80, 81, 102, 159, 162, 163, 164, 182, 183, 184, 196, 198-202, 220, 233, 237, 259, 260, 270, 272, 274, 283, 298, 312, 314, 315
  Premarital 22, 101, 120, 124, 136 139, 163, 266-269
  Post-divorce 40, 101
Cross-cultural (see intercultural)
Culture xxviii, 36, 50, 53, 57-66, 67, 69, 73, 74, 75, 100, 109, 113, 118, 120, 121, 122, 123, 125, 135, 137, 138-141, 147, 148, 156, 185, 186, 188, 191, 201, 203, 212, 213, 220-222, 224, 273, 280, 284, 289, 292, 299, 306
Dating 20, 22, 23, 35, 38, 87, 155, 163, 280
Debt 28, 125, 137, 247, 253, 257-259, 263, 272, 283, 299

Decision-making 10, 13, 58, 69, 77, 80, 150, 186, 187, 228-233, 241, 246, 247
Du'a 94, 160, 169, 226, 231, 257, 272, 305
Divorce xvii, xviii, 22, 26, 28, 29, 32, 40-41, 42, 44, 49, 56, 72, 73, 75, 88, 89, 92, 101, 107, 108, 119, 121, 137, 142, 143, 144, 147, 148, 149, 153, 154, 156, 157, 189, 191, 200, 220, 245, 247, 262, 265, 266, 281, 289-295, 298, 306, 312, 313
Domestic Violence (see Abuse)
Education 16, 50, 66, 69-71, 142, 168, 204, 221, 256, 258, 278, 286, 288
Family, 2, 7, 9, 10, 20, 24, 25-28, 31, 46, 55, 58, 61, 62, 64, 66, 71, 74, 79, 81, 83, 85, 96, 102, 136, 137, 146, 147, 149, 150, 157, 176, 179, 180, 181, 183, 184, 187, 191, 196, 197, 200, 205, 213, 215, 220, 221, 224, 225, 228, 229, 230, 245, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 254, 267, 270, 279, 280, 282, 284, 286, 287-289
  extended 29, 30, 34, 35, 37, 38, 53, 63, 64, 65, 86, 90, 138, 139, 144, 194, 222, 233, 244, 247, 252, 254, 258, 281, 289, 292, 293, 298, 299
  in-laws 59, 65, 120-124, 125, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131, 137, 142, 178, 194, 233, 270, 292, 300
  role of 39, 50, 55, 91-93, 95, 100, 105-132, 233, 261
Finances 28, 47, 69, 79, 124, 142, 149, 150, 180-184, 243-263, 293, 299, 314
Friendship 24, 25, 68, 204, 206, 300
Garments for one another 3-8, 11, 73, 153
Gender
  differences 2, 192, 193, 283
  equality 2, 312
  interaction 63, 86, 96, 97, 138, 150, 152, 203, 204, 206, 284, 293
  roles 4, 5, 12, 24, 25, 38, 39, 50, 68, 70, 73, 80-83, 86, 101, 113, 125, 126, 179, 180-184, 186, 196, 210, 228, 247, 252, 282, 286, 283, 292, 297, 307
Health 50, 68, 71-74, 117, 152, 193, 195, 233, 234, 248, 267, 274-279, 293, 298
  Mental 269-273, 277-279
Honeymoon 23, 158-159, 163, 169, 171, 278
Infertility 26, 27
Infidelity 75, 293
Intercultural marriage 60, 65, 138-141, 186, 212, 213, 292, 220-223, 224
Internet 88-91, 293
Interfaith marriage 138-141, 142
Intimacy 3, 22, 153, 156, 160, 161-169, 172, 174, 175, 185, 186, 188, 191-196, 198-200, 221, 290, 294
Istikhaarah 94, 230, 303
Jinn 9, 273-274

Kitaab (see *Nikaah*)
Love languages 7, 78
Mahr 138, 142, 143-150
Marriage contract 3, 22, 23, 38, 44, 46, 87, 137, 141-158, 179, 266
Mawaddah 2, 16, 151, 180, 284
Mental health (see health)
Mutuality 2, 3-8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 23, 29, 33, 45, 46, 62, 67, 74, 78, 82, 95, 98, 122, 130, 135, 138, 141, 145, 152, 153, 154, 160, 165, 166, 176, 179, 180, 181, 186, 190, 207, 228, 249, 256, 276, 289, 290
Naseeb (also *qismat*) 87
Nikaah 23, 38, 137, 155-158
Orphans 27, 36, 41, 43
Parenting 25, 26, 27, 36, 42, 54, 81, 83, 181, 182, 210, 221, 260, 261 294
Parents, obedience to 34, 92 107-111, 125-126, 127, 129, 157, 254, 288
Parity 1, 23, 171
Personality 4, 5, 32, 50, 70, 76-79, 83, 98, 120, 126, 127, 140, 233, 274
Polygyny 22, 42-45, 142, 154
Pornography 12, 73, 161, 162, 163, 164, 196-198, 199, 282, 291
Pregnancy 26, 34-36, 73, 75, 195, 281
Premarital sex 35, 38, 163, 245
Prenuptial agreement 141-143, 148, 154, 253
Qismat (also *naseeb*) 87
Rahmah 2, 16, 151, 180, 284
Religiosity 13, 51-57, 138, 291
Sakeenah 2, 9, 16, 24, 180, 285, 289
Shura (see consultation)
Shari`ah 8-12, 13, 25, 137, 142, 146, 154
Social Life 5, 20, 33, 56, 63, 172, 180, 195, 202-205, 206, 221
Socioeconomic status 13, 21, 28, 29, 46, 67, 70, 75, 109, 116, 120, 146, 244, 245, 254, 284
Spirituality 14, 16, 21, 51, 57, 172-179, 202, 234, 248, 255, 272
  Crisis 55, 110
Stress 4, 24, 72, 77, 79, 112, 123, 135, 137, 158, 194, 195, 219, 253, 254, 260, 261, 269, 270, 272, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 285, 291, 293
  Management 209, 227, 233-235, 285
Substance abuse (see addiction)
Ta`aruf 2, 6
Talaaq (see Divorce)
Therapy (see Counseling)
Tranquility (see *Sakeenah*)
Values 1, 2, 11, 12, 13, 14, 23, 25, 26, 29, 50, 54, 55, 58, 70, 79, 80, 88, 90, 105, 109, 117, 121, 138, 139, 140, 158, 165, 180, 186, 200, 201, 202, 221, 222, 237, 244, 252, 262, 284, 289, 291
Wali 86, 88, 100, 111-120, 151
Widow/widower 36, 41, 42, 43, 67
Zawjiyyah (see Parity)

About the Authors



Imam Mohamed Hag Magid currently serves as the President of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). He is the Imam of All Dulles Area Muslim Society (ADAMS) Center in Sterling, Virginia. Under his direction, the Center has grown to be one of the largest Muslim community organizations in the Washington Metropolitan Area. He has trained imams and religious leaders in the US and internationally on the issue of violence against women through the Peaceful Families Project. Imam Magid has co-authored *Reflections on the Qur'an* and written a chapter in *Change from Within: Diverse Perspectives on Domestic Violence in Muslim Communities.*

Salma Elkadi Abugideiri is a licensed professional counselor in private practice in northern Virginia. She has provides counseling for a wide range of mental health issues, specializing in marriage counseling and trauma treatment. She is also a founding board member of Peaceful Families Project, an organization dedicated to ending domestic violence in Muslim communities. She has authored several publications addressing domestic violence, relationship and mental health issues in Muslim communities.

"This book is an important addition to the literature on marriage preparation, encouraging our next generation of Muslim couples to prepare for a fulfilling married life. It provides a very comprehensive discussion of the issues potential couples need to consider prior to marriage including practical examples and topics that are very relevant to our time. The book is bold and courageous in addressing topics that are often not addressed prior to marriage."

— ANEESAH NADIR, MSW, PhD; President, Islamic Social Services Association-USA

"In a time where quality marriage guides are rare and the number of divorces is noticeable, this book is required reading for anyone hoping to get marriage right. Imam Maged and Salma Abugideiri are to be commended for this excellent work."

— IMAM SUHAIB WEBB, Resident Scholar, Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center

"A lot of our lectures and seminars on the marital process tend to lack expertise on a practical level. What this book does is provide practical tips that you would learn in a secular textbook while not departing from the spirit of the religion."

— SHAYKH OMAR SULEIMAN, Director of Islamic Learning Foundation in Texas

"Young people have questions about marriage and are not getting answers from their parents or community. This book provides some of those answers. The questions presented for self-reflection are very helpful in making you think about what you want."

— OMAMA ALTALIB, Communications major, George Mason University

ISBN 978-1493637058