

When You Are Counseling Members of the Bahá'í Faith on Issues Related to a Troubled Marriage, Separation, Reconciliation Effort, or Divorce

The following information is provided for your review as an aid to understanding the relevant religious beliefs of your clients, and in support of your approach to assisting them in remedying their difficulties.

Overview of the Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Faith was founded in Persia (now Iran) in the mid-1800's by its Prophet, Bahá'u'lláh, and is now established in more than 100,000 localities around the world. The United Nations and a majority of the governments of the world recognize it as an independent worldwide religion.

Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings (and the explanations of them provided by appointed or elected interpreters and representatives) provide a renewal and strengthening of the messages in previous religions that encourage people to make positive, spiritual choices in their lives. In addition, the religion provides guidance to establish a worldwide global family living in peace that embraces the diversity of its peoples, cultures, and languages.

The essential message of the Bahá'í Faith is that of unity. Bahá'ís believe that there is only one God, that there is only one human race, and that all the world's major religions represent stages in the revelation of God's will and purpose for humanity. Bahá'ís also believe that the family is the basic unit of society and that monogamous marriage between a man and a woman is the foundation of family life and civilization.

There is no clergy in the Bahá'í Faith. Administrative and spiritual matters affecting the members of the Bahá'í Faith are handled by local, regional, national, and international councils. Among the responsibilities of the local Spiritual Assemblies (local councils) is ensuring that couples know about and follow Bahá'í laws and guidance related to marriage and divorce. It also ensures that the civil legalities for both are completed. Local Spiritual Assemblies are involved even if only one member of the couple is a Bahá'í.

Bahá'í Views of Marriage

Bahá'u'lláh teaches that marriage is an historic and continuing Divine Institution. Marriage benefits both spouses, establishes a strong foundation for the rearing of children, and provides for the progress of humanity. In His Writings, Bahá'u'lláh states that God “established the law of marriage” and “made it as a fortress for well-being and salvation....” Bahá'í marriage is:

...the commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart. Each must, however, exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other, that the binding covenant between them may be a tie that will endure forever. Their purpose must be this: to become loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity.... (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 118)

As an indication of the couple's relationship to God, the Bahá'í wedding ceremony includes the vow, “We will all, verily, abide by the Will of God.”

Bahá'í Principles That Guide Healthy Marriages

The Bahá'í Writings encourage individuals to be involved in **personal and spiritual growth** throughout their lives, and married couples are asked to “ever improve the spiritual life of each other” (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 118) The more that spouses develop and practice qualities within the marriage such as compassion, courtesy, encouragement, faithfulness, flexibility, forgiveness, gentleness, helpfulness, love, moderation,

patience, respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, and truthfulness, the more benefit this brings to the marriage and family.

In a materialistic society, people tend to think that their value lies in their ability to exercise power over one another. The Bahá'í teachings specifically warn against such a concept, which leads to competition and power plays. Therefore, couples facing marital challenges may need assistance in recognizing spiritual qualities in one another and in demonstrating to one another that these qualities are more meaningful than other material standards.

Personal spiritual practices include **daily prayer and meditation**. Bahá'ís encourage praying together as a couple as one way to strengthen marriages, although there is no requirement that couples do this.

Bahá'í beliefs include individuals and couples **practicing gender equality** within their relationships to the best of their abilities. The Bahá'í Writings state, “Divine Justice demands that the rights of both sexes should be equally respected since neither is superior to the other...” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 162) Equality does not mean that the roles and responsibilities of the man and the woman are identical, but that they are to function within their marriage as equal partners.

This principle of equality is especially applicable when the couple discusses issues and makes decisions, a process Bahá'ís call **consultation**. The following is the applicable guidance from the Universal House of Justice, the international Bahá'í governing body:

...[I]n a marriage relationship, neither husband nor wife should ever unjustly dominate the other, and...there are times when the husband and the wife should defer to the wishes of the other, if agreement cannot be reached through consultation; each couple should determine exactly under what circumstances such deference is to take place. (On behalf of The Universal House of Justice, 1992, “Violence and Sexual Abuse of Women and Children”)

The ability to consult effectively is a virtue which the Bahá'í Teachings encourage. Therefore, Bahá'í couples will readily understand the importance of learning to listen, to be detached and non-reactive, and to remove self-interest from their spoken communications. Consultation includes the following principles:

- Maintaining harmony, love, and unity
- Turning to God for help and guidance
- Articulating one’s views clearly and frankly
- Opinions put forward as contributions, not as correct or right
- Encouraging and listening
- Holding pure motives
- Avoiding clashing feelings
- Not taking offense or belittling each other’s opinions
- Using difference of opinion to create unique solutions
- Deferring to one another
- Supporting unified decisions

Couples can benefit from help with avoiding disruptive behaviors and from taking a timeout/pause break as needed to stay focused and avoid destructive interactions.

Love and consideration are vital within marriage, and abuse is forbidden. This is clear from the following quotation:

It is also evident from Bahá'í teachings that no husband should subject his wife to abuse of any kind, and that such a reprehensible action is the antithesis of the relationship of mutual respect and equality enjoined by the Bahá'í writings—a relationship governed by the principles of consultation and devoid of the use of force to compel obedience to one's will. (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, “Preserving Bahá'í Marriages”, p. 458)

Of course, **abuse of children is also forbidden**. Spiritual Assemblies may have access to specific guidance on handling domestic violence and abuse. For more detailed information, you are welcome to contact the Spiritual Assembly in your area, which may be listed in the local phone book associated with “Bahá'í Faith” or through contact information supplied to you by the couple you are counseling. [Links to some of the guidance on domestic violence are available through www.bahaimarriage.net/resources.htm.]

The Bahá'í Faith holds a **balanced view of sex and sexual relations**. Sexual expression between a monogamous, married couple is considered a natural right and part of the purpose of marriage. However, chastity applies, which includes abstinence from arousing touch and sex before marriage, and faithfulness and purity of thought and action after marriage. Sexual relations between unmarried individuals or between people not married to one another is not permissible in the Bahá'í Faith. Homosexual behavior is also not permitted. [Further information on this issue can be found at www.bnasa.org.]

Children

The creation and rearing of children is a primary purpose of marriage. The Bahá'í Writings emphasize the mother's role in the early education of a child, but both parents are held accountable for the health, education, and well-being of the child.

If a married couple is struggling to get along with each other, the well-being of the children must be a consideration. “It is always a source of sorrow in life when married people cannot get on well together, but...you and your husband, in contemplating divorce, should think of the future of your children and how this major step on your part will influence their lives and happiness.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, p. 449)

Help for Troubled Couples

Bahá'í couples experiencing marital difficulties are encouraged to consult with a Spiritual Assembly, preferably before the problems become entrenched. In areas where there is not a Spiritual Assembly, the couple is free to contact any Assembly in a neighboring Bahá'í community or ask their National Spiritual Assembly for guidance. The Spiritual Assembly generally provides the parties with spiritual guidance and resources and encourages them to seek other assistance as well. The Universal House of Justice provides this guidance:

The House of Justice is distressed to learn that you and your husband are continuing to experience marital difficulties. It has frequently advised believers in such situations to turn to the Spiritual Assemblies for advice and counsel, and to follow this advice in their efforts to preserve the unity of their marital relationship. It has been found useful in many instances to also seek the assistance of competent professional marriage counselors, who can provide useful insights and guidance in the use of constructive measures to bring about a greater degree of unity. (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, “Preserving Bahá'í Marriages”, p. 459)

Couples are urged to think of the future of their children and how the major step of divorce will influence their lives and happiness. They are also encouraged to pray and be of service to others, separately or together as is possible.

Discussion of Actions and Occurrences in a Troubled Marriage

Bahá'ís believe that it is inappropriate to confess sins to anyone other than God for the purpose of absolution of the sins and that it is harmful to backbite and gossip about others. However, in a therapeutic setting, effective treatment requires that the problems counseling is designed to address are clearly communicated. So strong is the admonition against backbiting that some Bahá'ís are reticent to be open about the problems they have with their spouse and, for some, time may need to be taken in therapy to discuss the differences between backbiting and seeking understanding/resolution of problems.

Bahá'ís may also confuse confession of sins with actions of apology and forgiveness that can be vital in healing or reconciling a marital relationship. Guidance on this topic includes:

...[I]f we spontaneously desire to acknowledge we have been wrong in something, or that we have some fault of character, and ask another person's forgiveness or pardon, we are quite free to do so. ...[W]e are not obliged to do so. It rests entirely with the individual." (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 179)

Some Bahá'ís may also be reticent to turn for guidance to their Spiritual Assembly, often from embarrassment and reluctance to air such personal issues before the members, who they may regard as personal friends. If this is the case with the couples you are counseling, their concerns should be explored in therapy, and the couple should be encouraged to gain this help. Some Assemblies have counseling teams or committees that can assist this process, and spiritual guidance and religious conviction are often powerful motivators for change and growth. All matters brought to a Spiritual Assembly are held in the strictest confidence.

Separation, Reconciliation, and Divorce

Bahá'í Guidelines

Separation and divorce generally go against unity, which is a foundation principle included in the Teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, although there are times when these actions are appropriate and allowed. "The Bahá'í attitude is that marriage is a very serious and sacred relationship and divorce a last resort to be avoided if humanly possible." (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The Compilation of Compilations*, Vol. II, p. 449) Divorce is only allowed under conditions of "irreconcilable antipathy" or serious "aversion".

An individual or a couple wishing to have a marital separation for the purpose of divorcing approaches a Spiritual Assembly and makes the request. The Assembly works with both individuals to ensure they understand the relevant Bahá'í teachings and helps them with attempting to achieve reconciliation. If reconciliation is not possible, and the couple is intent upon divorcing, they are then required to begin a year of waiting (sometimes referred to as a "year of patience").

There can be many ways that individuals interpret the term "year of waiting". Many couples who feel strong aversion and think reconciliation is impossible may treat it as a period of "waiting for divorce". However, it is wise to share with couples that it can also be waiting for:

- Cooling down of anger
- Reducing feelings of aversion
- Becoming willing to work on the marriage
- Gaining of knowledge and skills for how to have a successful marriage
- Understanding the issues and how to address them

- Strengthening of unity
- Gathering of a support system for the couple and family
- Consulting with institutions, professionals, and family members
- Realizing significant concern for any children involved if there is a divorce
- Experiencing of compassion and empathy for each other
- Deepening in the Bahá'í Faith's teachings and the guidance about marriage and divorce
- Re-birthing of friendship
- Rekindling of loving feelings

“During the year the couple have the responsibility of attempting to reconcile their differences, and the Assembly has the duty to help them and encourage them.” (Universal House of Justice, dated November 3, 1982, to an individual believer, in *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1304)

“It is understood that two Bahá'ís who reach the point of strain where they feel a divorce is necessary need time to cool down and reflect, which is, of course, the purpose of the year of waiting.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, dated August 3, 1981, to a National Spiritual Assembly, quoted in US National Spiritual Assembly Guidelines for Local Spiritual Assemblies, Ch. 13 – Divorce; Revised September 2011)

Up until the point when a year of waiting is granted, a separation into separate dwellings is not required. Couples may find that other types of separation, whether it is temporarily living apart, or simply living in separate parts of the same home, provide enough space for emotions to calm down and repair attempts to begin. Separate dwellings only become a requirement when the Assembly approves the application for divorce and the year of waiting begins. If the couple has sexual relations or lives together, the year of waiting is considered ended. If the couple wishes to separate following this, the year of waiting application would have to be renewed.

During the period of separation, the Bahá'í teaching is that the husband is responsible for providing adequate financial support for the wife and children. Under some circumstances, the wife may assist financially, but this would need to be reviewed by a Spiritual Assembly on a case-by-case basis. Dating other people in the spirit of courtship is considered contrary to the spirit of the Bahá'í teachings when it occurs during separation or the year of waiting. The focus during that time is to be on reconciliation between the spouses. Applying for civil divorce should also wait until after the year of waiting is completed. If a couple completes the year of waiting without reconciliation and obtains a civil divorce, the Bahá'í divorce is granted, and the parties are then free to court and marry others.

The quotations below may guide you in working with a couple that is discussing separation or divorce:

“Irreconcilable antipathy arising between the parties to a marriage is not merely a lack of love for one's spouse but an antipathy which cannot be resolved.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, “Preserving Bahá'í Marriages”, no. 37)

“In the strict legal sense there are no ‘grounds’ for a Bahá'í divorce. No question of misbehavior of either party is involved and the only condition under which a Bahá'í divorce may be considered is the irreconcilable antipathy of the parties.” (Universal House of Justice, letter dated May 24, 1972, to a National Spiritual Assembly)

“Bahá'ís should be profoundly aware of the sanctity of marriage and should strive to make their marriages an eternal bond of unity and harmony. This requires effort and sacrifice and wisdom and self-abnegation. A Bahá'í should consider the possibility of divorce only if the situation is intolerable and he or she has a strong aversion to being married to the other partner. This is the standard held up to the individual. It is not a law, but an exhortation. It is a goal to which we should strive.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1303)

... “[A]version” is not a specific legal term that needs to be defined. Indeed a number of other terms are used in describing the situation that can lead to divorce in Bahá’í law, such as “antipathy,” “resentment,” “estrangement,” “impossibility of establishing harmony,” and “irreconcilability.” The texts, however, point out that divorce is strongly condemned, should be viewed as “a last resort” when “rare and urgent circumstances” exist, and that the partner who is the “cause of divorce” will “unquestionably” become the “victim of formidable calamities.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1305)

“Should resentment or antipathy arise between husband and wife, he [or she] is not to divorce her [or him] but to bide in patience throughout the course of one whole year, that perchance the fragrance of affection may be renewed between them. If, upon the completion of this period, their love hath not returned, it is permissible for divorce to take place.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, #68)

Marriage Education Suggestions

There are no specific Bahá’í guidelines for the practical ways for a couple to approach separation or structure their lives during a separation. Consulting to reach agreement and doing their best to be unified are key principles that do apply to the couple. The marriage education field makes some practical suggestions that may be useful for counselors who are helping separating couples with calming emotions and taking practical actions, but they are not required for Bahá’ís. Some of this type of information is provided below in case it is useful in achieving the key goals of aiding reconciliation or helping a couple with carrying out a less destructive divorce.

One possibility is for a counselor to assist the couple with creating an agreement that structures any type of separation. If a temporary separation becomes a year of waiting, the couple could then create a new agreement. If there is significant conflict between a separating or divorcing couple, or the Assembly grants the beginning of a year of waiting, it can be wise for any agreements to be in writing to minimize the chances of disunity arising due to misunderstandings.

Clarifications and agreements about separation could potentially address the following topic areas:

- Type of separation (such as, mental and emotional distancing; in-house with separate sleeping arrangements; separate residences; short-term; year of waiting...), living arrangements, and sharing of home furnishings
- Start date and length of separation and date for reflection and review
- Sharing and caring for children or other dependents
- How each will handle finances in light of the guidance in the Bahá’í Writings
- Keeping the business of the family going (such as, household responsibilities; personal responsibilities like medical visits; children’s school and extracurricular activities; contact with other relatives; family outings; family events; holidays...)
- Expectations of spouses in light of the guidance in the Bahá’í Writings (such as, methods and frequency of communications, personal development, constructive actions, dating each other or others, not registering on online matching sites, sexual contact with each other, ending an affair, entering of each other’s residences...)
- Meeting with a professional together or separately
- Professional assistance for any children or stepchildren
- Marriage education and skill building initiatives
- Whether to involve legal counsel or mediation and at what stage

- Confidentiality and sharing with children, family, and friends (Encouraged guidelines: limiting explanations, discouraging gossip and backbiting, refraining from maligning the other spouse, discouraging others from taking sides)

Further Information

If you require further information about the Bahá'í Faith and its approach to marriage and to counseling, please contact the Spiritual Assembly closest to you. You may also find helpful information and specific country contact information at this website: www.bahai.org. Additional information is available at www.bahaimarriage.net.