

The Sacred Commitment of Marriage: Foundation for Community Building

Why would we want to go through all the challenges in finding a mate and being married?

There are people who say, “Are you nuts?! Just enjoy being alone!” or “Just find someone to live with!” But, there is great value in marriage, and in having a committed partner to be of service to others with, so we’re here today to learn more about how to be successfully married.

Value of Marriage

We are in a world where marriage is often devalued.

- Youth and young adults are reluctant to marry because of their exposure to divorce and the scarcity of positive marriage role models.
- People are hesitant to re-marry after divorce because of bad experiences.
- Uncommitted cohabitation is common.
- Infidelity among married couples is epidemic.

Bahá’ís are not exempt from any of this. It is important to stop and remind ourselves that building a unified world includes having happy, healthy marriages. They are the foundational building block for a peaceful planet.

Research

Research shows that married couples are healthier, wealthier, and have sex more often. The outcomes for children are exponentially better when they are in a home with a stable low-conflict marriage at the foundation. Children do better in school, there’s less abuse, they’re healthier, and so on.

Let’s look at what the Bahá’í teachings say about the benefits of marriage:

- **“The Bahá’í Teachings do not only encourage marital life, considering it the natural and normal way of existence for every sane, healthy and socially-conscious and responsible person, but raise marriage to the status of a divine institution, its chief and sacred purpose being the perpetuation of the human race—which is the very flower of the entire creation—and its elevation to the true station destined for it by God.”** (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, “Preserving Bahá’í Marriages”, p. 446)
- And...marriage is strongly encouraged as a choice—it’s not an obligation.

Well-Being and Salvation

- **“And when He [God] desired to manifest grace and beneficence to men, and to set the world in order, He revealed observances and created laws; among them He established the law of marriage, made it as a fortress for well-being and salvation...”** (Bahá’u’lláh: *Bahá’í Prayers* (US 2002), p. 118)
 - We have just looked at the “well-being” that research has demonstrated.
 - Let’s look at the concept of **Salvation**...it’s the part of the quotation we don’t talk about much, and it’s important to strive to understand what it means.
 - Salvation is connected to the well-being and future of our souls.

- The soul is a mystery, but we do understand that qualities of character such as courage, patience, and truthfulness are part of it.
- We develop these qualities all through our childhoods, are asked to thoroughly know our partner's character strengths and weakness before considering marriage, and keep developing character qualities as adults.
- **“That divine world is...a world of perfections; virtues, or perfections, must be acquired... during this vanishing existence.”** (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 226)
- **“...[T]he union must be a true relationship, a spiritual coming together as well as a physical one, so that throughout every phase of life, and in all the worlds of God, their union will endure; for this real oneness is a gleaming out of the love of God.”** (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 117)
- **“The true marriage of Bahá’ís is this, that husband and wife should be united both physically and spiritually, that they may ever improve the spiritual life of each other, and may enjoy everlasting unity throughout all the worlds of God.”** (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 118)
- One spiritual practice vital in marriage is keeping your relationship “cleaned up” with being mindful of when you hurt your partner or spouse and need to request forgiveness. The Baha’i Writings say, **“Thy generous Lord will...forgive thy sins and transform them into goodly deeds.”** (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, #141) It’s up to you as a couple to create the space to feel that forgiveness from God and allow transformation to happen between you.
- Consider then from these quotations about the spiritual side of marriage that a primary purpose of marriage can be to help one another strengthen our spiritual character qualities and to help one another prepare for life after death.
- Our souls are beings of light, the strength of our character qualities brightens that light. Are you giving light, a dim bulb or a blazing light? Is your relationship or marriage giving light to others?

GROUP PARTICIPATION: Briefly discuss a question in groups of 2-3 people. Afterward share ideas. You’ll have 3-4 minutes to discuss this. **QUESTION:** What could you do to improve the spiritual life of a relationship or marriage? Example: pray together

In addition to well-being and salvation, marriage is also about:

Sex, Children, and Family

- **“The proper use of the sex instinct is the natural right of every individual, and it is precisely for this purpose that the institution of marriage has been established.”** (Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 344)
 - **“...[T]he primary purpose of marriage is the procreation of children. A couple who are physically incapable of having children may, of course, marry, since the procreation of children is not the *only* purpose of marriage. However, it would be contrary to the spirit of the Teachings for a couple to decide voluntarily never to have any children.”** (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 380)
- “...[T]he importance of marriage lieth in the bringing up of a richly blessed family, so that with entire gladness they may, even as candles, illuminate the world.”** (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 120)

And, healthy, happy marriages include:

Being of Service

“He realizes your desire to get married is quite a natural one, and he will pray that God will assist you to find a suitable companion with whom you can be truly happy and united in the service of the [Bahá’í] Faith. Bahá’u’lláh has urged marriage upon all people as the natural and rightful way of life. He has also, however, placed strong emphasis on its spiritual nature, which, while in no way precluding a normal physical life, is the most essential aspect of marriage.” (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 380)

Unhappy couples tend to focus their energy inward on problems instead of outward making the world better for others.

Marriage Also Includes Eternal Friendship:

- **“...[M]arriage should lead to a profound friendship of spirit, which will endure in the next world...”** (On behalf of Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 206)

Community Building

How do happy marriages contribute to building a vibrant and unified community, which the Bahá’í Faith sees as part of the salvation of humanity? Visualize the homes in the neighborhood in which you live as mini-fortresses of well-being and salvation, fortresses of safety for the neighborhood, for the children.

The Universal House of Justice is very clear that our credibility and influence in talking to people about the importance of world unity is directly connected to our ability to maintain family harmony:

“...[I]f the friends are not able to maintain harmony within their families, on what other basis do they hope to demonstrate to a skeptical world the efficacy of the pre-eminent character of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh? What possible influence could they hope to exert on the development of nations and the establishment of world peace?” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 222)

What is Community Building? [Summary – Building 4 Core Activities at the neighborhood level: Devotional gatherings, study circles focused on the Word of God and applying it to our lives, Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Groups, and Children’s Classes] **“...raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development. The activities that drive this process, and in which newly found friends are invited to engage--meetings that strengthen the devotional character of the community; classes that nurture the tender hearts and minds of children; groups that channel the surging energies of junior youth; circles of study, open to all, that enable people of varied backgrounds to advance on equal footing and explore the application of the teachings to their individual and collective lives....”** (Ridván 2010, para. 5)

Consider that many of the principles and skills related to community building can also apply to the process of finding a marriage partner and establishing a strong and happy marriage and family. As individuals engage in the process of community building, they can gain strengths that will apply to relationships and marriage, and the same works in reverse. Please consider the possibility that the knowledge and skill building process is synergistic between the two.

What are a few of the practical skills that could relate to both marriage and community building?

Relationship and Community Building Skill #1: Individual action

- “The individual alone can exercise those capacities which include the ability to take initiative, to seize opportunities, to form friendships, to interact personally with others, to build relationships, to win the cooperation of others in common service to the Faith and society, and to convert into action the decisions made by consultative bodies.” (The Universal House of Justice, Ridván 153, 1996)

Relationship and Community Building Skill #2: Willing to be guided to people who are a good fit to be in a relationship or marriage with you, or to those who want to participate in community building

- “...stepping outside their immediate circle of family members and friends, ready to be led by the guiding Hand of the All-Merciful to receptive souls in whatever quarter they may reside.” (Ridván 2010, para. 3)

Relationship and Community Building Skill #3: Creating a learning-in-action culture, where we make mistakes and learn from them; we accompany and encourage one another

- “Fear of failure finds no place. Mutual support, commitment to learning, and appreciation of diversity of action are the prevailing norms.” (The Universal House of Justice, Ridván 158, 2001)
- “...placing complete trust in God, reliant on His all-sustaining power and confident in His unfailing assistance...” (Ridván 2010, para 20)

Relationship and Community Building Skill #4: Form Friendships

- The Universal House of Justice is asking us to “...establish ties of friendship, on the basis of shared understanding, with those previously regarded as strangers.” (Ridván 2010 para 3)
- Genuine Friendships lead to spiritual transformation: “To the extent that the conversation continues beyond the initial encounter and veritable friendships are formed, a direct teaching effort of this kind can become a catalyst for an enduring process of spiritual transformation.” (Ridván 2010, para. 4)
- Friendships include: being reciprocal (Bahá’ís are good at being of service to other but sometimes find it difficult to receive service, a quality of friendship). Friendships are mutually helpful and respectful, with trust, encouragement, cooperation, and enjoyment. Friendship is one of the foundations for relationships and marriages.

GROUP PARTICIPATION: In groups of 2-3, discuss: What one or two actions will you take over the next week to initiate or strengthen a friendship with someone?