

Activity Ideas for Sessions About Relationships and Marriage

Note: This is a first draft compilation; feedback from users and suggestions for other activities are warmly encouraged!

Developing Excellent Friendships

1. Scatter the group around the room. Someone plays the role of being new at school. Facilitator approaches one youth and gets their cellphone number and texts them a message like, “Who is the new girl? Invite to lunch?”. Group has to pass the message among at least 5 of them (10 if larger group). Person number 5 (or 10) is then responsible for approaching the new girl and asking her to eat with the group. Afterwards, discuss the dynamics and how can texting result in building friendships and in-person connection. Discuss what they think and how they feel about texting when conversing with a friend or during prayers.
2. Take a journal book and use art supplies to decorate the cover of it as a friendship journal. You can do this by decorating a piece of cardstock (thick paper) and gluing it on the front. On the top of the first page in the journal, put the name of one of your friends. Do the same with several other pages, putting a different person’s name on the top of each page. Below their names, list the qualities you appreciate about them. As you gain new friends, add them to your book and begin to observe and list their positive qualities.
3. Create a collage or some other artistic expression that demonstrates the qualities and characteristics of an excellent friend. [Note: You create a collage by cutting out pictures and/or words from magazines or other sources that reflect a particular topic or theme and gluing them onto a large piece of paper or cardboard. You can also use markers to add your own artwork or words.]
4. Create a skit of spending time with some good friends. Group discussion: What demonstrates that the characters in the skit are good friends? What is different when you are with close friends rather than when you spend time with someone you meet for the first time?
5. Individually or as a group: Reflect about your favorite friends, what you do together, and what you appreciate about the friendships. Then, identify what actions and qualities have maintained the friendships. Create a poster based on your conclusions.

Communicating in Friendships and Relationships

COMMUNICATION ACTIVITY: MODERATING YOUR TONE OF VOICE

1. A kindly tongue is the lodestone of the hearts of men. It is the bread of the spirit, it clotheth the words with meaning, it is the fountain of the light of wisdom and understanding.... (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 289)
2. Love is patient, love is kind. (*The Bible*; 1 Corinthians 13:4, 5, 8)

The purpose of this activity is to understand how tone of voice affects your communications and how you can modify your tone to improve the delivery and receipt of your message. Your tone of voice is a powerful cue about your thoughts and emotions. If you listen carefully, you can usually tell if either of you is feeling

upset, happy, angry, excited, or annoyed by the tone used to deliver the words. When your words and tone of voice do not match, usually you will believe the tone.

As you increase your understanding of and skill with matching your own tones of voice with your words, you will notice that your trust in each other's words increases. You are also more able to "coach" one another with gentle feedback and communicate effectively about your concerns. As you talk with one another about what your different tones of voice mean, you can explore whether cultural factors and possibly your unique personalities are affecting your tones or interpretations.

Say a few of the phrases below to someone. First, say the term in a negative tone of voice and with a negative expression on your face. Then, say the same term with a positive tone of voice and facial expression. Watch the listener's reactions to these different non-verbal cues. A third person can be an observer who watches both of you and gives feedback. Take turns so that each person has the opportunity to both speak and listen.

- a. Sorry
- b. Fine
- c. Excuse me
- d. Thanks
- e. Stop it
- f. Come with me
- g. Don't touch me
- h. What do you want
- i. Will you call me
- j. Why did you do that
- k. Whatever you want
- l. Yes, dear
- m. All right, I will do it
- n. Can you hear me
- o. Sit down
- p. Leave it alone
- q. I don't want to talk now
- r. Can you help me
- s. How are you
- t. Good morning

Discussion: Which tones of voice did you like and which ones would you prefer *not* to have as part of your communication—either giving or receiving—with someone you are courting or married to? Were there any phrases that were very difficult to say in a positive tone? Were there any phrases that you added "please" to automatically to make them sound more positive? Did any cultural differences affect the meaning of the statements? What did you learn about the tones of voice you frequently use? How do you usually respond when others use tones of voice that do not match their words?

COMMUNICATION SKILLS: LEARNING TO RESPOND INSTEAD OF REACT

Often challenges arise in relationships when people react to one another, jump to conclusions, and communicate without fully understanding a situation or based on things they imagine rather than on what is

actually happening. So, the **first skill needed** is to be able to **pause** and begin to *discern* between fact and fiction:

- **What is actually happening** with one person (the facts)
- The **interpretation that the other creates** and that likely only exists in his/her imagination (the fiction)
- The **behavior that occurs** (the reaction)
- The **effect on the communication** between the couple (the result)

Example: One person might expect the other to meet him/her at a particular time as agreed. When the person is 30 minutes late, the waiting person might start to imagine that he/she has been in an accident and is badly hurt. Or he/she could be thinking that obviously the other person doesn't care. By the time the traveler arrives, the person waiting is highly anxious or angry. Before the traveler can even explain, the upset person who has been waiting launches into an emotional reaction. The traveler then gets upset as well, and the situation between them is very tense.

Group Activity: In groups of 3 or 4 people, with one person playing the man, one the woman, and the others as observers, role-play and analyze one or two of the scenarios below. The person reacting negatively to what happened should say what they are imagining in their minds aloud for the other people to hear:

1. One person promises to call the other at 5:30 p.m. after work and the call doesn't happen. It is now 8:30 p.m. What could be going through his/her head and how do they interact the next time they are in communication?
2. One person asks the other about going out for a meal with a couple he/she knows and the other does not. He/she does not really respond and changes the subject. What could be going through both of their heads and how does that affect their communication?
3. One person asks the other to stop at the grocery and buy a can of icing for his/her child's birthday cake. The person arrives at the party without it. What could be going through both of their heads and how does that affect their communication?
4. One person accidentally drops a credit card receipt for a \$200 item. The other person picks it up and reacts, knowing that the "dropper" is short of money. What could be going through both of their heads and how does that affect their communication?
5. One person is having a medical test and the other begins to imagine him or her becoming ill or dying. What goes through both of their heads and how does that affect their communication?

Discuss: When have you observed this pattern of reacting happening? Does it ever have a positive outcome when this pattern happens? What can you do to shift the pattern and stay in observing what is happening instead of creating other scenarios in your mind.

BACKBITING QUENCHETH THE LIGHT OF THE HEART

Materials:

- Glass bowl of water; container of water
- Container of loose dirt
- Beautiful and colorful metal or plastic confetti (hearts, flowers, stars, etc.)
- Spoons

Instructions:

1. Read this quotation:
...backbiting quencheth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul.
(Bahá'u'lláh: *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 264-265) (Ruhi Book 1, page 16)
2. Place the bowl of water in the middle of a table and have participants sit around the table. Give each a spoon.
3. Pass the container of dirt around to each and have them scatter the dirt on the top of the water (don't stir). Talk about what happens in our lives when we backbite (the dirt) about other people and how the water looks with the dirt in it. Reflect on how difficult it would be to take back (clean up) what was said.
4. Stir up the water and talk about the damage that gossip--often the spread of information passed through backbiting--can be.
5. Dump out the dirty water and clean the bowl. Refill it with clean water.
6. Read this quotation:
We can never exert the influence over others which we can exert over ourselves. If we are better, if we show love, patience, and understanding of the weaknesses of others; if we seek to never criticize but rather encourage, others will do likewise.... (Shoghi Effendi: *Lights of Guidance*, p. 83)
7. Give each participant a few pieces of colored confetti. Ask them to pretend that these beautiful pieces are the good qualities in each other that we can talk about freely and cause encouragement to happen instead of harm. Have them each scatter a few pieces of the confetti on the surface of the water.
8. Stir up the "good qualities" in the water and see if the water is harmed and if beauty is created. Talk about how it looks and how differently you each feel looking at this bowl instead of the dirty water.
9. Give each participant a small container or bag of "good qualities" to take home and spread around their houses as reminders to notice and speak of each other's good qualities.

Dating and Courting with Spiritual Values

1. Separate group by gender (this activity only), with a male leader with the males and a female leader with the females. Each group consults and creates a 10-point agreement for how they will behave in relationships towards the other gender. Give examples to describe each item, such as "I will show respect to women at all times. This could include asking her opinion and listening carefully to it and sharing decision making." [Note: Someone will need to ensure each youth receives a copy of both the male and the female agreements after the workshop.]
2. Create a collage of possible friend, dating, or courting activities to do together or with a group such as friends or family. See if you can discover some new and interesting activities to do. [Note: You create a collage by cutting out pictures and/or words from magazines or other sources that reflect a particular topic or theme and gluing them onto a large piece of paper or cardboard. You can also use markers to add your own artwork or words.] Use the poster as a starting place to discuss and agree on some of the activities you will do. What activities will you agree not to do and why? Do you have differences in what you would enjoy doing together? How important are these differences? How will you respond to them?

3. Discussion:
 - a. What movies have you enjoyed and which ones have you avoided or found disappointing? What were the reasons?
 - b. What are some of your favorite actors of both genders and explain why you like their acting? What others do you do not, and why?
 - c. Imagine that you have a chance to be a movie actor/actress. What type of plot would you like to be in and what role(s) would you like to play? Why?

Act out with assistance of one or two others a simple scene from a movie you would like to be acting in, either one that you have seen or one that you make up on the spot. What did you learn about each other?
4. Draw a t-shirt on a piece of paper. On the front of the t-shirt, write your vision of what you would like dating to be like. On the back of the t-shirt (other side of the page), write your negative thoughts and feelings about dating experiences. Share about the drawn t-shirts and discuss how to move from the negative experience to the positive vision.
5. Discuss the signals that would warn you that you are unwise as partners to continue with a relationship. Role-play the behavior that would be a concern and how you would respond to it.
6. Role-play an initial meeting between you, your partner, and your parents that has challenges in it. Role-play one that goes smoothly. Discuss what contributes to difficulties or success in the interactions.
7. Consult about and list the signs that would indicate a courtship is going well. Create a poster that illustrates these.
8. Assemble or use a toolbox and discuss each tool as a metaphor for some aspect of relationships, either actions to take or not take. Example: Hammer - Building the foundation of the relationship by spending time together.

Understanding and Strengthening Character

1. Look at photos of diverse people (magazine photos, PowerPoint slide show...). Write down what you think about their characters based on how they look and what they are doing. Reflect and discuss: Are there any character judgments that are likely to be accurate based on this type of assessment? What would work better?
2. Role-play the following scenario:
 Samuel arranges to meet a couple of friends in a nearby town at 10 a.m. on Saturday morning. He forgets to set his alarm clock, oversleeps, and sets out without calling to let his friends know he will be late. He arrives at 11 a.m. When he arrives, his friends are very worried and are relieved to see him.
Variation: When Samuel arrives, he finds that his friends have gone to have fun together without him.

Discuss:

 - a. What character strength(s) did Samuel demonstrate?
 - b. What character quality could Samuel work on to help him in a situation like this the next time?
 - c. What advice would you give him about developing this character quality in practical ways? (State specific actions he could do.)
 - d. How can he evaluate his progress?
 - e. How can he reward and encourage himself in developing this quality?

3. Have someone generically identify a situation with someone of the opposite gender when he/she over-reacted to something that was said or something that happened.
4. Discuss:
 - a. What quality appeared to be missing in the situation?
 - b. How would the situation have been different if it had been practiced?
 - c. How do you describe this quality?
 - d. What could motivate the person to develop and using this missing/weak quality another time?
 - e. What two actions could the person take to practice it?
 - f. How could the person tell if they were making progress in developing the quality?
 - g. How could the person encourage or reward himself/herself for making progress?
5. Read a story about a person demonstrating character-filled behavior. (Examples: ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela...) Look at the list of character qualities on the Worksheet. Which qualities did the person practice in the story?
6. Find a magazine photo that represents a positive aspect of your character. Find one that represents a second quality you practice effectively. Put the two photos next to each other. Reflect on how the two qualities work together and help each other. (Examples: tactfulness helping truthfulness, assertiveness helping justice, thoughtfulness helping service...). Share with the group.
7. In small groups, develop a recipe of the character qualities that would help create an excellent and lasting marriage. What would be the ingredients? How would you mix it? What would the result look like? (Examples: A cup of respect, a tablespoon of tactfulness...)
8. Reflect on and share about someone who had or has character traits you admire. This might include Bahá’u’lláh, or perhaps His Son, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, or daughter, Bahíyyih Khánum, both of whom are recommended models for Bahá’ís to follow. You may also admire character qualities in famous people, such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Joan of Arc. Look at your parents or other family members. Choose a person—what do you see as his or her positive character qualities?
9. Discuss:
 - a. What are the skills needed to determine whether someone is being truthful or lying? [Possibilities include: observation, listening carefully, clear perception/discernment, analysis]
 - b. How can you strengthen these skills?
 - c. How does it serve others when you are truthful?
 - d. How does it serve others if you encourage them to be truthful and not lie?

Read and Discuss:

The following story is about a person who strives over a long period of time to overcome the practice of lying:

As we grow in our understanding of the Creative Word, our flaws are shed. For example, a young man is touched by the Message of Bahá’u’lláh and becomes a Bahá’í. But he’s a liar. He has always lied, because his parents lied, as did their parents. Lying was a natural part of their lives, used as a tool to survive in a hostile society. So lying had been ingrained in the new Bahá’í. He couldn’t be kept out of the Faith because of a character flaw, for if that were the case, then most of us would be barred from Bahá’í membership.

As a Bahá'í he discovers that “truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in *Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 25) He vows to change. But how to do it?

Realizing that through deepening and prayer he can be “endowed with a new eye, a new ear, a new heart, and a new mind,” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 267) he decides to deepen every day—in the morning and evening as Bahá'u'lláh prescribes. He reasons that he must follow what Bahá'u'lláh urges us to do, because He knows, better than anyone else, what would help him carry out his vow.

So, he begins to deepen, making time in the morning before going to work, and making time in the evening before going to bed. He even buys an alarm clock, to make sure he gets up thirty minutes before his usual time. A week after he starts deepening, he's tested at work. His foreman asks a question, and he lies, the way he did in his pre-Bahá'í days, without hesitating an instant. But when the foreman leaves, he realizes that he lied, something he would never have concerned himself with in the past. His new awareness is not only a sign of progress in overcoming a character flaw, but also signifies the development of the young man's conscience.

A month later—still deepening every day—he's tested again. This time he hesitates before answering a coworker, wondering if he should tell the truth or lie. He succumbs to the pull of the past and lies, and for a few minutes feels bad for not having the strength to beat back his natural inclination. Though he lied, the young man is making progress.

He continues to deepen regularly. Three weeks later, he's faced with another test. He lies again, but this time, before he utters a word, his chest and throat tighten and he can't look at the person. Afterwards he berates himself for more than an hour for not telling the truth. Obviously, more progress.

Three months go by. Still faithfully deepening, he's confronted by a former friend about a matter that took place before he was a Bahá'í. He wishes he could disappear. The friend senses his uneasiness and wonders if he's ill. In a way, he is ill, for the thought of lying makes him nauseous—but he lies. For the remainder of the day he's conscience-stricken, even has difficulty sleeping.

After a year of deepening, a process he has learned to enjoy and now wouldn't think of missing, he's tested again. This time he's seized with pain in his chest and begins to sweat. His hesitation is so long that the person he's talking to asks the question a second time. In torment, he sits down, placing his head in his hands. He wants desperately to tell the truth, yet feels the tug of the past.

Suddenly, he opens his eyes, looks at the foreman who is standing over him and tells the truth. The pain in his chest disappears. There's a glow in his eyes. He feels like dancing. The foreman is perplexed, wondering if the young man is on some kind of narcotic. He has never seen him so happy. It is a victory only the young man can appreciate, a feeling of liberation he has never experienced before. He is not what he was before he started deepening. He sees and hears things that he didn't see or hear before. How could he ever go back to what he was? Never! For he has sensed the fragrance of the Abhá Kingdom. But this new awareness didn't emerge instantly. It wasn't something that he obtained as one would purchase a coat to protect oneself from the cold. The potential to be what he is now was always a part of

him. By deepening he simply nurtured and cultivated the seed of happiness that he was born with.

~ Nat Rutstein, *Teaching the Bahá'í Faith*, pp. 87-90 [quoted with permission from George Ronald, publisher]

Honoring Nobility with Purity, Holiness, and Chastity

1. Role-play a couple struggling with chastity/abstinence. What are your insights about how you can make wise choices? [Note: Whether to do this one or not will require great sensitivity. Unmatched individuals can be very sensitive to being “paired up”. If there is a dating or courting couple present, they may be willing to role play this scenario. They may need to be asked prior to the workshop.]
2. Create a collage by cutting out pictures of people projecting love, touch, sex, and chastity. Also look for words that reflect these themes. [Note: You create a collage by cutting out pictures and/or words from magazines or other sources that reflect a particular topic or theme and gluing them onto a large piece of paper or cardboard. You can also use markers to add your own artwork or words.] Discuss the images in the collage and the assumptions, expectations, and feelings that arise for each of you in looking at them. How are your perceptions of touch and sex shaped by the popular media? By your family? By other sources? Are these positive or negative perceptions and influences? Create a second collage with images showing activities or choices you could make that would help you to practice chastity. Discuss these images and your thoughts and feelings about them. Are there constructive decisions and choices that you can make based on this discussion?
3. Consult about and plan how to teach the content from this workshop to junior youth.
4. How do you achieve purity of heart, body, mind, and soul? Flip chart pages, one for each aspect; small groups go from one to the other and write down ideas.

True/False statements about chastity:

- Spending your time with your schoolwork, family activities, and service to others
- Sitting in the dark kissing
- Taking cellphone photos of naked body parts or naked people
- Giving oral sex to achieve a favor from someone would giving oral sex ever be true in respect to chastity? are the details needed?
- Tutoring a study circle
- Hosting a devotional for youth
- Etc.

Being of Valuable Service

1. Often using the arts helps to bring up thoughts and emotions that you were not previously aware of having. They can give you practical perspectives on abstract concepts, such as with Baha'u'llah's quotation, “The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct.” (Bahá'u'lláh, cited in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, pp. 24-25) Spend some time in prayer and meditation about this concept and then see what you discover through drawing a picture or making a collage of how relationships or marriage relate to this concept. If you prefer, use the arts in some other way, such as by writing a poem, creating a song, or developing a dance. Afterward, assess what new insights you gained from this exercise. [Note: You can create a collage by cutting out pictures and/or words from magazines or other sources that reflect a particular topic or

theme and gluing them onto a large piece of paper or cardboard. You can also use markers to add your own artwork or words.] Share your artwork or creation with someone and discuss your insights and feelings together.