

For Bahá'ís and Spouses: Creating a Separation and Reconciliation Agreement

As Spiritual Assemblies educate their communities about marriage, it is important for them to counsel couples and the community in general to seek assistance early when experiencing problems rather than waiting for years before asking for help. When couples delay seeking assistance, the problems become entrenched, and the couple may be at the point of strong antipathy and separation when they finally contact the Assembly. [Consider: An occasional general reminder at Feast, a notice in a newsletter, a letter to the community, a talk at Feast on the topic...]

Assemblies and couples may struggle with how to handle requests for separation and years of waiting and how to carry them out in ways that facilitate reconciliation and rebuild the relationship and marriage. If reconciliation does not occur, then everyone involved needs to assist the divorce to happen in ways that cause minimum harm to the individuals, children, and communities involved.

“When an application for divorce is made to a Spiritual Assembly its first thought and action should be to reconcile the couple and to ensure that they know the Bahá'í teachings on the matter. God willing, the Assembly will be successful and no year of waiting need be started. However, if the Assembly finds that it is unable to persuade the party concerned to withdraw the application for divorce, it must conclude that, from its point of view, there appears to be an irreconcilable antipathy, and it has no alternative to setting the date for the beginning of the year of waiting. During the year the couple have the responsibility of attempting to reconcile their difference, and the Assembly has the duty to help them and encourage them. But if the year of waiting comes to an end without reconciliation the Bahá'í divorce must be granted as at the date of the granting of the civil divorce if this has not already taken place.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 391)

A limited selection of secular or Christian-based books and practices exists that aim to assist separations to calm emotions and aid reconciliation or to carry out less destructive divorces. One of the key recommendations in the materials is for the couple, often with the guidance of a counselor or clergy (an Assembly for Bahá'ís), to create a consultative agreement that structures any type of separation. If a temporary separation becomes a year of waiting, the couple would then create a new agreement. If there is significant conflict between a separating couple, or the Assembly grants the beginning of a year of waiting, it is wise for the agreement to be in writing to minimize disunity. Agreements could potentially address the following topic areas:

- Type of separation, living arrangements, and sharing of home furnishings (in-house with separate sleeping arrangements, separate residences, psychological, physical, short-term, year of waiting...)
- Start date and length of separation and date for review
- Sharing and caring for children or other dependents
- How each will handle finances
- Keeping the business of the family going (household responsibilities, family outings, family events, participating in religious activities, holidays...)
- Expectations of spouses (methods and frequency of communications, personal development, constructive actions, dating each other or others, sexual contact with each other, ending an affair, entering of each other's residences...)

- Counseling together or separately; counseling for children
- Marriage education and skill building initiatives
- Whether to involve legal counsel or mediation and at what stage
- Confidentiality; sharing with family and friends (limiting explanations, discouraging gossip and backbiting, refraining from maligning spouse, discouraging others from taking sides)

Bahá'u'lláh's guidance about separation and divorce is this: "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." (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, #68)

Reference Materials:

Taking Space, How to Use Separation to Explore the Future of Your Relationship (Robert J. Buchicchio)

Hope for the Separated, Wounded Marriages Can Be Healed (Gary Chapman)

Should I Stay or Go? How Controlled Separation Can Save Your Marriage (Lee Raffel)

Marriage Education Sources for Further Study and Action

Marriage education helps couples build skills and strengths and equips people to be successful in their roles as marriage partners. Sources of excellent information can be obtained from the following websites: www.marriagetransformation.com; www.bahaimarriage.net; www.smartmarriages.com; www.prepare-enrich.com, and www.healthymarriageinfo.org.

From Marriage Transformation (www.marriagetransformation.com):

- *Marriage Can Be Forever—Preparation Counts!* (self/couple preparation for Bahá'ís and partners; useful for a marriage check-up and strengthening)
- *Pure Gold: Encouraging Character Qualities in Marriage*
- *Deciding in Unity: A Practical Process for Married Couples to Agree on Practically Everything*
- *Marriage Connection Modules* (Topics include strengthening your connection, assessing expectations and meeting needs, passionate and spiritual sex, decision making, fun...)
- *Creating Excellent Relationships: The Power of Character Choices*
- *Becoming Relationship Ready: Preparing for a Future Partner*
- *Becoming Unified Partners: Assessing Harmony Between You and a Partner*
- *All-in-One Marriage Prep: 75 Experts Share Tips and Wisdom to Help You Get Ready Now*
- *Can We Dance?: Learning the Steps for a Fulfilling Relationship*

Workshops: <http://www.marriagetransformation.com>

Other Resources by Authors Who Are Bahá'ís : *Partners in Spirit, What Couples Say About Marriages That Work* by Heather Cardin (Bahá'í Publishing 2006); *Mindful Matrimony* by Raymond and Furugh Switzer (George Ronald 2013)