



**RELATIONSHIP AND MARRIAGE EDUCATION IN
THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH COMMUNITY**
Vision and Perspectives from Marriage Transformation®
January 21, 2018

Inviting Bahá'í communities to engage in relationship and marriage education and social action for building happy, unified, and lasting character-based marriages.

"...[T]he provision of guidance on administrative matters such as the laws of engagement, marriage, and divorce falls under the purview of Local and National Spiritual Assemblies...." (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, September 24, 2014)

"...[Y]oung women and men become acutely conscious of the exhortations of the Supreme Pen to 'enter into wedlock' that they may 'bring forth one who will make mention of Me amid My servants'.... ... This generation of youth will form families that secure the foundations of flourishing communities. Through their growing love for Bahá'u'lláh and their personal commitment to the standard to which He summons them will their children imbibe the love of God, 'commingled with their mother's milk', and always seek the shelter of His divine law. Clearly, then, the responsibility of a Bahá'í community towards young people does not end when they first start serving. The significant decisions they make about the direction of their adult lives will determine whether service to the Cause of God was only a brief and memorable chapter of their younger years, or a fixed center of their earthly existence, a lens through which all actions come into focus." (Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Counsellors, December 29, 2015, pp. 11-12)

DEFINING RELATIONSHIP and MARRIAGE EDUCATION

Note: The following document reflects the current understanding of Susanne M. Alexander from her experience in the Bahá'í community and as a relationship and marriage educator. It is not an official administrative document; it is simply offered as an educational resource for Bahá'ís to consider as they strive to strengthen the institution of marriage in their lives and community. Any questions about the application of marriage laws in the community should be directed to the Bahá'í institutions.

Systematic Relationship and Marriage Education Based on the Bahá'í Writings

It is important to note that there is no one system for Bahá'í relationship and marriage education that exists. The methods and focus for any of these types of education effort will vary significantly across the planet depending on the needs of the population and available resources. Communities will make decisions about whether to use materials already developed by a variety of organizations and institutions or those that develop locally as needed. Those involved will utilize study of the guidance, consultation, learning-in-action, and reflection to discern what works.

"As you know, courtship practices differ greatly from one culture to another, and it is not yet known what pattern of courtship will emerge in the future when society has been more influenced by Bahá'í Teachings. However, there is no indication that it will resemble the practices extant in existing cultures.... In this interim period, the friends are encouraged to make great efforts to live in conformity with the Teachings and to gradually forge a new pattern of behavior, more in keeping with the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation." (Universal House of Justice: August 28, 1994, to an individual)

A Description of Relationship and Marriage Education

Relationship and marriage education's focus is on taking action to strengthen knowledge and skills in individuals and couples, as well as prevent future problems. It is aimed at empowering people to create marriages that provide healthy and happy stability and unity for families and communities. Relationship and marriage education can include such activities as reading books, studying in groups, taking courses, participating in workshops, and mentoring. It provides important knowledge, skills, and attitudes about relationships, marriage, and re-marriage to foster a gradual and organic transformation process.

Relationship and marriage education helps with building capacity and strengths. Ideally, it equips people to be healthy individuals with many character strengths who can then be successful partners in a relationship and then as spouses. It includes preparation for relationships and marriage for individuals and couples of all ages and experience levels. It also provides marriage-strengthening tools for healthy married couples who want to continue learning, growing, and developing. Ideally, this type of education continues across the life span of couples.

Relationship and marriage education is an excellent choice for:

- unmarried individuals interested in learning about relationships and how to prepare for them
- couples considering and involved in friendship, dating, courtship, and marriage
- unmarried individuals and couples considering re-marriage
- parents of individuals considering dating, courtship, consent, engagement, and marriage
- newly married couples
- couples experiencing the usual ups and downs of married life
- couples experiencing external tests that can affect the marriage
- couples in life-stage transitions; such as, becoming parents, their children leaving home, or retirement
- couples with strong marriages who enjoy enriching their marriage further

What Relationship and Marriage Education is Not

Relationship and marriage education is not counseling or therapy, but instead it focuses on building understanding and competence. It is not generally for couples in crisis. Although marriage education can provide skill building and assistance for deeply troubled couples considering separation or divorce, this education is usually best linked with help from a trained couples therapist and consultation with a Spiritual Assembly.

Marriage education may warn some couples who are experiencing difficulties of the need to address their problems. However, the *timing* of marriage education sometimes may not be appropriate when a marriage is in active crisis or decline. This could include:

- signs of estrangement or aversion
- daily conflict
- any type of abusive or addictive behavior
- infidelity
- significant diminishing in feelings of hope, joy, or commitment
- not experiencing the marriage as a haven and “fortress for well-being” (Bahá'u'lláh)

Seriously troubled couples may find marriage education in groups or workshops to be discouraging or difficult where other couples are having a much healthier experience in their relationships. Troubled couples may also disrupt the experience for or discourage other couples who are not in crisis.

FOUNDATION STATEMENTS AND PRINCIPLES

The following statements and quotations outline the role of Assemblies, describe marriage as the foundational element of society, underscore the significance of Bahá'í marriage and family unity as a model, emphasize the essential art of consultation and other knowledge and skills, and stress the importance of social action by Bahá'ís. Assemblies may wish to deepen on these statements and share them with their communities to assist the friends in expanding their awareness of the importance of working conscientiously to build strong marriages and families, for their own sakes and for the ultimate sake of the Bahá'í Faith and humanity.

- **Assemblies have a responsibility to educate the community about marriage and to respond to requests for help**

“The Spiritual Assembly should always be concerned that the believers in its community are being deepened in their understanding of the Bahá'í concept of marriage, especially the young people, so that the very thought of divorce will be abhorrent to them.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, #1304)

“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)

- **Fostering obedience to the Bahá'í marriage laws is an important duty of Spiritual Assemblies**

“The carrying out of the Bahá'í marriage laws, as given to the friends throughout the world, is a vital obligation of every believer who wishes to marry, and it is an important duty of every Local Spiritual Assembly to ensure that these laws are known to, and obeyed by, the believers within their jurisdiction, whether or not the Bahá'í marriage ceremony is recognized by civil law. Each Assembly, therefore, must conscientiously carry out its responsibilities in connection with the holding of Bahá'í marriage ceremonies, the recording of Bahá'í marriages in a register kept for this purpose, and the issuing of Bahá'í marriage certificates.” (The Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963 to 1986*, pp. 488-489)

- **Marriage is a foundational element for all human society**

“The Bahá'í teachings on sexual morality center on marriage and the family as the bedrock of the whole structure of human society and are designed to protect and strengthen that divine institution. Bahá'í law thus restricts permissible sexual intercourse to that between a man and the woman to whom he is married.” (*Note #134 appended to The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*)

- **Marital and family unity among the Bahá'ís builds credibility for their message to the world; seriously courting a partner and maintaining marriages are part of an individual's and couple's service to God**

“... [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*, #740)

“...[E]very aspect of a person’s life is an element of his or her service to Bahá’u’lláh: the love and respect one has for one’s parents; the pursuit of one’s education; the nurturing of good health; the acquiring of a trade or profession; one’s behavior towards others and the upholding of a high moral standard; one’s marriage and the bringing up of one’s children; one’s activities in teaching the Faith and the building up the strength of the Bahá’í community, whether this be in such simple matters as attending the Nineteen Day Feast or the observance of Bahá’í Holy Days, or in more demanding tasks required by service in the administration of the Faith; and, not least, to take time each day to read the Writings and say the Obligatory Prayer, which are the source of growing spiritual strength, understanding, and attachment to God.” (The Universal House of Justice, December 7, 1992, European Bahá’í Youth Council; www.bahairesearch.com)

- **Relationship and marriage preparation are key elements in establishing healthy marriages**

“Careful preparation for marriage is an essential first step in the preservation of Bahá’í marriage.” (World Centre Research Department in memorandum for *Preserving Bahá’í Marriages* compilation, item 3)

“...[T]here is nothing in the Bahá’í Writings which relates specifically to the so-called dating practices prevalent in some parts of the world, where two unmarried people of the opposite sex participate together in a social activity. In general, Bahá’ís who are planning to involve themselves in this form of behavior should become well aware of the Bahá’í Teachings on chastity and, with these in mind, should scrupulously avoid any actions which would arouse passions which might well tempt them to violate these Teachings. In deciding which acts are permissible in the light of these considerations, the youth should use their own judgment, giving due consideration to the advice of their parents, taking account of the prevailing customs of the society in which they live, and prayerfully following the guidance of their conscience. It is the sacred duty of parents to instill in their children the exalted Bahá’í standard of moral conduct, and the importance of adherence to this standard cannot be over-emphasized as a basis for true happiness and for successful marriage.” (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice: February 5, 1992, to an individual)

- **Building knowledge and skills with character/virtues supports relationships and marriages as well as all aspects of the Core Activities [devotional gatherings, study circles, children’s classes, and junior youth groups], each of which can include a focus on character; parents have a vital role in building strong characters in their children and in considering consent for marriage**

“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.” (Abdu’l-Bahá: *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, #86)

“No less pertinent [than rectitude of conduct] to the success of the Bahá’í enterprise today are the Guardian’s forthright comments on the importance of a chaste and holy life, ‘with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness’. He was unequivocal in his language, summoning the friends to a life unsullied ‘by the indecencies, the vices, the false standards, which an inherently deficient moral code tolerates, perpetuates, and fosters’. ... The forces at work on the hearts and minds of the young, to whom the Guardian directed his appeal most fervently, are pernicious indeed. Exhortations to remain pure and chaste will only succeed to a limited degree in helping them to resist these forces. What needs to be appreciated in this respect is the extent to which young minds are affected by the choices parents make for their own lives, when, no matter how unintentionally, no matter how innocently, such choices condone the passions of the world—its admiration for power, its adoration of status, its love of luxuries, its attachment to frivolous pursuits, its glorification of violence, and its obsession with self-gratification. ... May every one of them [the youth] come to know the bounties of a life adorned with purity and learn to draw on the powers that flow through pure channels.” (Universal House of Justice to the Continental Counsellors, December 28, 2010)

- **Consultation is a fundamental skill in marriages and families for maintaining harmony and unity and as a tool to seek help from others**

[When asked about specific rules of conduct to govern the relationship between husbands and wives] “...for example, the principle that the rights of each and all in the family unit must be upheld, and the advice that loving consultation should be the keynote, that all matters must be settled in harmony and love, and that there are times when the husband and the wife should defer to the wishes of the other. Exactly under what circumstances such deference should take place is a matter for each couple to determine. If, God forbid, they fail to agree, and their disagreement leads to estrangement, they should seek counsel from those they trust and in whose sincerity and sound judgment they have confidence, in order to preserve and strengthen their ties as a united family.” (Universal House of Justice: *Preserving Bahá’í Marriages*, pp. 5-6)

- **Social action outreach is a key part of the service Bahá’ís offer the world**

“...[I]t seems appropriate that the friends everywhere would reflect on the nature of the contributions which their growing, vibrant communities will make to the material and spiritual progress of society. In this respect, it will prove fruitful to think in terms of two interconnected, mutually reinforcing areas of activity: involvement in social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society.” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010)

POTENTIAL ACTIONS TO PROMOTE UNIFIED, HAPPY, AND HEALTHY MARRIAGES *Ideas from Marriage Transformation®*

Below are potential actions that could contribute to creating strong marriages. They are categorized by how Bahá’ís can conduct themselves individually and in couple relationships and marriages. They include educating the community about having healthy relationships and marriages. They also address how to become models and advocates who promote the importance of good relationships and marriages in the Bahá’í community and beyond.

When individuals, couples, Spiritual Assemblies, and their communities begin the process of transforming the quality of their marriages, it will likely be important to examine what ongoing relationship and marriage education can help. Each Assembly and community will choose its own gradual and organic process and set its own goals. Ongoing education will help individuals develop knowledge and skills. Further development of the art of reflection, consultation, and learning-in-action in a community will also be helpful in this unfolding and organic process.

Involvement in the Core Activities generally enhances people’s ability to be in relationships of all types. Character/virtues, moral choices, and spiritual behavior are part of the materials and practices for children’s classes, junior youth groups, and study circles. Devotional gatherings can have themes that include relationships and marriage topics as well as provide opportunities for courting and married couples to worship together. As participants engage in service as part of these activities, friendships and relationships strengthen. Service to each other and others becomes a way of life that benefits couples and families. Families who have an outward-looking service orientation can become strong examples and foundational elements for transforming neighborhoods and communities.

FOR INDIVIDUALS AND COUPLES

Enhancing Personal Conduct

- Engage in ongoing character development
- Be involved in service activities
- Regularly use prayer, reflection, and consultation for character discernment of potential partners, within our couple relationships that are moving towards marriage, and within our marriages to maintain awareness of our strengths and growth areas, set goals, and take necessary actions to achieve improvement
- Seek help early from skilled and trustworthy sources for any needed courting-couple relationship strengthening and premarital education, or for addressing marital couple difficulties
- Maintain marital faithfulness and sustain family love and unity to the best of our ability
- Regard marriage as a sacred commitment
- Practice forgiveness of others and ourselves, seeking healing, reconciliation, and unity building to the best of our ability as promptly as possible in any upset or difficulty; and seek/be willing to seek confidential consultative assistance with this process as needed from skilled and trustworthy sources
- Eliminate gossip and backbiting about relationships and marriages of our own or others
- Pray on my/our own for relationships and marriages generally and my/our own in particular
- Be accepting of the choice some make not to be married

Participating in Study/Education

- Encourage children, youth, and adults to study, understand, and live their lives according to the Bahá'í Writings, guidance, and laws about character, relationships, marriage, and family
- Participate in relationship and marriage education opportunities provided by Spiritual Assemblies or other institutions, agencies, Bahá'í schools, companies, or organizations; seek further education and skill building opportunities as needed
- Engage in the process of character education and transformation to empower practicing rectitude of conduct in relationships and marriages
- Periodically include prayers and readings focused on the strengthening of the well-being of marriages as part of community occasions such as the 19-Day Feast or family and neighborhood activities such as devotional gatherings

Becoming Examples for Others

- Demonstrate through our words and actions respect and love for the sacred institution of marriage as the foundation for family, neighborhood, community, and global unity and prosperity and as a “fortress for well-being and salvation” (Bahá'u'lláh)
- Share encouragement and hope, as well as a vision and model of marital success with others
- Model purity and chastity for our families, neighbors, friends, and coworkers; these complex concepts include maintaining uplifting and chaste thoughts, positive words, honest motivations, a loving heart, and a spiritually focused soul and keeping sexual intimacy as a God-given gift to occur only within marriage for building unity between marriage partners and as a sacred act that brings children into the marriage to create a family
- Regard the health and happiness of marriages as a major contributor to the well-being of children

- Be sensitive, moderate, and wise, and consultative, related to requests for service or volunteering for service beyond the family to avoid being involved in activities that significantly interfere in spouse or family relationships

FOR A SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY

Gaining Skills and Knowledge

- Use prayer, consultation, and reflection to gain understanding about the general health of the relationships and marriages in our community
- Track statistical data and trends for marriages and divorces in our jurisdiction to be able to set clear goals for improving trends, such as reducing the divorce rate or increasing pre-marriage preparation
- Strengthen the ability of the Spiritual Assembly and its representatives to skillfully meet with individuals and couples before marriage, those who are troubled about their relationships or marriages, and those who are applying for divorce
- Strengthen the ability of the Spiritual Assembly and its representatives to skillfully guide couples who apply for divorce to achieve reconciliation before or after the granting of a year of waiting (alt: year of patience)
- Be sensitive, moderate, wise, and consultative when making requests for service that may significantly reduce an individual's or a couple's time with a spouse or family

Providing Education

- Provide regular, proactive opportunities for spiritually-based relationship education, both knowledge and skill building, to unmarried individuals such that they have excellent characters and character discernment and are well prepared for being in a friendship, relationship, courtship, and marriage and positioned to prevent divorce; provide referrals for stepfamily education prior to marriage where applicable
- Provide spiritual guidance to parents on how to assist their children to practice chastity and how to carry out parental consent for marriage
- Provide regular, proactive opportunities for spiritually-based marriage education, both knowledge and skill building, to married members such that they are maintaining strong, happy, and faithful marriages that are of service to their families and community as well as examples to their children and others
- Provide education about Bahá'í marriage laws and the teachings about divorce and its harm
- Provide opportunities as appropriate and timely as part of the organic growth of the community for social action marriage educational outreach beyond the Bahá'í community members
- Discourage cohabitation and adultery with a balance of love, forbearance, and understanding along with firmness on laws and principles

CONSIDERING POSSIBLE LINES OF ACTION *Ideas from Marriage Transformation®*

Through the processes of consultation, learning-in-action, and reflection over time, Spiritual Assemblies and their community members may find that they begin to develop their own purposes and lines of action that are unique to the experience and developing knowledge of the community. These will reflect the creative and diverse ideas of individuals, institutions, communities, and others as the transformation process takes shape and evolves.

Some possible actions to consider are to:

- Track and celebrate wedding anniversaries as part of honoring the institution of marriage and the perseverance of couples in their marriages
- Consider and provide opportunities for single Bahá'ís, both youth and adults, to meet and spend time with each other in a safe, supportive atmosphere, including service opportunities whenever possible (Behavior to avoid could be embarrassing comments, teasing, and gossip)
- Provide opportunities for youth to learn about character choices and relationship skills
- Provide thorough marriage preparation for each seriously courting or engaged couple over a period of months, preferably along with some time with a skilled or trained married mentor couple
- Set-up follow-up meetings (at least two) between a mentor couple and a married couple during the first year of marriage
- Provide ongoing facilitated relationship and marriage strengthening groups with trained individuals or couples leading them*
- Offer relationship and marriage education and skill building study sessions or workshops periodically

* The concept of ongoing groups guided by non-professional individuals and couples who have gone through facilitator training and are also participants willing to gain ongoing growth in their own relationship or marriage (similar principle to the Ruhi study circle tutoring process) is just emerging as a possibility to help the relationships and marriages of Bahá'ís. This model holds possibility for also providing a vehicle for social action outreach over time. Challenges to address include the identification within a community of those appropriate and willing to be trained and carry out this service, as well as a practical method and funds to accomplish the facilitator training. This model of marriage enrichment has been successful for almost 40 years through Better Marriages (formerly Association for Couples in Marriage Enrichment; www.bettermarriages.org). By collaborating with experienced organizations, this model could benefit the Bahá'í community.