

**For Counselors Who Are Not Bahá'ís  
When Counseling Bahá'ís and Partners About  
Marriage, Separation, Reconciliation, or Divorce**

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The following information is provided as an aid to understanding the relevant religious beliefs of your clients who are members of the Bahá'í Faith, and in support of your approach to assisting them in addressing and 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 the Bahá'í Faith as an independent worldwide religion.

The Bahá'í teachings provide a renewal and strengthening of the messages in previous religions that encourage people to make positive, spiritual, and moral choices in their lives. In addition, the religion provides guidance to establish a worldwide global family of humanity 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 should be of benefit to both partners, establish a strong foundation for the rearing and education of children, provide stability for the community, and aid 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....” Marriage requires that the couple choose each other without parental interference and then the marriage happening is dependent upon consent from the couple's parents. Bahá'í marriage is:

... [T]he 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.... 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, #86

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” ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, #86). The more that marriage partners develop and practice spiritual character 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.

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

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, because it leads to competition, domination, 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 material standards.

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. Rather, they are to function within their marriage as equal partners, noting that there are numerous ways to meet their collective responsibilities.

This principle of equality is especially applicable when the couple discusses issues, builds understanding, and makes decisions, a process Bahá'ís call **consultation**. The following is 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 practice that the Bahá'í teachings strongly 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
- Engaging in full and truthful expression
- Encouraging and listening
- Holding pure motives
- Detaching from strong emotions and personal opinions
- Using difference of opinion to create unique solutions
- Taking a timeout, pausing as needed for reactions to calm down
- Avoiding disruptive behaviors and maintaining respectful boundaries
- Agreeing at times to defer to one another
- Supporting unified decisions

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

"The stress laid in the statements of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá on love and harmony as the hallmark of marriage, and in view of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's exhortation that each member of the family must uphold the rights of the others, makes it clear that violence in the family is contrary to the spirit of the Faith and a practice to be condemned. It is clear that no husband should subject his wife to abuse of any kind, whether emotional, mental or physical. Such a reprehensible action would be the very 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 any form of abuse, including force, to compel obedience to one's will." (On behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, April 12, 1990)

Of course, **abuse of children is also forbidden**. Some National Spiritual Assemblies provide guidance in alignment with their country's laws for Spiritual Assemblies on handling domestic violence and abuse. With the couple's permission, you may be able to obtain more detailed information from a Spiritual Assembly in your area through contact information supplied to you by the couple you are counseling.

The Bahá'í Faith holds a **balanced view of sex and sexual relations**. Sexual expression between a monogamous, heterosexual 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. This precludes the use of pornography. Sexual relations between unmarried individuals or between people not married to one another is not permissible in the Bahá'í teachings.

### 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 children, but both parents are responsible for the health, education, and well-being of their children.

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, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II, #2324*)

### Help for Challenged 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 Local Spiritual Assembly, or where the couple is unwilling to approach them for some reason, the couple is free to contact any Assembly in a neighboring Bahá'í community or ask their National Spiritual Assembly for assistance. The Spiritual Assembly generally provides the parties with spiritual guidance and resources and encourages them to seek professional 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, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II, #2346*)

### Discussion of Actions and Occurrences in a Challenged Marriage

Bahá'ís believe that it's inappropriate to confess sins to anyone other than God for the purpose of absolution of the sins and that it's 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 marriage partner and, for some, time may need to be taken in therapy to discuss the differences between backbiting and consulting to seek understanding and to resolve 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*, #589)

Some Bahá’ís may also be reticent to turn for guidance to a Spiritual Assembly, often from embarrassment and reluctance to air such personal issues before the members serving on the institution, who they may regard as personal friends. If this is the case with the couple you are counseling, their concerns should be explored in therapy. The couple should be encouraged to gain this help from a different local Spiritual Assembly, or they can do outreach to their National Assembly for assistance or to some other Bahá’í institution. Some Assemblies have counseling teams or committees that can assist this process, and spiritual guidance and religious conviction are often powerful motivators for new behaviors and growth. All matters brought to a Spiritual Assembly are held in the strictest confidence by its members.

### **Separation, Reconciliation, and Divorce**

Separation and divorce generally go against unity as the foundational principle of the Bahá’í Faith, although there are times when they 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, *Compilation of Compilations, Vol. II*, #2323)

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 and the couple to ensure they understand the relevant Bahá’í teachings and facilitates them with attempting reconciliation, ensuring first that any issues of safety have been addressed. If reconciliation is not possible, and the couple is intent upon divorcing, they are then required to enter a year of waiting (sometimes referred to as a “year of patience”). Living apart allows the couple to calm their thoughts and emotions, make further attempts at reconciliation as safe and appropriate, obtain counseling, and hopefully resume their marriage. If the couple resumes having sexual relations or living together, the separation is considered ended. If the couple wishes to separate following this, the divorce application and the year of waiting must both start anew.

Dating other people in the spirit of courtship is contrary to the spirit of the Bahá’í teachings during separation or the year of waiting, as the focus during that time is to be on reconciliation between the marriage partners. Applying for civil divorce should generally wait until after the year of waiting is completed, but there are exceptions in some cases. 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 free to marry others.

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

“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*, #K68)

“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” (2009), #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*, #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*, #1305)

### **Further Information**

If you require further information about the Bahá’í Faith and its approach to marriage and to counseling, with consent from the couple you are working with, you can contact the Spiritual Assembly closest to you or the offices of a National Spiritual Assembly. You may also find helpful information and specific country contact information at this website: [www.bahai.org](http://www.bahai.org).